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**There is definitely a look of surprise by someone I've never met when I walk into the room to run a meeting. Or in the parking lot you'll notice some people are nervous or tense up as I pass. It's not my suit or briefcase they are reacting to so it must be the color of my skin.**

**—Oral Muir, a 33-year-old e-commerce executive with Marriott Hotel, on being a Black man in the office.**



**B**linking in my inbox one day, there it was—a Fwd and Fwd and Fwd e-mail that had already been around a few times. Fwd e-mails are pure indulgence—messages that your friends want you to read, but that contain nothing you really have to read. They are irresistible that way. The subject line of this latest e-mail making its way through corporate America read—rather screamed—*Working While Black!* Despite my best effort, I couldn't help but smile. Not a Kool-Aid grin moment. But more a nod your head, I feel-your-pain, collective lip curve. All those Fwds signaled that I wasn't alone.

The e-mail was a Letterman-like list of 20 workplace scenarios that included the following:

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3. A colleague says with a broad smile, “You know I really like you. When I see you, I don't see color. I don't think of you as Black.”
9. You arrive at an off-site business retreat dressed in business casual attire. Your non-person-of-color peers approach and ask, “Why are you always so dressed up?”

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11. You are frequently asked why you change your hairstyle so often.
14. After a coworker returns from a weekend in the sun, they run to you on Monday morning and extend their arms to touch yours and say, “Hey, I’m darker than you.”

There goes that collective lip curve again.

Isolated, overlooked, ignored—that is what Working While Black (WWB) means. And it’s not funny. For young Black professionals, it is a cage. Some successful Black 30-somethings joke about the “5-year meltdown.” It takes about 5 years after business school for their fellow Black executives to feel as if they are suffocating in the cage. Optimism dissolves and hope shatters. It usually starts with the pace at which they are moving up the ladder—it is not as fast as they think it should be. It then turns into more. Earning respect in the office, as a Black executive, is more of a battle than they expected. Also the daily struggle of trying to fit into corporate environments that reward conformity can be trying for any group that is different. The internal torment can wreak havoc on the mind and emotions. These young Black executives still succeed in the office, but their spirit has been damaged. Trapped in the cage, they become angry and fed up. The culmination of the meltdown occurs when they start asking themselves the dangerous question: What am I doing?

Working While Black is not a rant, not a boo-hoo fest, not a plea for help, and not a sign of giving up. In the twenty-first century, it is just the truth.

“Black people have been holding onto this fairy tale bill of goods for too long,” says Sean Hudson, a 34-year-old marketing exec at Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS). “Be realistic. We are Black people in corporate America. Sure, we are making way more than our folks ever made. But I don’t want to wake up and be

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45, overqualified and underemployed, and have to think about how I got pimped.”

Sean is one of seven. That is what he discovered after a three-day companywide meeting of the pharmaceutical giant’s marketing division. They represented every BMS office across the country—from entry level up to senior management. It was the type of exhausting event that straddles the line between useful and not. At one point during the meeting, all 400 or so marketing professionals gathered together in the auditorium. Only seven were Black. So Sean is one of seven. He works in the HIV division trying to get physicians and health care professionals to sign onto the latest HIV drugs developed by BMS.

Sean spouted his precious *pimped* line one day when he called me from the Pittsburgh airport. During a conversation that seemed more therapy session than research, he unloaded about being the only Black man in too many rooms during his career. His words made my reporter ears immediately perk up in a way that only happens when a great quote is uttered. The feeling of being used at many levels runs rampant among these Black executives, and Sean had expressed it perfectly. Even before we ever met in person, I started dropping the line into conversations with friends. Before I knew it, my whole circle was talking about how we, too, didn’t want to get pimped.

When I finally met Sean, he was 32 days away from a big product launch that he was running and 34 estimated days away from fatherhood. The stress radiated from him like blinding sunlight. But he wanted to talk. I wasn’t surprised. I get that a lot from this generation of Black executives; they want to talk about race and their place. Cell phones, e-mails, two-way messages—I’d heard from people in the wee hours of the morning, from the middle of office meetings, and from vacation spots. They want to talk because they believe they are the only ones dealing with the frustrations of WWB (they’re

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not). They fear their generation is disjointed and lacking unity (it isn't). And mostly they want to talk because they feel no one is listening (well, maybe). So after the last session of that three-day marketing meeting, well past 8 P.M., Sean stopped by my office to talk before his commute home to his pregnant wife in the suburbs.

The conflict between the 32- and 34-day milestones meant that Sean was going to have to choose whether to witness the birth of his first child or run the product launch meeting that he had been told was critical for his promotion. The "7 of 400 issue," as he refers to it, was gnawing at him: "It scares me." Adding to his resentment was that it was a promotion he felt he had earned and for which he had already been passed over previously. That is why the fear of being pimped is very real. It wasn't the first time the equality fairy tale had been shattered for him during his career. After watching the "hoops of fire" a senior Black executive was put through for a promotion, he concluded: "There are different metrics for different people." Period.

So we talked. Sean tried to convince me that he was not bitter, yet. I tried to believe him. But there was a lot of talk about credentials and limits—the better credentials that this generation of Black professionals brings to the table and the limits the world still puts on them despite those credentials. Adding to Sean's distress over the 7-of-400 issue is that none of those 7 was at a higher level than he is. No Black faces ever graced the stage during the three days. There was no one, he felt, in a position of significant power, authority, or influence. His own department, HIV, is profitable, but it still is just a "pimple on the ass" of BMS. "There is no meritocracy," says Sean emotionless and accepting. "But I am not naive enough to think that there is a place in corporate America that is. The grass isn't significantly greener anywhere else."

Welcome to Working While Black.

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Today's reality, in the words of federal researchers, is one in which the "playing field is *still* far from level [*italics added*]." A recent government study of employment data concluded, "African Americans continue to suffer the most severe extent of intentional job discrimination." The study, which examined 200,000 of the nation's largest and midsize companies, found that overall African Americans have a 41 percent chance of being discriminated against at work no matter what their level or industry. Black professionals and managers in corporate America stand a nearly 30 percent chance of being discriminated against on the job. The research also found that in 1999, the most recent year data was analyzed, 27 percent of the nation's companies visibly discriminated against African Americans. Of those companies, 10 percent, or 22,000, exhibited what the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) terms "Hard Core" discrimination against African Americans, meaning not only that these companies practiced the highest level of employment discrimination recognized by the federal government but that they had also exhibited such discrimination for more than a decade.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about WWB is that race relations have reached the point that the phrase "While Black" doesn't really need explanation. So here's the Cliff's Notes version: Headlines in the mid-1990s about state police targeting Black motorists along the nation's highways helped pluck the catchall phrase from Black chitchat and inject it into national mainstream vernacular. Driving While Black, Walking While Black, Flying While Black, Learning While Black, [*insert your own verb here*] While Black.

In 1999, during an investigation by the Department of Justice, the state of New Jersey admitted that its state troopers systematically pulled motorists over because of their race. In the eyes of the state, complaints from Black motorists that they were being targeted by police on the New Jersey turnpike were

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“real, not imagined.” An embarrassing photo of Christie Todd Whitman, governor of New Jersey, frisking a young Black hands-against-the-wall man in a mock traffic stop became the new symbol of the Garden State. The State Police Commissioner was eventually forced to step down when he tried to defend the practice of what became known as racial profiling or Driving While Black.

After the publicity in New Jersey, lawsuits in Pennsylvania and along the I-95 corridor including Maryland, Delaware, Florida, and Connecticut legitimized the issue for the nation. This wasn't a case of Black professionals whining about cabs whizzing past them in midtown Manhattan. This was documented discrimination by law enforcement.

“While Black” was everywhere—even in the workplace.

But, few know that Driving While Black actually has traceable roots. Profiling as a police method grew out of the War on Drugs as it began to take shape in the early 1980s. At the time, legislators were faced with out-of-control drug violence. Frustrated by law enforcement's inability to lock up the drug lords behind the underground economy, they shifted their focus onto the kingpins' underlings. Drug couriers and small-time dealers became public enemy number one. Why go after the big fish when the guppies are what really matter, right? In 1985, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) introduced Operation Pipeline, an intelligence program that emphasized the transportation of drugs along the nation's highways, and tried to educate local law enforcement about how to pick out drug couriers. The instructions included general profiles of what these couriers could look like including type of car, patterns of driving, age, and, yes, race. What happened, though, as the lawsuits in the late 1990s illustrate, is that race became the only part of the profile that mattered. Black men became the profile.<sup>2</sup>



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Laws were passed to give weight to this new emphasis on the transportation of drugs. Most notable was the Comprehensive Crime Act of 1984, which gave police the right to seize property of suspected drug dealers.<sup>3</sup> The idea was to hit drug dealers where it hurt them most: Take their belongings and ask questions later. The logic behind the seizures was that such property was bought through illegal means—dirty money or underground channels—so it didn't really belong to these drug pushers in the first place. The plan made sense, except the part that threw out the basis of our justice system—the presumption of innocence. So what the beefed-up power of seizure laws really did was give a monetary incentive to local law enforcement to pull people over at the same time that the Feds were providing a profile of *who* to pull over. Interesting.

In 1997, the year before the New Jersey situation prompted politicians from both sides of the aisle to denounce racial profiling, local police and sheriff departments snatched up \$648 million in cash, goods, and property from supposed drug traffickers.<sup>4</sup> Impressive, if it weren't for one detail. Eighty percent of those who had assets seized were never charged with any crime.<sup>5</sup> Under federal law, people can be sentenced to a maximum of 5 years in prison for refusing to let cops seize their property during a traffic stop. In essence, police departments quickly learned that they could make money by pulling Black folks over.

If racial profiling is steeped in historical lore, then “While Black” reflects the emotional buildup of all that history. This phrase conveys the shared experience and expectations of Black people created by the active practice of prejudices and stereotypes about race. Simply, it is the baggage that comes with being Black in a white world, period. It is the reason behind the inexplicable. Why is the store manager following me around as I shop? Why am I being seated next to the kitchen

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at the 5-star restaurant? Why do women clutch their bags when I pass? Why do I feel constantly disrespected in the office? Remembering that I am [Shopping, Sitting, Walking, Working] While Black, is an attempt to provide logic to racist behavior. This all matters in the post-civil rights world because, despite the progress made, at last, the races continue to exist separately and differently making true equality still a dream.

Take housing. The most common measure of residential segregation is the U.S. Census Bureau's dissimilarity index. The index ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 means that African Americans and whites live together in perfectly balanced neighborhoods and 100 indicates complete segregation. Scores greater than 60 are considered to be "high"; those above 70 are "extreme." In 2000, the most recent data available, the average level of Black-White segregation in U.S. cities stood at 64, higher than segregation between any other groups. In the Northeast and the Midwest, the average segregation indices tend to be extreme, standing around 74. Checking in with an index of 85, the most segregated city in the nation is Detroit, birthplace of the automobile and Motown, and apparently still Jim Crow's hometown. Following Detroit's segregated lead are Milwaukee (82); New York (81); Newark, New Jersey (80); and Chicago (also 80). Other areas with extreme segregation scores include Buffalo, New York, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Kansas City, Philadelphia, and St. Louis.

Which means racial segregation is not unique to your county, township, subdivision, or block; or to South Central, Harlem, the South Side, or the Hill District; or to Utah, North Dakota, or Washington State. It is the American way of life. Most other multiracial societies are not as segregated—not Brazil, Canada, or the United Kingdom. The only other place where Black-White segregation indices routinely exceeded 70 was South Africa—under apartheid. Perhaps that bears

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repeating. Only under the legal segregation of apartheid—a system deemed so backward and heinous in this country that by the late 1980s it inspired widespread protests, mock shantytowns across college campuses, and ultimately congressional sanctions—were things worse.

Given the residential segregation, separate and often not-so-equal schools should not surprise anyone. The heavy hand of the law brought a period of integration to the nation's school districts. After schools began desegregating in the mid-1950s, they became steadily more integrated until the late 1980s. But then as more conservative courts began to strike down bussing and forced integration programs, the trend started to slow down. Now it is in reverse. Really. The proportion of African Americans attending integrated or majority-white schools declined by 13 percent during the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> That is the lowest level of school integration since 1968. Take a peek at our schoolyards, the lunch tables in the cafeteria, the classrooms. There is no mixing. There is nothing to mix; there are white schools and Black schools. Once you take the time to notice, the extensive sea of sameness can be striking. About the only things more monochromatic are the color choices of the motor vehicle bureau, or maybe the walls of a psychiatric institution. That is a powerful lesson we are teaching our children in almost every school in the nation.

Even in the most integrated city in the United States—Sacramento (according to research conducted by the Civil Rights Project for *Time* magazine)—life is not a multicolored paradise. In this California city, everyone is a minority. Of the city's 407,000 residents, 41 percent are non-Hispanic white, 15.5 percent are Black, 22 percent are Hispanic, and 17.5 percent are Asian. One in every 5 babies born in Sacramento is of mixed racial heritage. Although other cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, are more diverse, Sacramento's innovative housing programs, affordable real estate, and stable supply of

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traditionally integrated government and college campus employment have encouraged people of different races to actually live side by side. But, even in an integrated wonderland like Sacramento, racial tensions persist. At the local high school, Black and Hispanic parents find themselves pitted against whites and Asians for resources and attention. The police department, although serving a community that includes people who speak more than 70 different languages, is still 70 percent white; in 2000, 27 percent of the drivers stopped were Black, a higher rate than any other group. Says the local NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) chapter president, Anne Gayles-White: "There is still too much racism and hatred in a city like this."<sup>7</sup> You get the picture.

But work is what we all have in common as a society. It is the bridge that holds us together. This means that, for too many of us, the workplace often is the only setting where we mingle with different races on a regular basis. We live in our separate communities, send our kids to separate schools, go to separate parties, worship under separate roofs, and even watch separate TV shows. It is the office that disrupts those separate worlds.

Of course, it is still forced interaction. (With discrimination payouts as high as \$192 million, segregation is an expensive habit for the Fortune 500.)<sup>8</sup> Still, such interactions, no matter how limited, are where issues of race often get shaped, discussed, and examined. As much as we might try to keep the personal out of the office, it is impossible. Watercooler talk is real. Eventually, opinions slip from even the most reserved tongues. Likes and dislikes are exposed. Questions pop up. Such actions are what make us human. In our lives outside the office, we can control our audience. We surround ourselves with people who, at least, think like us. So, we pretty much know what to expect when such slips seep out. It is like a

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stacked deck; there is no gamble. But, when we expose our beliefs on the job, the reaction can be unpredictable. It is these unexpected moments—the newness in our world—that have the greatest potential in forming our viewpoints. Observations, real or imagined, become proof. Proof feeds ideas. Ideas lead to behavior.

That makes work an influential place.

The danger is that our views on race are much more emotional than logical. There will never be a scientific equation that can prove our racial conclusions. Instead, these things are based on feel, look, interpretation. There is nothing wrong with that, but the office is not the ideal setting for emotions, and so things constantly churn and bubble. Race is always present. Add money to emotions and people tend to become more sensitive to the race factor of any given moment. That is what work does. Something as little as the competition for a promotion can cause people's prejudices to seep out on one side and militancy to form on the other.

The boys with the bowl haircuts are balding now and ties have replaced the brown-and-orange striped turtlenecks, but the lessons learned in the third grade remain. Race mattered then, race matters now, race matters tomorrow. Saying that it doesn't is like claiming to be unaware whether someone is a man or a woman, tall or short, fat or thin. We could blame things on a person's shortness or thinness, but we just don't. It is against this reality—separate schools, neighborhoods, churches, everything—that While Black develops and flourishes. Only when these separate worlds intersect is While Black possible. Without a white world, While Black could not exist.

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1. A coworker sees you and several Black colleagues at a casual lunch. Back at the office she asks, "What was that meeting all about?"

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15. Walking through the hall with colleagues, you exchange greetings with two other African Americans you pass along the way. Your colleague says, "My, you know so many people."

Before we continue, a couple of explanations are in order. The first big misconception of integration is that one or two integrates. As long as a group is not 100 percent white, then it is considered integrated. But for those doing the integrating, there is no difference in the everyday world between 100 percent and 95 percent, 90 percent, or even 85 percent. They are still one of a few in a very big pack. That kind of math alone makes them, in essence, always the other.

The other big falsehood of integration is that it works two ways. If a group is 95 percent white, it is considered integrated; but if that same group is 95 percent Black, it is referred to as all Black. Take the sitcoms on UPN. They are often portrayed in the media, and in our minds, as a ghetto marathon of urban comedy. But most have a token white character. On *The Steve Harvey Show*, there's Bullet Head; on *Girlfriends*, there's Toni's fiancé; and *The Parkers* has best friend Stevie. Still, these shows are never considered integrated. Yet, when *Friends* hired Black actress Aisha Tyler just in time for sweeps for a recurring role, media stories the next day were about the integration of NBC's number one sitcom. "Diversity on *Friends*," splashed one AP story. For a real-world example, consider communities that get hit with white flight. A few years ago, the *Detroit Free Press* examined the issue with a series of high-profile stories. The tone was predictably dire. One article "From white to black: Once an integration model Southfield sees population shift" detailed how 21,000 whites have left the suburb since 1990 as African Americans have moved in. The conclusion was that the area's "testing ground for black-white integration" had failed. But the numbers tell a different story. When Southfield was hailed as a

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shining example of integration in 1990, it was 68 percent white and 29 percent Black. In 2000, the suburb was 39 percent white and 54 percent Black, and those figures were considered proof that integration had failed.<sup>9</sup> The difference is that whenever the scales tip to a Black majority, the tendency is to consider it a sea of Blackness.

It is a no-win situation, so why not congregate? Even kids in my third-grade class knew there was strength in numbers. That is what the Black lunch table is all about. It is a safe zone where all eyes will not be on you because now you are the pack and not the Only. For the current crop of young Black executives, there are no drawbacks to congregating. There is no reason to hide who they are because those that came before them already tried that and it didn't work—that's why there are so few Black CEOs.

Working While Black is disturbing because the consequences are much greater than the inconvenience of being pulled over on I-95. We spend at least eight hours of our day, a significant chunk of our lives, at work. It is often more time than we spend with our families. That is just too long a period for anyone to be trapped in a While Black cage.

Susan Chapman is a 34-year-old senior finance executive and director of global real estate for Level 3, a major technology company. At her company's Denver headquarters, she is also the ambassador of Black America. "They don't know anything about Susan, about my life. But I am the only Black person they know so of course I speak for all Black America." You can count the number of Black executives at Susan's company on one hand. But her complaints about representing a mass of Blackness and the isolation that it stirs up are far from unique. Susan's frustration is hard to forget. It is like its own WWB e-mail waiting to be FWD.

Number one on Susan's list is the comfort of ignorance. Let's call it the art of just "not getting it." Alone in Colorado,

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Susan works for a company with a CEO named James Crowe, who prefers to be called Jim. Really. One day, during a company retreat, Susan made up a Level 3 edition of Jeopardy for her staff to help them work together as a team. Her best Alex Trebek impression was a hit and everything was going well. Then came the question that stumped the room. It was under the topic of “Senior Management.” The \$200 clue: “His name is synonymous with a major civil rights faux pas.” The room of 30 was silent. That day the cage was crushing for Susan, the ambassador. “How could none of them not have made that connection before? I will never understand that,” she fumed. The connection being, of course, that the name of their company’s CEO was also the name of a major part of civil rights history. As in, Who is Jim Crow(e)?

It sounds minor. But the isolation, pressure, and frustration that these executives feel cannot be overestimated. Every Black executive I talked to had stories of being the “Only.” Talk of “they” peppers conversation constantly, and “versus me” eventually becomes understood. “Do they notice?” one 34-year-old marketing VP asked desperately. “Do they look around the room like I do and think, ‘Wow, there’s only one Black guy here’?” A big part of the isolation is the barrage of insensitivity, subtle and not so, that inevitably results from being the Only or one of a few. It doesn’t mean that the masses are intentionally trying to single out the few. But eventually it will happen. The mass exists because there are things that tie it together and exclude others. At the end of a long day, it is a recipe for disaster if you are one of the few. As in, Who is Jim Crow(e)!

The harder part is actually being just one of only a few. Although the ranks of Black executives continue to increase with each generation (even *Fortune* magazine now ranks the Top 50 African Americans in Business), the successes are still very



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much sprinkled. So every company (and some more than others) has just a few successful Black faces.

For young Black professionals (the current crop of 30-something execs who are scrambling up the corporate ladder now), this can be a heavy burden. These post-civil rights executives can see, even in the neighborhoods they live in, the critical mass of Black success. It is a mass that collectively holds significant power. Unlike the previous generation, they know they are not the only ones out there who have climbed so high. They have been to the same B-schools, law schools, and the best prep schools together. Socially, they can—and often do—exist in an all-encompassing world of Black elite. There are Black vice presidents, executive vice presidents, general managers, managing directors, and partners. Prestigious, big-wig sounding titles that can be splashed across a business card are common and, more importantly, are expected. So, to come into the office on Monday morning and be the Only generates more than feelings of isolation. It seems hostile and oppressive. In their minds, there is no reason the office still has to look like that. With their eyes always on the collective mass of Black professionals, the lack of representation, then, couldn't have just happened. The fact that the office looks that way becomes proof of something that is being done deliberately. Therefore, it must be reacted to, deliberately. The responses can range from one's own hostile action to the constant need to always fight back. On Monday in the office, these young Black professionals don't back down. They are not afraid to speak up because they feel they have nothing to lose. They organize and support each other and are always prepared to leave—the situation, the company, the system even—if need be. In Susan's case, she did not remain silent after the Jeopardy game. Her frustration was clear to anyone in the room. "I felt like a history teacher," she says. Susan also did not let the

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Jim Crow(e) connection drop there, but brought it up again in passing whenever she got the chance, so her staff could not forget the sheltered bubble that they had once comfortably existed in. Not getting it—at least about Jim Crow—could not be an excuse.

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7. You continually get more responsibility, but no authority.
16. You are told your attitude is affecting others. You are asked to . . . “lighten up, not be so serious about the work. Smile and laugh more often, to make others more comfortable working with you.”
18. You have to perform at 250 percent just to stay even.
19. You have to document everything. You’ve learned the hard way.

Alvin Bowles, 29, is the best kind of executive—never satisfied. Hailing from the suburbs of the nation’s most segregated city—Detroit—Alvin was bred on prep school, the University of Michigan, and Harvard Business School. He spent three years as an investment banker at J.P. Morgan before moving over to the music industry, where he is an executive at Sony. He has moved steadily up the ladder and is now in charge of brokering commercial partnerships and endorsement deals between artists and corporate America. But Alvin tells it like this: “I am the most senior Black person in strategic marketing at Sony Music and I am a director—which is bullshit!” We were sitting in Alvin’s midtown Manhattan office one spring afternoon. For the music industry, it had that very corporate *I’ve arrived* cache—large windows, plush carpet, a master-of-the-universe desk. At the time, Alvin was juggling a \$30 million account with Pepsi—a major venture for Sony—and the campaign’s first television ads were just starting to hit the airways.

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By corporate standards, he is doing well, even if in terms of Black progress it is still bull.

Married with a kid on the way, Alvin works—all the time. He always has either a call to take or a meeting to attend, whether it is for his job at Sony, his service as a volunteer mentor to Black teenagers, or his political fund-raising activities. (He collects hundreds of thousands of dollars for local Democratic candidates to make sure the Black vote is heard.) His phone rings constantly as we sit in his office. Most of all, he works at being a successful Black man, keeping the community at large in mind first by committing the best thing he can, himself. At Sony, that means being the best because his is the only Black face. “I feel the weight of that burden,” he says. “I feel my work being scrutinized. I am clearly an African American male and unapologetically Black. So it is not just enough to get the right answer. I am going to have to do it faster and quicker and better.” As he says this at work late one evening, the surrounding offices are all already empty for the night. He walks me through the darkened hall to the elevator and turns back to his office. There is still work to do.

Alvin touches on something that is intrinsic to WWB—twice as good, as in, you have to be twice as good for the same reward if you’re Black. “Twice as good” is **not** new. It is the motto in any Black household concerned with success. Ask Black standouts in any field and it will come up. “If you want to be successful, you have to outwork the other guy,” Dick Parsons, CEO of Time Warner, advises me. “I never thought I would make it without working the hardest in the room.” This is what Black parents teach their children and what children learn from their parents. It is a part of what it means to be Black in the United States. And trying to be twice as good all the time is exhausting.

Although the twice-as-good credo is not unique to the 30-something set, never before has the issue of being overlooked

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been so pronounced. Thanks to the civil rights movement, affirmative action, hard work, and progress, this group is the most privileged of any generation of African Americans. On paper, they look the same as, or better than, their white counterparts. They have the degrees and the experience going in. So, there is a healthy sense of entitlement. They expect their credentials will be rewarded. Simply, “I expect to win,” says Alvin. When they don’t win, resentment builds. So, it is not surprising that the harshest zingers of the WWB e-mail related to not being recognized. With each Fwd, these items got the most comment, support, and amens. It is a signal of just how serious the disconnect is and how much farther we still need to go.

Back at the Black table in the cafeteria, there is a lot of talk about getting what is owed. These are not 40 acres-and-a-mule fantasies. It is about legitimate frustration when the story does not end the same way for them as it does for their white colleagues: I did this, I did this, I did this, but I still didn’t get the promotion. At the office of one media company, they call it the “jet pack” phenomenon—the inexplicable rapid shot up the corporate ladder that some *other* people always seem to get. This is a world of “golden boys” and everyone else. The golden boys are usually unremarkable in every way except that they get everything handed to them. Each promotion of the golden boy provides additional proof that the jet pack phenomenon is in effect. The golden boy is the person in the office who manages to capture every opportunity to succeed, every plum assignment, while the rest must fight for themselves. The golden boy is also never Black. Sometimes the favoritism is blatant—lunches during the week, invites on the weekends. Other times, behavior might be subtler, but in the end these Black professionals still have an overwhelming sense that they are somehow being left out. When Sean concluded that metrics vary for different people, it was precisely after watching his

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company's most senior Black executive pitted against a golden boy for a promotion.

Anyone working in a competitive environment gets hit with feelings of being undervalued and unappreciated now and then. But not everyone can point to race as the reason. These days you can change almost anything about yourself if you think it will help you succeed. You can even change your sex if that is what it is going to take to be happy. But your race is the one characteristic that no one can ever change (even Michael Jackson). Which makes talk like I did this, I did this, I did this, but I still didn't get the promotion, hard to ignore.

We are traveling down a slippery slope here, I know. This is squarely territory where those who get it need no convincing, and those who don't will never be convinced. Racism is like that. It is one of those emotion-filled crimes where it is often hard to obtain evidence. How can you prove that your dignity has been hit? How do you convince someone that you have been slighted? Where is the line of disrespect? Still, no matter how fluctuating these questions may seem, there is never any doubt when you are the victim. And, thus, the crime only gets worse when people don't believe that it has happened.

Remember those federal findings about the hard-core discrimination that African Americans go through in the workplace? All the statistics were troubling, but the one that really stood out for me was that 10 percent of the nation's companies practice the highest level of employment discrimination recognized by government and have been doing so for more than 10 years.<sup>10</sup> That is hard core. Thirty years ago, such findings would have been expected and thus easier to accept. But today, when things supposedly have changed for the better, the reality can be disheartening. It is at the heart of why younger Black executives refuse to apologize for their Blackness.

Oral Muir, a 33-year-old e-commerce executive for Marriott, has a knack for offering nuggets of profound ideas

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no matter how short the conversation (my favorite is the quote that started this chapter). Oral is a native of Jamaica and moved to New York City when he was 12. He hasn't been back to the island since. But, living his formative years in a country where Black is the majority, with power and leaders, has profoundly shaped his outlook on what is possible. The experience helped instill in him a deep sense of pride and filled his head with the knowledge that there are unlimited opportunities for Black people. In Jamaica, Black did not mean disenfranchised minority, but the exact opposite. He expects Black people to be leaders because he has experienced that world. Most of all, he says, seeing Black on top for 12 years gave him a sense of power. "I experienced being a winner," he says. "You never lose that." It is something he wishes that every Black face in the United States could experience.

Like many of his generation, Oral has no patience for Black executives who are timid with their Blackness in the office. In part, it reflects the sense of isolation and marginalization that this generation feels. These highly educated overachievers find themselves fighting just as much for recognition and opportunity as the groundbreakers did. And if you are still fighting anyway, then why not be completely honest? In this realistic view, race is something then that cannot and will not be hidden. With no hope of actually changing the hurdles, they instead expect to succeed despite them. That is a key difference of this generation. For the first time, a generation is willing to look away from the inequalities and mistreatment at large. By admitting that they don't have the power to change things and make the field level, they are driven to succeed completely on their own terms. That is why Oral doesn't believe in playing the role of the raceless wonder just to make others feel comfortable.

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“People are screwed up,” he says matter-of-factly. “Folks are always going to hate each other. That’s why masks don’t make any sense.”

This generation talks a lot about masks. It is often the mask, perceived or not, that others wear in the office to survive being Black in corporate America. As Black executives, how much of themselves do they hide and how much do they allow to surface? They accuse those who came before of walking on eggshells when dealing with issues of race. One of seven, Sean, broke it down this way: The generation of groundbreakers wears opaque masks. His generation’s masks are translucent. And he hopes that by the time his newborn son goes to work, the mask will be transparent.

For Oral, part of destroying the mask is being the constant voice of race in the office. “If I don’t bring up these issues, then who will?” he asks. That has not always been the cry from Black executives in the office just trying to secure their place. More often, the advice has been to choose your battles. But for professionals of this generation, who are a little shell-shocked by just how hard things are, everything is a battle.

In his first corporate job as a technology consultant at a boutique firm, Oral noticed one summer that two young Black students were roaming the office without any direction or guidance. He concluded that they were interns stuck in a minority program with expectations set too low. One day when the firm’s CEO made an appearance on the staff floor for a meet-and-greet session, Oral had only one question during the brief encounter, which was not really meant for questions: “What’s up with the two Black kids?” His unexpected directness caught the CEO off guard and caused murmurs around the office. Oral, however, has no regrets for always speaking directly about race. Because of his candor, the CEO asked him to create and lead the firm’s nonprofit arm, which

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eventually acted as a liaison between Fortune 500 companies and urban neighborhoods. The division created yearlong internships and weekend workshops for as many as 300 students. Oral's goal? Give concrete experience so no one else could ask, "What's up with the Black kids in the office?" He also served as a consultant to other firms that wanted to create similar endeavors. Being honest about race helped Oral create opportunity and succeed, and prevented him from compromising on what he really wanted to do. When he was ready to leave the company, the CEO acted as a mentor, helping him field offers and eventually decide on Marriott. For today's young Black executives, such honesty about race is the only plan that works.

The danger with chitchat of golden boys and jet packs is that it will always leave people at the table dissatisfied. The bottom line is that as long as Black executives are not seen leading the pack, these feelings of frustration and resentment will continue to ferment. The Fortune 500 has four Black CEOs. Whereas the previous generation, with memories of no access, celebrates the achievement as amazing progress, the post-civil rights babies see *only* four. For a generation that has never lived in a world where they are not even let inside the door, leading the pack is what matters most. Alvin thinks his position at Sony is "bullshit," not because he isn't proud of his success, but because he feels he has not climbed high enough on the corporate ladder to be the highest ranking Black face in strategic marketing. There should be someone who has climbed higher. Sean is disturbed that he is one of seven, but he is downright disgusted that none of those seven were at a high enough level to be on the stage at the company meeting.

Who cares if folks gripe at lunchtime? Really. These are not, however, just any group of gripers. The current crop of



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Black professionals represents the success of the civil rights movement. This is what all the fighting was for—to make this group possible. And they are still complaining about race. That is why we should care.

My favorite item on the WWB countdown was the last:

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20. You presumed that all that was required of you was to work hard and get the job done.

I could have uttered these words myself. I *have* uttered these words myself. It is the feeling that nothing is ever enough. It will never be enough because the rules of success have changed, again. One of the distinctions between the current group of black professionals and the previous generation is that 30-somethings are cynical. Sean steamrolling toward his 32- or 34-day finish line called the equality promises a “fairy tale.” Such cynicism comes from the moment in time that this generation blossomed—blame it on the 1980s. It comes from watching their parents do everything necessary and still not become leaders. It comes from trying to survive isolation. It comes from unexpected insensitivity hurled out of (turtlenecked) corners once thought to be friendly. And it comes from those changing rules. The mere fact that this generation has achieved success by standing on the shoulders of those who died to make it happen, is a breeding ground for cynicism when that success is not considered enough. It also comes from having faith that things were supposed to be different. Hence, the jokes and the WWB countdown. Number 20 represents that little bit of faith beginning to break.

Coincidentally, at the end of that Working While Black e-mail I got that day in my inbox was a quote by Harriet Tubman:

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If I could have convinced more slaves that they were slaves, I could have freed thousands more.

It is a quote that we've all seen dozens of times during Black History month, as a tag line on Afrocentric calendars, T-shirts, and paperweights in Black bookstores. Familiarity and cheesy consumerism make it is easy to overlook the insight those words hold. But, alongside the twentieth item on the WWB list, the power of Tubman's point was blinding.

Seeing her words in my inbox that day, I smiled. This time it was a Kool-Aid grin moment.