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## The Surface Act: Exercising Emotional Intelligence as a Filter of Racial Awareness as a Means of Survival at PWIs

Dr. Khadija Boyd

*With 911 emergency being used as a tool to enact prejudice and fabricate racially biased incidents, Black people should always be ready to anticipate antiblack engagements and racial profiling when white people decide that their Blackness qualifies as dangerous or out of place. Black students are criticized when they elect to challenge how racism affects them in their learning environment by being countered with the same rehearsed statement of diversity and inclusion. With white supremacy culture being at such a high threat at institutions of higher education, and with no regard to the mental health of those affected by it, Black academics must adjust themselves to reflect whiteness to defy racial battle fatigue. Using the cornerstones of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), a combination of self-awareness and self-regulation, this article will be to discuss how EQ is being used as a filter of racial awareness as not to offend or disrupt white supremacy culture in higher education as a means of survival at PWIs.*

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence, Antiracism, Higher Education, Racial Awareness

With 911 emergency being weaponized by white America to enact prejudice and fabricate racially biased incidents toward Black people, Black people should always be ready to anticipate antiblack engagements and racial profiling when white people decide that their Blackness qualifies as dangerous or out of place. “Stop! What are you doing here?” These are the commands and questions police, campus security, and what is culturally known as “Karen’s” ask of Black students and faculty when on campus. Even when donning university gear, carrying a book bag, and school identification, Black students and faculty are still described as suspicious for merely walking, eating, sleeping, or doing their jobs on campus. At Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), 780 combined incidents of white supremacist activity were reported between 2016 and 2018 by the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center (Nelson, 2019). But somehow when the issue of racism and discrimination are addressed by Black students and faculty, they are criticized

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when they elect to challenge how racism affects them in their learning environment by being countered by academic staff with the same rehearsed statement of the institution's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

With White Supremacy Culture (WSC) being such a high threat at institutions of higher education, and with no regard to the mental health of those affected by it, some Black academics adjust their attitude and social being of Black culture to reflect whiteness in an attempt to avoid racial battle fatigue and to fit in. Due to historical attitudes and behaviors, antiblackness has existed in America's education system since pre and post integration, so making it to graduation takes a lot more than just keeping your head down and attempting to fit in or go unnoticed. Some Black students and faculty are unknowingly using the cornerstones of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) theory; self-awareness and self-regulation, parallel to the existing theory's intent, to "act white" so that one minimizes the chances of becoming a target of hatred or a racially motivated 911 call that could end in death. In this article, I will discuss how EQ being used as a filter of racial awareness by Black students and faculty in an attempt to hide their Blackness and all aspects of Black culture as not to offend or disrupt WSC in higher education as a means of survival at PWIs.

### **Emotional Intelligence as a Filter of Racial Awareness**

To be self-aware is the experience of knowing one's character, personality, individuality (Goleman et al., 2018). Self-regulation is to control and manage yourself as well as pay attention to how you feel in the moment to give appropriate emotional responses in an interpersonal engagement (Goleman et al., 2018). As EQ applies to racial awareness, being cognizant that Blackness can be viewed as a threat by white America because Blackness has been long associated with criminality and has correlated Black culture with being "ghetto", unamerican, and uncivilized, an opinion that is burrowed deep in their collective imagination. Self-regulating your words, body language, and how you enact your cultural being to what is deemed acceptable and suitable for the environment because sounding off with a loud and thunderous New York "yurrrrrrr" is considered unsophisticated and an improper greeting. Or, giving DAP which is a handshake that originated with Black combat troops in Vietnam to represent Dignity and Pride, and used as a symbol of unity for survival in a racially turbulent atmosphere (Hamilton, 2014) is associated with gang activity.

Viewed within the context of seemingly larger problems Black students and faculty face on campus, the concept of exercising EQ to identify, manage how one emotionally reacts and reactions of others can seem insignificant and inconsequential. However, using EQ as a filter of racial awareness to avoid having a glitch in WSC, and avoid negative racial stereotypes that are associated with antiblackness allows

for WSC to go unchecked. As Black academics provide an inauthentic version of themselves, they are emotionally laboring their mental and physical being under the misconception that they must do so to meet white expectations. I do not intend to blame the marginalized for their oppression, however, as a means of survival, this false sense of security of having a double consciousness by being socially forced to have two identities continues to provide power and influence into WSC as the societal norm.

Recently during the vice-presidential debates, Madame Vice President Kamala Harris had an overwhelming amount of support that resonated amongst, what is known as, “Black Twitter”. There was an unspoken burden and expectation placed on Madame Vice President Harris’ shoulders to not commit emotional malfeasance and maintain good order before the debate even began. During the discourse, former Vice President Mike Pence continually spoke over and interrupted Madame Vice President Harris in true patriarchal form with no regard to the established rules of the debate. He did so without fear of consequence. However, Madame Vice President Harris did not respond with anger or screaming. She maintained herself in such a way that was nothing short of professional and emotionally controlled. Black men and women applauded her for not feeding into the stereotype that plagues Black women by refusing to be a punching bag for misogynoir; where racism and sexism meet (Bailey & Trudy, 2018), and simultaneously not come off as the “angry Black woman”.

White feminists also took to Twitter attempting to correlate their experiences. These white feminists shared their misguided belief that the inequality that they face does not differ from that faced by Black women, and that somehow they are fighting the same fight as Black women when dealing with misogyny. However, white feminism has a history of leaving Black women behind to gain favor in the patriarchal structure by swearing to open the window of equality if Black women would just stand in solidarity for the movement and lift white women up on their backs. Twitter’s reactions only solidified what is already known, the marginalized are more self-aware than the non-marginalized when navigating power structures, racism, and when attempting to dispel racial stereotypes. Although not surprising considering the historically established social divisions in society, white people do not look at the world through the filter of racial awareness because whiteness is implied when there is no explicitly racial designator to state otherwise. Therefore, using EQ to dispel stereotypes and cater to white comfort in daily experiences means Black people must remain calm in the face of adversity, replace their African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with “proper English”, swap their Rap/Hip Hop playlist for the new Billy Eilish album, and act as though Miley Cyrus broke down feminist barriers with her version of twerking on television for the first time. It means forcing some common points of shared experience through identifiable communication by pretending to care about the new season of the

Bachelorette and other white movie and pop stars all while being astonished at the way that some white people don't pay attention or understand other realities besides their own.

Even with the disidentification of oneself, Black students still can't reveal too much of their inauthenticity because then they will become the focus of conversations with statements such as "I didn't think Black people liked that kind of stuff." Creating space where they now have to explain themselves, their hair texture, the cultural impact of *Black Girl Magic*, *Black Excellence*, the love for former President Barack Obama, how reverse racism doesn't exist, why to *Kill a Mockingbird*, although labeled as fictional, is also a harsh reality, and the frustrations behind the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black men and women by police. Sure, it's easy to say just walk away and that you don't owe anyone an explanation, but the arrogance and narcissism that fuels WSC demands answers and for the sake of avoiding going further in-depth into a loaded conversation, EQ takes over to ensure that future interactions with white peers and superiors remain comfortable.

### **Formulation for Preparation**

How does a Black person become prepared to survive WSC when obtaining higher education at a PWI? There is no real answer but unfortunately, transgenerational racial trauma is ingrained in some Black children since their youth in the form of fear, and children learn to cope with antiblackness and live with the race-related stress that comes from having to avoid or defend oneself against racism as a means of survival. Preparation begins with being self-aware of behavior displayed in public and then self-regulating that behavior as to not become hyper-visible to the white gaze. I can remember being the only Black girl on my swim team and going to predominately white high schools like Beaver River and Carthage, New York, hearing my parents say, "be careful up there around them white people". Having my parents reinforce my safety with my coach to always have an eye on me. Even on the professional side, being mentored by Black coworkers and supervisors telling me "just toe the line, you won't be here forever", and of course my favorite "if you work hard you will earn respect." Creating a false sense of solidarity that by being a team player, my experiences as a Black woman in the organization will be better if I just try to "fit in." But it goes much deeper than that. Me now 38 years old remembering the stories my grandmothers, who both lived through segregation, used to tell, to hear them speak their truth that their survival of Jim Crow was based on their conscious effort not to upset white people because white people held the societal power and decided what was what. This belief of societal power stems from the history of lawless and accepted racial violence against Black people, placing whiteness atop of a fictional racial hierarchy as the dominant racial group that, based on their lived experiences, can make life

more difficult than it had to be.

This mentality was passed to my parents, then me, creating a cycle of racial awareness. The idea that when encountering some white people, the slightest misstep, skewed facial expression, eye roll, or voice inflection could mean your last day on the job, at school, or alive. With the recent protests due to the killings of unarmed Black men and women and other racist incidents that have been reported on campuses, my ancestors' words still ring true, that just for being Black, to have the benefits of success and avoid any possible consequences of a racially fueled interactions, one must be self-aware, self-regulatory, and tiptoe around the fragility and volatility of whiteness as if on a minefield. Also, accept the fact that no action will be taken to protect or side with you even when you are right.

During my doctoral dissertation defense, one of my committee members stated to me, "you are so articulate". While he may have thought he was being complimentary, I felt as though that comment was rooted in misogynoir and carried in it the subtext of bewilderment and surprise that I, a Black woman, could engage in articulate speech. Although I should have challenged his comments because I am not crippled with fear from the outcome of checking someone from making a statement that has a history of associating intelligence with whiteness, I still needed his signature and was not considered a graduate. This comment left me with my upbringing and the question, "do you want to be right, or do you want to graduate?", so I left it alone because I did not want to be punished for being forward in correcting him. Scenarios such as this happen far too often to Black students who are only left with the option to ignore the blatant or micro-aggressive racism allowing WSC to thrive when attending PWIs.

### **Racializing Intelligence: Cultural Hegemony and the Destruction of the Black Identity**

Looking back at Ruby Bridges, the integration of schools, and the classroom experiences of other Black children can make a person hide their personal or group identity to feel at ease in an environment that their Blackness is deemed unworthy to occupy. Attending a PWI puts Black students, who may or may not suffer from transgenerational trauma, in an environment established by white supremacy and white dominance, leaving them consumed with stress and fear that being hyper-visible on campus will create an attributional ambiguity; the psychological state of uncertainty experienced concerning one's own treatment or those of another person resulting in a positive or negative outcome, of becoming a target of racial attacks or fall on the negative side of racial stereotypes. The social control imposed on Black students can be so powerful as to cause a cognitive adjustment of dis-identification and an abandonment of all cognitive diversity efforts to support a more agreeable, compliant culture fit among their white peers, even if that means

becoming a conformist by suppressing their Blackness. However, disidentification is not new. Steele (1992) explains that the basic assimilationist offered to Black students is that they will be rewarded and valued at school if they master the American mainstream culture, which is epitomized as white.

Research associated with “acting white” has focused on Black students at PWIs and has revealed that Black achievement is created through the burden of “acting white” causing Black students who want academic success to self-sabotage their authentic Blackness (Webb et al., 2018). Like most things grounded in white supremacy, intelligence has been racialized to overvalue the experience of qualities of whiteness and specifically white men. Historically whiteness and intelligence have been linked (Hatt, 2016), so “acting white” is a disturbing reality within a subset of the American education system that forces Black students into a box of obedience. Since Black people are not monolithic, forcing Black students into a box generates differing conflict with Black students and their ethno-racial cultural individuality. Thus, causing the creation of cognitive representations of a preconceived notion which dictates what behavior will create an environment that will allow academic success, even if the cognitive representation means sacrificing the specifics of Black culture by using the cornerstones of EQ as a filter of racial awareness. In turn, Black students uphold the framework of hegemonic cultural violence in juxtaposition to the destruction of the Black identity through emulated behavior of whiteness in exchange for academic credentials.

### ***Emotional Intelligence and Respectability***

Emotional intelligence as a filter of racial awareness plays respectability politics with Black culture which holds whiteness, its culture, and its emotions in high regard at the conceptual and operational levels equating it to success. Respectability validates white American mainstream culture by enforcing a biased narrative that to be successful, you must align with white indicators of class, status, and privilege (Warner, 2015). Respectability leaves Black students and faculty to answer the question “when is it safe to be my authentic self at a PWI?” Using the pillars of EQ to suppress Blackness to interact with whiteness every day is exhausting because of the emotional labor endured when trying to survive in a space that whiteness has deemed it intellectually inferior. Another downside is using EQ as a filter of racial awareness in daily interactions concludes that even adapted behaviors can become a way of being and doing morphing into respectability (Boyd, 2020).

Although Blackness and Black culture are not secrets to be kept, some students and faculty may still wonder “Am I being too loud? Should I get my box braids? Is my outspokenness being perceived as having an attitude?” A recent study on emotional intelligence conducted at the Army Logistics University (ALU) exposed an internalized prejudiced system that was overwhelmingly antiblack. The study

showed that antiblackness could be explained through biased professionalism as dictated in the data by the repeated use of the terms “angry Black woman” and “aggressive Black male.” These stereotypes focused on how Black students and faculty see themselves through a white lens and how they are perceived by their white peers and superiors (Boyd, 2020). Black students and faculty adjusted themselves depending on their audience and surroundings altering their behavior and leadership style as not to offend or disrupt white standards of professionalism (Boyd, 2020).

### *The Wake Up Call*

Differential standpoints on life will not always create the same life experiences and since being Black is not a hobby, putting on an Academy Award-winning surface act performance for white comfort is burdensome. PWIs across the country hurried to openly reinforce their commitment to creating a safe space for racial equality on campus after the streets of several major cities filled with protestors demanding change for racial injustices. Nevertheless, conversations of equality were short-lived after major news outlets changed the headlines. Even when active, these conversations only addressed racial trauma after the fact through coping strategies, therapy sessions, and using activism as an outlet. Putting the burden of labor on the student and removed all culpability from the university administration instead of making any real tangible change to policy or organizational culture.

PWIs screamed at the top of their privileged lungs about diversity and inclusion, but if anything, the lack thereof hides behind the cover of a few Black students, faculty, and Black student engagement perpetuating the falsehood of inclusiveness by impersonating the groundwork to deconstruct systemic racism. You will never see on any campus The National White Graduate Student Association or the National Society of White Engineers. However, you will see Black Campus Ministries and the National Black Student Union in place to supposedly help Black students build their identity and confidence. In reality, this only creates a space that allows Blackness while expecting the students to “act white” with regard to respectability when they are not actively involved in Black student spaces. It is also a way to lock Blackness into certain areas as not to be heard or seen by white and other non-black students.

Black students can make good grades, speak “proper English”, be dressed in their best GAP outfit, play respectability in an attempt to “act white” through self-awareness and self-regulation, and still be rejected by whiteness for being less persuasive. Therefore, this level of consciousness does not support how white society comports itself in the presence of Blackness. So, let’s forget EQ as a filter of racial awareness and be impetus in breaking the cycle of transgenerational racial trauma by ceasing to operate under the falsehoods of the oppressor, and rejecting

the idea that being Black means that sending a white-washed representative to comfort whiteness will somehow alleviate or change the Black experience when attending PWIs. From the words of James Baldwin (1963 as cited in Baldwin Collected Essays, 1998), “There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you.” (p. 293). Moreover, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) words as published in *Between the World and Me*, “You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable” (p. 107).

It is not your job to dispel stereotypes. White perception and blind spots are not the only reality! Let’s be conscious of the role authenticity plays in disrupting WSC, because as long as race only applies to non-white people in the racialization process, whiteness will continue to operate as the designated racial default category for what is accepted, setting forth the framework to destroy Black culture. Let authenticity be the shift in social structures and perceptions through constant and concerted endeavors to remind white America that inclusion and assimilation are not synonymous. There is no need for a new identity to walk freely on campus and no need to cave under social pressure to “act white” for academic success because it is self-sabotage. There is no disgrace in being Black, the disgrace is white supremacy. Thus, a complete rejection of the paradigm of this form of oppression and violence should not be accepted as the natural order. Be you, they will adjust!

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