



DIARY OF A **MAD LAW** PROFESSOR

'I, Too, Am Harvard' Rocks the Ivory Tower

At Harvard, as elsewhere, students battle the banality of racism by turning insult into art.

Patricia J. Williams

March 12, 2014



More than forty years ago, during my first days at college, I was made instantly and acutely aware that a lot of people seemed never to have met a black person. For the most part they were not intentionally belligerent, but they were excruciatingly, unself-consciously, dopyly innocent. ("Leontyne Price actually studied opera? I thought she was just naturally musical...")

Plus ça change, I suppose, but it is a disheartening testament to the intractability of America's housing and educational segregation that, so many decades after the civil rights movement, many white students still seem never to have truly engaged with a black person till they get to college. More discouraging still, they then seem to turn interrogation of that void upon their black classmates' right to be there, rather than upon the constrained and blinkered circumstances of their own upbringing.

The toll of that social gap is the subject of a new play, *I, Too, Am Harvard*, written by sophomore Kimiko Matsuda-Lawrence with a broad coalition of classmates, which premiered on March 7. The play is presented in two acts, the first of which looks at the wide diversity of Harvard's black students: descendants of American slaves, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, students who could (and are told they should!) pass for white, recent immigrants, mathematicians, musicians, poets, linguists, engineering students, children of all sorts of "mixed" marriages, poor kids and the children of Ivy League grads.

The second act looks at what those varied individuals have in common: this batch of young people is indisputably brilliant, thoughtful, humane and funny. A more pressing commonality, however, is that they are all routinely greeted as... otherwise.

They are treated with open disdain, the champagne flutes snatched from their hands at cocktail parties as they are mistaken for waiters. They are figured as criminals when they walk across campus. Their sexual prowess is interrogated, their beauty denigrated. They hesitate before asking questions in class—for a dumb question from a white person isn't heard as a reflection on all white people, but any question from a black person tends to be scrutinized for inherent inferiority, "proof" that the student's lonely little voice is the evil marker of where a "more qualified white person" ought to be sitting.

Only about 10 percent of the students at Harvard are black: yet that small, diverse population is hyper-visible. One young man described sitting down for dinner in the cafeteria, joined by four black friends. Later that evening, he was accused, by some white dorm mates, of "self-segregating." Yet every other table in the cafeteria was all-white. He wondered aloud if his dorm mates even realized that their world is much more segregated than his. They didn't seem to see that "they're living all the time in a white world" and that most other people on the planet "live in multiple worlds."

As another young man put it: "We are always so concerned about making everyone comfortable with our presence when we are made uncomfortable every single day."

In addition to the play, these students put together a gallery of photographs of themselves on Tumblr ([#ITooAmHarvard](#)), holding signs with actual comments made by friends and classmates ("You're really articulate for a black girl"; "Are you all so fast because you spend so much time running from the cops?"), as well as responses to those comments ("No, I will not teach you how to 'twerk'"; "Please don't pet my hair, I am not an animal"). They're evocative images, filled with gravity and grace, humor and sadness.

This project lends voice to unusually gifted, hard-working young people—by any human standard—who nevertheless spend much of their lives hidden behind the projections of others. Along with the eloquent students at Northwestern University who are unionizing to press their case against financial exploitation of poor and often minority "amateur" athletes by the NCAA, #ITooAmHarvard is part of an emerging nationwide student movement led by—but not exclusive to—students of color of all sorts. Oh, and joined by feminists, poor whites, those

identified as gay/lesbian/transgender, and anyone else who has a clue of what it's like to be bullied. Together, they have begun a new kind of dialogue about belonging and worth. And they are turning a mirror on the very bad manners, shall we call it, of a society that buries them beneath the history-deprived in-your-face-ness of tone-deaf provocateurs who, much like Paula Deen, never really mean to hurt your feelings—and yet who feel “crucified” when someone points out that they have.

This mix of insult and innocence is what some social psychologists call “microaggression”—the small, often unintentional expressions of ignorance and offense. It is a blindness that is as much the product of segregation as disparate stop-and-frisk policies. It's not always as deadly as George Zimmerman's constructed fears. But it represents a significant part of the unexpressed and unaccounted-for tensions within our polity.

An actor's clear young voice lingers long after the performance: “Blackness to me is faith...having faith in what you don't see. We as a people often don't see validation. So for me, it's having faith that I am significant, valid, valuable, even though everything else is telling me I'm not.”

Most conversations about race in American higher education focus on the endless, unwinnable effort to defensively prove “merit.” With gentility, restraint and admirable integrity, #ITooAmHarvard shifts the frame of this contentious landscape and asks instead: What institutional *Weltanschauung* is it that indulges such brutal, breezy presumptions regarding those about whom we are basically so miserably ill-informed? Whence does the entitlement come that allows such profoundly ignorant encounters within any community, never mind Harvard's? Harvard! That ultimate self-promoting paragon of what the “civilized” world exalts as our best and brightest hope for peaceful human co-existence—yet here so persistently revealed as... otherwise.

Patricia J. Williams

On-line March 12, 2014 | [This article appeared in the March 31, 2014 edition of The Nation at http://www.thenation.com/article/178818/i-too-am-harvard-rocks-ivory-tower](http://www.thenation.com/article/178818/i-too-am-harvard-rocks-ivory-tower)