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BLACK ATLAS:

THE WEIGHT OF WHITE JUDGEMENT

By

Lauren Harvey

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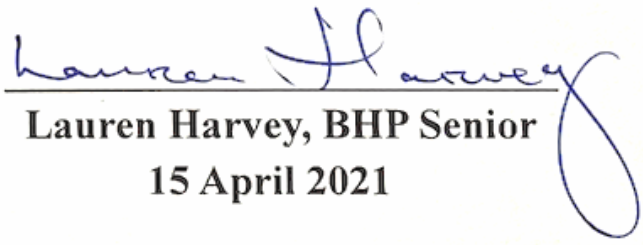
Signature: 

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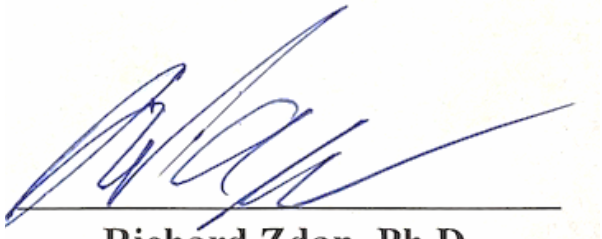
Thesis Advisor: Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

Despite living in a climate that touts that racism has been eliminated, true racial equality is still absent in the modern United States. My thesis research is a study of how American society identifies, categorizes, and reinforces stereotypes onto Black men, and how those expectations shape the personal identities that these men create. Grounded in a series of in-depth interviews with ten collegiate Black men, my research examines the hyper-focus that American society places on Black men, as well as the impact this fixation has on the way these men perceive both themselves and the world around them. I argue that my findings support the existence of a new sociological concept I am calling "Black Atlas" theory. Black Atlas theory stipulates that the lived experience of an American black man is tied inherently to defying the expectations of white society—of disproving stereotypes, learning specific, self-protective capital, and all the while, bearing the weight of the Black racial monolith on his shoulders. Black Atlas theory further argues that the lived experience of a Black American man means that he is constantly viewed as an example before he is viewed as an individual; chained simultaneously to defying white expectation and representing the entirety of the Black community.

Preface

While certain trends may be consistent across this pool of respondents, by no means is this project intended to create a holistic view of what it means to be a Black man in modern-day America. There exists no way to accurately encapsulate the lived experience of tens of millions of people by grouping them solely by the color of their skin. That was never the goal of this project. My research focuses on figuring out the divides between Black and white Americans; about stepping over gendered and racial lines and extending a hand to inform others. It is now

abundantly clear that the only people who can ever truly understand what it means to be a Black man in American are Black American men. My research in this project is intended as a starting point for racial discourse to come—how to dismantle both the conception of the Black racial monolith and remove the burden of white expectation from each and every Black Atlas. To quote the great W.E.B. DuBois, "How does it feel to be a problem?" is not a question that can be answered by a white woman with a sociology degree. That answer comes solely from this project's respondents, to whom I am eternally grateful.

INTRODUCTION

The myth of Atlas is one long-steeped in tragedy. Atlas is first referenced in *Theogony*, an ancient text from Greek poet Hesiod. In *Theogony*, Hesiod details the bloodlines and relationships of the gods and their messy construction of the universe. Supreme in power and strength, Zeus reigns over the heavens as the mightiest Greek god of all. Atlas, a titan, lacks these godly powers. Jealous of the gods' possession of heaven, Atlas leads his fellow titans to initiate war against the Greek gods, where the titans are ultimately defeated and punished. As Atlas was the leader of this insurrection, Zeus punishes him with an especially cruel task—commanding Atlas to "uphold broad Sky / with head and unwearied hands."[1] Picture the titan stooped over, spine breaking beneath the weight of the world, every heartbeat a reminder of his failure to invoke meaningful change. This is the story of Atlas—the figurehead of a failed insurrection, destined eternally to uphold the heavens as penance for his insubordination. To be Atlas is to be caught between worlds; caught in a hell of upholding heaven; trapped between sin and absolution; touching both but permanent in neither. That is the Atlas of ancient Greece, and it is now evident that a modern-day Atlas walks among us today.

I contest that modern-day Atlas is Black, Caribbean-American, Jamaican, African American, Afro-Latino; any Black man whom white society condemns for existing before even knowing him. Modern-day Atlas is burdened simultaneously by the inseparable burden of white expectation and his forced representation of the Black racial monolith. Like the Atlas of ancient Greece, he is burdened with carrying this weight—with the only exception being that our modern Black Atlas has not done anything to deserve his punishment. His only crime is that he was born Black, but in modern society, that is the greatest crime of all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The War on Black People

The "Black Atlas" construct of Black male identity is grounded in the historical and social context of American Black communities. One of the most important systems responsible for America's modern conception of Blackness is the 1980s "War on Drugs." Alexander refers to the War on Drugs as being one of the most powerful tools used to retard the growth (socially and economically) of modern Black communities in America.[2] Alexander's exploration of America's historical mistreatment of people of color establishes the foundation for Black Atlas theory—explaining how we got here, in the first place.

America has a long history of mistreating people of color, beginning from the first year of the country's founding. In the 1950s, the American Civil Rights Movement created a huge wave of civil rights reforms, and within the next two decades, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, abolishing the "Jim Crow system of discrimination in public accomodations employment, voting, education, and federally financed activities."[2] Unfortunately, however, the war to obtain equal rights (both in legislation and in practice) for Black Americans was far from over. As was seen in the Confederate South after the delegalization of slavery began, when one system of white supremacy fell, white elitists sought to establish a new one. As Alexander explains, "after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the public debate shifted focus from segregation to crime," effectively setting the stage for a new public enemy #1: criminals.[3] This authoritarian fervor peaked in the 1970's and 1980's, with President Ronald Reagan's administration initiating a "War on Drugs"—one that would more aptly prove to be a "War on Black People." In fact, Alexander refers to the War on Drugs and its subsequent slew of minority-targeting anti-drug policies as the rise of a new system of white hierarchical social control: a "New Jim Crow." The War on Drugs

prioritized the demonization and destruction of Black communities, with special disdain and hatred directed towards Black men. The steps leading into the War on Drugs appeared innocuous and innocent enough, starting with the passage of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970. This act "included a civil forfeiture provision authorizing the government to seize and forfeit drugs, drug manufacturing and storage equipment, and conveyances used to transport drugs," which intentionally avoided racially-charged language.[4] Written to sound as though it was protecting American citizens from the terrors of drugs, rather than as the beginnings of a new system of racial discrimiantion, this act went unchallenged.

The passage of this act marked a shift in modern American drug legislation—and was the first act of modern war against Black communities. In 1975, the landmark Supreme Court decision in the *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce* case "concluded [that] it was permissible under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment for the police to use race as a factor in making decisions about which motorists to stop and search."[5] The Supreme Court's decision to uphold the apparent constitutionality of racial profiling sent shockwaves through the Black communities, sending an incredibly clear message that the law would never defend people of color in America. Alexander explains that while "race is rarely the sole reason for a stop and search, it is frequently the *determinative* reason," and thereby is far too subjective to be deemed as providing the "equal protections" promised in the Fourteenth Amendment.[6] This established a dangerous precedent—one where the police were able to racially profile and stop any person they so choose, so long as they did not tell the person that they were detained solely because of the color of their skin. The gradual erosion of protections for Black Americans under the law began to accelerate, leaving room for discrimination to become not only normalized, but *embraced*, under the law.

The War on Drugs was waged in a fashion that seemed counterintuitive to its stated purposes. Rather than focusing efforts and energy on going after drug lords and kingpins, the War on Drugs disproportionately targeted lower-level offenders, including first-time dealers and individuals charged with petty drug possession.[7] In fact, "in 2005 … four out of five drug arrests were for possession," "one out five was for sales," and "most people in state prison for drug offenses [had] no history of violence or significant selling activity."[8] Because the War on Drugs was focused on drug distributors (most of whom are Black), rather than drug suppliers (most of whom are white), the purpose of the War on Drugs appears to be not to reduce crime rates, but rather to create another system of control that targets, demonizes, and punishes Black men and women.

The Black Racial Monolith

The War on Drugs was not the first system created to assert social control over Black Americans. Rather, the War on Drugs merely acted as the newest iteration of a long line of systemic control over American Black communities and the current mechanism whereby American society creates a Black racial monolith. The Black racial monolith refers to the ways in which modern American society views Black Americans: as faceless and homogenous, as largely interchangeable, and, of course, as criminals. The Black racial monolith is a unanimous mass into which society casts Black men, stripping them of their individual identities and grouping them together based solely on the color of their skin. Two halves of the same whole, the weight of Black racial monolith and white expectation are inextricable from one another, and the existence of this Black racial monolith further reinforces white expectations that Black Atlas bears.

Recognizing the shift of public enemy #1 from "Blacks" to "criminals" is critical to understanding how America changed the way they viewed Blacks—and how this impacted the way that Black individuals viewed themselves, as well. Alexander's "New Jim Crow" argument extends into the realm of mass media due to the fact that mass media was largely responsible for selling the Black criminality narrative the War on Drugs created. Every news article published contributed to the development of a bifurcated "Us versus Them" mentality between Black and white Americans. Before long, crack cocaine usage became associated exclusively with " 'crack whores', 'crack babies,' and 'gangbangers.'"[9] As crack was found overwhelmingly in minority neighborhoods, a link quickly emerged between Black people and drug usage.

Unfortunately, and as it often does, American entertainment media drew from sensational news articles and further supported a conception of Black culture as being inherently "gangsta."[10] Some of the most common media portrayals of American Blacks depict Blacks as "out-of-control, shameless, violent, oversexed, and generally undeserving,"[11] criminals that endanger white society. Mass media succeeds in pushing a narrative of monolithic Blackness as being inextricably characterized by struggle and crime—even in situations in which the media is attempting to avoid these stereotypes. Bryant discusses the unflattering depictions of Blackness in the media by examining a series of situational comedies from different time periods, beginning with 1974's "Good Times."[12] Despite the initial good intentions of "Good Times," the show's focus soon shifted from "the importance of family and integration" to hyperfocusing on one character (J.J.)—emphasizing his "undignified antics," "toothy grin," and "buffoonery."[13] This character's scripted ineptitude sent a message to viewers that the actions of Black men are goofy, unintelligent, and unimpressive. Before long, the show devolved from a well-intentioned depiction of contemporary Blackness into a parody of the same negative depictions of Blackness from which it

originally tried to distinguish itself. Blackness in the media is accompanied with a laugh track or a sympathetic sigh. Black people are not individuals to admire and look up to—they are stepping stones for other characters' advancements. Black people are side characters, supporting actors, unimportant other than to help white people succeed.

Furthermore, entertainment media depictions of Blackness are often structured around a "struggle story" that focuses on Blacks living in poverty, selling drugs, committing crimes, or being sexually promiscuous. Even in modern television shows like "Empire" (which focuses on a Black family's successful efforts to create a music production empire) still underscore stereotypes of Black violence, sexual promiscuity, and drug usage. Mainstream media's insistence that Black people are unstable, dangerous "predators"[14] established a dangerous link between Black people and inherent criminality—one that still persists, even today.

W.E.B. DuBois addresses the place of Black men in American society from a different angle, however. Rather than addressing the impact of mass media depictions of Blackness, DuBois addresses the physical state of Blackness, itself, as a handicap. Occupying a "uniquely unfortunate" place in society, DuBois describes how Black men possess a "double consciousness" of "warring ideals" of being both "American" and a "Negro."[15] DuBois's uniquely-Black "double consciousness" explains that the roles of being both Black and an American are utterly contradictory. To be an American is to have limitless opportunity and immeasurable autonomy; to be Black is to have one's growth retarded, one's opportunities blocked, and lived chained inherently both to the Black racial monolith and white expectation. In order to escape the limitations of this double consciousness, Black men must choose which role to perform: Blackness, and have their growth stunted, or Americanism, in which they have opportunities unfettered.

Furthermore, Cooley's "Looking Glass Self" acts as another tool to understand the impact that false narratives of Black criminality have on reinforcing the concept of monolithic Blackness in American Black communities. Cooley describes his theory of identity construction as follows:

> As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass … so in imagination we perceive in another's some thought of our appearance … and are variously affected by it.[16]

Cooley argues that the construction of the self-concept cannot occur absent of a society upon which to cast judgment on the individual. This judgment then pushes individuals to develop their identities to either match or reject the way society views them. In doing so, American Blacks embrace exactly the sort of performative racial categories described by DuBois, regardless of whether or not these performances are sincere.[17]

Becker explains similar means of identity construction in his "Labeling Theory," arguing that people who are viewed as criminals will end up becoming criminals, due to the pervasiveness and strength of the "criminal" label.[18] Applied to the impact of the Black racial monolith on young Black men, Becker's Labeling Theory implies that even if a label is untrue, it will still greatly impact an individual's development. As Alexander and Becker explain, the damage behind the "criminal" label resides not in the actual committal of crimes, but rather in the *perception* of being a felon. This critical argument is the crux of my research and the purpose of my thesis: understanding how this label creates and perpetuates misconceptions that implicate the way Black men are viewed and view themselves.

The synthesized application of these theories tell a discouraging story about how young Black men learn to view themselves through the lens of the Black racial monolith. These young men are not only learning, but *internalizing* the view that society has given them: that they are gangsters, criminals, and dangers to society. Regardless of how gentle or intelligent they may be, they view themselves this way nonetheless *because society only views them as thugs.* Unable to be

seen the way that they desire to be seen—or perhaps unable to create a self-concept outside of what negative media portrayals been always shoved down their throats—these young Black men oftentimes throw up their hands in frustration and actively become the very thing society assumes them to be. *This* is the perniciousness of the Black racial monolith and how it adds immeasurably to the weight Black Atlas comes to bear.

The Weight of White Expectation

The weight of Black Atlas is two-fold. It begins first with the imposition and internalization of the Black racial monolith; it is then further exacerbated by the weight of white expectation. The two halves act in tandem with one another, with the Black racial monolith encompassing the social misconceptions of Blackness and the weight of white expectation reinforcing it. White expectation is a reaction to the Black monolith—upon understanding Blackness as being homogeneous and criminal, white expectation then shifts to treat all Black people in a manner consistent with the Black monolithic conception. This treatment results in people acting on the assumptions or beliefs associated with the monolith, including imposing prejudices, discrimination, and alternate means of "othering" onto Black individuals.

A primary and critical consequence of the white expectation imposed upon them is that Black men learn an extremely specific kind of cultural capital. Their development of skills, knowledge, ideals, and principles is learned both formally and informally—both from within the confines of an academic environment and outside of it. Irrelevant of where the white expectation was first learned, the fact remains that white expectation plays a critical role in the development of cultural capital in Black communities.

Before delving deeper into this topic, however, it is critical to note that while class and race are two distinct concepts, both are inextricably linked to one another through America's class system, and thereby are reciprocally influential on each other. Based on the access that different social classes have to means of education, different classes learn entirely different sets of cultural capital, which allows for the maintenance of America's hierarchical social structure. Furthermore, access to different kinds of cultural capital further widens the opportunity gap afforded to lower-income versus higher-income communities. These connections, which may seem unimportant at first, are actually essential to creating a way out of a lower-income community and enter the mainstream workforce—a workforce that favors the cultural capital the upper-class possesses.

Elijah Anderson argues that the use of violence is directly built into the lives of many, describing *his* code of the street as a compilation of "informal rules of behavior" centered around a "desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence."[19] Applying Garfinkel's ethnomethodological[20] approach, Anderson explains that the code that dictates behavior in inner city communities operates solely as a polarizing binary, divided only into "decent" and "street." "Decent" culture emphasizes "deep religious values, a work ethic and desire to get ahead," and a "strong disapproval of drug use, violence, and teenage pregnancy."[21] In contradistinction, "street" behavior is synonymous with the rejection of white society and its values, including the 'white values' of "doing well in school, being civil to others, and speaking Standard English."[22] Furthermore, "street" culture includes possessing "contempt for conventional values and behavior."[23] In essence, to be "street" is to be Black, and the only way to be "decent" is to assimilate to white society and its conventions, entirely leaving behind the culture of one's community, Black or otherwise.

Beyond the scope of determining a moral binary in these neighborhoods, Anderson also explores how the usage of violence differs as perpetrated by the state/government versus by the people in a specific community. Weber defined the "State" as a governing entity that "is considered the sole source of the 'right' to use violence"[24]—Anderson's "code of the street," a natural outgrowth of Weber's "State," defines the concept differently. Whereas Weber's "State" dictated the monopoly and legitimate use of violence of a governing body or group, Anderson's "code of the street" acts as a modern form of governance in which individuals involved in the communities (rather than a governing body) dictate what rules to follow and how to survive on rough inner-city streets.

Cultural capital does not end merely with patterns of behavior and the conduction of violence. Rather, as previously mentioned, the education that one receives (both formally and informally) is instrumental to the formation of one's capital and the skills he develops. Bourdieu's discussion of this "habitus" explains how "the type of schooling [one] received" provides a person with a "set of basic, deeply interiorised master patterns."[25] The discrepancy between these low-income Black communities and the rest of modern society begins with the formal education available to Black children—or, more aptly, the lack thereof.

There has been extensive research done pertaining to the intersection of race and education, which has yielded unsurprising and disheartening results. Picower's studies on racism in the American education system found that many of the racist attitudes found in mainstream society persist even in an educational environment.[26] Picower's findings expose a worrisome trend that extrapolates out to many other white teachers' views when teaching in predominantly-Black communities: that Black people are inherently scary and dangerous, and are entirely different from

white people. This misconception then directly impacts the formal education that these men receive, creating a marked difference between their cultural capital versus that of their peers.

Anderson addresses this judgment, explaining that, "As the young people come to see the school and its agents as unreceptive to them, embracing the oppositional [street] culture becomes more important as a way to salvage self-esteem."[27] Young Black Americans are entering school, facing discrimination and racial profiling that disses and discourages them, and then are making the conscious decision to turn to the streets, where there may be less opportunity for social advancement, but at least there is a degree of cohesion and belonging. Furthermore, it is imperative to note that, for many young Black folks in these communities, turning to the street is not their first option. Rather, many do so after many experiences of being written off, discounted, ignored, and discriminated against in their formal school environment. Ogbu also studied the role that students' race played in their success in formal educational settings, and found a consistent pressure to "act white" and perform behavior in school that caters to the white expectations embedded in America's public education system.[28] Built with provisions that favor white standards, these "institutional preferences" about the 'right way' to act, speak, write, and behave in a formal educational settings "evolve into institutionalized inequality, as differences come to be defined as deficits."[29]

As the cultivation of cultural capital begins with both formal and informal education, the chasm between mainstream and Black society widens early. For young men in these communities, the streets often act as their most influential teacher, due largely to the discouraging educational communication mentioned previously. When it comes to knowledge and skills picked up from formal institutions, environment and income play a huge role in determining what an individual is taught. Lareau explored these income-based class differences, identifying that the social and

cultural capital obtained by the lower class research subjects was not necessarily "bad." Absent of a value judgement, Lareau's argument is that the retarding aspect preventing social advancement for low-income communities is not that they are not learning useless skills, but rather that they are *not* learning a set of very specific and privileged cultural capital. The lack of Black males' development of this specific set of capital then implicates the ways in which Black men understand and internalize what it means to be Black. The cultural capital between Black and mainstream society looks impossibly, irreconcilably different. This formally-fostered disconnect of the development of capital necessary for mainstream social success is largely responsible for the growing chasm between mainstream white versus Black society.

Lacking the proper cultural capital necessary to join the workforce present in mainstream society and under immense pressure to "feed and clothe themselves and their families,"[30] these young men incrementally[31] begin to engage more and more with the underground drug-dealing economy as "a means of survival."[32] While oftentimes necessary to short-term survival, once one has adapted the mannerisms, behaviors, and expectations of life on the street, it can prove impossible to escape that environment. The question remains, then: How can these young men escape their environment and genuinely begin to partake in the mainstream economy?

Escaping appears anything but straightforward. Anderson argues the "resulting stereotypes" from media representation are "so broadly applied that anyone from the community who dresses [or] looks that way, is thereby placed at odds with conventional society."[33] Obviously, young Black men cannot change the fact that they look like young Black men, and that, in and of itself, brings on judgement from mainstream society. However, these young men can control the *degree* to which they adhere to society's stereotypes of them, via their deliberate participation in their community's counterculture. Enter code-switching, described by Bourdieu as the ability to use

"self-censorship" to choose the "'level' of a language" used in conversation.[34] One's ability to change one's vernacular and behavior in order to adapt to circumstances is critical to his successful integration into that specific situation. Anderson expands on Bourdieu's concept of code-switching, writing that the practice also applies to changing behavioral rules based on interpreting different situations. Anderson writes that there is "a great deal of 'code-switching'" in Black American communities, where "decent people, especially young people, often put a premium on the ability to code-switch."[35] The reason for this premium is clear: it allows Black youth to change their presentation of themselves in situations where it benefits them. The ability to code-switch almost appears as means through which Black Atlas can escape his burden.

However, not all Black youths in these urban communities are able to smoothly shift from persona to persona. Youth intensely engaged with the streets (i.e. selling drugs, removed from their formal education, embracing their countercultural stereotypes and posturing as "thugs") are significantly less comfortable turning off those behaviors to code-switch into a person that has been sanitized and accepted into mainstream society. How effectively an individual can code-switch often becomes a matter of life or death, with individuals simultaneously being wary to not be viewed as targets and being worried to be viewed as potential gang members, either.

The weight that Black Atlas bears is an inextricable combination of the Black racial monolith and white expectation. The monolithic misconception of Blackness and the weight of white expectation create a negative feedback loop in which the existence of white expectation perpetuates the existence of the Black racial monolith. The presentation of the incessant "criminal" label forces Black Atlas to engage with the label, internalize it, and react accordingly. He is forced to identify as either "street" or "decent," fluctuating constantly between the two. Having internalized the "criminal" label, he then is forced into a Black racial monolith, in which he is

burdened by acting on behalf of his entire race every time he speaks. The existence of false, monolithic racial conceptions of Blackness further encourages the existence of white expectation, and the cycle continues, Black Atlas trapped beneath it. Crippled simultaneously by the weight of the Black racial monolith and by white expectation, it is astounding he remains standing, at all.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methods and Procedures

The participants involved in my thesis research and subsequent data collection are all self-identified, collegiate Black men identified through convenience sampling methods. Data was collected through a series of one-to-two-hour long interviews conducted over a video chat platform, in which I spoke with participants at-length about issues pertaining to their family lives, experienced discrimination, and, most importantly, their own self-concepts. At the time I submit my undergraduate thesis, I have successfully met with ten participants.

It was my original intention to complete an in-depth, interview-based study with Black men who had and had never been incarcerated in an effort to determine whether or not serving time in the American criminal justice system would heighten, lessen, or have no impact on an individual's self-concept as a "criminal." Regrettably, due to an unexpected global pandemic occurring just as I was preparing to begin data collection, I was unable to gain access to New Jersey-based halfway houses and other societal re-entry programs in a timely manner to complete my full research plan in advance of my deadline. Fortunately, I was still able to conduct interviews with my control group of non-incarcerated, Black, collegiate men.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Weight He Bears

The Black Racial Monolith

When speaking with my respondents, it became evident that there exists an invisible weight that rests on the shoulders of Black men. This burden is comprised of two indissoluble parts: the Black racial monolith and white expectation. It is not enough to merely list the two-fold nature of this burden. In order to understand the true impact that the Black racial monolith has on Black Atlas, we have to understand the compositions of these weights, as well.

As a result of being thoroughly demonized, and with white society operating on the misconceptions popularized through the media, Black men face incessant pressure to act on behalf of the entirety of the Black population. Despite the fact that the War on Drugs created a social identity for Black people as being a homogenous mass of criminals, Blackness is not a monolith. In proof of fact, sixty percent of participants self-identified as something other than "Black" when I asked their race. There were four different racial identities self-identified by respondents, further highlighting the utterly unique and infinitely complex breadth of racial identity that being merely labeled "Black" erases. Several respondents made no distinctions in identifying as "African American or Black," calling the two identities "synonymous." Other respondents pushed back against using "African American" and "Black" interchangeably, arguing that the two were distinct from one another. One respondent explained that he had no no ties to Africa and thereby felt he would misidentify himself if he claimed to be "African American." Other respondents identified strictly as Caribbean-American; others, Afro-Latino; others, as immigrants living in America. Despite the fact that a vast majority of respondents did not self-identify as Black, they explained that when they are forced to check boxes to indicate

their race, their choices are often a binary: "Black" or "African American." Nowhere is there any nuance or acknowledgement of Caribbean-Americans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Guyanese, Panamanians, or any of the other hundreds of potential racial identities. Consequently, the Black Atlas construct is not intended to support the conception that Blackness is a monolith, but to highlight the fact that it *isn't*. Black Atlas represents every man who finds himself forced to check the box labeled "Black" for his racial identity; typecast into representing a race he may not even feel he belongs to. One can almost feel the weight of the monolith settling back into his shoulders.

Secondly, assuming that every Black man is innately representative of an entire race of people puts an obscene amount of pressure on him, forcing him to conduct himself in ways he may not have otherwise. When I asked one respondent how he viewed himself, he poignantly said, "I see myself as an example." Unsure of what he meant, I asked him to clarify, and he explained that with every action he took, he felt he was representing every Black man. The respondent elaborated, explaining that he felt as though every step he walked and conversation he had with someone, he had to take great care to come across as being non-threatening and *create a message that not all Black men are scary*. Another respondent described this constant self-consciousness as feeling obligated to present himself as a "watered-down version" of himself; sanitized to be more palatable for his audience.

This kind of self-rendering was consistent across respondents, with more participants also echoing this statement. Respondents explained that, when conversing with someone outside of Black spheres, they became incredibly self-aware of their actions, vocal inflections, and physical presence. One respondent explained that he would take care to appear less physically intimidating by smiling more; another explained how he took care not to raise his voice if he

could avoid it. Another respondent explained how it feels as though hot-button topics (such as race) can't be spoken about all the time outside of Black spheres, due largely to a feeling of misunderstanding and disconnect between Blacks and whites. Nearly every respondent expressed a self-conscious feeling of people's judgments in non-Black spaces. More explicitly, there was a common consensus among respondents that they felt pressure to change someone's mindset on what it "means to be a Black man" when they spoke. One respondent explained that he feels a compulsion to "change [the] stereotype" associated with him "from the beginning" of *every* encounter. When asked what kinds of conceptions the respondents were looking to change, the answer centered around some variation of "proving that not all Black men are dangerous" or "proving that all Black men aren't intimidating." Another respondent echoed these sentiments, explaining that "if one Black person come up to you and do something wrong, you'll think the whole society of Black men are the same way." To be a Black Atlas means to be representative of his whole race before he can even represent himself; to constantly work to change people's conceptions of himself every time he speaks. This performance of "not all Black men!" turns Black men from individuals into racial spokespeople—a burden unjust and undeserved. This racial monolith conception is a weight, omnipresent; a show that starts over with every white interaction.

White Expectation

Just as the Black racial monolith sits heavily on the shoulders of Black Atlas, so too does the weight of white expectation. White expectation, a collection of assumptions and stereotypes about Blackness, builds responsively to society's conception of the Black racial monolith. Subsequently reinforced by the Black racial monolith, white expectation largely impacts the

ways in which Black men grow to view themselves. In order to discern what these white expectations entail, I asked the respondents their thoughts about how they see Blackness portrayed in mass media (in both news and entertainment):

> "Black people in media aren't portrayed well. When a Black person commits a crime, they're a thug, [but] you'll see another race [commit a crime] and they'll say he's mentally disturbed or has mental issues and try to justify his crime."

> "[Portrayals are now] starting to take a better turn, whereas before, Blackness in the media was funny. It was comical. The main character would be white, and they would always have a Black best friend. And the best friend would be not as smart, kind of foolish, acting a fool … not something you wanna look up to."

> "A lot of Black movies are about crime or violence or the hood, and it's like, I get it, you're trying to portray what goes on in these areas … but not every Black story or Black movie produced has to be a struggle story. Why can't it ever be a regular movie about Black people succeeding?"

Not a single respondent had anything positive to say about the way Blackness is portrayed in the media, other than the fact that it is getting incrementally better. Keep in mind, however, that getting "better" in this case just means that the media isn't using Black folks as a punchline as frequently as they formerly did. Respondents echoed the same sentiments presented in Bryant's argument: that stories of Black success are few and far between. To the question of "what is a Black man?", the media's answer is simple: a punching bag.

Even more personally, I then asked the respondents what misconceptions or stereotypes they grew up hearing about what it meant to be a Black man:

> "People think I'm always angry."
> "If you can't run fast, you're not Black."
> "[Black men] don't do schoolwork."
> "Playing basketball, being into sneakers, … trying to get a ton of girls as fast as you can."
> "People assume that I'm involved in drugs or violence or something."
> "[Black men] drink, smoke, smoke weed."
> "[Being] poor, not willing to work for themselves; not intelligent."

Almost invariably, respondents' answers centered around being perceived as being aggressive, violent, hypersexualized, substance-abusing, unambitious, naturally athletic, dangerous, and unintelligent. Obviously, we know that these misconceptions are just that: misconceptions. However, the lack of accuracy of these statements does not remove the sting from them, nor does it stop them from having a real-world impact on these men. It is also important to note that these expectations do not exist in a vacuum. These judgements are not made solely by entertainment media attempting to sell a narrative of Black pain. It is through this translation of baseless stereotypes into real-world, personal applications that the full, crushing weight of white expectation is felt.

Unfortunately, many of these white expectations often come from educators or members of law enforcement. In order to grasp how these stereotypes translated into real life situations, I asked respondents what kinds of judgements they grew up facing. The majority of respondents explained that they grew up in rough, crime-dense areas, oftentimes with extended family members living with them. As children, participants were exposed to varying levels of crime and violence and spoke candidly about growing up surrounded by drugs, violence, and "not a lot of great people." Two respondents' descriptions of street names adjacent to their childhood homes encapsulate the climates in which they were raised, as they explained that they learned at a young age to avoid "Murder Manor" and "Death Avenue." Another respondent, addressing the violence, death, and poverty he viewed first-hand as a child simply stated: "It happens."

Consequently (or perhaps causally), respondents that grew up in these grittier environments explained that the educational opportunities they received were scarce and often underwhelming. Despite attending school in these rougher areas, some respondents explained that they did receive support and encouragement from some of the adults with whom they

interacted. However, there are two critical aspects to note with these few positive, school-related adult connections: firstly, that the majority of these connections were made with sports coaches or religious leaders *outside* of an academic climate, and secondly (imperatively), these role models were almost always Black and shared similar experiences. The support that these young men received during their formative years was important and positive; however, it is unfortunate fact that these connections did nothing to lessen the weight of white expectation in academic settings. Heartbreakingly, one respondent emotionally recalled being told by his fifth grade teacher that he shouldn't even dream of going to community college—that "I'm just gonna be a statistic."

This respondent's example of being underestimated and written off by teachers is unfortunately not an isolated one; similar testimonies are also present in studies and ethnographic work by Anderson and Ogbu. Writing on the behalf of one of his respondents, Anderson wrote that "overwhelmed by clothes, the look, or the swagger, [teachers] cannot discern" the difference between a kid that looks "street" versus "decent."[36] Similarly, Ogbu revealed a similar trend, explaining that what harms young Black individuals' performances in school is a communication and cultural gap between Black students and their white teachers.[37] Educators working in these predominantly-Black, crime-riddled areas often judge every young Black boy as a "statistic"; just another kid headed for a life of crime, thereby implicitly unworthy of receiving any formal education.

The respondent-wide, shared experience of having teachers and people in positions of authority doubt their abilities is indicative of a greater theme: one in which white expectation negatively impacts the education and support that Black Atlas receives. In not giving Black students the tools to succeed in an academic capacity (much less the *support* also necessary for

success), these educators contribute to the ever-widening chasm between Black Atlas and the rest of society. Lareau's point about differing kinds of capital is substantiated again here: with educators refusing to support students equally, students thereby learn and internalize differing kinds of cultural capital. Receiving different expectations and reactions from people in formal, institutionally-focused positions of power reinforces a sentiment in Black Atlas's mind: that he is unworthy of time or support. This is the pervasiveness of the white expectation that Black Atlas bears—he will be told he will be nothing, before he has even tried to become *anything*.

Unfortunately, these white expectations do not exist merely in an academic capacity. One of the most obvious examples of the impact of the racial discrimination implicit in the weight of white expectation are racially-charged interactions with members of law enforcement. I asked respondents to relay any interactions they had with the American criminal justice system, and the responses, yet again, echoed a collective experience of injustice:

> "Whenever I see the cops in my neighborhood, I get nervous. Because they're probably gonna randomly search me; they're gonna harass me; they're gonna say I fit whoever's description."

> A second respondent recalled being a little boy, walking down the street with his cousin one night, when he "saw a white male come out his house and say, 'I'm calling the cops on you.' … as a kid, I didn't know why. But now, looking back, that's prejudice. It's dark at night and he saw two Black kids walking down the street."

Another respondent, still, explained to me how his first encounter with the police was when he was at a convenience store with his father. He recalled the police entering the store and "asking to see [his] waistband" to check for weapons. He was twelve. The respondent continued: "I didn't do anything. I walked to the store." But for Black Atlas, that's all that it takes. If one's skin color is indicative of criminality, how is Black Atlas ever supposed to expel the crippling weight of racial profiling; of white expectation?

After discussing at-length the ways in which society stereotypes Black men, I thought it necessary to ask the respondents if there is anything about them that surprises people. Their answers varied:

> "People are surprised that I'm a good person."
> "...how empathetic I am. How I'm able to put myself in their shoes and … understand where they're coming from. I know what to say to a person and know how to make them feel better."

A third respondent explained that he is currently developing his brand as a photographer and has accumulated an impressive portfolio of work. Despite his natural talent, however, the respondent stated that people are always in disbelief that someone from his background is interested in art. Beyond their initial skepticism, the respondent explained that some people doubt his abilities, and some people have even asked if the work was really his. Yet another respondent stated that people didn't believe that he wasn't a playboy, given his amount of female friends and the belief that all Black men are sex-obsessed.

The answer to my question was overwhelmingly that people are surprised by the kindness or creativity of these men. These Black men are clearly conceptualized by those who meet them as being inherently demonized and dangerous—to the point where people are genuinely surprised to learn that these Black Atlases are actual people with emotions and interests. People are surprised by their kindness, their creative ability, their ambition, their lack of sexual appetite. Every surprised, "You can't dance?" or "You're _____ for a Black guy!" further emburdens Black Atlas. Saying that "You're not like most Black guys!" is not the compliment white society believes it to be. The audacity to be surprised that Black men are individual people is one that is uniquely white; and, by the same token, one that continually reinforces and contributes to the weight on Black Atlas's shoulders.

When these two halves of Black Atlas's weight (white expectation and the Black racial monolith) are taken together, it creates a haunting picture of what it means to be a Black man in modern-day America: to become a symbol before one is a person. This closed loop is iterative, constantly taking in feedback from the expectations of white society that redefine the Black racial monolith. Black Atlas (and every other man who sees himself in this light) is trapped under the burden of stereotypes and misconceptions; unable to raise his arms to defend himself from abuse without being called a thug. No other race is so buried beneath this weight, forced to change people's minds before they even know him. No other race starts every interaction with a guilty verdict—this struggle is uniquely that of Black Atlas. Every stereotype circulated and misconception drawn from it adds to Black Atlas's weight of representing an entire race of people with every action. These stereotypes are themselves destruction, constantly adding pressure to the world pulverizing Black Atlas's shoulders.

White expectation, then, is doubt of the potential for Black greatness; disbelief that Black men can be anything other than failures or criminals. These harmful stereotypes create a context in which mainstream society links Black men with danger; with violence; with distrust and immoral character. As previously mentioned, these conceptions do not exist in a vacuum. And therein resides the next task Black Atlas must endure: finding a way to defend himself against his burden.

Defensive Tactics

Upon recognizing the two-fold weight of Black Atlas's burden, we now understand the construction of the Black racial monolith, the stereotypes that sustain it, and how the Black racial monolith and white expectation create a negative feedback loop to reinforce the weight Black

Atlas bears. The existence of a Black monolith—the latest system of social control over Black men in America—propagates the continued existence of white expectation. Consequently, DuBois's "double consciousness," Becker's Labeling Theory, and Cooley's Looking Glass Self can be synthesized to further examine the Black Atlas construct, asking: Do you accept the label that society has forced upon you, or do you resist it? The question also implicitly asks: How do you defend yourself from the expectations of white society, which push you into a homogenous racial monolith? In order to discern the ways in which these young men created their self-concepts under the weight of this two-fold burden, I asked them a series of description-based questions. I first asked them to explain how their friends would describe them:

> "Sensitive, emotional, energetic, friendly."
> "Loyal, compassionate, [with a] protective side that could be good or bad for you."
> "Fun, outgoing, supportive."
> "Patient, always happy, different, kind, loving."

I then asked them how they would describe themselves:

> "Carefree, but how I treat you is dependent on you. Adventurous, self-motivated, confident … introvert."
> "Loyal, passionate, loving, multi-talented, … likes trying to go outside the box."
> "Happy."
> "Kind, caring, compassionate."

The contrast between these descriptions and the stereotypical labels applied to Black men as violent, aggressive, sex-obsessed, angry, dangerous, uncaring, and untrustworthy could not be more stark.

I asked the respondents these questions in this order in the hopes of seeing consistency in their answers for the ways in which their friends and themselves describe the respondent. Should the respondents' self-descriptions be applied through Cooley's "Looking Glass Self," their self-concepts would clearly match. However, it is important to note two key aspects of this line

of questioning: one, that the adjectives used to describe the respondent from his and his friends' perspectives would of course match, given the presumed closeness of that relationship, and two, that these responses do not explain how the disconnect between respondents' versus society's conception of them impacts Black men. Appreciating these two points, I then asked participants how they dealt with society viewing them in such jarring contrast to the way they viewed themselves.

One respondent admitted that he internalized a lot of the violence he experienced in his childhood and later grew up adhering to the stereotype of being a scary, violent Black man. He spent years in therapy in order to reign in his anger issues, and spoke proudly of how far he's come in terms of controlling his emotions. Another respondent admitted to feeling as though he couldn't trust people, resulting in his feeling "scared of vulnerability" and not trusting others to give him the same positive attention he gives them. Nearly half of the respondents self-identified as having developed anger issues and distrust in others as a consequence of these stereotypes, further supporting how the internalization of negative labels increases the weight Black Atlas carries.

However, not all of the respondents developed issues with dealing with their emotions as a consequence of the imposition of white expectation forcing them into a monolithic identity. In fact, many respondents explained how embracing the burden of the Black racial monolith can also be used as a defensive strategy. Rather than attempting to separate oneself entirely from the monolith, some respondents explained that they sometimes would seek out ways to reconnect to the monolithic Black identity. Respondents discussed joining groups focused on Black identity as children, seeking out friendships with other Black individuals, and joining Black fraternities as adults as means to *reaffirm* their Black identities in conjunction with the Black racial monolith.

One participant explained how adhering to the Black monolith can become a defensive strategy to combat the expectations of the white world, stating that there is a certain "comfort" that comes from being in an "entirely Black space." The respondent continued:

> "When you're in an entirely Black space, there's just … a different understanding. It's a mutual agreement … almost like a brotherhood. Just like, an unspoken, mutual agreement that, 'Okay, yeah, we're all chill here.' … There's just a comfort. There's just a comfort that comes from being in a completely-Black space."

As the respondent explained, while Blackness is not a monolith, there is a degree of in-group solidarity between the men that are typecast into homogenized Blackness. In situations where they are surrounded by other Black individuals, respondents explained that there was a sense of being able to relax. In a room where everyone else is struggling under the same weight of the Black monolith, respondents explained, these situations act as a break from the white world—one in which Black men do not need to worry about being perceived as thugs or gangsters. Embracing the construct of monolithic Blackness creates a sense of Black solidarity against a white world; effectively turning tools of white expectation back against mainstream society.

However, in many situations, it proves impossible to surround oneself with other members of the Black monolith. The weight of white expectation, lifted when surrounded by other members of the American Black community, soon returns in full; the absolution of this weight does not last beyond the timeframe of these in-group engagements. Participants stated that the heaviest aspect of white expectation imposed upon them were the labels that were associated with the Black monolith. Explaining that they grew up conscious of the labels that society had cast on them, many respondents revealed that they deliberately took measures to

distance themselves from these false conceptions. However, not all respondents felt the weight of these misconceptions as heavily as others.

It is imperative to reiterate that respondents came from a wide array of socioeconomic backgrounds, and that race and class, while obviously not conceptually interchangeable, prove exceedingly difficult to isolate from one another in terms of guiding the lived experience of *any* individual, including Black men. While certain trends were consistent across respondents, there was a fascinating difference that emerged between lower-income and average-income respondents: one in which certain respondents *knew* innately that they were Black, while others *had to learn* that they were Black.

This intersection of race and class impacts the specific cultural capital that Black boys acquire and, in doing so, also impacts the development of their racial identities. Consequently, depending on the economic background in which these respondents were raised, the Black Atlas construct manifests in a slightly different fashion. Forty percent of respondents self-identified as growing up in largely suburban areas; the other sixty percent self-identified as being from "poor," "rough," or "low-income" environments. A trend quickly emerged between the higher-income versus lower-income respondents wherein race became a much more important identifier for respondents from lower-income communities. Respondents that grew up in houses with higher incomes placed less of an emphasis on the development of their racial identities, while respondents who grew up in lower-income environments placed a greater emphasis on the development of their racial identities.

The respondents from suburban areas consistently spoke about being the "only Black kid" in their hometown of predominantly-white, middle-class families. Contrary to what one might imagine, growing up as the "only Black kid" did not force respondents to grow up

cognizant of their racial identities. Rather, they grew up largely *unaware* of them. I spoke with one respondent about his views on Black media portrayals, and he described how, due to feeling that he "didn't fit into the media description" of Blackness, he "didn't really think of [himself] as Black until sixth grade." This same respondent explained how he felt that there were specific stereotypes and behaviors to which Black people had to adhere to in order to "be Black." The respondent continued:

> "I think the picture-perfect media portrayal of a Black person would be a democrat, good at dancing, athletic, protests, social justice warrior, says 'Black Lives Matter.' … If you don't check all those boxes, you're kinda ostracized, in a way."

This respondent explained that he "didn't act the way" that the media portrayed what "it meant to be Black, so how could [he] call [himself] that? It didn't make sense." Feeling as though he couldn't find an identity in either mass media depictions or white expectation stereotypes, this respondent expressed that "being Black isn't the highest point of my identity."

If one comes from a middle-class upbringing, there appears to be a critical turning point, however, in one's life where he *learns* he is Black. A second suburban-based respondent explained that what made him *realize* he was Black was his first (and only) interaction with the police.

> "The only thing that made [my racial identity] real for me was one time, when I got pulled over, and it was a new car and I didn't have my license plate on the front. I was on the phone with my dad … and I was like, 'Oh, Dad, the license plate is in the trunk. Let me go get out and get it.' And he was like, *'No*. Do not get out of the car. Because you are a Black male and you're leaving the car and [the police officer] doesn't know what you're gonna do.' And in that moment, I was like, '*Oh, shit. I am a Black man*.'

The fact that respondents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can pinpoint an exact moment in which they *realized* they were Black further serves to highlight the complexity of the Black racial monolith. The fact that some people homogenized into this racial category can be unaware

of their Blackness reinforces the fact that the Black racial monolith exists solely as a tool used to exert social control over Black people.

In contradistinction, many of the lower-income respondents recalled being keenly aware of their racial identities at a young age. Many of them lamented on wishing they could change their physical appearances as children so as to receive different treatment in society. One respondent recalled being aware of his skin color at a very young age:

> "When I was younger, I [wanted to] change my skin complexion, because years ago, there was this thing against dark-skinned people. Dark-skinned people were made fun of, always called names, especially in school. That would've been something I would change [if I could]..."

Other respondents echoed this sentiment, explaining that as youths, many of them wished to change the texture of their hair or other distinguishing racial characteristics. The privilege of not being aware of one's skin color at a young age appears to be a luxury reserved for the middle-class.

A particularly interesting point regarding the impact of cultural capital on the development of racial identity emerges when discussing the role of modern American policing in the construction of the Black Atlas theory. One suburban-based respondent also explained his views on the police:

> "It's important to have a police presence [in a community]. Because I'll tell you what: I trust the police more than I trust a gang member. [The police] have a code of conduct. They wouldn't just shoot you in the face if you didn't have a gun, yourself. … I didn't have any experience where I thought the police officer was genuinely gonna take my life. … I just treated the officer with respect and I was fine. … I guess it's natural to fear the police. I think everyone fears the police."

This respondent's view of the police as simultaneously being something necessary to ensure safety and something that it is "natural to fear" exemplifies the dissonance felt between Black and mainstream society. Despite his middle-class, suburban upbringing, this respondent still

grapples with his racial awareness, and, even if he does not fully embrace his Black racial identity, he subconsciously fears law enforcement as a consequence of his race. Regardless of socioeconomic background, a common trend emerged between lower-income and higher-income respondents: one of a sense of wariness of the police.

Despite a seeming commonality between classes regarding inherent wariness of law enforcement, suburban-based respondents' descriptions of their self-concepts deviated significantly from lower-income respondents. The data suggests that living in a specific income bracket impacts both the formation of one's racial identity and cultural capital that one learns as a consequence of one's race. This argument is further exemplified by the incredible distinction between "I didn't really think of myself as Black" versus sentiments to the effect of, "I grew up wishing I *wasn't* Black/I grew up wishing I wasn't so dark-skinned/I wish my hair didn't look like this." Growing up cognizant of one's racial identity versus realizing it at a much older age is critical to the cultural capital one learns and internalizes, thereby making one's socioeconomic status linked significantly to the formation of one's racial identity.

Furthermore, the application of Becker, Garfinkel, and Bourdieu's respective theories allows us to comprehend how identity formation is influenced largely by understanding one's racial identity. The synthesis of these theories supports my argument that the cultural capital Black men develop stems directly from the Black racial monolith. After Black men learn the habitus necessary to survive in their given environments, they then internalize this cultural capital. As the cultural capital one develops is a consequence of the Black racial monolith in which one lives, the internalization of this habitus is therefore an internalization of Black racial monolith. This internalization fundamentally changes the ways in which Black men construct their self-concept.

This is not to say that all men adhere to the "criminal" label, however. In fact, the vast majority of respondents expressed frustration with the "criminal" label attached to the Black racial monolith, and set out to defy it with the defensive tactics described above. The Black monolith is constantly reinforced by white expectation, which pushes an incessant narrative of Black crime and of Blacks being inherently dangerous. Constantly reaffirmed by white expectation, the Black monolith feels utterly inescapable. To Becker's point about the pervasiveness of this "criminal" label being attached to mainstream society's conception of Blackness, even the *rejection* of this conception still takes Black criminality into account. The formation of Black Atlas's identity is built largely from the negation of the Black racial monolith, and it is vital to note that whether the respondents identified themselves as internalizing and acting on these socially-imposed labels or not does not matter, as *they still were using the label to construct their identities.* Becker's Labeling Theory still applies—even efforts to defy the "criminal" label are still tied inherently to it, reinforcing both Becker and Garfinkel's arguments to the pervasiveness of labels on the construction of personal identity.

In insisting that he is not a criminal, a Black man still constructs his identity understanding the white expectation associated with the Black racial monolith, then works to prove those expectations wrong. The "criminal" label attached to the Black racial monolith, despite being baseless and inaccurate, still remained so pervasive as to fundamentally shift the ways in which these men created their self-concepts. Both the respondents who internalized this "dangerous"/"scary"/"criminal" label as being socially-inherent to Blackness *and* those who vehemently rejected it both found themselves tied inextricably to the toxicity of the label. The way in which Black Atlas creates his self-concept with the weight of the society's judgment on

his shoulders is by clinging to the labels imposed upon him until he can muster the strength to attempt to prove them wrong.

Another defensive tactic common among respondents was experience with an "overprotective" parent attempting to shield their sons from the negative assumptions inherent to the Black racial monolith. Another respondent, from a single-mother household, recalled how his mother was extremely protective of the people with whom he associated:

> "She sheltered me a lot, and I didn't understand that until recently. Like, I couldn't go down the street, I couldn't do this and that like my other friends were doing. I didn't like my mom for that. Like, why couldn't I go down the street and play basketball? … But I finally understand why, especially seeing where my other friends are at now."

Respondents explained how these protective efforts took the form of controlling who their sons hung out with, how their sons dressed, talked, and even how they wore their hair. One respondent recalled that growing up, he learned that he had to dress well and "be presentable" in order to be taken as seriously as a white man would be regarded. This respondent explained how he grew up with an emphasis on the importance of professional presentation in white-dominated spaces. Strikingly, forty percent of respondents explained that their parents were hyper-focused on controlling the length of their hair—namely, in keeping it as short as possible. One respondent was especially passionate about his hair and struggled with understanding his father's rule that he couldn't grow it out until he was in high school:

> "[I was] forced to keep my hair less than an inch long, [so I] never knew what my hair looked like. … My dad explained to me that it was almost as if I was already at a disadvantage because I was Black. It was almost as if we already have something we're fighting against, which is this image of Black men robbing banks or [being in] gangs and crimes. … In order to fight against that [conception], my dad made sure that we were well-dressed, not rocking any weird hairstyles when we were young, and were well-defined. Which *sucks*, because I was at a disadvantage for something that's not in my control."

He continued, explaining that while he didn't initially understand his father's continued focus on his hair, he does now. The respondent explained that he realizes his father was "actively trying to change" the conception of Black men as being unkempt criminals. Despite now understanding the context that guided his father's focus, the respondent still expressed remorse at the fact that he was unable to fully express himself *out of fear he would be judged*. Another respondent told a similar story of hair socialization, where his father told him to not have an "outrageous haircut" or dress like the "typical Black man." This respondent explained that his father was very much a proponent of keeping one's style simple and unassuming; as well-dressed and tidy as possible. This protective parent narrative sends a clear and unfortunate message: that in order for a Black man to be successful, he has to hide elements of his Blackness.

I then asked respondents one final question pertaining to their development of cultural capital: Is there anything that they learned, as Black men, that I would not learn as a white woman?

> "The 'talk.' 'The talk' is telling your child at a young age … that there are people who are gonna punish you based on the context of your skin only. And when you get into a situation with a white boy … most likely, the teacher …. will take the side of the white boy, because they'll assume that he's innocent and you're the criminal because of the color of your skin. And you're more likely to get pulled over by the cops and most likely not going to get out of there."
>
> "There's always this emphasis on saying, 'yes, sir,' or 'no, sir' to the officers, being polite to the officers, just this idea that the [American criminal justice] system would treat me differently because I'm Black."
>
> "How to get out of things. That could be dealing with the cops, dealing with issues at school. … Being able to know what to say and how to say it in different situations. … Not having to look over your shoulder so much. Not having to have a guard up, as in, 'Okay, I go here and I have to protect myself.' Worried about cops or other people that don't like you."
>
> "Everyone code-switches, but there's levels to it. Being assertive. Knowing to hold your

> ground. … Don't be naive. Always be alert, because you never know what's going to happen. Be street smart. … Make yourself presentable."

Interestingly, some respondents addressed certain cultural capital they thought *I* would learn that they wouldn't have:

> "Knowing how to take care of what's yours and your family. [I] never had a person to say, 'hey, family's important. Take care of each other 'cuz that's the only people you have in life.'"

Another respondent addressed the stark differences between his hometown and the prestigious technical high school he attended, recalling his disbelief at the differences in how he versus his (predominantly white) classmates lived:

> "Mom, dad, brothers and sisters, cat and dog. I'd never seen a full family before. That was pretty interesting. [Seeing these families] was something I kinda looked up to. I always wanted a full family [with a] mom, dad, brothers and sisters, who I can depend on. … [I] kept thinking, 'Why couldn't that be me? Why couldn't I be in that situation?' They didn't have to worth about financial issues or elderly parents being sick. Why did I deserve this?"

The "this" the respondent spoke of referred to "the poverty, [his] single-parent household, the crime in [his] city, the things [he] was seeing." A third respondent replied that he couldn't accurately assess what he learned that I didn't because it "all comes down to experiences." He explained that the lived experience of Blackness comes from a lifetime of struggle—one that cannot possibly be described in an hour-and-a-half interview. The respondent continued, saying that he had no clue what he could learn from *me*, as he knew nothing about "living in a nice house in a nice neighborhood" or "being financially stable" and not worrying about personal safety. A life of privilege versus a life of struggle. The question becomes, then, how does one even begin to understand the differences?

I argue that we do so by asking.

Absolution

Having created a social context in which we now understand the burdens Black Atlas bears, a final question remains: Is there anything that can be done to lighten the weight of this burden? In order to discern this answer, I spoke with respondents about their support groups and communities, asking them to describe how they fit into their environments:

> "It would always be me, trying my hardest to make the relationship work."
> "Most of the time, in friend groups, I'm usually the one who's an outlier."
> "I still don't feel like I fit in. … I still haven't really found a person who is on my mindset and wants to do the things I do. … [No one] to kinda bond with."

One respondent described how he grew up surrounded by two different groups of friends: those who had "troubled pasts" and later fell into "street" life and those who had strict, overprotective parents similar to his who tried to socialize him to be "decent." This respondent explained how he was able to avoid falling in with a bad crowd due to his "strong mind" and refusal to be pressured into anything he thought was negative. Elaborating, he stated that he "always hung out with people that did great in school," and if he did "get sucked into something, it was something good." Unfortunately, not every respondent was so lucky, and this respondent's answer was in the vast majority of the participants' replies.

Another respondent explained how he felt he never had a solid friend group around him, and instead spent the bulk of his time in school trying on different personas to figure out where he best fit. A second respondent explained how he grew up in a suburban area with a negligibly-small Black population, where he found it equally hard to find friends. The respondent who grew up in a white-dominated area mentioned several instances in which his non-Black friends were casually using the N-slur around him, explaining the incredible impact this casual racism had on him:

> "There were times when [these interactions would end] and I would just start crying because I was so upset that I would just have to constantly have these types of conversations with the people I was surrounded with."

Another respondent remarked how his friends growing up "weren't that serious" about grades and lacked "leadership qualities," making the gap between this academically-focused respondent and his friends. Shockingly, an overwhelming number of respondents explained that while they had people they viewed as friends, they still felt largely alone and different, somehow, from the rest of the culture around themselves. The vast majority of respondents overwhelmingly expressed a common feeling of not fitting into the groups they saw around themselves. Addressing the feeling of self-reliance of the Black community as a whole, one respondent described how the Black community is "built to deal with our issues ourself. We're built to suck it up and smile and not hurt. We're built to [believe] that what goes on in the house stays in the house." When I asked him why this was, he was unable to explain why this phenomena occurs, stating that it's just the way it happens.

Being alienated and anomic implicates one's ability to offload any negative emotions, forcing them to bottle up any worries or fears they have generated. One respondent admitted that he keeps his negative emotions to himself until it explodes out of him; another similarly stated that he grew to rely solely on himself for comfort or help. The consequence of this overwhelming trend of communal disconnection and being the "odd man out" further alienates Black Atlas and limits his ability to share his burden with other Black men around himself. Unable to forge these critical bonds, many of the respondents in this study explained that they had difficulty opening up to others, dealing with their emotions in a healthy way, and letting their guard down. These Black communities, already isolated from mainstream society, appear to

become echo chambers in which individual Black Atlases feel further isolated from one another, as well.

This sense of isolation is magnified by the perceived need to engage in code-switching. On the surface, this code-switching may appear to Black Atlas as a way to absolve the burden he bears. I asked respondents if they ever experienced pressure to code-switch, and the answer, overwhelmingly, was yes. Respondents explained that they felt pressure to code-switch in educational contexts or in situations in which they were dealing with someone in a position of authority. When I asked respondents to elaborate, they gave examples of using their "white people voice" in school (e.g. not using slang, repressing their normal accent or inflection) as well as emphasizing that the way they carried themselves fundamentally changed from being self-protective (adopting a street swagger) to defensive (downplaying their Blackness in white-dominated spaces). Illustrating this point, one respondent explained that he works hard to "present myself as [me], so that they won't see me as a Black male, at first." The fact that the Black monolith is so prevalent as to be something that must be countered at every interaction is indicative of the burden that these Black men bear—and something that must be addressed.

Another respondent explained that the ability to effectively code-switch becomes a valuable skill for Black men growing up in rougher communities. He clarified that

> "In order not to be messed with, … you have to look a certain way. If people see you and you look aggressive and you look angry, more chance than not, people aren't going to approach you or mess with you."

This participant was not the only respondent who came from a rougher background. Anderson addresses how code-switching proves invaluable in potentially-dangerous situations, explaining that while violence may not always be initially necessary, "it is important to 'know what time it is' … by reading people, places, and situations" and reacting accordingly.[38] It is not enough to

simply be aware of one's surroundings: one must also understand the implications of others' actions, "then show one's capability of dealing with these situations."[39]

Respondents that came from a similar environment largely echoed Anderson's statements, explaining that it is imperative to walk down the street in dangerous neighborhoods with a certain air about oneself. One respondent explained that it's imperative to appear "street-built" in rougher areas—to change the way one "walks, talks, dresses" to match the environment he is in. As another respondent explained, code-switching does not even necessarily focus merely on tightening up one's speech or dressing more nicely—it is also a "swagger thing." When necessary, respondents explained how they are able to adjust their stride, "sag" their pants, and otherwise blend into potentially-fatal situations. Furthermore, in these grittier contexts, Black men are able to protect themselves by playing up their aggression, adopting a "mean face." A respondent echoed Anderson's observations, explaining that when he is moving through dangerous areas, he adopts a much more aggressive front:

> "Me, I'm not an aggressive person. I don't do confrontations, hostility, violence. But it's more a matter of … I know when to turn that side on and off. Certain areas, you're walking, people looking at you. You looking away from them is [a sign that] you're soft. I would stare back at people, like 'What you looking at?' You can't show intimidation. Once they see that intimidation, that's when they're like, 'We got one.'"

Code-switching is not simply an aesthetic skill. As one respondent explained, understanding how to properly code-switch and blend into his environment are "things that would probably save you." Walking down these dangerous streets or living in precarious environments forces Black men to utilize aggression as means of avoiding becoming a target. Furthermore, in an environment where naivety to street life is synonymous with weakness, the possession of *respect* becomes a new means of currency. As Anderson explains, "Possession of respect—and the credible threat of vengeance—is highly valued for shielding the ordinary

person from the interpersonal violence of the street."[40] If an individual walks down the street, keeping eye contact with other people sizing him up, it sends a clear message of "I belong here; I am not a target." Survival in these dangerous environments, then, seems to orbit around respect. Can you hold your own? What would you do if you were getting jumped? And, most importantly, what can you do to prove you are not prey? In these specific contexts, code-switching becomes Black Atlas's armor; his performance of Black aggression, his shield. This armor keeps him safe, but also keeps him separate. His armor, so long as he wears it, marks him distinct from mainstream society—for this armor, too, does not come without a certain heaviness. The aggressive, "street" persona a Black man adopts in order to protect himself simultaneously adds weight to the burden of white expectation he bears, as he is told incessantly that to "be a Black man" means to naturally seek violence. He is put into a lose-lose situation in which if he adopts the aggressive persona, he further supports white expectation of Black male aggression, but, if he rejects this persona, he becomes a target for unauthorized violence. Aggression, for Black Atlas, is a double-edged sword. The most imperative capital he develops centers around learning when to wield it.

Black Atlas's ability to lessen the burden he bears depends fundamentally on how willing he is to sacrifice his soul and excise his Blackness; how well he can use his ability to code-switch in order to successfully assimilate to white society and reject his culture. Although Black communities are already isolated from mainstream society, young Black men can at least fall back into the Black racial monolith for in-group support when necessary. The application of code-switching, however, removes this final fail-safe from Black Atlas. Now, he is entirely alone and isolated, as the nature of the code-switch requires him to wholly reject his Black identity. This code-switching is the foundation of DuBois's "double consciousness"; an admission that the

only way that a Black man can succeed in a society that champions whiteness is by attempting to become white, himself. Black Atlas then reaches an impasse: he can act white and lose the weight of white expectation, but in doing so, he loses not only his community, but his very self. He can excise his identity, lose himself, cut out anything that separates him from white society—but then, what remains? Not him; not anyone. Black Atlas, if given instruction as how to succeed, is told that in order to flourish, he must lose everything that makes him Black.

Obviously, code-switching alone cannot absolve Black Atlas of the burden he bears. Code-switching acts as a tool to push back against hegemonic domination, but it does not help Black Atlas succeed beyond a certain point. The ceiling is always too far away to shatter. Even if he succeeded in fully sacrificing his Black identity, his skin grounds him firmly as a Black Atlas; a man whom white society does not accept as an equal. Even with 'perfect' white assimilation, a Black man with the ability to flawlessly code-switch would merely become a white asymptote—always approaching the opportunities afforded white society without ever reaching them. In summation, the burden that traps Black Atlas cannot be absolved by Black Atlas, himself. At the end of the day, Black Atlas can never be free of his skin—and even if he could, not a single respondent said they would. I explicitly asked respondents, "If you could change your physical appearance, would you?" The answer: a resounding, unanimous, unambivalent "No."

The weight of white expectation and of the Black racial monolith is one that Black Atlas is born bearing. This burden is unyielding, but so too is Black Atlas. Respondents were consistently adamant in their refusal to abandon the responsibility they should never have been assigned, in the first place. Black Atlas sees himself as an example, and despite everything, still refuses to give in to a world intent on destroying him. This is Black Atlas, unfailing, unfaltering; a tragic hero with his shoulders bent forward in defiance.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The data presented here seems to largely support the existence of my proposed Black Atlas theoretical construct, both in the belief that the burden he bears is an inextricable combination of white expectation and the Black racial monolith and the argument that he still occupies a modern-day double consciousness via code-switching. However, while the data appears to indicate that Black Atlas bears the weight of the world by himself, sufficient data has not yet been collected to substantiate this aspect of analysis. From the limited data, however, respondents' testimonies do indicate a certain "odd man out" phenomena that makes every Black Atlas joined similarly in their struggle, but utterly self-contained within it.

Isolated and lonely, he can look to other Atlases for solace, but with one glance, he can recognize that they, too, are holding up the same weight he bears. Without a solid network to support them, this creates a situation in which Black Atlases can look to one another with the knowledge that they are sharing the same burden but cannot help one another resolve it. A situation emerges where these young men are able to appreciate the struggle they see others going through—but Atlas cannot extend help to others without shattering his own world. Crushed beneath the weight of the world, these Atlases can only look at one another in shared empathy and anger; absolution of this weight is not possible without someone else to absorb the weight of the world Black Atlas bears, alone.

Further questions have also arisen from this preliminary research, including a discussion as to how social class impacts Black Atlas's formation of his racial identity. As explored in the "Defensive Tactics" portion of this paper, respondents' awareness of their racial identities appeared to differ based upon their economic background. This trend emerges as one that still warrants further investigation to support or disprove, but provides an interesting dimension to the

intersection of race and class that Black Atlas occupies. A new question arises, then, determining if Black Atlas is scary, criminal, and *poor*. This prompts further research to determine just how pervasive the impact of economic class is on the formation of one's racial identity. Sufficient data has not yet been collected to either support or disprove this aspect of the Black Atlas construct.

A final, critical discussion point that I feel is worth discussing is rooted in a question that more than sixty percent of respondents asked me: "Why are you doing this?". Over the course of my research, I was in contact with dozens of potential respondents and proximal contacts to tap into Black communities. On more than one occasion, the first time I met with a new contact, he or she expressed surprise at the realization that I am, in fact, white. One respondent actually burst out laughing when he saw me, immediately explaining that he was shocked I wasn't Black.

More than an amusing tidbit about the surprises of sociological research, however, this brings forth an important question: *Why* were people so surprised that a white person would be doing research on this topic? The reaction of this one respondent was echoed in the majority of the interviews I conducted, with participants curiously wondering why a white woman would be interested in this branch of research. The implicit assumption behind this question is that issues of Black identity are only of interest to Black Americans—an assumption that furthers my argument that the Black racial monolith and white expectation serve to isolate Black men from mainstream American society.

I explained to my respondents that it was my intention with this project to educate both myself and others about the lived experiences of Black American males, and that this project was the starting point for much more research to come. Every respondent that I explained my

project's purpose to thanked me for my interest—one respondent even expressed that he wished "everyone was doing this."

This anecdote is presented as more than just an exercise in reflexivity. Rather, the fact that the majority of respondents thanked me for doing this research reinforces the argument central to my project: that Black Atlas seeks absolution for the weight he bears. The inextricable weight of white expectation and the Black racial monolith sits laboriously on his shoulders; Black Atlas waits for aid that is yet to come. Every interview conducted, conversation held, or misconception withdrawn serves to lessen the burden Black Atlas bears, but much work remains to be done to remove it entirely. My thesis is a starting point on a long road of research to come, and there is no time to be wasted—every minute, a new Black Atlas struggles beneath the weight of this burden.

The ancient myth of Atlas concludes with Atlas bearing the weight of the world for eternity. I am determined to find a better ending.

NOTES

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4. Ibid, 78.
5. Ibid, 131.
6. Ibid, 131.
7. Ibid, 60.
8. Ibid, 60.
9. Ibid, 52.
10. Ibid, 173.
11. Ibid, 173.
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14. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press, 2012), 52.
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32. Ibid, 209.
33. Ibid, 318.
34. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press: 1991), 77.
35. Anderson, Elijah. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 36.
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