

# WRITING WHILE BLACK: THE BLACK TAX ON AFRICAN AMERICAN GRADUATE WRITERS

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In *Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois states that African American identity contains a “double consciousness” of being both black and American (45). According to Du Bois, African Americans are constantly aware of their dual identities because their existence is a constant struggle to reconcile those two selves in a society that scorns them. As Du Bois writes, “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (46). As a result, African Americans have to see themselves in relation to how white Americans view them, while struggling to encounter a world that they anticipate will eventually—and hopefully—view them without contempt.

Writing these words over a century ago, Du Bois’s ideas still resonate in twenty-first century America. While African Americans hold positions throughout American society, through the lens of whiteness they are still both black and American. Nowhere is this situation more apparent than in U.S. institutions of higher education. As the recent protests at the University of Missouri, Yale, and other campuses attest (see, e.g., Chessman and Way; Jaschik; Wong and Green), African Americans still carry their double consciousness. While Du Bois generally frames double consciousness for American society, I want to examine how double consciousness works in the university for those who are both black and graduate students writing dissertations.

This article examines the double consciousness of being a black graduate student writer through what I term “the black tax,” or the toll paid by African Americans to enter and participate in white institutions. I argue that teachers and scholars should consider how the black tax affects African American dissertation writers (and many graduate writers of color, especially when working within predominantly white universities). First, I offer a definition of the black tax. Then, I provide a narrative illustrating how the black tax can affect the writing practices of African American graduate writers. From there, I offer a reflection of how the black tax works in higher education. Finally, I conclude with a call to action for

universities to provide support for African American graduate writers, who navigate the double consciousness of writing while black.

## The Black Tax and Graduate Writing

I define the black tax as the societal charges placed on African Americans in order to enter and participate in white spaces. At the heart of the black tax is the notion that if African Americans work hard and rise above their situation without complaining about racism, they will gain privileges that whites already have. One mechanism or institution enforcing the black tax is education. As Kwame Ture [Stokely Carmichael] wrote about his experience as a student at Howard University, education “render[ed] us ‘cultured,’ i.e., polite and sage in the word, thought, deed, and appearance so that ultimately superior white America might in its benevolence, one blessed day, accept ‘the Negro’” (119). Because African Americans have historically been viewed as a problem, the responsibility is placed on African Americans to improve themselves to become adequate to enter white American society. Such a responsibility is grounded in the philosophies of African American thinkers and can be traced back to Booker T. Washington’s urging of African Americans to “‘Cast down your bucket where you are’—cast it down, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded” and the creation of The Talented Tenth by white northern philanthropists and popularized by W. E. B. Du Bois. Today, discussions of respectability politics (e.g., Higginbotham; Wolcott) show how this philosophy continues, too often unquestioned.

In my own educational experience, I felt the presence of this responsibility: that is, of the black tax. I understood clearly that, as a student, I would always be read as a black student. It came from my sixth grade teacher telling me, “You’re born black, which is one strike against you, and no one pays attention to average black children.” It came again with an undergraduate professor telling me, “It’s a white man’s world out here, and they’re not going to take just any black person to work in their business. You have to be twice as good. You have to exceed the expectations and be

the best at everything.” This presence has even been articulated on television with shows like *Scandal*, where Daddy Pope tells his daughter Olivia, “You have to work twice as hard to get half of what they have.” I heard these words so frequently that this philosophy encouraged me to do more in school. If the paper assignment was 5–7 pages long, I wrote 7 pages; when the graduation requirements were *summa*, *magna*, or *cum laude*, I reached for *summa* (though received *magna*); and when my Ph.D. comprehensive exam was graded on *honors*, *pass*, or *fail*, I strove to pass with honors (which I actually did).

Six months after completing my comprehensive exams, I felt the presence of the black tax as I sat for my dissertation proposal review with my committee. After an hour of being asked questions related to my project—which examined how Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were incorporated into composition textbooks—I passed my review and received notice that I could begin writing my dissertation. Before leaving the room, the majority of my committee reminded me that “a good dissertation is a done dissertation,” meaning to write it out and not expect the dissertation to be a perfect document. However, after everyone left, one of my committee members, an African American woman, told me privately, “Forget what they said. It’s not enough to have a done dissertation. You can’t be average; you have to exceed everyone’s expectations.” Then, pointing to her skin, “People who look like us have to work twice as hard to be successful in this world.”

Despite years of success, when I began writing my dissertation, I had a hard time writing. I did the research and took all of the necessary notes, but I couldn’t save any of my writing. I would write for an hour, and instead of saving the work, I would erase it. In these moments, I experienced the double consciousness: on one hand, I had to get the dissertation done, while on the other, I had to be twice as good and make the dissertation worthy of being published. After a few weeks of going back and forth between these two urgencies, I decided I needed help. I made an appointment; went to the campus writing center; and met with the tutor, an undergraduate English education major who would begin student-teaching the next semester.

After about ten minutes of reading my draft, he commented, “You’re a very strong writer. How did you learn to write so well?” Holding back the rising anger in my spirit, I told him that it came from years of writing and teaching others how to write. After reading some more, he commented again: “Your writing is good, but you may want to rephrase some of your ideas so they won’t offend certain groups.”

“What groups?” I asked.

After several attempts, he stated, “You may offend white people with some of your language. You’re stating that a person who is white will not be able to teach a writing by Martin Luther King, and that can be offensive to a white audience.”

“No,” I responded. “My argument is that anyone can teach a speech or writing by King as long as they understand the cultural dimensions of his works.”

“Well,” he responded, “that’s not what someone who’s white may get from this writing.”

After thanking him for his time, I left the center feeling frustrated. Did he not understand what I was writing? Or, did he not even *try to understand*? I couldn’t tell my committee for fear that they would think I wasn’t strong enough to deal with criticism, and I didn’t want to go back to the writing center after that experience. So, I resolved to try writing some more and hope it would work. But the double consciousness of being black and a dissertation writer kept me from writing more.

While taking a break from writing, I walked around campus and noticed a flyer for a dissertation support group sponsored by the Counseling and Psychological Services. Feeling like I had nothing to lose at this point, I promptly signed up for it. The group met every week, and we discussed our goals and frustrations with writing our dissertations. After several weeks of participating in the group, I felt comfortable mentioning what my committee member said to me, along with my experience in the writing center. After I finished voicing my experiences, one student—an African American man—said, “Sounds like you’ve experienced ‘the black tax.’”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“This idea that you have to work twice as hard as whites to succeed.”

“You mean there’s a name for it?” I responded.

“Yeah,” he replied with slight laughter in his voice. “It comes with the territory of getting your degree.”

After our group meeting, I talked with this student some more, and we began to share our experiences with the black tax. We also began our own writing sessions, where we would share our writing with each other and ask questions if there was anything that needed clarification. This strategy helped us both, and the more we met, the more productive I became in my own writing. Later, as I continued to write my dissertation, pass the defense with honors, graduate, and enter a tenure track position, I met other African Americans who shared similar experiences. They also experienced the black tax and had to pay it to finish their dissertations. Across our shared experiences, common themes emerged that explained how the black

tax operates within graduate education. The following are four of the more concrete themes (or defining characteristics) of the black tax:

**1. Presenting an acceptable form of blackness to the white world.** In its original state, the black presence is seen as a threatening image to white society. It is seen as a threat because the cultural nuances of African Americans are either misunderstood or ignored by white society. Therefore, when the black presence crosses into white society, the African American subject has to tone down cultural dimensions related to African Americans in order to be seen as pleasant and respectable to white Americans. In my interaction with the tutor from the writing center, his suggestion that I alter my paper's content because he felt that whites would find my writing threatening suggests that either he did not want to engage with the complexities of race that I was offering, or he wanted to shape it in a manner that he would find acceptable on his terms. The result in either or both cases would be that my voice would be silenced, while his voice would permeate my writing and make me respectable for (that is, respectable to) a white audience. Therefore, I was taxed with the burden of proving that what I had to say would be seen as acceptable/respectable.

**2. Appreciating the generosity of white society for being allowed into their institutions.** When African Americans are accepted into graduate programs, their presence is understood to be the result of benevolence. They should exhibit an affect of gratitude and not disrupt institutional practices. For instance, when I was accepted into my graduate program, one professor told me, "Be grateful that you are allowed into the program. You only have one opportunity to do well. Don't make it harder on the next ones who come in here." In this statement, the professor negated my accomplishments that qualified me and necessitated my entrance into the graduate program. Instead, I was seen as an entity that would serve as the gateway for others to enter into the program. If I—the trailblazing African American—succeeded, then my success would open opportunities for other African Americans to enter into the program. If I was perceived as failing to succeed, then I could just as easily be blamed for blocking opportunities. Because of this responsibility, I was not allowed to voice any frustrations or concerns, and I had to silently accept all of the microaggressions that I encountered. Any voicing of concerns was seen as a sign of weakness or being unappreciative of my place in the program. To be clear, the notion here was that I was chartering territory that would make it easier—or harder—for others who enter after me. And that

responsibility fell to me—not to faculty, administrators, or program leaders, who truly had responsibility—because they had already benevolently given me a chance.

**3. Representing the race.** When the African American pays the tax to enter white society, they will not be seen as a person. Instead, as a representative for the race, they hold the responsibility for speaking about issues that affect African Americans, for behaving in ways that are considered appropriate and non-threatening, and for being an outstanding student: in essence, they hold all the responsibilities of an ambassador charged with representing a sovereign nation. Therefore, if the African American does something that is considered offensive by white standards, the person will not be judged as an individual, but as a representative of their race.

While serving on a panel about the low number of African American graduate students at my institution, one person remarked, "In my department, we had two African American students enter our program, and neither of them finished. Why should we keep letting them in if they're not going to finish?" This person's comments suggested several factors about the black tax. First is the representation of people as racial entities instead of individuals. By flattening the personalities and circumstances of two different people into a narrative about "two African Americans," the speaker suggested that he saw them as two instances of the same thing—as a collective instead of as individuals. By doing so, the speaker marked these two African American students as representing a single story of failure. He told their story about not finishing as though it was one story (not two) and as though it represented the experience of all African Americans. At the same time, even though white students also failed to complete their degrees, their stories were not remembered or recounted in this way. The speaker did not choose to investigate the individual reasons as to why either African American student chose to leave the program but created his own narrative. Further, because the two students were seen as being unappreciative of their opportunities, we see how the themes/characteristics of the black tax are inextricable. The speaker told a story in which the students did not present an acceptable form of blackness (i.e., theme #1) and did not appreciate the generosity of white society (theme #2). As a result, the speaker—and, hence, the program—could readily refuse future African American students. When individuals represent an entire race, the stakes are incredibly high, and each person is levied a similarly high tax.

4. *Recognizing that the African American subject is an intrusion to white institutions.* In talking with several African American colleagues, one of the recurring themes is that we all were taxed with the burden of being *allowed to* rather than *worthy of* enrolling in graduate school. The white graduate students felt they were accepted into the graduate program based on their credentials, while the African American graduate students were seen as diversity additions. These different perceptions of worth reverberate throughout graduate programs and mean that African American graduate students are never on the same playing fields as white graduate students. When African American graduate students succeed, their counterparts may see them as successful because of white guilt (i.e., leniency by white faculty or administrators) instead of earned success, significant accomplishments, or unique qualifications. And when African American students' accomplishments are celebrated within a program, white students may further resent these students for taking away from their own success.

For instance, in the situation with the white writing center tutor, his surprise with my writing shows the underlying assumption that I would be a writer who would need to understand and be taught basic grammar, syntax, or diction. These assumptions are part of the master narrative of African Americans as ill-educated students who come from low-performing inner-city schools. Instead of *learning to know who I am*, the tutor took it upon himself to create an image that fit his expectation of what an African American writer should be. He didn't show any sign of revising this expectation and expected all revision to be on my part. His reaction shows how the mere presence of the African American subject serves as an intrusion within predominantly white institutions. For African American graduate students to survive and thrive within such institutions, the black tax must be paid. In considering this metaphor for graduate writers, we might ask: how can African American graduate students' reserves be filled and refilled so that paying the tax doesn't deplete all resources?

### **Black Graduate Writers Matter: Helping Universities and Writing Centers with the Black Tax**

In his autobiography, Malcolm X recalls his childhood experiences when he encounters white institutions in Mason, Michigan. One of the memories that resonated with him was when whites—in his presence—discussed African Americans through racial epithets and stereotypes. Reflecting on those

experiences, he wrote that he realized that he was never seen as a human by whites. While he was *with* them, he was not considered *one of* them: “Even though they appeared to have opened the door, it was still closed. Thus they never did really see me” (32–33). Malcolm X's experiences are the same as African American graduate students. While they are on campus and are seen with other students, the black tax is imposed on them *because of their presence*. At predominantly white universities, they are not truly part of the university. Double consciousness involves recognizing the black tax and its role in how white institutions (fail to) understand or (de)value the African American presence in society. Therefore, when African American graduate students enter these institutions, they are often seen with suspicion.

For writing center staff, mentors, and others to support African American graduate writers, I offer that we rethink the notion of safe spaces. Some scholarship already attends to the need for rethinking safe spaces (e.g., Pratt, Greenfield and Rowan), and yet we need more work in this area. For instance, when I went to the writing center, the tutor and I were supposedly in a “safe space,” where we were allowed to freely discuss my writing. However, in this space, racial power dynamics were clearly present and obscuring real connection. While the tutor attempted to give feedback, it was through the lens of whiteness without acknowledging how his feedback could affect the perception of myself as an African American graduate writer. In contrast, consider my collaboration with another African American graduate writer. I encountered a person who understood me *as a person* and who empathized with my difficulty of navigating double consciousness at the university. Together, we were able to share and process our experiences, while exchanging writing feedback that supported our dissertation completion and overall professional development.

In light of these comparisons, I suggest that universities, writing programs, and writing centers create spaces for people of similar backgrounds, especially shared racial identifications, to work together. Such spaces can reflect the needs of the group and allow members to discuss their experiences without the gaze of whiteness haunting their space. One example would be peer or co-mentoring programs in which graduate students help each other through the dissertation process and bond over shared experiences (e.g., Godbee and Novotny; Patton). Such a mentoring program might involve paired tutoring relationships or small writing groups, which writing centers could provide space for and officially endorse. Another example might involve a peer group coordinating

meetings to discuss progress with writing, to share challenges, and to provide suggestions for overcoming those challenges. Such meetings could blend the best of writing groups and professional development seminars, but keep centered and central the experiences of African American graduate writers.

Along with student-centered programs, writing centers and faculty should be aware of what James Weldon Johnson terms as “the double audience” (202). In his essay, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” Johnson notes that the African American writer is always aware that their audience consists of both black and white America, two divided audiences that create “two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view” (202). If the African American writer chooses a white audience, he or she will have to encounter “numerous conventions and traditions” that white Americans (whether consciously or unconsciously) have about African Americans, including the belief that African Americans should only speak about topics that “belong to the white world” (205). If the African American writer only focuses on an African American audience, the black tax makes discussing taboo subjects in the black community impossible for fear that it would make the African American community look bad in the eyes of whites and confirm repeated stereotypes upheld by whites.

As with the recent examples of Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance, Jesse Williams’ speech at the BET Awards, and Colin Kaepernick’s decision not to stand during the playing of the national anthem can attest, the African American subject is allowed to discuss or perform only certain subjects and subjectivities. Yet when African Americans move into subject-positions that whiteness deems as unacceptable, African Americans are taxed with the burden of proving that they have the right to talk about a subject. Writing centers and faculty can help African American students navigate through the black tax and double audience by holding training workshops on both the double audience and black tax and how both concepts affect the writing practices of black graduate student writers. For instance, in their workshops on how to train tutors, writing center administrators can show students examples like Beyoncé, Williams, and Kaepernick to examine the statements that each person made and the reactions to these statements by society. Then, they can compare what these African American subjects have stated and compare it with when someone white has performed or said that same behavior and ask tutors the different reactions based on the audience. Doing so will help tutors become aware of the black tax that African Americans face and also the double audiences that African Americans are aware of when writing.

In creating student-centered programs to support African American students and being aware of the double audience, universities would show these students that they are more than a checked box to fill diversity requirements or a necessary evil to fulfill an accreditation standard. Instead, universities would allow what Du Bois terms as a people “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight” of the American world to have the space to deal (and heal) with their double consciousness on their own terms (45). Such work allows African American graduate writers to face the world that taxes them, but with fuller and replenished selves ready for the future. In this way, we can affirm: black graduate writers matter.

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