

The Only One: Being Black in the White Working World

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In fourth grade I sat in the back of the class with the other girls in our pressed plaid uniforms. We passed notes and giggled, while our teacher droned on and on at the front of the room, a ruler in one hand and a Kleenex in the other.

One spring day, Mrs. Shapiro began a new chapter in our history book, the one on slavery. I'd been dreading this chapter. I knew it was coming, and I knew about slavery; my parents had told me. One by one, as Mrs. Shapiro spoke, everyone in the class turned eyes away from her to peer at me, sheepishly -- as though they were seeing me for the first time, as if I hadn't played tag and done homework and taken the bus with these kids all year. Mrs. Shapiro snapped her fingers. Their little heads whipped back into place, facing forward.

I was the Only One. The first black person some of them had ever had a chance to get to know up close.

It was the first time I was aware that others were aware that I was the only black kid in the middle school. I was the point of reference. Some of them liked me because I was black. Some of them didn't like me because I was black. For some of them, it didn't even matter.

Not much has changed as I write this. I am still the Only One. I am the lone black employee in my workplace, in a city full of ethnic culture and diversity. At my last job, where close to 300 employees worked, I was one of a few African-Americans, excluding the janitorial staff. None of us worked together. I looked forward to making photocopies so I could chat for five minutes with Dorothy at the front desk. When we spoke it was briefly, and in hushed tones. We were hyper-aware of our positions. At large department meetings, I was the only black person, sometimes the only person of color, in the room.

In every position I've held, I've felt valued for my qualifications, and highly prized for being black in a sea of whiteness. I've sometimes felt like what James Baldwin once described as the fly in the buttermilk. Token and expendable. I am constantly aware of my loneness, of how I am being treated, of how I am treating others and how I am perceived.

There are others like me, white-collar and blue-collar workers who are single-handedly diversifying our workplaces and classrooms. The receptionist at the law firm, the executive shot-caller, the teacher at a predominantly white school, the school administrator, the surgeon.

I talked recently with several black women who are also "Only Ones" in workplaces taking baby steps toward diversification. I discovered that being the "Only One" is a balancing act that takes practice. Being an "Only One" leaves you without a witness if anything racist happens. Back in the day, being an Only One was more likely to get you killed, or at least framed. These days, being an Only One may be considered a diversity success.

But it leaves us "Only Ones" with a challenge: We must integrate without compromising ourselves or our beliefs. We must retain our cultural selves and run the risk of scaring the white

folks we work with and for. We must constantly filter our experiences, screening for racism in each moment, while still being a team player. We must be able to culturally navigate both worlds, working side-by-side with folks who are only vested in their own white world. We must teach tolerance or suffer being misunderstood. We must put up with ignorant comments, always picking our battles. We must reach out to other people of color for reality checks. We must prove that we are more than a dark body the white company brings in to sit behind a desk. And we must perform twice as well as our peers and look twice as good doing it.

Always with a smile and always with flair. No exceptions.

I'm used to being the Only One, so at this point in my professional life it's almost second nature. Still, it often leaves me feeling numb, defeated. I go home at times exhausted from the effort. I feel cheated out of being who I am in my workplace, where I spend nearly half my waking life. Other "Only Ones" experience being "Only Ones" a little differently.

Teresa Younger, executive director of the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union, is one of a handful of black executive directors in the nationwide organization. Younger grew up as an "only" in North Dakota before heading East.

"I've never had a person of color more senior than me" in the workplace, she says. She recognizes when she is the Only One at a meeting or in the room right away. "I definitely scan the room when I walk in," she says. "If there's another black face in the room I will introduce myself. When there's a multitude, I'm impressed." That happens rarely, she says, and usually it's a church function or an event geared to urban dwellers.

Sarah (not her real name) is the only African-American administrator at a local arts organization. She knows she was brought in to diversify, and she's been tapped to sit on a number of committees that seek to diversify the larger arts community. She's connected to a small network of "Only Ones" in the area. "There are some triumphs and some tragedies," she says.

Ife Michelle Gardin works for a regional theater company. An artist, she wears materials that flow with an Afrocentric theme, carrying herself with a regal air. She sits on local arts committees. She's often the Only One, too.

Sociologist Dena Wallerson is a top college administrator. She remembers her 10 years as one of a few African-Americans in the graduate sociology program at a state university. She wrote a paper there titled "Minority Among Minorities," which examined how women of color cope in a white-dominated workplace. She found that it was important for the women to network with other people of color outside of their workplace. In these networks, the women could let down their guard and strip themselves of the mask.

Wearing the Mask

While the folks here at my alternative newsweekly are pretty progressive, I often feel like that lone black kid who was Photoshopped onto the cover of his Midwest college's recruitment brochure. As at the other places I've worked, here I teach about my culture and my place in society. Here, I've encountered ignorance and fear. I've had a co-worker lean over during lunch and tell me that Haitians reek of body odor. Here, I've been frustrated by how I am perceived. But each day, I take a deep breath and don the mask as I leave my black world and merge.

The mask gives you more access to the white world. It is that corporate, professional thing you take off when you get home, put your feet up, pick up the phone, and say, "Girl you wouldn't believe the kind of day I've had. *" It can change daily, depending on who will see it. What doesn't change is how heavy it is. It weighs so much, it's numbing.

We get used to the transition -- on and off, on and off. I used to date a guy who was an insurance salesman by day, thugged-out rapper by night. Tattooed biceps and all. I called him at work one day and listened to his voice mail -- he sounded like a straight-up white guy. His deep voice was nasal, his words crisper than normal. With this voice, his co-workers probably had no idea who he really was. I didn't either.

When I worked in a more corporate environment, I remember feeling exhausted at the end of the day from continuously putting on the front. Jealous that my white co-workers could let loose and blow off steam while I fronted 'til the end. Some days I was relieved just to make it to my car where I could finally breathe and play my soul music, returning to my black world.

"It's part of playing the game -- you wear the game face," Wallerson says. Right. Without the mask, I couldn't do my job well. It keeps me in check so that I don't go off when the owner of a diner I've written about tells me, over the phone, that "sometimes colored people are a problem." The mask helped me keep my composure a couple of jobs ago when one of my company's partners greeted me in the morning with, "What's up, my sister?" and a fist. Or the time another partner invited me to a luncheon meeting to pull me aside and profess his attraction to black women.

The mask allows me to react seamlessly, but it's still me underneath. Instead of talking black, I speak the Queen's English. I don't drop verb endings. I speak slow, enunciate. I am extra clear. I don't use the full range of facial expressions black folks rely on for meaning because my white co-workers won't get it. I don't hold back my thoughts, but I finesse my response, making myself more palatable.

I surprise myself with how well I wear it. Without it, I would have been fired many times over. I'm resentful. It hides my frustration at fearing that my white bosses think I never work hard or long enough. But at least I can still take the mask off. Some black folks can't. Some refuse to put it on.

Arts administrator Sarah totally refuses to front. "My work is Afrocentric, even in the midst of Eurocentricity," she says. Some black folks get hung up on the duality and leave their jobs because they can't handle it, she says. "Give [white co-workers] who you are because they give you who they are," she says.

"It's not like it's not me that goes to work," says Younger of her game face. For her, the mask is that internal strength that you muster when it's time to perform, just before you walk into the room and all eyes are on you. Although she maintains a front, no matter if she's heading a meeting with white colleagues or addressing a crowd at a NAACP conference, she says she doesn't conform.

Distance

The slings and arrows of racism can't get you if you're not emotionally present. In addition to the mask, tuning out white co-workers is one way of coping.

That black woman in your office who isn't so friendly? The one who doesn't hang out with the rest of the gang? The one who doesn't join in on the water-cooler talk? She's most likely using the only tool she knows to deal with being the Only One. She's keeping a safe distance and double-checking her work. She knows that if something goes wrong, she'll be blamed and fulfill a stereotype of the shiftless Negro.

By keeping low profiles, we can inadvertently become part of the problem. Wallerson worked at a school that was actively trying to recruit more minority students. The black students at the school didn't want to have their photos taken for the brochure cover. However, their parents would complain about the lack of diversity in the school.

Sarah breaks down the way black students sit with each other in cafeterias. "What's interesting is that they don't realize they're all white," she says of the people who complain about blacks seeking each other out. "Stop looking at the black table and turn around and start looking at all the other tables." We hear about the black table all the time because we are visibly identifiable. But, adds Sarah, there is an Italian table, a Jewish table, an Irish table.

A friend remembers a white professor using slurs to describe her and another student of color. One nudged the other; neither knew how to respond. Ultimately they each had to suck it up for the rest of the semester. They needed the credit.

The Only Spokesperson

At this job and other jobs, I've had to suck it up. During meetings, I've had well-meaning white folks jump at the chance to rephrase or translate my ideas before I've had a chance to finish my thought. It feels like they have a need to come to my rescue. Somehow, in ways I still don't understand, it seems like the other white folks at the table understand each other better than me, no matter how "articulate" they say I am.

Younger can relate. "They'll say to me, 'I'm not sure you're saying that the way you mean it.'" She attributes this to the white males in her arena having a hard time working with strong black females. "Males need to take care [of somebody]," she explains, "but black people have a strength that's undefined. We don't need our professional counterparts to take care of us."

One time, Younger confronted the white male president of a company where she used to work. The man had been shirking management duties; Younger had been picking up the slack. "One day I marched into his office and told him that some things were going to have to change," she says, her voice taking on an executive tone. She detailed the changes, then she announced that she would be leaving the company. The boss walked on eggshells around her until her parting date. To her, it was a victory to flip the status quo in her favor.

"I try not to be overly aggressive because it is a teaching experience," she says. One thing she has had to "teach" white folks is that being black and middle class should not be confused with the upper-class lifestyles blacks portray in popular culture. Buppies are not drinking Cristal and attending designer fashion shows on the weekends. But they probably own a home and mow the lawn.

Another big problem for "Only Ones": being the spokesperson for the race. We're not a monolithic group. Black folks come from as many different backgrounds as white people. Within

the community, we are more attuned to the differences, but white folks have a tendency to just see black and make general assumptions.

It's tiring being the teacher all the time, but Younger believes it is an integral part of black professionalism. The more black professionals there are, the less isolated we are, and the more diversity there is, the less each one has to teach.

Those white folks with little to no exposure to people of color, who are over eager to seem "down," need to be taught a lot.

In an effort to seem cool and supportive of the black cause, they adopt urban slang, expressions, manners of dress and style. Then they shuffle it off on the only black person in the office with an exaggerated "What's up?" or by regularly calling us "sister" or "girlfriend."

It's a transparent act. A white person may have the best intentions of helping "the Only One" feel more comfortable. But when black folks work hard to maintain a professional front, it feels condescending when coworkers call you "homegirl." It's never a good idea, but especially not in the workplace.

Wallerson describes the practice of "trying on race" -- when white folks test out black colloquialisms on black folk to see if they're authenticated. "Next it's going to be, 'You my nigga.'" Strategies For Preserving Your Sanity (Or: How Not to Lose It) If you're an "Only One," you probably have already figured out a strategy for those times when you need support. I know of one young woman who keeps a powerful piece of black history on her desk -- shackles. Seeing them each day renews her purpose.

Younger keeps quotes and books of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in her office to remind her of her goals and what has been overcome. Networking helps. "I think the good news is that we have e-mail," says Wallerson of the small network of sociologists of color she communicates with regularly.

Younger, too, has developed a network of black professionals. In her last job, Sarah was an "Only One" in her department, but there were a handful of black females scattered throughout the company. None of them worked with each other. Yet they maintained a network, met socially and knew each others' families. When one of them was suffering from work-related problems, they provided a support network, meeting for lunch. And when the company unfairly criticized one of the women, they all lobbied on her behalf, helping each other write responses to Human Resources. They eventually all left.

The group still occasionally gets together. Sarah enjoys the sisterhood networking. She finds that "bonding is minimal and forced [with white folks]. It shouldn't be. There are more things that tie people together than color."

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