BEING HERE

A black student's experience
of Boston College
was once asked by another student what it was like to be black at Boston College. It was the semester that I worked at the Murray Commuter House. We’d just had one of our Wednesday night spaghetti dinners, and I was doing the dishes. The question took me by surprise since it had nothing to do with anything we’d been discussing. In fact, it came up in the middle of one of those conversations where you could listen to every other word and still keep up. That was depth of most of our conversations. Also I was surprised to be asked. I had grown accustomed to thinking that white students were generally apathetic about the concerns and feelings of people of color.

Why do you want to know? I asked. It was a discussion topic in her sociology class, she said, and she had to write a paper on it. I thought that was a good enough reason to answer her question honestly—though I was not, however, about to tell her all I really felt, having learned from experience that when I do, when I try to convey to a white person the personal meaning of what I have encountered around campus or in Boston, the usual response is guilt-stricken silence, when what I desperately need is verbal expression, is conversation.

I told her I had gone to public schools in Boston, where being black didn’t matter because everyone was black, the whites having fled after busing was imposed by the courts to aid integration. And so my skin color was neither an obstacle nor a benefit in my education until I came to Boston College. It was here that I discovered how black I was and how white my world was.

The first inkling of what I was to encounter here came within my first few days. I lost count of the number of people who asked me if I was on the track team, and upon hearing a negative response asked what sport I did play?

I quickly learned three things in my first months on Chestnut Hill. I learned, from things said by white students, that they believed I was here not because of talent or ability, but that my education was simply the gift of Boston College’s policy of affirmative action. I learned, from things said in class, that most of my white classmates had learned more at the schools they attended than I had learned in Boston’s public schools. And I learned a new, frightening loneliness. In four of my five classes I was the only black or AHANA person. I had become, for the first time in my life, the chosen representative of my race.

The effect of all this was a pressure resulting in near paralysis. Each time I spoke or presented myself, I had to prove I was not like those people on the evening news. I, for example, could speak proper English. I could comprehend and follow what the professors were saying. In high school I had never been shy about speaking out in class, about calling attention to who I was and what I knew. Now, however, I wouldn’t raise my hand to speak in class unless I was sure I had the correct answer to a specific question; a wrong answer would be a reflection on every African American in the University, those already here and those to come. Each time I handed in a paper, the fate of all of Africa depended on the grade I received.

Time and experience have relieved that pressure, I told my questioner, but it is still wearisome to have to prove to people that I am qualified, as I sometimes feel I need to do. I sometimes still wonder: will anyone ever take it for granted that I may be smart?
I didn’t really expect any comment from her, and she didn’t surprise me by giving me one. I went on washing dishes, and the issue and topic faded away as quickly and suddenly as they had come. But for some reason, I didn’t mind. I found myself being grateful for a course and an instructor that had asked this girl, in her senior college year, to consider what it might be like to be me.

When I came to Boston College and discovered Black Studies, I felt like someone who had awakened from a coma. For the longest time, I thought, I hoped, and I somehow unconsciously knew, that black people, for their centuries of existence, had to have had more to do with the development of this country and of this planet than my teachers were telling me. I simply couldn’t believe that the passive enslavement of my people was the most significant part of my history. I knew I had to have more heroes than Dr. King.

When you successfully complete 12 years of education and encounter so few representations of your culture, there develops a small nagging voice that asks: am I less than? This voice says no black person will ever be president of the United States. It says that maybe the skinheads and the neo-Nazis are right. If my people have not contributed to culture, to learning, to justice, then on what grounds do we claim equality? That voice and those questions are quickly suppressed, but they continue to whisper.

And so when I took a course in black theology at Boston College, I was like a woman crazed from hunger. Learning about my people, about myself, and our contribution to religious studies, made me feel cocky, enabled me to better still that little voice that had been holding me and my potential hostage.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. I wanted to hear and see everything that had to do with black people and black culture. I did everything from viewing every single installment of “Eyes on the Prize” to purchasing mail order cassettes of sermons by Louis Farrakhan. Everything about being black fascinated me.

And there were other students in and around the University that I could talk to about these issues. I had a friend who was a Black Muslim. He was “so black” that he believed that it was white people who were actually less than. I had a classmate, who at the beginning of our relationship, referred to me by name; I gradually became “sister.” Each one of us was exhibiting different levels of “blackness.” We were as black as we needed to be to fill the void, to quiet the whisper.

I was grateful to have these and other black friends here to help me deal with the problems and the pressures we face that are uniquely our own: our implied obligation, as young black leaders, to better a whole race of people; the fear of becoming a “pseudo” brother or sister because we live in “snowflake city.”

There are times when I sit and think about my academic journey to this point, and I am amazed that I made it through without turning my back on education.

I was sitting in McElroy Cafeteria one day last winter with a couple of friends, gossiping, when one of my friends said, “I hate that boy,” pointing to an average-looking fair-haired boy. When I asked why, she looked pensive and told us about a literature course she was taking. She said the class had been assigned to read three short stories by black authors—an acknowledgment that February is Black History Month.

My friend told me that for the first time she was actually excited about going to class and taking part in the discussion. The stories were about things she could relate to, about emotions and situations she had experienced. She was aching to share that.

The class began with the professor asking for comments on the readings. My friend and a number of other students raised their hands, among them the average-looking fair-haired boy. The professor called on him. He said that he’d read the stories but now he was “tired of reading about ghetto life and black
people."

Those of us sitting around the lunch table were stunned. I thought of my years of education, my careful study of European and American history, into which black people appeared to drop, seemingly miraculously, every three centuries or so. After three short stories, the average looking fair-haired boy was "tired" of reading about "ghetto life and black people."

I sat and looked across the room at the average-looking fair-haired boy. For a brief moment I was so jealous of his arrogance—to be so secure that who and what you are is all that you need to know, all that is necessary for success in this world, to be able to draw comfort even from your own ignorance.

I went back to my old community, the Mattapan neighborhood of Boston, last spring to look around, run some errands and see a couple of friends. This was the community that I claimed as my own from age six to 18; my so called "formative" years. Before we moved to Mattapan, my family and I had either shared homes or lived in apartments. In Mattapan, we had our first real house, all our own. For my parents, coming from a poverty-stricken country like Haiti, this home marked an important milestone in their lives. My sister and I were simply astounded by the huge backyard and the raggedy swing set that stood in the middle of it.

I was walking in Mattapan Square, mixing with the crowds, the people boarding and unboarding the bus, the kids getting out of school, the teenagers hangin' outside the Greek pizzeria—and it suddenly struck me how alien the place looked. Everything was so familiar, yet so different, as if someone had rearranged the furniture in my room so that it lost that look that made the room undeniably mine. And I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I was terribly exposed, that I stood out, as though I was bigger or taller than everyone else. It was a nightmarish moment. It was at that moment that I realized Mattapan had ceased to be my home.

I continued to walk around the square and I began to think about how two years at Boston College had changed me, the way I thought, the way I perceived, and how that evolution had begun to make me a stranger in my own home. If my community looked foreign to me after only two years at Boston College, what would it look like after four years?

It was not the first time I wondered what my higher education will mean to my life. It sounds like the beginning of a tasteless joke, but where does a black woman with a degree in English and political science go? Can she go home to Mattapan? And if not, where? Mattapan Square may no longer feel like my place, but Chestnut Hill isn't either. Even after nearly three years of life here, I am still trying to get used to M.D. license plates and joggers, and I find the quiet simply nerve-racking.

I know all the cliched implications of higher education—it's the road to a better job and making more money than my parents made. It means a better foundation for my children to start from and all those other good things. But I can not help thinking about and grieving what I am losing.

I was once talking to a black friend. As usual, I was criticizing this thing or that about the black community, providing my educated analysis of exactly what was wrong. He suddenly turned to me and said, It's working. What are you talking about? I said. You're starting to think white, he said, to lose faith in the value of your culture. He said that he could recognize the symptoms because he, too, had experienced them.

We both attended predominantly white colleges. We both came from predominantly black communities. My friend said that he had "cured himself" by combining his biology major with one in black studies and by joining a historically black fraternity. These were two acts that allowed him to be comfortable in his own skin, to feel he was keeping his sense of self as a black American.

Though I was initially angry, I needed to hear what he had to say. I needed to hear someone else voice my secret anxieties, my feeling of being cut loose, against my will, from something important. But mostly, I needed to know that someone had gone through this and had come out all right.

I have another friend. He attends a predominantly black college in Washington, D.C. I've noticed that the way he thinks of his college experience is different from the way I think of mine. I think of my college experience in terms of the sun and the moon.

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WHEN SENIOR WILLIAM SCHNEIR WALKS THROUGH the dining room in McElroy Commons, he sees students seated as though they'd been instructed to separate themselves according to race, culture or ethnic group. That, he told a gathering of about 200 at a February 20th meeting on campus racism, is troubling.

While Schneir, who is white, would like to socialize with people from different backgrounds, he would not feel comfortable “going up to a table and saying, ‘Hi, I’m here. Let’s interact.’ But how do you make that contact?”

The forum at which Schneir made that observation followed a nationally broadcast teleconference on campus racism. Held in the Conte Forum, the event was sponsored by AHANA Student Programs and the Intercultural Affairs Council, a group of faculty, staff and students appointed by President Monan last fall to widen BC's appreciation for its many cultures.

Student Affairs Vice President Kevin Duffy told the gathering that although one of every five BC students is of AHANA [African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American] or international origin, “we still see separatism” on campus. “Getting to know people who are different than us is not on the agenda,” Duffy said. “It just doesn’t seem important, somehow.”

Those who spoke at the forum generally agreed that, while Boston College has had few overt racial incidents, it is not immune from harmful attitudes and behaviors. Associate Professor of Sociology Seymour Leventman postulated that the 1980s saw a general use of racial and ethnic stereotypes in the political arena, which led to a perception that racist behavior is socially acceptable.

Horace Seldon, a lecturer in philosophy, recommended “structured opportunities” for students from different racial or cultural backgrounds to talk with one another about social issues. “I have seen the benefits of this in my classes,” he said. “The students disagree, they get mad, they argue. But over a year, some remarkable things happen, and they wind up communicating.”

Additional help in improving cross-cultural awareness, Duffy suggested, would come from the new intercultural council and the Core Curriculum Task Force—which is examining, among other matters, the role of diversity in the University’s undergraduate curriculum.

Communication is vital, said Sonja Tucker ’93, in helping more members of the BC community appreciate AHANA students' abilities and experiences. Too often, she said, some students—and even faculty—assume AHANA students are admitted to BC simply for the sake of integrating the student body. “I didn’t come here through the AHANA Office, but through the Admission Office,” Tucker declared.

University Chaplain Richard Cleary, SJ, an Intercultural Affairs Council member who attended the event, came away impressed by the candor and tenor of the discussion. The challenge, he said, is getting more of the BC community to reflect and share their views on race and culture.

Fr. Cleary said he liked Seldon’s comment about providing “structured opportunities” for students from different racial or cultural backgrounds to interact. This could be accomplished through initiatives by University Housing in dormitories, he noted, or by holding intercultural retreats. “You don’t want to have a setting where you have two AHANA students, and all the rest are white,” Fr. Cleary said. “That does not help address the issue; you need a better balance. But we do need to extend Horace Seldon’s model beyond the classroom, and bring students together. It won’t solve the problem, but it is a step.”

Associate CSOM Professor Judith Gordon, another council member, said the task is more broad-based. “We have to stress that ‘intercultural’ spans more than issues of black-white. It has to do with a person’s religion, sex and perhaps even other characteristics. We have to make people aware of what diversity really means.”

Sean Smith
White students and black students make up the different bodies that orbit the University. There are instances where the two align and instances where they influence each other, but they are usually short-lived. My friend comprises the sun, the moon and all the stars. He sees himself in his university, and there are times when I am so envious of his position that I’m ready to hijack the next plane out of Logan Airport for Washington.

Once he called and said that he had heard about a dance at Boston College and wondered if I was going. I said that I knew about the dance, but I wasn’t going because it was a “white” event. That is not to say that there would be a sign at the door saying, “no niggers allowed.” I simply understood that I probably would not feel comfortable there. Who would I talk to? Who would I dance with? What kind of music would be played? Questions like these always keep me home.

But these superficial questions only mask the deeper problem. Despite the great strides that have been made in this country in race relations, we still remain a practically segregated society. Crossing that line socially is hard and many times uncomfortable. I have attended a few events where I was either the only AHANA or the only black person present, drawn there by coaxing from white friends or by my own curiosity. I have often wondered if either my white friends or the other white students were as aware as I was of my “only-ness”. Only-ness is such a feeling of vulnerability. Among other things, it ruins almost any chance of having a really good time.

At my friend’s university, all events—academic, social, formal and informal—are geared toward him, made for his comfort and enrichment. The idea of a “white” event is totally foreign to him. What keeps me from hijacking that flight, however, is the knowledge that being here at BC is teaching me to deal with the “real world” I am preparing to enter—a world a universe away from Mattapan Square—a world in which, sadly, I will likely continue to be “the only.” The ability to survive, to thrive and even to be happy under those circumstances is something that can’t be obtained in a semester-long course or explained in a textbook. That ability can only be learned by getting up every day and wrestling with who I am in the world I live in.

Students come to Boston College carrying all the grit and grime of larger society, at times in concentrated portions. (A white student once said to me that he had no problem with blacks attending BC, since he knew plenty of other “dumb” students here. I hope he counted himself among them.) There are times when I feel as though I am walking against the wind. But at my most hopeful I can’t help but believe that being here, dealing with other students, professors and administrators, and giving them the opportunity to deal with me, is teaching us all something, removing the other-ness, giving us a mutual point of reference, a shared world.

But I must admit that I have yet another, less noble, motive for attending a predominantly white college. I want a degree from Boston College precisely because it is a “white” institution. My friend’s university has more PhD’s teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate level. His university includes a law school, medical school, a university hospital, a dental school, a school of divinity, and centers for cancer and sickle cell research. It boasts alumni like Lawrence Douglas Wilder, governor of Virginia; David Dinkins, mayor of New York City; and Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice. And like BC’s, his college’s board of trustees reads like an excerpt from Who’s Who.

The difference between my degree and his is that mine will already have been ratified by the majority culture. I won’t have to explain. I will never have to qualify or defend my education. My friend won’t always have that.

I want my degree written in Latin and my name in bold type. Let no one, seeing it, even for a moment doubt my ability, as a black person and as a woman. Understand, though, that this is not for me. The degree will only make official what I have managed to know all along.

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Johanne Lochard will graduate from Boston College in May 1992. This is her first published work.