

13

“GETTING INFLOMATION”

A Critical Race Theory Tale from the School Library

Kafi Kumasi

APRIL 2, 2019

I usually never check the mail at home. There’s nothing there for me except the occasional reminder for a dentist appointment or a few prospective student packets from colleges that are not even on my radar. All my real college mail comes as football recruitment letters that Coach Rettner gives me during seventh-hour Team Sports class. Today was different though. It was raining hard outside and I saw some mail sticking out of the mailbox getting all wet when I pulled up the driveway. I parked in the backyard and hurried to the back door with my practice shoes almost falling out of my backpack. I fumbled around for my keys. Once inside, I headed straight down the main hallway to the front door, stopping only to drop my wet bookbag by the back door. As I grabbed all the mail from inside the box, I noticed a large white envelope with a rubberband around it. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Harvard’s crest emblem on the top right corner. I also noticed that my full name was on the mailing label, without the usual “To the parents of” prefix. I separated the letter from the rest of the mail and headed upstairs feeling very grown up.

April 14, 2019

Jamar's Acceptance Letter to Harvard

Dear Admission Committee,

I am writing to accept your early admission offer to pursue my undergraduate studies and my collegiate football career at Harvard University. As my application essay indicated, I would like to focus my “freshman focus” project on helping reform the college admissions standards in the country in ways that mediate against the effects of institutional racism on K–12 schools. My project is more than an affirmative action effort. My goal is for college admissions programs to create a questionnaire for prospective students to identify areas where they feel they have been either “miseducated” or “undereducated” in their K–12 education. I want to gather data on what areas the questionnaire should cover during freshman inquiry class. I have several family members and friends who are just as deserving to attend a place like Harvard, but who have not been able to surmount the racist structural barriers that make school curricula at our local public schools outdated, irrelevant, and biased towards Eurocentric knowledge and ways of viewing the world. Nor have they been able to find solid academic footing in a schooling context where urban schools get less state funding than their wealthier suburban counterparts, causing a ripple effect of instability, most notably in teachers taking better-paying positions in suburban school districts. It is my privilege and honor to represent the voices, culture, and concerns of my community as best I can during my matriculation at Harvard. Please find the completed documentation attached to this email. I look forward to making Cambridge my new home in the fall.

Sincerely,
Jamar Johnson
C/O 2019
Morningside Prep Academy
@OutsideTheLines

Later that evening, I read my acceptance letter aloud at my aunt Theresa's house where we gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. I love Thanksgiving not only because my aunts can throw down in the kitchen, but it's also the time when I get to see all my cousins take part in games and heated discussions; oh and I can't forget the dancing. One time, one of my cousins recorded my aunts doing the ballroom hustle in the kitchen and the video had over 1,000 views on Facebook. At that point I realized that our Thanksgiving traditions are pretty unique and that I am lucky to have such a close-knit family. This year was no different. My mom and aunts caucused around the kitchen island while cooking, dancing and discussing the latest hot-button issues over prosecco, mojitos, and garlic butter shrimp. I listened as they argued about the pros and cons of the SAT board's new environmental context dashboard. This

new app allows students and parents the ability to access benchmark data about where they stand on any number of life indices such as neighborhood crime data, household income, etc. It was designed to measure the level of adversity people experience compared to others across different demographic backgrounds. On paper, they describe it as an effort to get more nuanced data on college applicants instead of the typical race, class, gender, and test data. This topic had been the subject of one of our recent family group chats. Even the younger cousins are in the chat, but they rarely respond unless they are asked a pointed question. They may acknowledge the text by hitting the like button on their iPhones, but even that minimal effort is rare for some of the "too cool for school" teens in the family. Usually the messages are lighthearted, containing memes, gifs, emojis, and pictures from recent family gatherings or outings. However, my mom in all her inquisitiveness broke from tradition and asked a more serious question.

April 11, 2019

Johnson Family Group Chat

MOM: So I see the SAT board has changed the name of their new data dashboard from the "adversity index" to the "environmental landscape" dashboard? Ya'll know what that's all about, right?

AUNT TRACY: Um no, but I have a sneaky suspicion you are about to write a dissertation to explain it. But go off, sis. I'm here for it.

MOM: Ha! You know me well, sis. Basically, the SAT board is trying to get around collecting racial demographic data in their new "adversity" dashboard so that they can sidestep squarely dealing with the lingering effects of White Supremacist policies in America on students of color today. Initially, they caught heat about calling the new dashboard an adversity index. People saw through their attempt to use a benign term like "adversity," which virtually everyone can claim they've experienced at some point in their life, regardless of their circumstances of birth. It's like that other term whites love to use—"diversity." Both of the words are too broad to be meaningful when it comes to changing the status quo. It's simply a way to give an even greater leg up to the average working-class white kid whose parents feel threatened by the browning of America and losing their unearned privilege of white skin they have accrued for several centuries in America.

It's like how whites prefer "diversity" and "multiculturalism" over "race," "power," and "privilege" because they are more polite terms that assuage their guilt from benefiting from a system that dehumanized and disenfranchised entire races of nonwhite people. Meanwhile, WE already know that the single most galvanizing factor that defines what adversity looks like for people in any given community in a neighborhood is race. There's no greater factor than racism and White Supremacy that can explain why concentrated poverty, poor schooling, and lack of viable housing and job opportunities disproportionately affects communities of color.

But they don't want to collect that data on race because that would mean they'd have to acknowledge that race is the most salient factor dictating the level of adversity a student experiences in the first place. If they DO collect data on a student's racial background, they might have to actually do something about the trends they see. They might not be able to ignore the elephant in the room. They might have to concede that affirmative action for Black and Latinx students in inner-city schools is necessary to give them a fairer shake in college admissions decisions. But that's not why they designed this SAT dashboard. It's not for US.

AUNT TRACY: I know that's right, sis.

MOM: Can you even imagine a majority-white community where the schools are failing? Where the houses are abandoned and there are liquor stores and marijuana shops on every corner? Or can you imagine such a thing as "Black flight," where we took our resources and fled the inner city for the suburbs, leaving a largely disenfranchised white community behind? Imagine if all the surrounding suburbs had Black mayors who spent decades bashing the inner-city residents by calling them "white trash" and coordinating policies that strategically black-ball the inner city from economic growth? If you can't imagine any of these things, it's because race and racism is so deeply enmeshed in the social fabric of our society that it seems normal. Seeing People of Color experience racism is normal. By contrast, it is difficult to imagine whites, the group that has received the most unearned benefits and social status in society, in a position as a permanent underclass striving to be treated equal to Blacks. It's unfathomable.

AUNT TRACY: Sis, I don't know why you get so worked up. You KNOW the SAT was never about leveling the playing field for people who look like us. They're in the business of making money. If they can get the growing number of white parents who feel left behind by capitalism to buy into this idea that naming hardship they've experienced (even if it's mostly at the hands of conservative and racist economic policies) will somehow give their kid a better chance to attend an elite college, they're all for it. It's affirmative action for white students by another name.

After a pregnant pause in the conversation, their eyes turned toward me. "Well let's hear from Mr. Harvard over there," Aunt Joyce said. "He's our new resident expert on all things politics and education." I felt like I was being initiated into a Black family's version of a rite of passage ceremony. A common refrain in Black families is that "kids are to be seen and not heard." At that moment I understood that I had successfully graduated from the kids' table and was entering the adult ciphers—also known as the kitchen table.

As I approached the counter, I mustered up the kind of composure one might expect from a Harvard-bound sixteen-year-old. I cleared my throat and began, "Well, aside from the fact that standardized tests are really no indicator on how well college freshman perform academically, this is really about keeping the testing companies in business. It's a way for them to placate the growing number of working-class whites

who want their kids to attend elite colleges but they cannot afford the high-priced tutors and private schools that will better ensure their kid does well on the SAT." I kept going. "The fact that they don't track for race in their new index shows that they are not interested in solving the tough problems that create such disparate life outcomes for People of Color in America. Whatever remedy they propose, you better believe whites will have to benefit from it somehow in order for us to see any relief at all. It's called interest convergence."

"Okay Mar Mar!" My mom said with a prideful tone. "Go on n' school your aunts on what interest convergence means, baby." Without hesitation, I said, "Derrick Bell, who is one of the great legal minds of the twentieth century, coined the term 'interest convergence' to explain racial developments in America. He argued that white self-interest is the main reason Blacks have received any relief from racial oppression throughout American history." There was a collective sense of exasperation in the room. That sober moment was quickly interrupted by Uncle Chace yelling at the TV. "You gotta dunk that, man! My bad, I forgot Staffman's a role player kind of guy. Shiit, pay me 40 million. I'll play any role you want me to play!"

May 5, 2019

Morningside Heights School Board Meeting

Dear parents or guardians,

At their regular meeting, May 1st, the Board of Education voted on new open-enrollment policies aimed at addressing student capacity at the high school while maintaining its growing reputation for excellence in urban education. This is the culmination of a year-long process that included the following:

- A June 2018 resolution that passed unanimously the criteria that would be used to determine open-enrollment boundaries and class size limits.
- Enrollment data from the November 2018 confirming that criteria had been met to enforce new enrollment policy as of Fall 2019.
- 6 Urban Education Council meetings—all materials posted online.
- 15 Town Halls attended by 1976 community members.
- 4 listening sessions conducted by the State Board of Education's Urban School Office.
- A 6 yes, 1 no vote to implement the new open-enrollment policy in the Fall of 2019–20.
- A 5 yes, 2 no vote to draw new district lines for open enrollment as a means of balancing open enrollment between the two high schools in Morningside Heights.

Information on new out-of-district boundaries and open-enrollment caps will be coming out shortly, as will opportunities for parents, staff, and student participation. We thank everyone for their participation to date. This process has been difficult because our community loves its schools. This solution allows the district to focus limited funding on programs

and people that make Morningside Heights an exemplar of urban education in the nation. Together we will continue our work to carry out our mission: Educational Excellence, Future Readiness, and Community Engagement.

This message has been sent on
behalf of the Morningside Heights
School System.

May 17, 2019

District Letter to Parents about New Enrollment Caps

To the parent or guardian of: Ryan Murphy

Based on the new out-of-district residency policy, your child is no longer eligible to attend Morningside Heights based on the address listed in your child's most recent enrollment application. Please visit our new website for more information pertaining to our new residency enrollment policy.

This message has been sent on
behalf of the Morningside Heights
School System.

May 17, 2019

Kathy Murphy and Katelyn Boll Text Message

Kathy

I got a letter saying Ryan can no longer attend Morningside! I've already inquired about the appeal process with the district. I've already spoke with my lawyer and discussed our legal options. He thinks we have an affirmative action case since Ryan is the only white student affected by this new policy. Maybe I will call Peggy and see if she can run a story about this on the local news. Do you have her cell number?

Katelyn

Wow, smh! You would think they would appreciate the book drive donation we gave them. I will hold off on getting Tom's company to donate their used computers until I hear back on your appeal outcome. We're all staying tuned to see how your urban experiment goes. I'll share Peggy's contact in a sec.


May 26, 2019


Channel 4 News Release


A mother from the Bridgepoint community is challenging the local urban school district's out-of-district policy on the grounds of affirmative action. Here the full interview with this local mother and her attorney live at 11 on Talk It Out.


May 27, 2019


Black Twitter Buzz


 Morningside Heights LIT center and 200 others liked


 **KumariHill@RebelRootsED**
Becky and Keisha both want their kids to attend a "better" school. They BOTH bend the rules by using a family members' address to get their kid into their school of choice. Keisha gets jail time. What do you think Becky gets?


 **Ria/ the RN**
She gets a half hour news segment complete with tears and white fragility.

 **Celebrityblogger**
A new car! Compliments of the Make American Great Again (MAGA) social justice fundraiser.

 **Starambroasia**
A commemorative t-shirt with the words: "All students matter" on the front and the back reads: "Sponsored by Bridgepoint Border Patrol and Enforcement Office."

 **Channel 4 @TalkitOut** 1d Affirmative Action or Entitlement? Viewers sound off about a suburban parent's appeal of a local urban school district's new open enrollment policy.
77 comments 11.5K retweets 30K loves

 Morningside Heights LIT center and 300 others liked

 **Justin Smith@ Just-usmedia**
A white mother expecting kudos for donating used books to an urban school that is literally known for its state-of-the-art library is the epitome of having a white savior complex.

#whiteprivilege #whitefragility #whitenessstrikesback



Channel 4 @TalkitOut 1d

Affirmative Action or Entitlement? Viewers sound off about a suburban parent's appeal of a local urban school districts new open enrollment policy.

77 comments 11.5K retweets 30K loves

That next day, during InFLomation time in the library, Ms. Brooks brought the Twitter debate about Ryan's mom front and center. Ms. Brooks calls InFLomation a hip hop-based learning process that describes how today's youth live and learn through digital media. She says that the library media center is all about learning how to learn, so she created an inquiry model that draws on Black culture as the basis for learning in the school library.

When we enter the library, we can choose to work at one of three stations that mirror the elements of hip hop, including Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix. Where you choose to work depends on the level of the learning task you are engaged in for that day. You can usually find me at the Remix station. Ms. Brooks asked me if I wanted to help work on a new metadata schema that would allow us to hyperlink hip hop songs to the MARC records cataloging system using new access points that mirror the way we talk and think outside of school. Traditionally, librarians have to use the standard vocabulary and subject headings assigned by the Library of Congress (LOC) to catalog and classify their books. However, not many kids my age talk the way the majority-white middle-aged men and women who created the LOC system talk. Therefore, most of my friends find out about books by word of mouth rather than by searching the library catalog using its assigned subject headings or key words.

That's why I like getting InFLomation. If a kid is heavily into music, this model allows them to use that as the bridge to building more traditional literacies like reading and writing. Ms. Brooks also gives us the option to work on a hip hop book classification project that allows us to assign a book a set of hashtags that get linked directly its MARC record. There's also a new MARC field that allows us to embed links to songs or artists whose work deals with the themes in the book itself. It's a pretty complex set of projects, but if we do it right, it will be something that puts Morningside on the map, besides our football program.

Most of the kids go to the Rhythm or Rhyme stations because they are more free-flowing and exploratory. As long as you submit an exit slip before you leave the library, stating your level of flow in the InFLomation process you were working in

that day—Rhythm, Rhyme, or Remix—then you are good. Ms. Brooks says that you will know when you are in the peak stage of FLO because you will lose track of time. She says FLO occurs when your skill level and the challenge level of a task are at their highest. If you are bored, distracted, apathetic, anxious, relaxed, or worried while you are in the library, it's because you are not engaging in learning tasks or inquiry projects that create an optimal combination of skill and challenge levels. It's actually true. I've been in the school library when the atmosphere was zen-like because you could tell the majority of students were in their zone, just flowin'. Sometimes I like to go to the Rhyme station because it's an intermediate level where I can work a short task I want to accomplish that day. Today I used InFLOmation time to find new people to follow on the library's Twitter feed, based on the approved hashtags like #HipHopEd and #FutureReadyLibraries or autogenerated recommendations that come from Twitter based on common hashtags and topics mentioned. I like this task because I get to see new activity not only on the library's website, but in the hallways on digital library kiosks stationed outside our classrooms.

Today, Ms. Brooks was fired up about our library hashtag, #GetLIT, going viral after Ryan's mom was on the news. As we entered the LIT center, she asked us to get InFLOmation with her. This means we prepare to lose track of time and forget about our daily problems of life in the process of seeking and creating information because our interests and skills are both being challenged at peak levels. I went first and sat at the edge of the commons area near the smart screen, which was clearly set up for an activity. Ms. Brooks asked us to take out our cell phones and enter one word into the Socrates app on the screen to describe how we felt about the news clip last night and all the Twitter buzz afterward.

We always use Socrates to jumpstart our inquiry projects during InFLOmation time, but this time the aura seemed urgent. I think everyone was ready to speak their mind. Plus, Ms. Brooks has a way of really hearing us out and helping us turn our passions into legit research. She's a big reason I applied to Harvard and decided to research college admission policies in the first place. Ms. Brooks went to college with my aunts and was known for her involvement in progressive Black education circles such as the Black Student Union. I can still remember when she gave all the ninth grade English classes an orientation to the school library. She complimented me on my locks and asked me where I got them twisted. When I told her my aunt twisted them, we quickly learned that we had a lot of mutual family and friends, namely my aunt who she went to college with and who was known for her budding talents as a natural hairstylist.

She put the three-minute timer on to allow us time to open the app and complete the task. I probably typed my response in three seconds flat. I had been thinking about the whole ordeal since last night when it hit the news. The timer went off and with the click of a button, all the words appeared on the screen.

“I see a lot of words. I see ANGRY, CONFUSED... someone wrote BEFUDDLED. Someone wrote TENSE; I also see, SAD, NUMB, and even NOTHING. These are quite descriptive words, you all!” Ms. Brooks exclaimed. “Thank you for your honesty.”

She kept on, “Let’s start with this one right here—BEFUDDLED. Would anyone like to share their thoughts on why this information you saw or read made you feel befuddled?”

I raised my hand and she immediately acknowledged me. “How come when a Black mother tries to get her son into a better school in a white neighborhood, she is given jail time for using her relative’s address, but a white mom rallies the entire media community behind her claim that her son is being denied an educational opportunity? *She’s* the one who bent the admissions rules to experiment with sending her son to a predominantly Black urban high school.”

I had already learned during last year’s InFLOmation project that the answer had something to do with the way racism and White Supremacy function in America. My research on Critical Race Theory had given me the tools to dissect this scenario. People like Kathy Murphy would ordinarily oppose affirmative action measures meant to allow students from underresourced urban schools a chance to attend elite expensive universities, on the grounds that unqualified applicants are taking up spots that should be reserved for their more qualified (aka white) students. However, these same folks would quickly abandon cries that affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination if they think they can benefit from a quota system. This kind of hubris and entitlement falls squarely in the realm of white privilege and interest convergence. Ms. Murphy enjoyed the privilege of escaping scrutiny about whether her son Ryan belonged at a school like Morningside Heights in the first place. She also enjoyed the privilege of not being questioned about whether Ryan was taking away a spot at an Ivy League school from a more deserving student at Morningside Heights who has attended an underresourced school their whole life—not just junior and senior year.

At that moment, Ms. Brooks invites other students to begin researching incidents to support my statement about Black parents getting jail time over out-of-district residency policies at majority-white public schools. She quickly creates a folder on the smart screen inside our LIT center Google account for us to upload the documents and websites of our search results. She asks us what we would like to name the folder. Without hesitation, I say, “Name it ‘Whiteness as Property’ and inside it put

any evidence you find that demonstrates the property functions of whiteness. If y'all need a refresher, I got you." I offered to airdrop from my phone to Ms. Brook's laptop a picture that I had screenshot last night from a website. It outlined the four main elements of whiteness as property:

1. Rights of disposition;
2. Rights to use and enjoyment;
3. Reputation and status property;
4. The absolute right to exclude.

Ms. Brooks acknowledged my contribution with a proud smile. She asked me to elaborate on which of the four elements of whiteness as property I thought were at play in Ryan's mother's case. I said, "All of them, but numbers 3 and 4 apply directly. For number 3, the logic (or illogic) of White Supremacy relies on symbolic cultural capital or the status reputation that implies that having a majority-white student population makes a school automatically better than one where students of color are the majority. In this sense, whiteness has a kind of cultural currency that can be carried around and traded like material goods and property. For example, when whites fled inner cities in the 1950s and 1960s, they were making a strategic investment in the property value of whiteness. Collectively, they had to buy into the idea that People of Color moving into their community would literally make their property value go down. They did just that. If one too many families of color tipped the scale and moved into a white neighborhood during the 1960s, whites would then start to flee to suburban communities in direct proportion. This pattern of migration, called white flight, helped cement the idea that it was white people in and of themselves that carried currency, or property value. So, a white mother like Ryan's mom is more apt to receive empathy in her efforts to give her child a more 'diverse' (aka nonwhite, urban) educational experience because the status and reputation of a Black school does not have as much cultural capital as a predominantly white school—even though Morningside Heights is an exception," I said with a sly smile of arrogance.

"For number 4, ever since Jim Crow, the US government has given white people a sense of entitlement to claim public spaces as exclusively reserved for their use and enjoyment. That legacy still permeates the way police engage with Black people and other racialized groups in their everyday lives—suspecting that they don't belong in certain spaces even if they live there or are visiting a relative. Trayvon Martin was killed going to buy Skittles near his father's house, because a wannabe cop has seen countless police get off scot free for killing unarmed Black people. That's not even

mentioning how comfortable whites feel moving in and taking over formerly Black and Brown urban city spaces in the name of gentrification.”

Later that day, I left my seventh hour class and headed to football practice. It was time to let my hair down—which in my case means tying my locks up and putting on my helmet and pads and locking down anyone who comes my way.

It was my hair that actually brought Ryan and me closer together than I could have ever foreseen. One day Ryan asked for a ride home on the same day that I had planned to get my locks twisted by my aunt Kemba. Since Kemba is one of the top natural hairstylists in Morningside Heights, she does not play about being late or being a no-show. You will never be able to get another appointment if you flake or cancel on her. I was not about to be out here searching for someone to retwist my hair last minute, because I have too much going on for that. Besides, I am in the running for class hair thanks to Aunt Kemba’s fly double-strand twists and elaborate parts for men’s looks.

Ryan said he would ride with me to get my locks tightened. He said he wanted to see what all the fuss was about having “tight” hairstyles, as we called it. The locker room was a place where you either got roasted or got props for any range of things about your looks. I mostly got props because of the way I rocked my hair. But I’ve also been fried for my share of stuff, too. When we got to Aunt Kemba’s, I could tell Ryan was nervous. He should have been. My family has a reputation for interrogating anyone about anything—at any time. It didn’t matter that there were several people waiting to get their hair done. When Ryan and I came down to the basement where the makeshift salon was, the room got quiet and all eyes turned toward him. Normally, there are any number of arguments about politics, sexuality, religion, white people, or similar hot topics going on simultaneously at Black salons and barbershops. This time, we apparently walked in on a conversation about the current occupant of the White House, a flagrantly racist, bigoted simpleton who has made a mockery of the office of the president.

I introduced Ryan to Kemba and she went straight IN on him. A trial by fire it was indeed. She goes, “Oh, you’re Jamar’s teammate from Bridgepont, aren’t you?” “Yes ma’am,” Ryan politely replied. She fired off a litany of questions without giving him time to respond. “How’d you get into Morningside? Yo’ momma and them voted for that idiot in the White House, didn’t they? How could so many white women be so ignorant? You know people think you only got into Morningside because of your white privilege, don’t you? Do you think that’s true? What was the last book you read? Do you read, or just stare at your phone like the other kids your age?”

Ryan's face was red as a tomato. He just kept swaying side to side and running his fingers through his hair while his other hand was playing pocket pool. When she finally let up on her verbal spray of questions, Ryan chose to answer one of her questions. "I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*," he said matter-of-factly. "Oh wow, really? I know they didn't let y'all read that at Bridgepoint," she replied curiously. "Well, actually we just finished it here at Morningside. It's part of our American lit assigned reading." "I knew it. They probably think Malcolm X was a Black Panther who walked around shooting white people. They the ones that need to be reading it... real talk."

The whole time, Ryan gave only a few nods and smiles. He couldn't really get a word in edgewise anyways, so it's probably good he kept quiet. As I sat in my aunt's chair, I could feel Ryan's emotions swinging back and forth on a pendulum between fear and curiosity. When we got back into the car two hours later, Ryan began to question me about what just happened.

"Man, your aunt is the real deal!" Ryan said with exasperation. "I know, right? She don't play. But she means well. She just don't believe in faking the funk... for anyone, especially not for white people. And I'm glad you told her about reading Malcolm X. She went to an HBCU and loves to speak on a lot of Black history and culture topics." "Yeah," Ryan mumbled. "It's all good. I actually like people that act like her because in my family everyone talks one way in public but another way in private when it comes to race."

May 27, 2019

Jamar and Ryan Text Messages

RYAN: Are you still able to drop me off after practice?

JAMAR: Sure, I'm surprised you asked. Must be hard being the white guy everyone loves to hate then riding home with me, the Blacktivist. I do think you should hear what we discussed during InFLOmation today, though. I'm not gonna be fake. Gotta keep it 100.

RYAN: Ok thanks, I heard some guys talking about it in the hall but yeah I'd love your take.

I like Ryan, but sometimes he just doesn't get it. I guess it's not his fault that his mother and father are walking contradictions of self-proclaimed color blind and conveniently conservative thoughts and actions. They strike me as the kind of white people who are good with equality so long as it doesn't infringe on any of their unearned privileges. For Ryan's part, I usually give him a pass on the clueless things

he says because between his parents, the school curriculum, and the news media, he hasn't been taught a balanced story of the contributions Blacks have made in America and in society at large.

Ryan has enjoyed seeing plenty of images of people who look like him in superhero roles at the movies, as protagonists in the required readings at school, as executives in banks and government and just about every other industry in America. So it's no wonder he has such an optimistic view of America. I try to take into account that he's been taught a narrow and stereotypical understanding of Black history and culture that typically centers around their experience of being enslaved and/or fighting against the legacy of white racism.

Rarely do schools, even urban schools, teach the history of African Americans from the view of how their presence forced America to reckon with how to live up to its ideals of freedom and democracy. We rarely talk about slavery as the singular historical event that put the constitutional creed of "All men are created equal" to the test. Instead, slavery is taught in ways that focus on the hardships and cruelty Blacks endured instead of the ways it shaped virtually every modern institution in America today. Because of this miseducation, Ryan still doesn't understand why Black people, including me, have a problem with him saying the N-word but are okay with him listening to Black music that contains the word. He doesn't understand why that word carries a special stigma like no other word in the American lexicon. I tried to explain it to him by using the word "redneck" in a hypothetical scenario of reverse racism.

I asked him to imagine if Black people enslaved white people and used the word "redneck" to keep them in their subordinate place both literally and symbolically. Ryan says he wouldn't care if I called him a redneck if all the songs white people made 200 years later used the term and if white kids used it in everyday conversation like we do now. I think my analogy failed, but its failure is a clear example of how White Supremacy is normalized in our collective imagination.

Ryan could not imagine the legacy of pain that would come from seeing documentaries of white men who look like his father being called "boy" by other grown Black men, or being told to address Black men as "sir" and not look at Black women in the eyes or show any sign of romantic interest. There is no Emmett Till-like figure in the white community that would allow young white kids like Ryan to understand the pain and history of the N-word. The fact that Black people reclaimed the N-word for use among themselves doesn't remove the stigma it carries when someone white uses the word. It doesn't help matters that Black people are generally accepting when it comes to allowing others to enjoy Black culture and be a part of the community.

A white rapper like Eminem enjoys mass cross-cultural appeal in large part because he was welcomed into the underground scene of Black Detroit rappers. Ryan kind of reminds me of Eminem, only without the rap skills or the poor upbringing. When he came to our school, we welcomed him into our culture. I started offering him a ride home once he made the football team. At times I would share things about my upbringing and school him on the origins of hip hop. However, it seems sometimes that Ryan just wanted to take in and copy all the good elements of Black culture without offering anything in return. I would have expected him to give proper credit to our car ride conversations on the history of sampling in his senior InFLOmation project. Even Eminem credited his rap style to Masta Ace, who is well respected but never gained the stardom he deserved. I never felt Ryan brought the same level of sharing or education as I did to our friendship. I've heard some people describe this phenomenon as "culture vultures."

May 29, 2019

Black Twitter Strikes Back

InFLOmation Center

Intrigued by what our favorite Harvard-bound QB @OutsideTheLines is saying about Blackness. Let's hear the #InFLOmationWarriors speak on it?

Jamar Johnson @OutsideTheLines

Everyone wants to be Black until it's actually time to be Black. Smh

"Everyone wants to be Black until it's time to actually be BLACK." Who's got receipts?

I should have known Ms. Brooks was going to retweet my post from the library's Twitter account. But before I knew it, the whole school—PLUS the Black Twitter community—had gotten hold of it and it was taking on a life of its own. For my part, I was just trying to call Ryan out on his white privilege and cultural appropriation. He had the nerve to tell me that the police were just doing their job when they stopped and frisked me and muscled me to the curb with handcuffs. It was just moments after I dropped Ryan off at his house after football practice. Ryan said he heard that a few cars were stolen in the area recently and that I probably fit the profile of the perp they were looking for. "Nothing personal," he said. It pissed me off that he couldn't take himself out of his lily-white Bridgepoint view and see that a similar exchange would be unfathomable if he were dropping me off at my crib in

Morningside, or anywhere for that matter. His mom's little experiment with Black culture does not seem to be working.

Plus, he thought nothing of taking the playlist I shared with him and using it as the basis of his senior LIT project. He didn't know any of the rappers on my playlist before I played them on in my car on our rides home. But now he wants to chronicle the influence of jazz on hip hop music sampling for his project. Someone's probably gonna call him out on it with the quickness. Imma sit back and watch.

June 3, 2019

Jamar's Letter to Harvard's Academic Advising Office

Dear Academic Advising,

Per your recent request, I am writing to confirm the topic of my "freshman focus" project. A lot has transpired since I wrote my acceptance letter back in April. Specifically, there have been several racially charged incidents at my high school and in the surrounding community. In one instance, I was racially profiled and harassed by the police on my way home from football practice after dropping a teammate off. Another incident involved this same teammate's mother, Mrs. Murphy, being caught in a firestorm of controversy surrounding her appeal of our school's new residency policy and her own alleged malfeasance in falsifying records. In all this, I have gained more experiential knowledge about how race, power, and white privilege function and intersect in our everyday lives. That said, I am going to adjust my "freshman focus" project to center on urban education reform. More specifically, I plan to institute a new mandatory exchange program where urban schools are matched with a nearby suburban school for an exchange that occurs 2x per week. This reform will differ from previous methods used to desegregate schools in the 1950s and 60s. It will be more comprehensive than simply busing students from inner-city to suburban schools. It will require city government involvement in housing relocation incentives and mass transit solutions.

My philosophy is that white families have to have as much skin in the game as families of color if school desegregation is to truly work this time. One of the major pitfalls of the previous school desegregation policies is that they put the burden mainly on Black families to be bused into suburban white school communities. However, this had a few negative effects. For one, it instantiated the idea that predominantly white schools were inherently better by virtue of their whiteness, as opposed to the discrepancies in resources and community stability with urban Black and Latino communities. Yet, it did help show that when all things were equal, Black students have the same—if not greater capacity—to learn and do well when they receive the same instruction and resources as their white counterparts. Secondly, it further destabilized urban communities of color by accelerating white flight and draining urban communities of the talent and tax base of middle-class Blacks who sought better housing and schooling options in the suburbs after busing ended. I look forward to partnering with the Center for Urban Schooling at Harvard to help realize my plans. I appreciate your support and cannot wait to make Harvard my new home in a few short months.

My senior year ended with a bang, literally. Ryan was shot on his way home from the football banquet. He got into a Twitter beef with some neighborhood guys about who owns Black music and culture. His mother Kathy was actually locked up the night of the banquet for her role in a widespread college admission scandal where wealthy (mostly white) parents were relinquishing their guardianship of their kids so that they could be considered legally independent when applying for financial aid. Turns out, most of the people convicted could have easily paid for college, and the grant fund they drained caused hundreds of students with actual financial need to have to take out loans.

I visited Ryan at the hospital and he did show some remorse for stealing my playlist. He also said he didn't feel right about claiming independence on his financial aid forms, but that his mom said the loophole was meant for people smart enough to take advantage of it. It wasn't lost on me that the subtle implication here was that working-class Black and Brown parents were being stereotyped as too dumb or lazy to take advantage of the system.

I look forward to coming back to my alma mater in the fall for the "Twitter takeover" day. Ms. Brooks invited me to take over the LIT center's Twitter page to engage in a Twitter chat about my freshman focus project at Harvard. I invited Ryan and his mother to the event so that they could redeem themselves in the eyes of the Morningside community. We'll see if the diversity, equity, and inclusion training that Mrs. Murphy was mandated to attend as part of her probation sentence will make any difference in how she participates. Black Twitter will surely be the judge of that.

