

Washed Out

Students, staff of color describe the racial battles they've faced in predominately white institutions.

STORY BY NOEL MOHAMED

Nine-year-old, Gabby Phifer, looked at herself in the bathroom mirror sad. She wished her skin to be lighter, like her mother's, and less like her father's darker complexion. She wanted her eyes not to be deep brown, but ocean blue like her friends.

"I would find myself thinking 'I didn't feel pretty because all the boys would like them [white friends]' and then my mom, I feel like she's a gorgeous, strong woman. I had wished I looked more like her and not my dad," Phifer said.

As children, it's normal to look up to your parent or role model. You want to be like them, to emulate them. This desire can lead to unforeseen consequences if not fostered in the right environment. If someone cannot truly accept themselves for who they are first, how can they grow to become who they want to be?

This constant desire to be accepted becomes a never-ending cycle of changing who you are to meet society's standards. Adjusting again and again and again until one day, you don't remember who you are.

Several things can contribute to this "cycle," but for people of color (POC), pivotal battles determine how the cycle ends. The first battle is internal — the struggle of accepting one's inner and outer beauty, cultural identity and way of life. The second is the communal battle — the inner struggle lived out amongst your communal peers: not being black enough for your peers or not using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to name a few examples.

Dictionary.com defines AAVE as a dialect of American English characterized by pronunciations, syntactic structures and vocabulary associated with and used by some North American Black people and exhibiting a wide variety and range of forms varying in the extent to which they differ from Standard American English. The final one is societal — the portrayal of racial stereotypes such as the angry black woman and how that affects the way young people of color develop. These cyclical battles are often a product of whitewashing.

"I think that whitewashing affects many different things, like the way you act and speak," senior Shyanna Lindsey said. "I think my being light-skinned and speaking 'grammatically correct' makes other black people have this idea in their head like 'oh she ain't about it or whatever'. To them I'm whitewashed."

Merriam-Webster defines whitewashing as film practice in which white actors portray non-white characters. not commonly prescribed. The act of not stereotypically portraying your race, culture, or both as it creates a divide and casts you as whitewashed.

One side is then known as ghetto, uncivilized, improper and dangerous. The other is intelligent, proper, quiet and "white." You can't just be as POC; you're one or the other.

POC who live in predominantly white areas often struggle with fully embracing their beauty because it's uncommon for them to see someone who resembles them. They walk into school and rarely see a teacher who looks like them, they go shopping for toys and have trouble finding ones that are of color and turn on Disney after school to an all-white cast except for the token funny best friend who just happens to be a person of color.

"I grew up hating my skin color a lot," junior Tola Abitogun said. "I didn't accept that I was black and learn to embrace it until last year. That shows how important it is to represent people correctly and give people somebody to look up to. When you don't do that, then people will be looking to turn themselves into something that they're not. That has a negative effect on people's minds."

Senior Melanie Interiano-Giron experienced similar feelings to Abitogun about her appearance growing up.

"I used to always want straight hair because I noticed all these white girls did not have curly hair," Interiano-Giron said. "They only had straight hair, so I'd always want to straighten it. When I was younger, I never got complimented on my hair and appearance."

This internal battle of embracing one's heritage can be a lifelong struggle. This struggle is evident from childhood for those who grew up in a predominantly white area. Those who grew up in a diverse environment may not experience that internal battle until later.

"I'm originally from Chicago and I grew up around people that look like me in some way," counselor Jasmine Morgan said. "A lot of my experiences are tied to that. So, my experience with white people didn't happen until college."

Morgan experienced a significant culture shock when she moved to Columbia, MO to attend the University of Missouri.

"I was like, 'how do I show up as a Black woman?'" Morgan said. "I started to understand the nuances of how the things that I did growing up or times acted

around my Black family and friends may not be accepted in the white world."

Morgan, who is also the Black Student Union sponsor, found a safe space at Mizzou where she could connect with other Black students was helpful.

"I was intentional about seeking out those safe spaces for myself, and I had opportunities in college to create a space specifically for Black women on campus to talk about their experiences," Morgan said.

Once the internal battle begins to bleed into one's relationships with family and friends, it shifts from the internal to the communal battle. This can stem from many things: negative comments about how one speaks, how one dresses, where one grew up.

"The 'competition' within the black community is something that I've struggled with. I know a lot of POC, specifically Black people themselves, that I wouldn't fit in with at school just because

the way that we do things is different," Abitogun said. "I'm not saying this to bash on them either, because I really do admire them. I have been bullied for being whitewashed and told that I'm not 'Black enough' and that I don't 'act Black.' I think there is a hierarchy and that if you're not 'Black enough,' you're kind of left to find different people to hang out with."

Senior Chabelly Palacio has had similar experiences being judged for her physical appearance and friendships.

"I think many people from my culture, especially people that are Mexican, my age and look traditionally Mexcian, tend to always assume that I'm whitewashed," Palacio said. "It's because I have white friends and I would dress a certain way. I don't think those things matter."

Another communal-centered conflict relates to the way people speak and how dialect may impact another person of color's opinion about you.

"I've found that if you speak 'more proper,' or you don't use AAVE then you're considered whitewashed. There is nothing wrong with speaking in any way, but depending on how someone speaks, they're either whitewashed or ghetto. It's like you're one or the other," Phifer said.

Phrases like "the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice" push an abundance of people into limbo. This grey area of not being black enough but also not being white. Why must one always go down for the other to go up, when

COMMON DIALECT

A list of popular slang terms that are rooted in AAVE.

Heada** — stupid
Whip — Car
Finna — Going to
Paper — Money
Been — (I been knew...)
Pressed — Upset

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to society black is black no matter the shade?

While the internal and communal battles can bleed into one another, the societal battle primarily stands on its own. This battle consists of a multitude of fights, microaggressions are an example.

"It was freshman year and I was walking up to my friend and another girl, and I was wearing Ugg boots. The other girl said, 'those are white girl shoes, why are you wearing those? You so act white,'" Lindsey said. "Later that day, I posted on my private story and said, 'Guys my friends think I 'act white' and she swiped up and said, 'you do.' I then said, 'You can't act a color,' and she said, 'yes you can.' After that, I said, 'well, you're acting very purple right now,' and she said, 'you're acting orange.' She thought it was funny."

Junior Korrey Womack shares a similar experience to Lindsey.

"Around the school, people I say I act more 'white' than I do 'ghetto,' Womack said. "That's so weird to me because it's my skin color; I'm still black."

This divide between the Black community has been documented as early as the 1930s. Harvard researcher--Ellis Monk, wrote a paper titled 'The Unceasing Significance of Colorism: Skin Tone Stratification in the United States'. In it, he recounts sociologist Charles S. Johnson's observations, in his ethnographic study of a rural Alabama town in 1934.

"Darker-skinned Black women did not want to marry lighter-skinned Black or mulatto (Black and White) men because the darker-skinned Black women considered lighter-skinned Black and mulatto men untrustworthy and "poor providers for dark women," Johnson said.

Merriam-webster defines microaggressions as a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

"I've been called 'exotic looking' and I know POC who have been called 'ethereal,' and I don't know about these so-called 'compliments.' It's like we're all fantasized about, and our cultures are appropriated yet when we express ourselves we're looked down upon. However, when white people do it, it's cool and trendy."
- Gabby Phifer

A common form of microaggressions is the backhanded compliments many POC hear daily. These 'compliments' can be about many things: looks, offspring, dialect and education to name a few.

In late August 2022, Hailey Bieber posted a TikTok showing her favorite lip combo from her brand, Rhode Skin. The video has around 24.5 million views and the comments section is filled with reminders that this lip combo has been used by POC women since the 80s.

"Twitter users underscored the longevity of the beauty trend and how it was popular with women of color long before Bieber posted about," Time Magazine wrote. "They also pointed out how the racism inherent in beauty ideals means that Bieber is being celebrated for doing the same thing that women of color have been criticized for."

This incident sparked discussion on the unfairness of status between white and women of color.

"I don't necessarily think that Haley Bieber was wrong for posting the video," Phifer said. "It's just the fact that she was not considered ghetto or unprofessional looking, goes to show that white people can wear almost anything and be called positive things. Then when POC do it, they're judged."

Microaggressions, to people who don't receive them constantly, can seem unimportant. However, to people that experience them daily, the annoyance of a microaggression becomes hurtful.

A six-year-old video titled, 'How microaggressions are like mosquito bites - same difference,' uses the analogy of mosquito bites to describe microaggressions.

"For people that still don't think microaggressions are a problem: just imagine that instead of being a stupid comment, a microaggression is a mosquito bite. Mosquitoes are one of society's annoying pests, but if you're only bitten once in a while it's not that big a deal. The problem is that some people get bitten by mosquitoes a lot more than others."

When you're bitten by a mosquito it doesn't seem to be that big of a deal, however, when you're bitten constantly you'll become extremely irritated. One day, lashing out because of how painful and hurtful the bites are.

"I feel like people always make it seem like POC don't have feelings," Palacio said. "They [white people] think that POC are always strong and tough, and so they shouldn't be 'overreacting' when they're just speaking up. I think when POC speak up about these 'small things,' it's not small anymore. They're hurt and they feel uncomfortable. It's as if POC aren't allowed to voice discontent like their feelings are pushed under the rug. That's not fair."

DEFINE WHITE WASHING

staff and student share their definitions of white washing.

STUDENT

"I would define it as the term to define POC who don't fit into the stereotype of their race. Whatever that may be for that certain group."
- Shyanna Lindsey

STAFF

"For POC, I think it is assimilation. Your experience around other white people affect your view of yourself and other POC view of you. You sort of assimilate to that culture, and it may not be done intentionally."
- Jasmine Morgan