

Why more education can't block the criminalizing gaze at black bodies

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Since attaining my PhD in the Spring of 2016, I've had to consider how that translates for me socially as a young black man desiring to be honest about my own complex social location. There is no question that I have more access and opportunity than I previously did in various networks I navigate and in particular places I inhabit. Many doors have opened up as a result of attaining this degree. To be formally educated at all is a privilege many never have the opportunity to pursue, and so I am deeply grateful to have had the chance. There are social structures in place that recognize that piece of paper and thereby elevates people who have attained it. There are pros and cons to this system, of course, but that it exists is not debatable.

At the same time, I am a black man, and will always be so. Therefore, when I move about in the United States people first see my blackness and not my education. This means ongoing vulnerability because my blackness still is interpreted as criminal through a racialized lens. I have described one such encounter in my book *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* of police drawing their guns towards me during a routine traffic stop, and I know very well that my diploma cannot now magically shield me from these kinds of instances. Consequently, I live in a strange place of tension; I can recognize how our society provides social

advantages to highly educated people, in a structural manner that also provides whiteness with advantages, while simultaneously hyper-aware of my ongoing vulnerability within our racialized State. I guess if I wanted to, I could walk around holding my diploma everywhere I went. Yet that would certainly provoke other racialized gazes and tropes, like the supposedly pompous and uppity black man that does not know his place. Remember Dr. Gates? Do you remember how some blamed him for his own arrest at his own house because he dared to stand up for his own humanity?

There are always racial expectations in place for black people, whether one is rich or poor, and these expectations have no regard for whether someone is formerly educated or street smart. Being polite, just like speaking boldly to authorities, as many white people do, will not close the door to the dangerous possibilities of a racial gaze criminalizing your black body. I just wanted to name this obvious yet real struggle I feel in my body as a black man with a PhD. It emerges naturally when responding to things like the video included in the link below, which I came across earlier today. Grateful this black man seeking to become a scholar in his field is still alive and well, as I have been in any troubling encounters with police I have had in the past. May that become a reality for everyone someday.

Police tackle and arrest a black Northwestern PhD student "suspected" of stealing a car: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH15aLGUxj4>