THE FIGHT OF THE FINITE

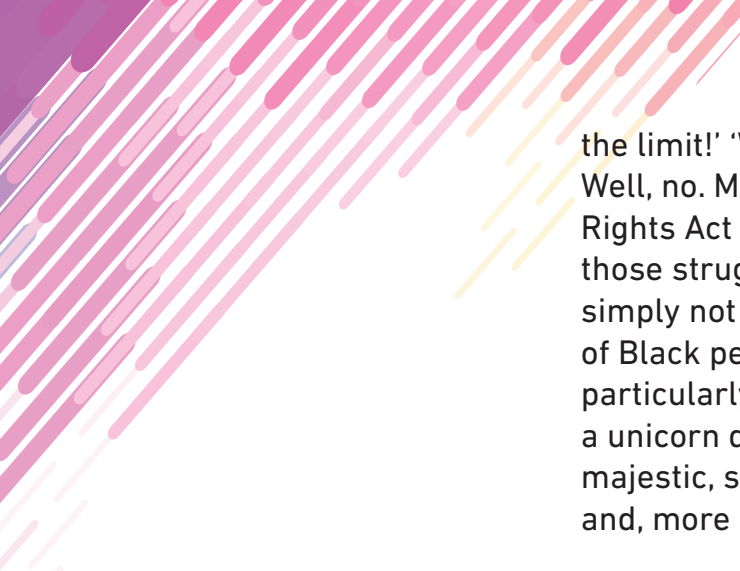**Liz Williams**
Finance Professional
9 Years

1....2...3............1.................None...

Over the years I've become aware of a subconscious activity I perform just about everywhere and in most situations. I count the number of Black people in a room, on the street as I'm walking... I search for Black faces in coffee shops and restaurants I pass, on planes, everywhere. I count, because it's finite, and because it's lonely. But more importantly, I wonder where are faces that look like mine.

I am the only Black woman on a 25-person finance team of a multi-billion dollar corporation, an objectifying and sad facet of my professional existence that hangs around my neck like lead weight that I drag behind me each day. I am one of possibly three Black women on my floor, and of maybe ten among the more than 1,200 employees here at the corporate headquarters; none of us work together. I've never had a Black woman or Black man in a role more senior than myself in any of the public companies I've worked for ever, until about six months ago, and it was not in finance. As a Black woman navigating corporate America, the majority of my experiences have been positive, but there is a darker, subtle underbelly that is more akin to that embarrassing uncle America is always trying to hush, who just won't shut up, who stumbles into conversations and ignorantly makes bigoted comments in front of your new boyfriend. I honestly never thought I'd have to face these realities, or experience the exhaustion of being the only Black person in the room. However, my hope is that by sharing the many objectifying experiences you as younger Black females may potentially encounter, I can provide a kind of vaccine, building up your immunity against so much you will be made to endure and expected to navigate silently.

Most corporate finance departments that I've worked in do live up to the popular stereotype: they are mostly male-dominated, and full of overconfident, overly-educated, name dropping, top-tier, fraternity types who are almost all Caucasian or Asian, raised in environments that fostered and rewarded a heightened sense of entitlement.

the limit!' 'We can do anything we want!'" Right? Well, no. More than half a century since the Civil Rights Act was passed, many are convinced those struggles are no longer relevant; this is simply not true. What is true is the presence of Black people in corporate America—and particularly in finance—is as rare as finding a unicorn drinking from the water cooler: majestic, singular, highly underrepresented, and, more importantly, thirsty.

THERE WAS SOON A HIRING FRENZY; YET NOT ONE BROWN FACE WAS PARADED THROUGH OUR BULLPEN TO AN INTERVIEW. RATHER, IT SEEMED LIKE ALL THE HIRING MANAGERS, WHETHER CONSCIOUS OR NOT, WERE ONLY ENTERTAINING CLONES.

It was very clear when I arrived at my most recent company that the department had been battered by high turnover. So I was excited when we got news that a new, female Vice President with a progressive point of view had been hired. She had claimed her top priority was to reduce attrition and make our department whole for once. There was soon a hiring frenzy; yet not one brown face was paraded through our bullpen to an interview. Rather, it seemed like all the hiring managers, whether conscious or not, were only

My field of work is not inconsistent with other areas of the corporate strata, in that Black employees are still very rare. A Huffington Post report published in 2015 stated that after the Black male CEO of McDonald's, Don Thompson, stepped down, Black CEOs wouldn't even make up one percent of Fortune 500 companies. This chasm also shows up proportionately in mid- and entry-level positions in corporate America. "That's not how it is now though," you say? Or maybe you think, "We had a Black president, so 'Sky's

entertaining clones. In an effort to add a little "color," I tapped my network, but only received one qualified response, which also illustrated a gap in eligible candidates. In the end, the hiring managers' unconscious bias won out, and they hired people who fit into the assembly line, rather than seeking out people with differing backgrounds, views, and experiences. In 2016, Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce published a study called "African Americans: College Majors and Earnings," which stated that while we make up 12% of the population, we are underrepresented in the number of degree holders in the highest-paying, fastest-growing college majors of STEM, health, and business. The case from my workplace is one of many examples of how these issues of underrepresentation persist.

Another indirect result of the hiring frenzy was the abundance of icebreaker shticks that were meant to give us fun little glimpses of all the new personalities joining the team, and allow for new insights into old comrades. We'd answer questions like, "What is a fun fact about yourself?"; "What's one new thing you did this year?"; and so on. It was a bit summer-campish and trivial, and was seen as an attempt for inclusion—one we came to loathe. What these moments offered (in addition to many ridiculous tidbits about my co-workers) was a chance to learn how shortsighted people were as a result of their truly narrow worlds. I tend to keep it light, occasionally sharing something a

2

SOME SAY ONE KEY TO SUCCESS IS A POKER FACE; I DON'T HAVE THAT KEY. MY PRE-RECORDED MENTAL NARRATIVE CLICKS ON: "OH NO, SHE DIDN'T?!? YEP, SHE DID!!!!" HER WORDS IN MY EARS SOUNDED LIKE THE TASTE OF FRESH VOMIT.

little more personal, but consciously sharing "unique" facts that challenge the stereotypes I've seen assigned to Black women. "I am a ballerina;" "I grew up in rural Colorado;" "I was a competitive swimmer;" "I love Fleetwood Mac;" "I enjoy sewing." From the gasps and eyes that widen to the size of saucers, I know they never see these fun facts coming. I do this consciously because their experience of me as the only Black in the office is likely one of a very small number of experiences with Black people they will ever have, making it the *only* monolithic voice for all Black people.
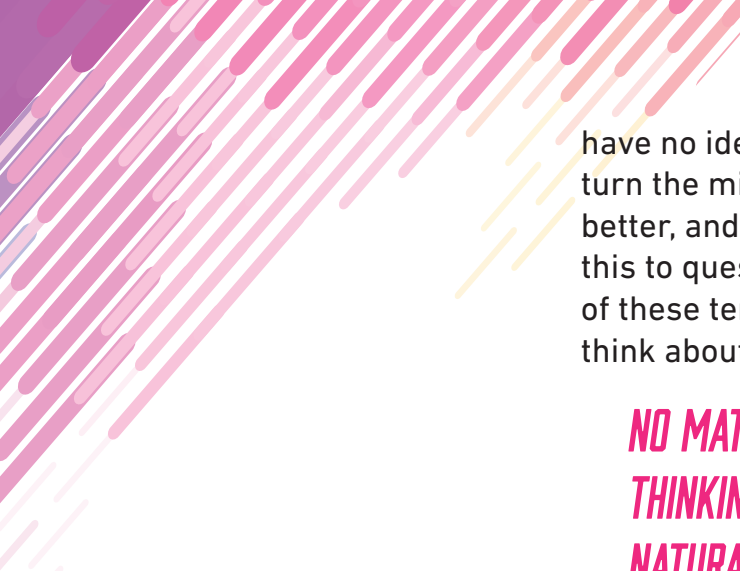
My experience with white people is just a microcosm of the bigger issue. They were raised on objectifying myths about Black people, with institutions and entire communities that perpetuate these myths, and systems that were created to enact and reinforce these beliefs. So imagine the paradox of interacting with a Black person for the first time. My experience of these professional interactions demonstrates that we are a perceived

contradiction in this world; when our existence challenges the myths people have been misled to believe, the truth is irreconcilable to them, even to the point of implausibility. Some are astonished when I mention the companies I work for and my titles. I've been told, to my face, "You don't look like you work for" said company, and asked outright, "How did you get your job? You must have majored in finance, right?" I am a clear example that hard work, determination, and a little luck can get you just about anywhere, despite privilege or pedigree.

At some other staff meeting, it was "fun facts" time. We balked, but were curious about whose story would win out today. We went around the room one by one: someone was trying a hip-hop class for the first time; another was leaving the following week to climb the Alps; and another had eaten Domino's seven nights in a row the week before. I shared that I surprised my husband and his friends to an archery lesson the weekend prior. They gawked, eyes widened; some were so intrigued that Black people would participate in such an event they even had follow-up questions later. We arrived at the last teammate, who is hyper-introverted, nervous, and self-deprecating, especially in large group settings. She started awkwardly, "Well, it's not that interesting, butttttt, I went to an all-women's college." A collective "Ooohhhh, and ahhhhhhh" came from the group. She persisted, "In Oakland...I went to Mills...in East Oakland, actually. I mean, DEEEEEEEEEEEEP

East Oakland." My eyes must have rolled to the back of my head. This had the room simmering. She continued, "Yea, it was in the hood...I mean the campus itself was gorgeous, but it was surrounded by gates." Some say one key to success is a poker face; I don't have that key. My pre-recorded mental narrative clicks on: "OH NO, she DIDN'T?!? Yep, she did!!!!" Her words in my ears sounded like the taste of fresh vomit.

My abhorrence was partially masked, but I am very aware that I am immediately triggered by the use of words like "hood" or "ghetto" in the corporate space, and not only because I am the person present who has the most contextualized understanding of the historical significance, but because they

have no idea how offensive they are. We must turn the mirror on ourselves and learn to do better, and also be willing in situations like this to question the offender's unthinking use of these terms. Let's give them something to think about.

NO MATTER HOW HIP OR FORWARD THINKING THE COMPANY—IT'S CLEAR THAT NATURAL BLACK WOMEN'S HAIR IS A LIABILITY IN CORPORATE AMERICA.

Another inescapable experience I have repeatedly encountered in the corporate space is around the tactile fascination with my hair, which most often ends awkwardly. I gave up relaxers sophomore year of college, and never looked back. It's rarely pressed, and always wild and free. Though I have tended to choose companies that best fit my personal style (suitless and scrappy), I have not had to bridge a large work culture gap like some of my girl friends in politics and government or entertainment. Still, though, my hair precedes my abilities and me. With the larger companies I've worked for—no matter how hip or forward thinking the company—it's clear that natural Black women's hair is a liability in corporate America, given the lack of experience and sensitivity with this facet of who we are. Why is Black hair so intriguing? They always know someone who has "similar" hair or they

are not used interchangeably with terms like "white trash" or "trailer parks" to describe tangled electrical computer cords or a bad hair day. Best believe "ghetto" permeates corporate life as a way to add an element of boldness or hipness to whatever is being described, and it happens more than I can handle. Yes, we may use "ghetto" amongst ourselves, but there is so much context behind it when used by a white person. It's a term that stereotypes and lampoons my culture and is wrought with racial implications. Ultimately, it's thoughtless comments like this we must face, because some of the people using them

have a granddaughter or niece whose hair "is just like yours," and they most definitely won't think twice before going in for a feel. Why, oh, why do you want to touch my hair? Do you go around touching other white coworkers' hair? And why do you exclaim, "It's soooooo soft"? Should it be "hard"? Why is it that I'm unrecognizable when my hair is pulled into a bun or when it's flat ironed? And no. It's not difficult to do. If you want to know what products I use, how about let's discuss during downtime, not in the middle of a meeting or during a group event. Why is it we have to conform to a corporate norm when the characteristic they most want us to adapt is exactly what makes us who we are? Hair doesn't have to be the only thing we talk about, even if you are white with curly hair. Do you not have anything else in common with me other than my hair? The answer won't be different the third or fourth time you ask. The antiquated perceptions of Black women's hair, and the lack of representation of unprocessed Black hair in media and pop culture have taken a toll on the American psyche. However, it's hard to brush these off as simple naïvetés and not see these interactions as intense microaggressions, whether conscious or not. Just like white people, Black people have bad hair days. Our textures are different, but in the end it's just hair, right?

Many Americans have had the luxury and fortune of growing up in a post-civil rights

America where segregation, slavery, and treating people differently simply because of the color of their skin was all regarded as little more than a distant memory. However, if you happen to be a Black man or woman in America, you are innately aware that our society is still heavily cloaked in racism. The prison industrial complex; persistent anti-Black racism in our judicial system; and the parallel of Jim Crow-era lynchings to modern day unpunished murders of Black people by police are all clear examples of how deeply rooted racism still is in American policy, institutions, and psyches. Yes, we have many more opportunities than in the past; yes, access to college has increased; but we are still under-represented across the board, and lack proper role models who will support us, who understand our situations, and whose image we can see ourselves in. We need to provide each other with support across our disciplines to help navigate the trying events we experience daily; if we don't have the opportunity to learn that our experiences are shared and common, rather than personal and particular to us, we may brush them off as passive acts or conclude that we're reading too much into things when the discrimination is harder to substantiate, like in the case of receiving slower service; being expected to do additional work without additional compensation; waiting longer for a promotion or not being promoted at all; or being passed up for a job or interview. Though not always easily identifiable, these are all

very real barriers that disable and stifle the advancement and placement of brown people in corporate America and America at large. It will be you—not your white counterparts—who will spend additional time counting the number of Black people on a subway car, in a meeting, or on your team. You are the one who will spend precious hours having to analyze your interactions through the lens and historical context of racism and the legacy of being Black in America.

So, I urge you, smile and make friends with all the Black people you can in your workplace, seek to actively hire and promote well deserving Black and brown people. Don't be afraid of being labeled. Don't be afraid to speak up. Ask clarifying questions. Push people to question the assumptions and myths. And always know that you are not alone. I am here, likely smiling as I pass you on the street or in the lunchroom. When you pass me, don't just count me, share a smile and let's help each other thrive, break barriers, push the status quo, and push people out of their comfort zones. Know you are beautiful in all your Blackness.

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