

The Expectations of Blackness

*Written by Amiri Tulloch, Phillips Academy Andover Associate Editor
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“I didn’t expect you to talk or act like that when I first saw you.”

“Yo, how does it make you feel to know that I’m blacker than you?”

“You’re basically not black.”

“Why are you so white?”

“Amiri. You really are the whitest black guy I have ever met.”

Every time I hear that phrase – or any of its similar forms – it leaves a tangible impact on me. It’s a rotunda of feeling, really: first, it’s shock and confusion, then anger, and then, lastly, hopelessness turned to numbness.

That chain of emotion has been a strikingly familiar reaction for me in my life. In fact, hearing those phrases, and dealing with the ensuing emotions, have become so familiar to me that every new instance leads to a decrease in the immediate confusion and anger I feel. I’ve encountered it so much that it doesn’t anger or confuse me the same way it used to. I’ve realized, though, that every new instance also leads to an exponential increase of the hopelessness and numbness. It’s like a rolling snowball that only grows in size the longer it plummets down a mountain. It’s clearly a problem, but every new interaction with snow makes it more and more difficult to fix the situation. It’s already too out-of-control.

I’ve heard those phrases frequently throughout my life. But, in reflection, I’ve almost exclusively come across the phrase when I was in predominantly white spaces – which I’ve slowly come to realize is also unsurprising.

My arrival to Andover this year – a school at the cream of the crop of predominantly white spaces, and especially in the education field – has been, unsurprisingly, filled with people who use the phrase. In my dorm, in the buildings around campus, on sports fields... everywhere. So each and every time I hear the phrase, whether it comes from the often blatant tongue of a white student or the often coded language of a white faculty, it’s another reminder that Andover is a difficult place for me to develop and understand my unique blackness.

At the same time, I realize that those earlier phrases – to some – may seem like something trivial, inconsequential, or worthy of a “*Chill out! It’s just a joke.*”

But I really can't just minimize it. Those phrases signal a larger problem at Andover and other predominantly white spaces: defining blackness within a context of whiteness. It's not too difficult to think about, either: How is it even possible for someone with no context of the black experience to put definitions and frameworks around my existence?

Furthermore, their definitions of blackness are problematic because they uphold specific, narrow images of blackness. Every time I hear the "I didn't expect you to talk or act like that when I first saw you" phrase, I'm forced to wonder what exactly *did* you expect this black man to talk and act like? And, where did you get those images of how black men are supposed to act? Holding monolithic expectations of my blackness and masculinity is dangerous, no matter how well-meaning the expectations are intended. The black community is far too unique and diverse for one label, or one term, to cover its wide complexities.

Although I'm focusing specifically on masculinity because of my experiences as a black man, it is crucial not to forget about the identities of black women and gender non-conforming students at Andover. Their interactions with the expectations of whiteness can be even more stark and harmful, especially because our society – and Andover's culture, specifically – has so few acceptable images of their identities.

That danger has caused me to reflect on Andover's impact on black students who spend all four of their formative years here. How does the smothering whiteness of Andover impact a new freshman entering this institution, for example? Will they be able to navigate their formative years while also maintaining a healthy understanding of their blackness – one that doesn't center their identity around white expectations? And, will this white space allow them to form identities that might contradict the narrow expectations?

I understand that these questions might not connect with people who have never had their identity challenged or confronted. Then again, maybe it *will* connect in some fashion. For the most part, though, I'm writing these questions to a younger me who might have entered Andover unaware of the school's culture and who might – simultaneously – have lost context of my personal existence surrounded by this learning environment.