

# DEFIANCE AND BLACK SCHOLAR IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

By Marlon C. James

The development of Black scholar identity begins by acknowledging the tension surrounding being both an African American and a scholar in a nation resistant to reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> Maturation as a Black male scholar requires recursive contemplation of the following question: How does one negotiate being perceived as a villain as an African American male scholar regardless of one's own moral character? How does one negotiate being typecast as a producer of inferior knowledge despite one's own intellectual merits? These questions emanate from my own ongoing struggles to find inner peace amidst the conflicting pushes and pulls of social stereotypes, of being a Black scholar in a Euro-dominant academic establishment, and my personal spiritual commitments as a member in the movement to uplift the Black community.

These forces collided during one of my latest research endeavors, producing a cathartic moment that is the subject of this essay. My hope in relating these experiences is to spark continued contemplation and commitment among Black scholars to serve the cause of creating a more just world, particularly for African Americans. The experience emphasized to me the extent to which research may often be understood as an act of defiance. Specifically, my work, focused around achievement disparities in a culturally diverse, middle-class, suburban high school, met resistance through digital media channels and an organized political and racially motivated opposition. This essay postulates that defiance should be considered a central pillar of Black scholar identity.

## THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

In 2009, I was initially approached to conduct research on the racial achievement gap between middle-class African American and White students at Windsor High School in Connecticut. It took four years and a progressive majority in the local school board and district leadership before an agreement was reached about the necessity of the study, and I was contacted in the spring of 2012 by district leadership to gauge my interest in conducting research on the matter. I was immediately hesitant given my knowledge of Windsor's racially divisive school board politics.

Yet, I began receiving emails and calls from African American friends and colleagues whose children attended Windsor Public Schools, encouraging me to reconsider partnering with the district. They assured me that the African American community would be supportive of the work. In preparation for further talks with the district, I reviewed performance data for each school with a more detailed analysis of Windsor High data, and I discovered a three- to four-year gap across all academic subjects between Black and White students. Digging deeper I found that social class differences among African American students made only a slight difference in performance, and nine out of ten African American males were not meeting state standards across all subjects and for most grade levels.<sup>2</sup>

I was intrigued. The researcher in me was awakened, and questions abounded. What could cause such disparities in a community with only a 2 percent poverty rate, stable two-parent families, an average annual income of \$79,000 (Blacks at \$81,000), high home ownership, and college-educated parents? How engaged were the Black parents, and how welcoming were the high school and district to their involvement in education? Are there measurable differences among parents, students, and educators in expectations about college degree attainment? Were there differences in discipline, academic track placement, and quality of instruction for different student subgroups? How might race relations in the town and on the school board help or hinder prospects to address student needs?

None of the typical justifications offered for the achievement gap throughout the state of Connecticut—or nationally, for that matter—seemed to fit. Baseless stereotypes such as the notion that all Black parents are poor, unemployed, undereducated, and incapable of caring for their children could not be easily dismissed with respect to a community like Windsor. Yet in my conversations with community leaders, these were the very explanations offered by White community members, parents, politicians, and educators for the achievement gap. I did not know that this pronounced, racialized view of schooling foretold the emergence of an active campaign of White resistance to even studying Windsor's achievement gap at all.

### WHITE PRIVILEGE GOES DIGITAL

In June of 2012, I made plans to travel to Windsor to conduct professional development for the school

board concerning matters of equity, equality, and achievement. Soon after, the board requested that I submit a proposal to study and address achievement disparities at Windsor High. The initiative was called Excellence and Equity at Windsor High School, and I proposed a three-year process with three objectives:<sup>3</sup>

1. Year One: Provide critical insights into learning, teaching, and leadership impacting the change process at Windsor High School by conducting an Excellence and Equity Review.
2. Year Two: Redress capacity shortfalls and strengthen progressive strategies that are effective with the infusion of community, corporate, and familial capital in a process called Community Assets and Resources for Excellent Schools (C.A.R.E.S.).
3. Year Three: Build the capacity of the district to apply for external grants, pursue additional corporate partners, and leverage local university partnerships to sustain the community support structures advanced during the C.A.R.E.S. initiative.

This proposal was detailed at the September 12, 2012, board meeting, and the tense discussion that followed was recorded and posted online by the district.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the only African Americans present at the board meeting were board members as well as two African Americans representing the state and local teachers' union—one of whom testified in support of past work. In a five-to-three vote, Democrats secured the right for the superintendent to negotiate the terms of the contract,

which took more than six additional months to secure.

In the weeks following the board decision, some Republican board members along with conservative news reporters began publishing articles in local and regional newspapers attacking the intelligence and integrity of the board president, superintendent, and myself. They pursued two baseless ethics complaints against the board president and superintendent,<sup>5</sup> attempted to convince the public that local funds were used to pay for the study and not the State of Connecticut Alliance Grant,<sup>6</sup> and wrote articles suggesting that the sole purpose of the study was to label White teachers as biased.<sup>7</sup> These methods were adopted in an attempt to prevent the contract from being executed, but all their attempts fell short, as the research agreement was reached in March 2013. Opposition continued, nonetheless, unabated over the next four months of fieldwork, largely through the *Windsor Patch* online news site. In fact, hundreds of stories were posted, the vast majority of which were in opposition to the study.<sup>8</sup>

A turning point, however, emerged in June 2013 as a number of posts and conversations confirmed that Republicans had reorganized against the study and convinced enough sympathetic community members to vote down the local budget a third time if the Excellence and Equity contract was not terminated. Community members had already twice voted down the budget (on May 14 and June 5) in opposition to higher taxes and increased educational expenditures in light of the schools' poor performance.<sup>9</sup> Although the funding for the study was provided by a state grant, Republicans used Internet posts to spread misinformation that local funds were

used.<sup>10</sup> Unlike previous attempts, this vote presented a clear threat to the viability of the research project, and a counter-movement was developing among African American parents who wanted better schools for their children. These most uncommon of circumstances required more than an "objective" and "detached" researcher.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCHING AS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE

Conceiving of my research as an act of defiance began as I authored letters and emails to editors of local and regional papers, which were effective in changing the tone of local reporting. Purposefully, the superintendent and school board president established personal blogs, and most importantly, Black parents increased their own presence on the *Windsor Patch* site.<sup>11</sup> I decided that it was important for the research team not to blog so that parents and their emerging leaders could take ownership of their own defiance. Yet I contributed insights and suggestions as needed, and I hosted special sessions with parents and community members to promote the development of a common language about school reform.

Most critically, I decided to take advantage of Republican efforts to link the continuation of the Excellence and Equity research with budget cuts that would have resulted in the reduction of student services and teaching jobs. I reasoned to Loyola's research office that Windsor's political environment might eventually pose a threat to participants in the research, if students or educators who took part in the study were negatively affected by the budget cuts. Furthermore, it was in our best interest to complete our contractual objections for

year one and request not to be considered for a renewal of services for years two and three, given that the required annual renegotiation clause in the contract allowed us to do so.<sup>12</sup>

This action effectively ended the last major Republican-led opposition to the Excellence and Equity initiative. More importunately, it sparked deep outrage among African American parents, who organized press conferences with the NAACP and the African American Affairs Commission with the support of the Connecticut Black and Latino legislative caucus to protest the racialized opposition to addressing achievement disparities.<sup>13</sup> Parents were also catalyzed to start a nonprofit called Partners Advancing Change in Education (P.A.C.E.), and at every public meeting on education in Windsor since June 19, 2013, African American residents have outnumbered White residents. Their presence has helped to heighten awareness, common knowledge, political support, and coordination, which has empowered people of color and progressive educational leaders in the community to fight more boldly for educational equity.

## CONCLUSION

When the final report, titled *Excellence and Equity: The Impact of Racial Inopportunity on Student Development and Achievement at Windsor High School*, was presented to the school board and community on August 29, 2013, P.A.C.E. showed up in numbers that tripled White representation. They added additional testimonies in support of the research and respectfully opposed any attempt by conservatives to undermine the credibility of the research or the authenticity of the Black experience. Ultimately, after one last conservative push, the Windsor school board voted to accept the findings of the study and implement its critical recommendations on September 27, 2013.<sup>14</sup>

It is too soon to assess how the study will impact Windsor High, but the impact on my own development as a Black scholar is more apparent. Because of this experience, I am more committed to community-centered research, which requires sustained engagement within communities, attention to the pace and direction of local Black educational reform, and a willingness to sacrifice personal and professional gains if doing so sparks shared defiance among local Black families.

### Notes:

1. William E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).
2. Marlon C. James, Wendy Smith, Robert Simmons, and Carrie Levy, *Excellence and Equity: The Impact of Racial Inopportunity on Student Development and Achievement at Windsor High School* (Chicago, IL: Center for School Evaluation, Intervention and Training, Loyola University Chicago and Center for Innovation in Urban Education, Loyola University Maryland, 2013), accessed January 21, 2014, [http://www.windsorct.org/files/\\_sElv0\\_/9eb34747d831247a3745a49013852ec4/Excellence\\_and\\_Equity\\_WHS\\_Master\\_Updated\\_9\\_3\\_.pdf](http://www.windsorct.org/files/_sElv0_/9eb34747d831247a3745a49013852ec4/Excellence_and_Equity_WHS_Master_Updated_9_3_.pdf).

3. Marlon C. James, *Contract with Loyola University* (Chicago: Center for School Evaluation, Intervention and Training, Loyola University Chicago and Center for Innovation in Urban Education), accessed January 21, 2014, [http://www.windsorct.org/files/\\_nLJLf\\_/abe862b2d2cd59983745a49013852ec4/loyola\\_contract\\_executed\\_3\\_18\\_13.pdf](http://www.windsorct.org/files/_nLJLf_/abe862b2d2cd59983745a49013852ec4/loyola_contract_executed_3_18_13.pdf).
4. "Regular Meeting of the Windsor Board of Education," *The Town of Windsor Connecticut*, September 12, 2012, accessed January 21, 2014, [http://windsor-ct.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=2&clip\\_id=203](http://windsor-ct.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=203).
5. Julian McKinley, "Ethics Board to Review Complaints Against Superintendent, School Board Pres.," *Windsor Patch*, December 13, 2012, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/schools/p/ethics-board-to-review-complaints-against-superintend8d7c982d73>.
6. Kristin Ingram, "The Alliance Grant and Matching Funds," *Windsor Patch*, May 21, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/kristins-blog/p/the-alliance-grant-and-matching-funds>.
7. "Concerned Mothers & Fathers, Voices heard and a BOE Vote EER Study at WHS," *Windsor Patch*, June 09, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/concerned-mothers-and-fathers/p/voices-heard-and-a-boe-vote-eer-study-at-whs>.
8. The articles can be found by searching for "Marlon James," "Excellence and Equity," or "EER" at the *Windsor Patch* web site, <http://windsor.patch.com/>.
9. Julian McKinley, "Windsor Voters Reject Third Budget Proposal," *Windsor Patch*, June 25, 2013, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/breaking-news/p/windsor-voters-reject-third-budget-proposal>.
10. Julian McKinley, "Equity and Excellence Review Gets State Funding Approval," *Windsor Patch*, December 19, 2012, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/schools/p/equity-and-excellence-review-gets-state-funding-approval>.
11. Julian McKinley, "Windsor's Equity, Excellence Study Draws Attention from NAACP," *Windsor Patch*, June 18, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/schools/p/windsors-equity-excellence-study-draws-attention-from-naacp>.
12. Marlon C. James, "Loyola Notification Ending Study," *Loyola University*, June 13, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, [http://www.windsorct.org/files/\\_pOCNM\\_/8aa355f77757ef8b3745a49013852ec4/Loyola\\_Notification\\_Ending\\_Study\\_\\_6.13.13.pdf](http://www.windsorct.org/files/_pOCNM_/8aa355f77757ef8b3745a49013852ec4/Loyola_Notification_Ending_Study__6.13.13.pdf).
13. Julian McKinley, "Residents Express Need for Excellence, Equity Review," *Windsor Patch*, December 19, 2012, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/schools/p/residents-express-need-for-excellence-equity-review>.
14. Julian McKinley, "Loyola's Excellence and Equity Review Reveals Inequities, Makes Recommendations," *Windsor Patch*, August 30, 2013, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://windsor.patch.com/groups/schools/p/loyolas-excellence-and-equity-review-reveals-inequities-makes-recommendations>.



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