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Opinion Piece
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The Problem with Respectability

Black Americans breathed a collective sigh of relief when news spread that Christian Cooper, the Black man who was threatened by Amy Cooper, was both a Harvard graduate and a biomedical editor at Health Science Communications in New York. This information ignited hundreds of tweets on Twitter listing the accomplished credentials of Christian Cooper while condemning Amy for feeling threatened. Like this [tweet](#). And this [tweet](#). And this [tweet](#), too. Suddenly, the conversation shifted away from Amy Cooper's blatant attempt to utilize racism and abuse systems of power against Christian Cooper. Fawning over this well-educated, competent Black man had become much more appealing. How could anyone ever think that this Harvard-educated, bird-loving, comic book nerd was a threat?

The answer to this question is an easy one for those who have lived the Black experience: racism. However, my goal isn't to focus on Amy Cooper's awareness of the tense relationship between the NYPD and Black Americans, nor the fact that she planned to use that relationship to her benefit. My goal is to confront why Black and White Americans, alike, decided to pay so much attention to Christian Cooper's credentials.

Respectability politics is to blame here. Coined in 1993 by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, respectability politics refers to marginalized groups self-policing in order to adhere to hegemonic standards of what is respectable, usually in hopes of gaining basic human rights. This ideology validated the NAACP's decision to choose Rosa Parks over Claudette Colvin as the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Colvin was the first African-American to refuse to give up her seat at the front of the bus, but as a dark-skinned, unwed, pregnant teenager, the NAACP and other Black organizations at the time believed it would be better for Rosa Parks, a lighter-skinned, older Black woman with 'good hair,' to be recognized for the defiant act. Parks' image adhered more closely to Black women respectability politics, therefore she is famous and remembered today, while Colvin has become an obscure figure that college students may learn about in their sociology classes.

Respectability Politics is hardly a socio-political strategy of past marginalized communities; it has been carried over into the 21st Century via tactics hailing from before the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Black Americans were determined to show their

oppressors that we were just as smart, just as pretty, just as rich, just as worthy of life as White Americans; and the way we demonstrated this was by becoming extraordinary individuals—all so we could gain the same rights as mediocre White people.

Additionally, respectability politics as a theory implies that once Black Americans overcome income inequality and break free from the ghetto, that we would be treated with the same decency and respect as White people. In the case of Christian Cooper, we see the theory fails. In the case of Serena Williams and Beyonce being ignored by healthcare professionals and almost contributing to the statistic of black women being [3-4x more likely to have a pregnancy-related death](#), we see the theory fails. In the case of Michelle Obama being constantly referred to as an “ape in heels” despite being the first First Lady of the United States to attend an Ivy League as an undergraduate, we see the theory fails. In the case of Barack Obama needing to prove his place of birth, we see the theory fails. In the case of me getting pulled over by police for a random license plate check while driving my mother’s Mercedes Benz out of my private school’s parking lot, we see the theory fails. I could go on. You get the gist.

Regardless of its failures, the idea of respectability politics being the only way for Black Americans to gain the same rights and value of our oppressors is still ingrained within the historical and current mindset of plenty of Black Americans. We created and maintain exclusive organizations to show, and possibly prove to ourselves, that we can be exceptional individuals. Respectability politics played a large role in the beginnings of these organizations, which excluded non nuclear, lower class, darker-skinned, LGBTQ+ members of our communities because of our internalized beliefs of success equating to proximity to what society labeled as Whiteness. Even though we fought to make these spaces exclusive and respectable under a White gaze, they are still socially seen as lesser than their White counterparts. Jack and Jill of America, Inc., an organization for well off Black American families to find community and give back, is still widely unknown amongst nonblack Americans. However, amongst Black Americans, membership of Jack and Jill has become a marker of a Black family’s success. Historically Black Colleges and Universities struggle to reach the same accreditation as predominantly White institutions. The relevance of historically Black fraternities and sororities is nearly nonexistent outside of Black communities. It isn’t because these organizations and institutions failed to be respectable enough, it’s because they are seen as spaces for Black people; and society has failed to value anything Black unless it has found a way to profit off of it.

Parents of young Black Americans insist on policing the various African-American cultures that cultivate our communities in the hope that their children aren't killed by a police

officer; or are at the very least respected, and allowed to succeed within a system that strives to undermine us. My mother, from an early age, taught me to look my best when attending my predominately White private school. Not because she was so concerned about vanity, but because she knew that someone within the school would have something negative to say or think about me that could in turn negatively affect my education if I showed up to class without my hair perfectly done or my clothes perfectly ironed. Along with that, she knew that I, as one of two Black girls in my lower school class, would be the representative of Black people as a whole to my peers and faculty who otherwise didn't have much interaction with Black Americans. All of my mother's efforts were appreciated, but they didn't save me from the racism and constant microaggressions I faced at my private school. They didn't save me from White students' constant uncomfortable comments on my hair and lips. They didn't save me from being called a "drama queen," "liberal trash," or an "irrelevant bitch" every time I tried to speak up about racism within the school. They didn't save me from students downplaying and dismissing my Ivy League acceptance because they believed "[I] only got in because of affirmative action." They didn't save me from the constant, underlying feeling of always being a pariah amongst my White peers who were allowed to love themselves without doing so in spite of societal standards.

The onus is not on the Black American community to prove ourselves worthy of rights, respect, and basic empathy. Respectability politics stems from our communities believing we could "pull ourselves up by the bootstraps" by policing one another in order to solve the quandary of American racism. The last century has proved this way of thinking is a fallacy. The onus is on society as a whole to combat its misconceptions regarding Black Americans, who, in all of our imperfections, failures, and differences, are humans who deserve more.