

# The Price of Black Ambition

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Hank Willis Thomas, 'Raise Up,' 2014. Bronze, 112.2 X 9.84". (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.)

You never know when or if you'll get a big break as a writer. You write and write and write and hope that someone out there will discern what you believe is in that writing, and then you write and hope and wait some more. I think I am having my big break right now. This year I published two books—a novel, *An Untamed State*, and an essay collection, *Bad Feminist*. Both books have received positive critical attention. The latter book has been on the New York Times bestseller list twice. Articles about me keep telling me that I am having a moment, my big break. My friends and loved ones tell me that I am having a moment. Part of me recognizes that I am having a moment, while the more relentless part of me, a part that cannot be quieted, is only hungrier, wanting more.

I began to understand the shape and ferocity of my ambition when I was in kindergarten. Each student had been given a piece of paper in class, bearing an illustration of two water glasses. We were instructed to color in one-half of the illustration. I suspect we were learning about fractions. I diligently shaded in one half of one of the glasses and smugly turned my work in to the teacher. If it had been the parlance of the day, I would have thought, *Nailed it*. I had not, of course, “nailed it.” I was supposed to color in an entire glass. Instead of the praise I anticipated, I received an F, which, in retrospect, seems a bit harsh for kindergarten. I couldn’t bring such a grade home to my parents. I had already begun demanding excellence of myself and couldn’t face falling short.

On the bus ride home, I stuffed my shame between the dry, cracked leather of the seat and assumed the matter had been dealt with. The driver, a zealous sort, found my crumpled failure and handed it to my mother when he dropped me off the next day. She was not pleased. I was not pleased with her displeasure. I never wanted to experience that feeling again. I vowed to be better. I vowed to be the best. As a black girl in these United States—I was the daughter of Haitian immigrants—I had no choice but to work toward being the best.

Many people of color living in this country can likely relate to the onset of outsized ambition at too young an age, an ambition fueled by the sense, often confirmed by ignorance, of being a second-class citizen and needing to claw your way toward equal consideration and some semblance of respect. Many people of color, like me, remember the moment that first began to shape their ambition and what that moment felt like.

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The concept of a big break often implies that once you’ve achieved a certain milestone, everything falls into place. Life orders itself according to your whims. There is no more struggle, there is nothing left to want. There is no more rejection. This is a lovely, lovely fantasy bearing no resemblance to reality. And yet. I have noticed that my e-mails to certain key people in my professional life are answered with astonishing speed where they once were answered at a sedate and leisurely pace. I enjoy that.

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I am thinking about success, ambition, and blackness and how breaking through while black is tempered by so much burden. Nothing exemplifies black success and ambition like Black History Month, a celebratory month I’ve come to dread as a time when people take an uncanny interest in sharing black-history facts with me to show how they are *not racist*. It’s the month where we segregate some of history’s most significant contributors into black history instead of fully integrating them into

American history. Each February, we hold up civil-rights heroes and the black innovators and writers and artists who have made so much possible for this generation. We say, look at what the best of us have achieved. We conjure W. E. B. Du Bois, who once wrote, “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.” We ask much of our exceptional men and women. We must be exceptional if we are to be anything at all.

Black History Month is important and a corrective to so much of America’s fraught racial history. But in the twenty-first century, this relegating of black ambition to one month of recognition feels constraining and limiting rather than inspirational.

In the *Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates published an essay about President Barack Obama and the tradition of black politics that reached me in a vulnerable place. Coates writes of the president’s ascension: “He becomes a champion of black imagination, of black dreams and black possibilities.” In that same essay, Coates also writes about how the narrative of personal responsibility is a false one that is, unfortunately, often parroted by our president, our brightest shining star, Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States. At the end of his essay, Coates writes, “But I think history will also remember his [Obama’s] unquestioning embrace of ‘twice as good’ in a country that has always given black people, even under his watch, half as much.” About a month after that essay was published, Obama announced the My Brother’s Keeper initiative, “an interagency effort to improve measurably the expected educational and life outcomes for and address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color.” The initiative is certainly well-intentioned, but it also speaks to the idea that black Americans must make themselves more respectable in order to matter. In its initial incarnation, it also gave the impression that only boys and men matter. On its surface, My Brother’s Keeper is a program that does nothing to address the systemic and structural issues young men of color will face, no matter how well prepared or respectable or personally responsible they are.

I have come to realize how much I have, throughout my life, bought into the narrative of this alluring myth of personal responsibility and excellence. I realize how much I believe that all good things will come if I—if we—just work hard enough. This attitude leaves me always relentless, always working hard enough and then harder still. I am ashamed that sometimes a part of me believes we, as a people, will be saved by those among us who are exceptional without considering who might pay the price for such salvation or who would be left behind.

Du Bois was a vocal proponent of the “Talented Tenth,” this idea that out of every ten black men, one was destined for greatness, destined to become the powerful leader black people needed to rise up and overcome and advance. This 10 percent of men were to be educated and mentored so they might become leaders, the front line for much-needed sociopolitical change.

We often forget, though, who first came up with the “talented tenth.” The idea first began circulating in the 1890s, propagated by wealthy white liberals. The term itself was coined by Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white man, who wrote, “In the discussion concerning Negro education we should not forget the talented tenth man... . The tenth man, with superior natural endowments, symmetrically trained and highly developed, may become a mightier influence, a greater inspiration to others than all the other nine, or nine times nine like them.” Here was a somewhat repulsive proposition gilded in condescending intentions, that if the strongest efforts were focused on the best of black folk, a few might be saved from themselves. Here we are today, still believing this could be true.

Before, since, and during Du Bois’s time, the “Negro” has been a problem demanding a solution. Historically we are, of course, quick to neglect examining how this problem began. We are, it seems, still looking for that solution even as some declare the United States is embarking upon a post-racial era. We forget that we should not only measure black progress by the most visibly successful among us, but also by those who continue to be left behind.

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While I am having what some refer to as my moment, I am in the middle of a second book tour. The first tour, for my novel, took me to thirteen cities, beginning in Boston. There I stayed in a hotel where my room had a fireplace that kept my feet warm and toasty. I marveled at this fireplace. I still had a lot of energy for my first event at Brookline Booksmith. I had not yet realized how much energy it takes, as an introvert, to fake extroversion. I was nervous during that first event, but holding my book helped. Looking down at the words I had written helped. Seeing so many supportive people in the audience helped. The booksellers were a delight.

I was next off to New York, a city that is always intimidating and exhilarating to be in. There were two readings, at Community Bookstore and McNally Jackson, where I had conversations with Sari Botton and Ruth Franklin, respectively. It was standing-room only at both readings and deeply engaged audiences and people buying my book and

asking me to sign those books. I would encounter more of the same in every city. There were reviews, mostly glowing, even in the *New York Times*. *Time* magazine declared, “So let this be the year of Roxane Gay.” It all felt so extravagant.

And then my essay collection came out. The crowds at my readings have swelled. People stand in hot rooms and then hot lines for an hour, sometimes two, just to meet me, shake my hand, pose for a picture, have a book signed. In Los Angeles, 450 people gave me a standing ovation, and the recognition nearly brought me to my knees because it was all so unexpected and gratifying.

Another reading, in another city, standing room only. During the Q&A, an older woman recounted a story of how she once couldn't get a credit card because she didn't have a husband. I think she said the year was 1969. I thought about her story all night and kept thinking, *May I be worthy of the work you have done to make my life possible.*

At that same reading, I met a seventeen-year-old girl named Teighlor whose mom had brought her. She sat near the front, and her eyes were shining the whole time. I threw her a *Bad Feminist* tote bag, and she held it tightly in her hands. She was first in the signing line and she told me how she looked up to me and she was wholly adorable and I felt my eyes burning at the corners because I was so moved. I kept thinking, *May I be worthy of your respect and admiration.*

At that same reading, I met a young man named Robert who also brought his mother. She began speaking to me in Creole so I responded in kind. They were Haitian and they were just so excited to meet another Haitian from the Midwest. The bookstore had sold out of my book by that point, but they wanted to meet me anyway. They apologized, as if they owed me something. Their presence at my reading was all I could ever ask for. I gave them my personal copy of the book and signed it. They asked if they could take a picture with me, and I kept thinking, *May I be worthy of your respect. May I be worthy of our people's history.*

There were so many encounters that night and on all the nights that made me think, *May I be worthy of all of this.* And there is a part of me that realizes how hard I have worked for this, and that I have, in part, earned this.

My novel is in its third printing. My essay collection is in its fourth fifth printing. I am having a moment, and the burden of my ambition still has me wondering if I am worthy.

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For most of my life, I have taken for granted how my middle-class upbringing and my loving, educated, and involved parents made it possible for me to strive for excellence. Nearly everything has worked in my favor well beyond whatever natural gifts I possess. I attended excellent schools in safe, suburban neighborhoods with healthy tax bases. I had teachers who encouraged my talent and creativity. I had parents who supplemented what I was learning in school with additional studies. It was very easy to buy into the narrative that exceptionalism would help me and those who looked like me to rise above the challenges we face as people of color. All I had to do was work and want hard enough because nothing in my life contradicted this ethos.

All along, though, there were insistent reminders of how, even with all these advantages, certain infrastructures, so profoundly shaped by racial inequality, would never willingly accommodate me or my experiences. I would never be able to work hard enough. I didn't have to be twice as good, I had to be four times as good, or even more. This is why I am relentless. This is why I am not satisfied and likely never will be.

In high school, I attended boarding school. I was one of a handful of black students, and even among them, I was a stranger in a strange land, a Midwestern transplant in the wilds of New Hampshire. At first, my cadre of fellow black students had little in common beyond the brownness of our skin, but at least we had that much-needed kinship because to the white students, we were usurpers, treading upon the hallowed ground to which only they, with their white skin, were entitled.

My senior year, I received an acceptance letter to an Ivy League college. I was in the campus mailroom. Everyone was buzzing as they learned of their fate. I opened my letter and smiled. I had been accepted to all but one of the schools to which I applied. I allowed myself a quiet moment of celebration. A young white man next to me, the sort who played lacrosse, had not been accepted to his top choice, a school to which I had been accepted. He was instantly bitter. He sneered and muttered, "Affirmative action," as he stalked away. I had worked hard and it didn't matter. I was exceptional and it did not matter. In that moment, I was reminded of my place. I was reminded of why my ambition would never be sated, and would, instead, continue to grow ferociously. I hoped my ambition would grow so big I would be able to crowd out those who were unwilling to have me among them without realizing their acceptance should never have been my measure.

In college the situation was much the same. I belonged there, I had earned my place, but few people would acknowledge that belonging. Not a week went by when I or other students of color weren't stopped and asked to show our student IDs. It was

easier to believe we were trespassing than simply traversing campus between classes. This was a small indignity, but it also wasn't.

At both my master's and doctoral institutions, I was the only black student. Any success I achieved only spurred me to work harder and harder so I might outrun whispers of *affirmative action* and the arrogant assumptions that I could not possibly belong in those institutions of supposedly higher learning.

Like many students of color, I spent a frustrating amount of time educating white people, my professors included, about their ignorance, or gritting my teeth when I did not have the energy. When race entered class discussions, all eyes turned to me as the expert on blackness or the designated spokesperson for my people. When racist "jokes" were made, I was supposed to either grin and bear it or turn the awkward incident into a teachable moment about difference, tolerance, and humor. When a doctoral classmate, who didn't realize I was in hearing range, told a group of our peers I was clearly the affirmative-action student, I had to pretend I felt nothing when no one contradicted her. Unfortunately, these anecdotes are dreadfully common, banal even, for people of color. Lest you think this is ancient history, I graduated with my Ph.D. in December 2010.

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Today, I teach at Purdue University, where in the semester I write this, I have no students in either of my classes who look like me. I have yet to see another black faculty member in the halls of my building, though I know some exist. I previously taught at Eastern Illinois University, where, in my department, I was one of two black faculty members, one of only five faculty of color in all. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is the price of exceptionalism—you will always be the only one or one of a few. There are no safe harbors. There are no reflections of your experience.

I have written three books, have a fourth under contract, and am working on three more. I have been widely published. I am regularly invited to read and speak all over the country. I advocate, as best I can, for the issues that matter most to me. As a feminist, I try to be intersectional in word and deed. When I fail, I try to learn from that failure instead of hiding it as I did in kindergarten.

I have achieved a modicum of success, but I never stop working. I never stop. I don't even feel the flush of pleasure I once did when I achieve a new milestone. I am having a moment, but I only want more. I need more. I cannot merely be good enough because I am chased by the pernicious whispers that I might only be "good enough for

a black woman.” There is the shame of sometimes believing they might be right because that’s how profound racism in this country can break any woman down. I know I am one of the lucky ones because unlike far too many people of color, I had far more than “half as much” to work with, the whole of my life. It is often unbearable to consider what half as much to work with means for those who are doing their damndest to make do. I call this ambition, but it’s something much worse because it cannot ever be satisfied.



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