



## A Fly in the Milk: Being the Only Black Teacher

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While majoring in English education at Purdue University, multiculturalism was important. In one class, we read the book "White Teacher." Tell me you are not expecting Black college students without telling me. I read enough of the book to participate in class discussions, but I was frustrated. Where was the book for me? How would I move through this racialized world as a Black woman in the education system?

Earlier this week, Misty Copeland, the first Black American Ballet Theatre principal ballerina, was interviewed by NPR. This month her book "The Wind at My Back: Resilience, Grace, and Other Gifts from My Mentor, Raven Wilkinson" was released. (Yes, I plan on reading it.) The interview mentioned her book but also dived into what it is like being a Black person excelling in a white space.

I can relate.

I have been the only Black teacher in an English department.

I have been the only Black English as a New Language (ENL) teacher in an entire school district.

I have been the only Black librarian in a school district.

I have been the only Black administrator in a building. (Sidenote: the principal had a Black mom & white dad but considered herself just a person ... we can unpack that some other time.)

In all of the situations, there was pressure to excel but excel in a way that isn't too Black.

When Misty says that whiteness "chips away at you," it does. We know that race is a social construct; it's all made up. However, that social construct can envelop you and choke you until you are gasping for air.

During the interview, Misty mentioned having to paint her beautiful skin to look less melanated, but I also took that metaphorically. To succeed in a white space, people want your brown skin to check that diversity box, but they want everything else about you covered in whiteness.

As a Black person, you feel that you can't ruffle feathers because you will dash all future opportunities for yourself and prevent other Black people from having a chance. During the first part of my career, I tried to stay completely under the radar, but three years after I had my twin sons, I could not do it anymore. Here's why:

I would either raise Black men who felt they needed to put on white skin to survive, or I would raise Black men who would walk fully in their Blackness and thrive.

It is not easy going against the grain to be your full self, but I owe it to myself and my sons to figure it out. The process can take a toll. Copeland danced with black line fractures, which are almost full bone breaks, because she felt this pressure to succeed and pressure not to slam the door shut for other Black people. She hid her pain because she wanted others to have the opportunity. Keeping the door open for other Black people should not come at our expense. Some doors we need to close, and some doors we need to blow off the hinges.

As an English teacher, I felt that I could never slide into African American Vernacular English even if I could explain a concept better to my students, and most of my students were Black. I worried that I would get blackballed if I didn't go along with the program. All I was really doing was telling other Black educators that they couldn't be themselves. The truth is it will be hard whether you fit in or stand out. Why not stand out and shine and leave that as your legacy for others to follow? If we don't know how, we can follow Misty Copeland's example. She is an example of how to find ourselves, be ourselves, and still help others who look like us.