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Black Man, White Campus

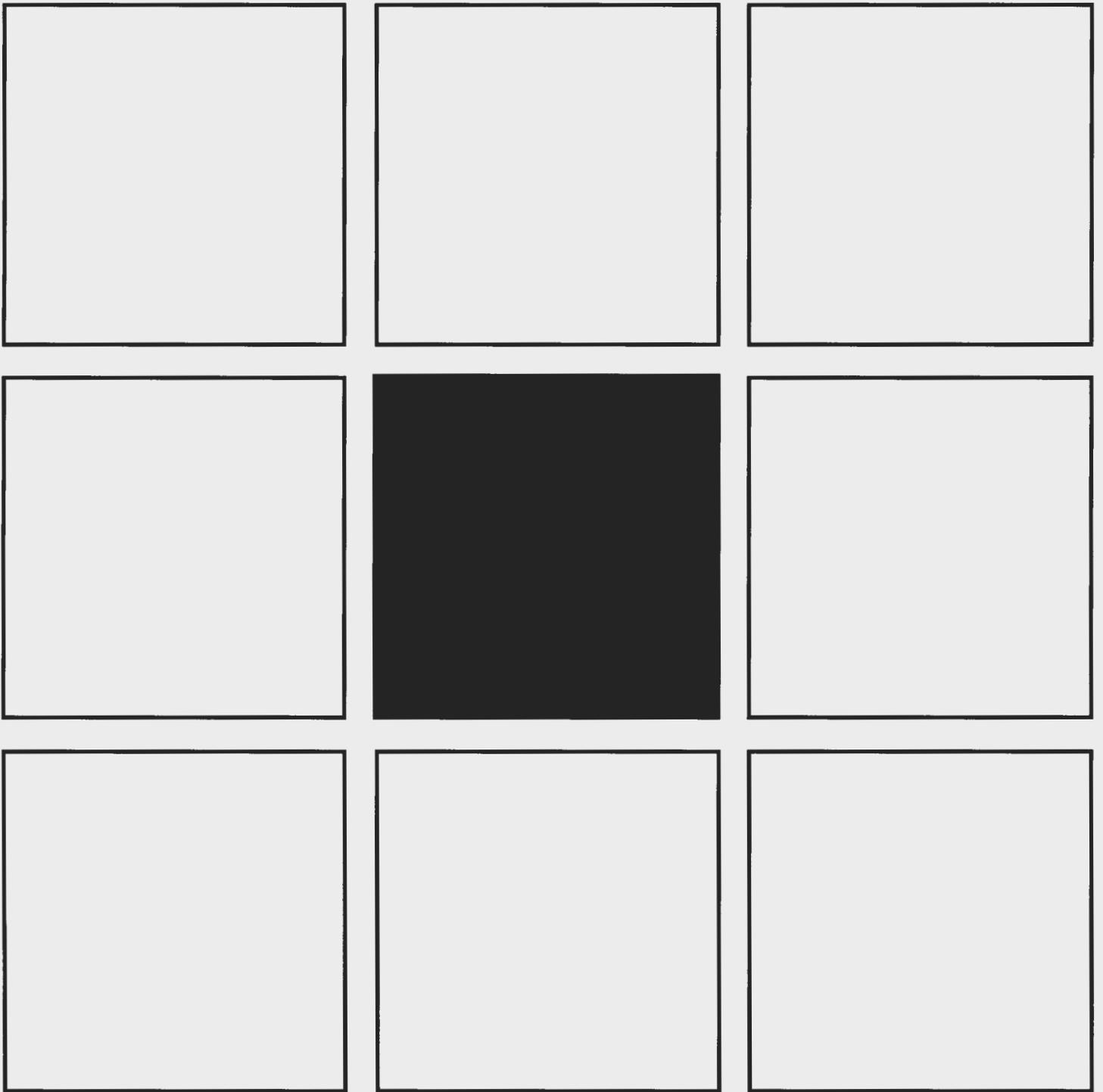
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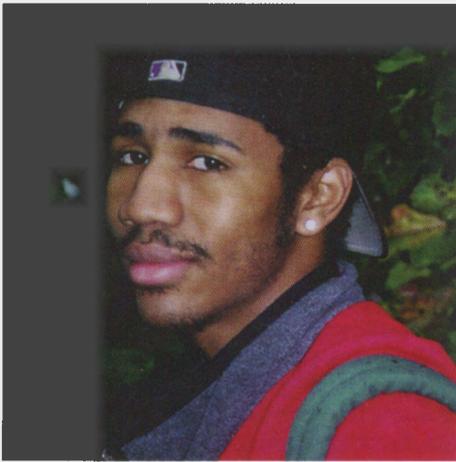
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BLACK MAN, white campus

How it feels to stick out in Middle America.



Check it, on my neck I still got marks from the nooses/ The truth it produces, fear that got n***as on the run like Carl Lewis/ The truth is my crew is the smoothest bits of saliva juices like the roots is /More organic than acoustics

Talib Kweli — The Truth

Remember watching *Sesame Street* as a little kid and seeing the segment “One of These Things is Not Like The Others?” You had to guess which one was not like the others before the time was up. It was always an obvious choice between, for example, Cookie Monster, Bert or Ernie. Now stay in that frame of mind. This is sometimes how it feels to be a black person in this country and on this campus. We are your Cookie Monster.

When I was asked to write this article about how African-Americans feel they are perceived at Iowa State University, I thought it might be an easy task. Yet after much research and inner thought, I came to the conclusion that I can't make anyone feel how it is to be black here. It is an idea that many white people can't handle and surely won't be able to comprehend unless they stay open-minded.

Many African-Americans feel like they have to prove their worthiness to be able to hold a seat in the classroom. “I think a lot of white people here feel like many of us here are only here because of affirmative action or athletics. We are just as intelligent as they are and have earned our spot on this campus,” says Jerone Jones, Jr., sophomore in mechanical engineering.

Jones told me of a time when he was in an engineering class, happily going along, when one of his classmates told him, “I can't believe you can do work like this.”

“The guy was like trying to say in a subtle way he couldn't believe a black person could do the work because he had never had a conversation with me before that point,” Jones says.

Some white people may feel this is not a big deal. But it goes back to my original statement. It is hard for many white people to understand what it's like to be totally aware of your race at all times on this campus. It's the indirect things and mistaken perceptions that other African-Americans and I face that are tearing our nation's harmony apart. Yes, we are making progress in race relations, but we are nowhere close to where we need to be. Being happy with this progress would be like me beating on my

wife, then saying, “At least I am not killing her.”

It is strange when you think about it. It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that black people started receiving equal legal treatment in this country. This means we are less than 50 years removed from segregation. We are only the second generation to live without that daily bias. So we know negative perceptions and racism are still out there and do exist. This doesn't mean that it should be tolerated.

I am going to give you another example. Those of you who were here for the 1999-2000 basketball season remember when many members of the student body celebrated after the men beat UCLA to move within one game of the NCAA Final Four. The crowd soon got big and unruly and began to riot. A few students started pushing over cars, ripping down road signs and vandalizing all across campus.

Those of you present might also remember some African-American students being there. I doubt you saw any of them partaking in the vandalism, for very good reason. Black students did not get involved because they know two things: No. 1. The biggest stereotype we face is the belief that African-Americans are criminals and “thugs.” For us to participate would help reinforce the stereotypes, even though plenty of white people were rioting. No. 2. We are a lot more at risk if we get in trouble or fail to succeed at ISU.

The second idea is one that African-Americans must deal with all the time. While many whites look at us and see a number or just another athlete, we have to treat this college opportunity as a way to help other black students like us who want to go to college. We set an example for other African-Americans to achieve their goals.

That is why the whole case with Katie Robb, the ISU student charged with falsely accusing four black men of raping her, hurt our campus more than anything because it showed a perception many whites have of black men. I believe, if the charge is true, Robb felt she could target black males at ISU because of the small population and the negative stereotypes

associated with them. By the way the case was treated on our campus and the glares directed at blacks after the accusation, it was evident stereotypes are still held by many students.

“It goes to show how a black man can be a scapegoat for anyone's crimes or accusations,” says Curtis Tarver, junior in sociology. “Black America has been the scapegoat for most of the problems of this country since we arrived here on the boats.”

Lawrence Johnson, senior in psychology, told me he was in a class once when the professor asked students to get in groups. “Many people in class turned to look right at me, then looked away and proceeded to act like I wasn't there,” he says.

I know many people don't believe racism is an issue here. I am sorry to tell you it is. I am not saying I'm worried about getting lynched, but I constantly face that subtle and indirect negative perception.

As for my own personal experience, racism became very apparent to me when I was the head representative for a college-oriented Web site. We had many booths and fund-raisers and frequently would talk to ISU administrators about our efforts to recruit students for the site. Sometimes they would address some of my white colleagues even though they knew I was the group's leader and was the only one who could answer their questions. At first, I thought it was just coincidental. After it happened a couple times, I knew it was because they had a certain perception of me.

Every African-American has had similar experiences. Some have felt it in different ways and to different degrees. All will say racism still does exist, and the perception of African-Americans is not what it should be. Remember this when you walk past an African-American on campus. Be sensitive to the perceptions you have of him or her. If you don't care, it's OK. We have been fighting for freedom for more than 400 years. You won't stop us.

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