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We're No Angels

June 28, 2016 by [Danielle Moss Lee](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)



At the end of my freshman year in high school, I got word that I'd been selected for the National Honor Society. For me, it was a thrilling acknowledgement of a year's hard work. Because my Upper West Side private school took a literary approach to almost every subject, I'd been able to capitalize on my love of reading and writing. Our literary/historical/political explorations took us on journeys with everyone from Gore Vidal to James Baldwin to Alice Walker—and I'd loved every minute of it. But, my Spanish teacher had another idea about what my induction meant. Despite my stellar academic record, she said, there hadn't been immediate faculty consensus about my suitability. I was confused. She went further to tell me that, she herself had thought my inclusion in this prestigious society would send a signal that, "You don't need to be an angel to be in the National Honor Society." I didn't know what to make of her declaration, but I loved seeing the look on my mother's face in the audience at the awards ceremony.

It took me many years to reflect on what that teacher was trying to tell me about myself, and about Black girls in general. As a student, I did my work, showed leadership in the classroom, came prepared, and was always deeply engaged in learning. But, I wasn't afraid to challenge the adults in my school either. So, when I caught my Spanish teacher loosely holding test papers to her mouth and loudly whispering, "Were they Black?" after a classmate told the class he'd been mugged while smoking and hanging in the park after school, I immediately asked her, "How come you didn't ask him if he was okay?" What my 14-year-old self hadn't realized, was that I'd stepped out of a box and crossed a line girls who looked like me weren't supposed to cross. We both knew that the race of the attackers only mattered in so far as the knowledge had the power to confirm prejudices and stereotypes. Knowing their race wouldn't change the fear or anxiety or damage the experience had caused my classmate.

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My challenge not only shone a bright light on my teacher, but it cast a light on me—a light that led future white employers to playfully tell me I was uppity, and that prompted an employer to have someone sit me down and tell me I needed to learn how to speak to older white people.

Apparently, my parents' greatest mistake was to instill in me a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy that exceeded the level of respect people felt they should extend to me—a Black girl or woman. The challenge is not unique to me. And, it's particularly problematic in majority white spaces where Black girls and women are expected to be grateful just to be included, and to reflect white female norms in beauty, communication, and comportment. In professional spaces, something as simple as a natural hairstyle can be translated into rebellion against "mainstream" norms in the workplace. And, the notion that Black girls are not "ladylike" has less to do with Victorianism among white girls, and more to do with a seeming wholesale rejection of supremacy-laden representations of femininity.

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What did my teacher mean when she said that I, an honor student with no history of discipline issues, was no angel? As we begin to push back against the institutional barriers facing girls of color, we know that the underlying, racially constructed factors contributing to perceptions of Black girl students like this one are at the root of school push-out and punitive, zero-tolerance disciplinary responses to even minor infractions for Black and Latina girls. Black girls and women are being penalized not just for who they are, but also for what they are not. The #BlackGirlMagic hashtag and movement are a much needed antidote, for they create and extend community around the notions of belonging, acceptance, validation, and legitimacy. Additionally, the #BlackGirlMagic movement gives visibility to our inherent excellence in ways that help to grow aspirations and that can insulate us, to some extent, from the feelings of hurt and rejection that result from the extremes of our experience—at one end invisible and at the other, unacceptable.

But social media movements are not enough. My role as CEO of the YWCA of the City of New York, whose mission is the elimination of racism and the empowerment of women, has given me a transformational opportunity to be a part of the YWCA's global movement dedicated to grappling with issues of identity, oppression, and resiliency. In New York City we are hosting convenings for girls, partnering with institutions of higher learning to add context and depth to our work with girls, and offering our own YW AMP Girls Leadership Program, to help girls find and leverage their voices.

Additionally, I am proud that this past year gave me the opportunity to co-chair the NY City Council's Young Women's Initiative along with philanthropist Ana Oliveira and activist Joanne N. Smith. This historic effort, spearheaded by NY City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and members of the Women's Caucus, brought together over 200 young women, advocates, nonprofit leaders, educators, researchers, philanthropy, and government officials to do a deep dive on new approaches to data collection, policy reform, and program design aimed at centering and uplifting the experiences of girls and young women of color so as to mitigate the impact of systemic barriers to their achievement.

As we move forward to work toward a sustainable implementation strategy, we are deeply committed to sharing what we have learned and encouraging other municipalities and cities to engage in deep and meaningful conversations that center on equity for girls and young women of color, and restorative policies to strengthen whole communities. Becoming a more visible advocate for girls and young women has taught me a great deal. As it turns out, I'm still no angel. But I have come to realize that that might just be a good thing.

Dr. Danielle Moss Lee is President and Chief Executive Officer of the YWCA of NYC, President of Black Agency Executives, a member of the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women Advisory Board, a Board Member of the Human Services Council and a member of the Swarthmore College Board of Managers. She previously served as President and CEO of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Urban Youth Policy at CCNY, Director for Community and Parent Partnerships at The After-School Corporation, and Consulting Project Director for The Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth.



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