

**A NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST  
OF AUTHORS TO KNOW  
AND BOOKS TO READ:**

**Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents**

By Isabel Wilkerson

**Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto**

By Tricia Hersey

**The Sum of Us**

By Heather McGhee

**There Will Be No Miracles Here:  
A Memoir**

By Casey Gerald

**Thick: And Other Essays**

By Tressie McMillan Cottom

**We Real Cool: Black Men  
and Masculinity**

By bell hooks

**You Are Your Best Thing:  
Vulnerability, Shame Resilience  
and the Black Experience**

By Tanya Denise Fields

**Black  
Being**

**MEDIOCRITY  
IS A  
LUXURY  
ONLY  
WHITENESS  
CAN  
AFFORD.**



Mediocrity is a luxury only whiteness can afford. Everyone else is expected to justify their right to exist peacefully with earned accolades, societal contributions, and normalities approved by the white gaze.

As a generic concept, the phrase “Black excellence” is intended to inspire descendants of enslaved Africans to continue building upon the achievements of their ancestors. However, the execution of this concept can burden Black people with the weight of these expectations. #BlackExcellence, when used unironically, perpetuates the false idea that normalcy is inadequate, and disregards the inherent value of Black life.

But Black excellence is not the problem. Black exceptionalism is.

Black exceptionalism quantifies Black life by its assimilation and proximity to whiteness. Those who do not adhere to the white, capitalistic definitions of productivity, respectability and achievement risk disapproval from the governmental and social entities that seek to disproportionately restrict Black humans from basic rights and services.

Black people should be able to take up space without their presence being questioned or diminished, but American culture demands a cognitive dissonance that acknowledges Black achievement and interrogates everyday Black existence: At the convenience store. At the park. Fishing. Jogging. Bird watching.

When achievement and respectability are no longer quantified by white supremacist ideals like perfectionism, individualism and either/or thinking, Black leisure can exist without criticism and perpetual surveillance.

Black exceptionalism’s negative impacts are reflected in the ways in which news outlets weaponize foundational aspects of Black culture such as streetwear fashion, hip-hop and rap to inaccurately profile victims of police violence and systemic oppression. The racist assumption that “educated”, “smart”, “kind” and “articulate” are rare characteristics among the Black population feeds the narrative that Black people must out-work, out-perform, and over-achieve their white counterparts in a never-ending attempt to be seen as worthy of living. The arguments against the oppression of Black people cannot come from a mindset that uses white supremacy’s narrow definition of “socially acceptable” as a quantifier. No level of achievement or recognition can protect Blackness from white fear. Working twice as hard to get half of what oppressors never wanted you to attain is a dead-end theory that prioritizes labor over leisure.

*Black Being* purposely excludes struggle and oppression as a glorified subject matter of Black-created artworks. Although Black experiences and histories are burdened by violence and exploitation, there is much more to Black culture than its relationship to systemic trauma. *Black Being* is an opportunity to revere the sacred rituals and traditions that engulf the diasporic Black experience and be a witness to the extraordinary artistic representations of Black people simply...being...Black.

Thank you for being present.

**Kaitlyn B. Jones,**  
*Curator*