



Contact Dermatitis

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Abstract: This poem is about a Black social scientist's experience with being a faculty at a college of medicine. To cope with the stress of the microaggressions she experiences at work, she spends time washing her hands in the bathroom. As a result, she ends up with a skin condition, similar to the skin condition her grandmother, a janitor, also had. The character of one of the university's janitors is a composite of many of the BIPOC staff at the university who have made efforts to look after this faculty member and to offer words of encouragement.

Keywords: microaggressions, first-generation faculty, first-generation students, college of medicine

That's what granny had on her hands, her arms, from all those cleaning solutions she had to use at work.

"It's just easier without the gloves" she'd say, when I'd offer her gloves, for her protection.

I thought I'd be stronger than her, better equipped to stand up for myself in those hallowed halls.

But here, on a Tuesday, I stand, over the basin, taking a deep breath, as the cold water washes over my own discolored wrists.

I'll linger there, sometimes so long that the motion-sensing lights click their tongue in disgust and throw me into darkness.

My office is a better sanctuary, probably, without the sights—and echoes—of the women's bathroom, in the building's west wing.

But behind my desk, I'm in a resolute battle with the name plate on the door, the gilded plate derisively calling me a "P-R-O-F-E-S-S-O-R".

Both my shield and my cage, the plate shows a nine-letter word telling others that I *should* have a lot to say, on matters both historic and contemporary.

And best believe that I do, and I try.

But, speaking that word, Professor, after making plain
my “other (ing?)” identity, my race,
adds an asterisk to my status as a subject matter expert.

I try to show, but they doubt.

They call it the “yeoman’s” work I’m doing: recruiting, advising and consoling,
the students they never wanted,
the ones they don’t take seriously.

Call it what you like, “the field” or the “the community”;
But know that I’m toiling from the outside,
in my place, not in the Tower.

“But your labor is important, and the relationships it produces are invaluable!”

It’s the dirty work in the hallowed halls, the work of darkened hands
that cannot be raised to speak about
the damaged roots from which this canon grows.

It’s the bloody work of the academic granny midwives
who stay up late to read the drafts of the Jacksons and the Garcias,
bursting with unrecognized intellectual fecundity.

“But your work is so hard; I could never do it!”

And They won’t. Because this hard work is rewarded
with more work, more advising, more recruiting,
more mopping up of tears.

Lately, it earns me one new thing: a keen and watchful eye,
trained to seek out any sunburned yeomen
who have lost the plot.

“Hello? Hello! Oh, I am seeing you again! No, I mean, I’m sorry.”
she says as she pushes the bathroom door open
with her mop bucket.

Blinking at the sudden light, I chuckle and say,
“Yes, I am in here again! I don’t want to bother your work.
I will leave.”

Again. She said again.

She’s been watching me. She sees when I’m coming and going.
She knows my gait;
she watches my pace.

And knows Their schedules too. Their hurried, well-heeled steps,
headed to a place
more important than this.

“No you’re not bothering me. I’m just glad to see you.
It’s been a few days.” Her silver tooth shines
under the bathroom lights.

She knows the trouble I’ve seen, and the trouble I’ve made.
And the messes
I’ve mopped up along the way.

We talk about it sometimes, respecting FERPA, of course.

Her voice is the balm
that softens my wounds.

She doesn't always know the hierarchies of the Tower, but she understands
my battles with the Fast Walkers
and tells me to watch my step.

Open palm on chest, I say: "Thank you. I needed a few days to recover,
but I'm back today.
They ain't gonna get rid of me so easy."

"Oh, I know that's right!" She said, a little too loudly,
as she threw her head back and clapped
her gloved hands together.

She gave me a gentle head tilt; "Don't work too hard, y'hear?"

I look down at my wet hands, and they remind of my granny, my aunt and my mom.
These broken nails are yeoman's hands, and I'm proud of it.

Author Biography

LaShaune P. Johnson, PhD, is a Clinical Professor in the Department of Health Systems and Population Health Sciences at the Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine at the University of Houston. She is a medical sociologist, certified listener poet, and a culturally responsive evaluator. At the University, she teaches courses about non-medical drivers of health. She is also the Co-Director of the Scripts Teaching Fellowship Program, which is a program sponsored by the College of Medicine and the English Department. Her research focuses on Black breast cancer survivors' and Black caregivers' experiences across the cancer continuum. She is also active in the medical legal partnership community.