



# Acting Black: College, Identity and the Performance of Race

*Sarah Susannah Willie*

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Sarah Willie asks: What's it like to be black on campus. For most Black students, attending predominantly white universities, it is a struggle. Do you try to blend in? Do you take a stand? Do you end up acting as the token representative for your whole race? And what about those students who attend predominantly black universities? How do their experiences differ?

In *Acting Black*, Sarah Willie interviews 55 African American alumnae of two universities, comparable except that one is predominantly white, Northwestern, and one is predominantly black, Howard. What she discovers through their stories, mirrored in her own college experience, is that the college campus is in some cases the stage for an even more intense version of the racial issues played out beyond its walls. The interviewees talk about "acting white" in some situations and "acting black" in others. They treat race as many different things, including a set of behaviours that they can choose to act out.

In *Acting Black*, Willie situates the personal stories of her own experience and those of her interviewees within a timeline of black education in America and a review of university policy, with suggestions for improvement for both black and white universities seeking to make their campuses truly multicultural. In the tradition of *The Agony of Education* (Routledge, 1996), Willie captures the painful dilemmas and ugly realities African Americans must face on campus.

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