



Buruuj Tunsill

UNSEEN STRENGTHS

Navigating Intersectionality of Race
and Disability in the Workplace

Black Studies

Collection Editor

CHRISTOPHER MCAULEY

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PUBLISHING



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Christopher Mcauley



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Abstract

This memoir is the story of a Black woman living with schizoaffective disorder as she navigates identity, mental health, motherhood, and workplace adversity. Beginning with early symptoms and a formative manic episode, the narrative follows her experiences at Howard University and the resulting cultural disconnection. Subsequent chapters explore her transition into single motherhood, the pursuit of stability through work, and challenges within toxic professional environments shaped by racial and gendered hierarchies. Through a deeply personal lens, this memoir illustrates the impact of intersectionality on mental health, and the concluding chapter reflects on healing, growth, and strategies for sustaining wellness and identity.

Key words

Schizoaffective disorder, Black identity, Mental health, Intersectionality, Single motherhood, Cultural disconnection, Workplace trauma, Racial dynamics, K-12 Education System

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Learning objectives

- Analyze the impact of mental health diagnoses on Black identity formation within the context of systemic racism, cultural expectations, and historical stigma in Black communities.
- Examine the intersections of race, gender, and mental health as they shape lived experiences of marginalization, resilience, and self-discovery.
- Critically engage with the challenges faced by Black women in professional and educational spaces, particularly within hierarchical and toxic workplace cultures.
- Explore the cultural disconnection and community response to mental illness through the lens of a Black woman navigating both personal and collective identity.
- Reflect on the role of single motherhood as a site of resistance, agency, and stability within the broader narrative of survival in Black life and culture.

Prelude

This chapter introduces the symptoms of schizoaffective disorder, recounts experiences before attending Howard University, details the first manic episode, and explores the lack of identity

As a child, I rarely spoke and often found myself isolated, retreating into an imaginary world. The world I created in my head was far better than reality—people were kinder, I had a loving husband, and a beautiful house. It was simply wonderful. As I grew older, my imaginary world evolved. It became my safe haven, a place where I didn't feel pain, wasn't hurt, and had complete control. If I had to pinpoint the root cause of my dissociative traits, I would say it was witnessing the abuse my mother endured and my father's absence. My family was dysfunctional and divided. After my dad left, the chaos continued, as my older siblings often fought. As time passed, the need for a functional family diminished because my alternate world felt more real to me.

I often found myself dissociating, but dissociation wasn't the only issue I struggled with. As a teenager, I developed hypochondria, which led me to spend hours lying in bed, consumed by paranoia. This constant anxiety eventually resulted in insomnia, which began in my junior year of high school and persisted into college. In the months leading up to my extended and involuntary hospitalization in a psychiatric institution, I became obsessed

with illnesses and ailments. I rushed to the emergency room multiple times, convinced I was dying from HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) complications after having unprotected sex. I feared I had contracted the virus, and my mind spiraled, filled with endless scenarios of what could be wrong with me. In the end, I was simply suffering from acute bronchitis. But those irrational thoughts were just the tip of the iceberg. The insomnia, paired with my constant worry, led me to uncover a deeper set of issues that had been lurking beneath the surface.

Due to my constant detachment from reality and emotional dysregulation, my academic performance occasionally suffered. By high school, my behaviors began to manifest more outwardly. I found myself triggered more frequently, leading to belligerent outbursts and a few referrals. I remember one day when three teachers pulled me aside privately, recommending anger management. High school was filled with futile drama, friends, boys, and work. It was at work where I discovered my inability to control my temper. I started working at JCPenney at the age of sixteen, and while I appreciated the paycheck, being surrounded by so many people all day drained me. On top of that, I had to deal with co-workers who were often ill-equipped and, at times, hostile. I constantly questioned whether the effort was worth the outcome—a small paycheck for encountering a variety of personalities five days a week? By the end of high school, the combination of working a meaningless job and dealing with teenage drama sparked a strong desire to leave my hometown for good.

Unfortunately, I didn't get accepted into my dream school—Howard University. My failure to prepare was the reason for my failure. I couldn't focus on studying for the SAT (Scholastic

Assessment Test) and ACT (American College Testing), which resulted in scores that were less than satisfactory. Eager to leave my current home, I decided to enroll in a community college in Tallahassee to be closer to my sister. The transition from high school to college was liberating. During that time, I became more focused on my studies, adopted a more conservative mindset, and developed a newfound love for writing poetry. Living life without the distractions of sex, being surrounded by childhood friends, and enhancing my writing skills created a natural high unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. My creativity knew no bounds, and I'd wake up in the middle of the night just to write. However, my intense writing was just one sign of the overwhelming energy I felt, which soon led to a loss of control.

In March 2010, I can't recall the exact date, but I know that's when my life began to spiral out of control due to a deep disconnect between my mind, body, and soul. I felt as if I were possessed, as though something beyond myself was in control. Before my family knew it, I was gone—mentally absent. I was away for approximately three months, and I had to rely on my family's accounts to understand what I did during that time. My mother described me as being "dead" because I wasn't myself, one of my sisters compared me to the girl from *The Exorcist*, and my dad believed a demon had taken over me. Doctors diagnosed me with Schizoaffective disorder. Regardless of how anyone perceived it, I wasn't myself, and as a result of my absence, my sister had to withdraw me from school. My plan was to transfer to Howard after a year, but instead of moving closer to my goals, I found myself set back an entire year.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), schizoaffective disorder affects 0.3% of the population. Schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type, is characterized by episodes of mania and severe depression, accompanied by delusions and hallucinations. Specifically, individuals may experience the following symptoms:

- Disorganized thoughts (jumping from one topic to another without connecting ideas)
- Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there)
- Delusions (false beliefs)
- Manic behaviors (racing thoughts, euphoria, risky behaviors, aggression, feeling overly confident)
- Catatonic symptoms (being unable to move or appearing in a daze, stuck)
- Reduced range of emotions
- Lack of interest in activities
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Lack of motivation
- Suicidal thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- Feelings of hopelessness or negativity

Additionally, symptoms may worsen due to stressful events, substance abuse (including drugs and alcohol), and some researchers suggest a genetic or brain chemistry component. Regardless of the cause, one thing is certain: adverse environmental factors, such as the place of work or frequently visited locations, can exacerbate symptoms.

Less than a year after the onset of symptoms, I continued my life as if it were just a rare occurrence that would not happen

again. I shared my experiences with co-workers, and for the first time, I realized how ignorant people can be. At the tender age of nineteen, I was in school and working at JCPenney to make a living. I worked in a hectic, hostile work environment where “the customer is always right” and associates were just gossipy individuals who lacked adventure in their lives. I recall sharing my story with an older Hispanic woman from New York, and before I knew it, she was running around telling others my story and warning them to be careful around me because I could snap at any moment. Another older Asian woman, who was my supervisor at the time, pulled me aside and told me to keep my business to myself because people talk. The moment I realized I was being viewed as a threat to some based on a diagnosis was the moment I began to attempt to dissociate from the occurrence completely. Being a woman, which I had always deemed inferior based on my upbringing; being Black, which society deems a threat; being Muslim, which society views as a terrorist; and now dealing with a mental illness that carries stigma? I never really spent much time situating myself in society. I just lived life, doing what I was “supposed” to do and pursuing my goals. However, something felt off. I felt different, alone, and no longer understood who I was or who I really wanted to be.

1

Who am I? The struggle of diagnosis and disconnection from Black modern culture

This chapter reflects on my two years at Howard University, highlighting both the positive aspects and challenges within the Black community. It discusses feelings of rejection following a manic episode, which further disconnected me from my cultural identity.

Culture can be defined in many ways. Often, when people think of culture, they associate it with language, nationality, or race/ethnicity. While these are certainly aspects of culture, there are other elements that are frequently overlooked, such as individual disability/ability, social class, and gender. There are three types of culture: overt, covert, and subtle. Overt culture refers to the obvious differences, such as language or the way someone dresses. Covert culture, however, is implicit and often goes unrecognized by its members unless they engage

in self-reflection. Last, subtle culture involves recognizing the underlying values and beliefs that influence one's actions. Culture is not a fixed concept; it is continually redefined by each individual's unique experiences. It shapes the worldview of most people. For me, however, due to my tendency to retreat into my imaginary world, I never gave much thought to how I viewed myself or the world around me. As a result, I wasn't fully aware of my covert and subtle culture. When it comes to my overt culture, yes, I was raised Muslim, identify as Black, and am recognized as a woman, but I can't say I fully connect with any of these identities. After spending a year catching up on college credits at a local community college in South Florida, I finally arrived at Howard University in the fall of 2011. Being a college student on an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) campus was a new experience that pushed me to examine myself and the world around me.

The desire to attend Howard University stemmed from advice my older sister gave me: to choose a college that best aligned with my goals. After some research, I found that Howard University was an excellent school for those pursuing a career in journalism. It also helped that I learned my favorite actress, Taraji P. Henson, and my favorite video jockey, LaLa Vazquez, had both attended this school. Beyond that, the prospect of being surrounded by other Black students with similar aspirations was inspiring, and perhaps most importantly, it offered me a chance to get away from Florida. I envisioned Howard as a place where I would be surrounded by individuals with a strong sense of community and greater knowledge. However, my expectations quickly proved to be inaccurate.

On my first night in the dorm, I met two young women who became my acquaintances: one from the Virgin Islands and the other from New York. Both appeared humble and friendly. One was religious and involved with the campus choir, while the other seemed more like a free spirit and was also in the School of Communication, like me. My first night was positive, and I was excited about attending my classes.

During my first week, I received a syllabus and assignments that were due sooner than expected. I was especially excited about the Intro to Mass Communication class because I'd get the chance to test out my journalism skills. However, the class was taught by an older White woman who didn't quite resonate with me. Her rigid rules made it feel like we were children, and her approach failed to capture my attention. Initially, I was uncertain about her as a professor, but that quickly changed after I received my grade on my first paper. I had written about FOX News and its blatant racism, supporting my arguments with credible sources, but I received a C. Since I was used to getting A's, this grade was both frustrating and unacceptable. I requested to meet with her during office hours to discuss it. After a heated conversation on my part, she eventually changed my grade from a C to a B. The fact that it didn't take much convincing to get the grade adjusted made it clear that her grading was subjective, and she had taken my stance on FOX News too personally. As a result, I decided the best choice for me was to withdraw from the class and reconsider my future career plans. Her attitude was very off-putting, and my passion for journalism diminished. So I switched my major from journalism to Communication and Culture, with a focus on legal communication. I figured the writing I would be

doing in this field would be more concrete, leaving little room for subjective grading.

Immersing myself in the remainder of my classes was exciting, and I thoroughly enjoyed my professors' discussions. However, the students around me were not what I had envisioned. Many seemed to come from the bourgeoisie class, exuding a materialistic attitude and lacking an understanding of community. I'm not one to force friendships, so I continued to navigate the campus on my own. As I walked up and down the hill to various classes, one thing that stood out to me was the campus' strong affiliation with sororities and fraternities. I was familiar with popular organizations like AKA (Alpha Kappa Alpha) and DST (Delta Sigma Theta), but I decided that my education was more important than joining a group of what I perceived as snobbish individuals who had forgotten where they came from. I could often spot their affiliations by their pearls and sweaters, but to me, it seemed as though many joined for a sense of security or belonging rather than for the values of community, scholarship, leadership, and service. While everyone seemed preoccupied with fitting in, I stayed focused on my grades and on meeting my graduation goal—2013.

However, my new desire to stay mostly to myself didn't quite pan out. Due to wearing a hijab or head covering, I was often approached by other Muslims on campus. One guy invited me to join the Muslim Student Association (MSA), and since I wasn't particularly drawn to the overall culture of the school, I figured that being among other Muslims wouldn't hurt—it would likely be the closest I'd come to finding a sense of community. The guy invited me to walk downtown DC (District of Columbia)

with other Muslim students, and my new acquaintance from the Virgin Islands joined me. The exploration was fun, and I developed a little crush on the guy who had invited me. I also cultivated relationships with two other Caribbean American Muslim girls, "T" and "B," with whom I would soon spend quite a bit of time.

I learned at a young age that my personality isn't for everyone, which is why I tended to keep to myself. I often blurted out things that might offend others or failed to display the kind of decorum that most people preferred. Yet, for some reason, people always seemed to gravitate toward me. As time went on, more people approached me for various reasons, each with different intentions. I can openly admit that I tended to be open with anyone who approached me because I simply didn't see the harm in expressing myself or revealing my true thoughts on any subject. While most didn't take a liking to it, I did develop some friendships with people who appreciated my personality.

In some of my classes, I had to complete group projects. In one class, Computers and Society, I ended up in a group with a student named "D," who had a southern drawl from North Carolina. Initially, I didn't care to be in the same group as him because he had once complimented me on my shoes, and for some reason, I didn't like when people complimented me. It made me feel awkward and uncomfortable, as if I were suddenly on display for judgment. But to my surprise, D turned out to be a laid-back, chill guy. We ended up having other classes together, where we started sitting together, developed inside jokes, and built a mutual respect for each other.

D also showed me the respect I deserved. Every time we walked on the sidewalk, he would pull me by the arm to the inside, saying, "Now, B, you know I don't play like that. Girls are not supposed to walk close to the road." I had never known that was proper decorum, and he taught me something new. In another instance, he demonstrated his respect when I felt his girlfriend was rude for interrupting our conversation without saying "excuse me." A few days later, he walked over to me with her in the iLab and insisted that she apologize. She hadn't even realized what she had done. While he was just my friend, he showed me how I would want to be treated in an intimate relationship.

Aside from my new cultivated relationship with D, I became involved in MSA and also spent quite a bit of my time in the School of Communication. During off-campus hours, I spent a lot of time with the two Muslim girls, working in the admissions office, or working at JCPenney. Most of my fall semester was spent talking about my crush, who seemed completely oblivious to the fact that I liked him. Since he wasn't giving me any attention, I spent my days gossiping and talking negatively about him to my friends out of bitterness.

As I networked around the school, I noticed pockets of humble people who kept to themselves. Some were focused on sorority and fraternity life, others were more spiritually inclined, and some were deeply dedicated to their religion, whether Islam or Christianity. Then there were those who barely showed up. It was clear that there was a dominant macroculture of students who knew how to navigate the school and finesse their way through. I can honestly say that the majority of students knew how to talk

a good game to earn their place within the school; however, the hard work I expected to see from many of them was often missing.

Concurrently, working at a major mall in the DMV (District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia) area exposed me to more people from DC, offering a broader view of the world beyond college. This experience gave me a deeper understanding of how the world worked, and it created a disconcerting feeling within me. Ultimately, it fostered a growing distrust of the world around me. There was one instance with a young Black female co-worker who often tried to get free meals from others, including me. She would tell a sob story about being abused and forced to abort multiple babies by her abusive partner. She was definitely a likable person, but I quickly began to notice that she often tried to throw herself a pity party to get a free lunch. On the one hand, it's like "get it how you live," and on the other, it revealed to me that many people lack authenticity and genuineness.

The organizations I was associating with—from the university to JCPenney—felt misaligned with my morals and ethics. I found myself asking: Had I sheltered myself too much? Why was it so easy for people to skate by without truly earning their place? Is this how most people act? Numerous questions swirled in my mind, but once again, I had to remain focused on the reason I was there. My relationships with work-study co-workers, classmates, and professors continued to evolve. Despite the disconnect with the masses, it wasn't difficult to focus on cultivating authentic connections. At the end of the day, I knew we were all there to complete a degree or move on to something bigger and better,

but human connections and interactions are an essential part of life—whether we admit it or not.

As I continued to develop new connections, the fall semester began to move a little faster. After homecoming, Thanksgiving quickly rolled around. I spent my time with “T” and “B” and video chatting with my family since I couldn’t afford to travel for such a short period. These girls welcomed me into their home and really made me feel comfortable. Oftentimes, we had raw conversations about various things, but I often found myself talking about the Muslim guy who didn’t want me. I thought I had found a safe space with “T” and “B” to say whatever I felt, as they would listen and offer their feedback or thoughts.

As time passed, I found someone new to crush on; eventually, my thoughts about the Muslim guy faded. By the time the spring semester rolled around, I was transitioning into new classes, new crushes, and meeting new people. During that semester, I started speaking up more in class, leading discussions, and adjusting to life as a Howard student. I spent a lot of time in the iLab, where students typically go to study, and it was there that I met a consistent Muslim friend named Muammon. He was of Middle Eastern descent from Maryland and majored in engineering. He showed a genuine interest in being a friend—offering me food, rides, and any kind of help I needed, which was pretty rare on campus.

Aside from my friend “D,” Muammon was another person I fully trusted. Around the same time, I met more pleasant Muslim women; the Muslim community on campus was tight-knit. They were often the ones who showed the most interest in helping

me out, whether by offering assistance or simply hanging out with me.

In one of my most boring classes, I also managed to form an alliance with some classmates to get through the semester. One thing I noticed about Howard students is that they communicate with purpose—they get to know you if you can serve a purpose for them. I can't say many genuine connections were made, but if your goals aligned with theirs, you could build some meaningful academic relationships.

Unfortunately for me, I tend to genuinely care about people when I meet them and I always want to help however I can. It's just the way I am. Nevertheless, the consequence of constantly meeting new people is the harsh realization that others often cannot and will not show up for you the way you show up for them. Once the need for you is over, so is the "camaraderie." This is a lesson I had to repeatedly learn through my experiences in work and school.

To be honest, I understood the dynamic of the Black individual: at the end of the day, we often have to work twice as hard to prove ourselves or find ways to finesse the system in order to earn our spot in society. The mentality of individuals on campus, especially within my specific school, was understandable but disheartening, as I was someone who deeply desired authentic connections.

That being said, not all of the relationships I formed were negative. Through one connection, I landed a full scholarship for my senior year. While some relationships were growing, others were slowly fading. One thing I've learned about myself is that I'm generally

tolerable on a surface level, but once I become comfortable with someone, my bluntness can become a problem. For example, one of the first girls I connected with became increasingly frustrated with me because she felt I was judgmental. I had called a tattoo she wanted to get “ghetto,” which upset her.

As the spring semester came to an end, the two sisters, “T” and “B,” ended our “friendship” because they were upset about how I had talked about my crush. Although the conversations about him had only lasted for about four months, they chose to express their dismay months later, via text. I’ve never understood why some people hold their thoughts and feelings in for so long, only to explode later. If they had truly considered me a friend, I thought an open and honest conversation would have been more appropriate. Sadly, the end of that friendship left me in tears, but it also forced me to reflect on my behavior and make improvements.

As some may say, *c’est la vie* (such is life). The spring semester ended on a bittersweet note. I successfully completed all my courses, landed a scholarship, and gained a deeper understanding of the school’s culture, but I also lost connections that I thought were genuine.

Throughout that summer, I stayed in touch with Muammon, D, and, of course, my high school classmate who also attended Howard. I started to develop hidden feelings for Muammon, but I knew that a relationship between us would never work due to our cultural differences. Still, I decided to hold on to our friendship until it inevitably came to an end, likely due to his eventual marriage. The reality that many of my friendships would eventually fade, one way or another, became a sad truth I had to accept.

One spiritual and insightful young lady once told me, “Just because we separate or I am not here doesn’t mean I am not still here for you.” I held on to those words, and from that moment forward, I made an effort not to become too attached to people. Instead, I began to appreciate that everyone who enters your life serves a purpose, and while their presence is meaningful, I had to learn not to shatter when they inevitably leave.

Entering the fall semester, I knew I had to maintain a tunnel vision. I was taking nine classes—more than the recommended course load—and because of my solid GPA, I was approved to take the maximum number of credits. Fall 2012 revealed the hierarchy within the School of Communication, showing how those involved in certain honor societies received privileges others didn’t. The laziness among the student population became more apparent. My frustration and anger grew as I led group projects time after time due to my distrust of others. Some students seemed entitled and didn’t prioritize their major classes. At this point, I had been pegged as the responsible one. In most of my major courses, I felt exploited.

On multiple occasions, I did all the work for group assignments. In one group, I completed everyone’s portion, and all they had to do was present. Despite my hard work, I received a lower grade than the guy who presented the work I had done—simply because he was part of the honor society. In another group, a student demanded to present on a section she hadn’t contributed to. I thought I was giving her an easy task, but she ended up taking credit for it. I was always the one to lead, but I wanted everyone to be satisfied even if they didn’t put in the effort. It was in these moments that I truly understood the importance

of speaking well and affiliating with the right people. I also began to notice a trend among the most successful students at Howard—they were all exceptional speakers. While they were great at grasping topics and acing exams, I found myself carrying more of the weight in group projects. Their priorities seemed to be more focused on the hustle and their social lives, including crossing over into fraternities or sororities.

During the fall semester, more people started to associate with me because of my strong work ethic. I became the person others turned to when they needed help. At that time, I didn't mind, as I simply wanted everyone to succeed. However, I had my boundaries, which were questioned by one of my professors during class. It was the beginning of my last semester, and I had rented my textbook, fully prepared for class. In a room with approximately twenty to twenty-five students, I was the only one who had made the effort to obtain the book. Many students found other ways to get through the class, but this time, it seemed we actually needed the book.

The professor pointed out that we were a "family," and that family helps each other. She then requested that I pass my book around so others could make copies. My jaw dropped. I couldn't bring myself to say that I didn't feel like the majority of these people were my family. Perhaps she held that "family" mentality because she was older and from a different generation, but she didn't know those students. In fact, half of them hadn't even spoken to me. I'm usually quiet and keep to myself to avoid confrontation or being disliked. I don't need everyone to like me, but I certainly don't want to be someone others dislike.

But this time, I had to speak up. Despite my usual avoidance of conflict, I didn't feel comfortable just passing my book along. I asked publicly, "How can I trust that I'll get my book back when these students weren't responsible enough to prepare for class?" The professor made an example of me, framing it as if I didn't value family, which felt like an attempt to guilt me into complying. And unfortunately, it worked. I ended up passing my book along, but only under the condition that I monitor who makes copies.

The more encounters I had with people, the more I learned about societal structures. I consistently found myself having to be mindful of what I said, as my words often ruffled a few feathers. D, Muammon, and a couple of others at my work-study job were the only ones I felt completely comfortable being myself around. I don't like upsetting people, but I was never taught to hold my tongue just to avoid offending others. At the time, the "lost friendships" didn't impact me because, in reality, having one solid, authentic friend is enough. On top of that, I met random people who provided me with delightful conversations or helpful assistance.

At the beginning of my time at Howard, I was closely involved with the MSA, but as time went on, I began to notice a disconnect within the group. Many people didn't like the MSA president, judging him for his confidence in who he was and in his ability to lead. Once again, I felt uncomfortable because of the inauthentic attitudes of others, so I started associating with Muslim students individually rather than as a group. Most of my time, however, was spent with D, as we shared the same classes

and therefore similar schedules. Every day, we would meet by the twin dorms to walk to class, and on some days, we would have lunch at Potbelly.

Days spent with D were never boring. When an arrogant student would speak rudely toward a professor or act too self-assured, D and I would exchange looks, as if to say, "Who does this girl think she is?" Then D would make a clever joke that would often humble her, if she happened to overhear. When we had time to ourselves, D and I would discuss religion, politics, and our personal goals. The light that surrounded D's aura made me forget the overall culture at the school; he was the embodiment of the Howard I had envisioned.

While D was my closest friend at Howard, every so often, I would spend time with my high school friend at her off-campus dorm. She knew me better than most, so I felt more comfortable around her, but she also wore a facade, like many other Howard students. I completely understand that people evolve as they get older, but it seemed some were more focused on maintaining a certain appearance. My friend, along with her roommate, exhibited this in many ways. As a result, I often had to bite my tongue to avoid outwardly judging them. Truthfully, I was better off spending time alone, as I could trust my own company.

As my workload increased, I became more focused on maintaining my grades. As the fall semester grew more hectic, I found myself spending less time with D. We would meet up in iLab to study, and during that time, I noticed he seemed a little sluggish. During homecoming, he fell and hit his head. In the days leading up to the fall, he had been complaining of a headache