

**Kevin Tang**

**Black Man in a White Coat: A Doctor's Reflections on Race and Medicine**

Dr. Damon Tweedy, a Black physician, is the author of “Black Man in a White Coat” and he gave a talk to the Jefferson community on race and medicine. The auditorium was filled with students, faculty, and outside visitors. In his hour talk, Dr. Tweedy shed light on multiple points, which included the demographics of disease, social determinants of health, and his experiences of double consciousness as a Black physician.

One line that he mentioned was “being Black is bad for your health” and proceeded to support it with objective data. He pointed to residential segregation and its impact on socioeconomic factors, which then lead to certain health-related risk factors and ultimately a more expensive health insurance plan. Moreover, he addressed the past events of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and how that influenced the Black perception of the health care system. It is no surprise that the downstream ramifications from unethical government experiments have created a gap in trust and a mistrust in doctors in the Black population.

After detailing the societal impact race has on medicine, Dr. Tweedy shared some personal experiences. Some of his experiences revolved around this idea of “double consciousness”, which he described as “navigating two different worlds”. On one hand, Dr. Tweedy has the prestige of a doctor. But, on the other hand, he comes from a low-income background and has the labels of Black stereotypes. Being a doctor did not exclude him from being a victim of racial profiling. The first question a police officer asked him after pulling him over for speeding was “do you have any drugs or guns on you?”. And yet, despite the injustice he endured from racism, Dr. Tweedy still preached a hopeful message that emphasized grassroots change. He ended his talk with a powerful quote from Dr. King on success and change: “if I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.”

Although I am not Black, I can empathize with his experiences of racism. Being Asian, I have encountered racism throughout my journey to medical school. His experiences with racism and my experiences with racism are simply two different branches from the same tree. Since Dr. Tweedy is a tall and fit Black man, people assume he plays basketball. And similarly, I am

pigeon-holed in the “Model Minority” stereotype as an Asian man. I am expected to be hard-working, passive, and smart. In college, people assumed I was pre-med just because I was Asian. I double majored in neuroscience and philosophy, and when people asked me what my major was, at first, I answered with neuroscience. Eventually though, I started responding with philosophy – which is close to being the exact opposite of the biological science majors – and people still assumed I was pre-med.

Furthermore, his concept of a double consciousness was very real to me. I was born in the U.S. and grew up in White Suburbia. Growing up in a Chinese household but going to a very White school made discovering my personal identity very challenging. I was White until I saw my face in the mirror. I had to tip-toe two different and distinct cultures growing up – was I American or Chinese? How do I balance these two identities – is that even possible? Watching the news made it even more difficult since it very rarely covered a story that involved an Asian. The only stories it covered that involved Asians were ones that showcased academic success, which only further progressed the societal stereotype of Asians being the “Model Minority”.

Currently, despite tragedies like Stephon Clark still occurring, there is tremendous social progress and awareness in young people on the racism Blacks endure. But, at what point will social progress be made on the racism Asians endure? Or that of Hispanics or Native Americans? I don’t have an answer, but in the context of racism, it feels like we’re simply cutting off branches of a tree rather than cutting the entire tree down. Maybe racism is too integrated in our institutions that it’s impossible to cut the tree down.

Dr. Tweedy’s talk was interesting and informative, but it also left a lot to be desired. While his conclusion with the Dr. King quote was powerful, it was unsatisfying. Does he have any ideas on how to combat racism in medicine? What would his solutions be to this problem? It would have been fantastic to hear his vision in fixing race in medicine because of his experiences as a Black physician.

While I understand the limitations the impact a single individual can have on the institution of racism, I am now more aware of racial injustice in medicine. From Dr. Tweedy’s talk, I learned more factors that indirectly play a role in poor health outcomes for different races. It makes sense how income, diet, and safety play a role the context of health outcome, but I had

not considered the impact historical injustices can have on one's perception of the health care system. Looking many years towards the future, with my future Black patients, I will emphasize building a trustful physician-patient relationship. Moreover, as a young and educated individual, I understand the importance I have in shaping our generation for the better. So, I must continue being wary of racism and participate in conversations that combat racism in our society. And eventually, these actions may play a part in creating social progress against the racism Asians endure.

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### **Jefferson Chamber Orchestra: Dancing through Time and Space**

The Jefferson Chamber Orchestra, made up of both students and faculty, performed various masterpieces by greats like Mozart and Bach. Moreover, there was a beautiful snow flurry in the background, which added to the already artistic atmosphere. It opened with a flute piece, consisting of two parts. There was a soloist who took the melody, with the rest of the flutes playing the accompaniment. Afterwards, they played some classical pieces, such as Minuet by Handel. Finally, they ended with a couple waltzes. Throughout the performance, the talent of a student named Nataliya, who was the concertmaster (or the first-chair), was clearly noticeable. She played the violin with such emotion, swaying side to side with each upstroke and downstroke, feverishly layering vibrato to each note, and seamlessly gliding from first position to third position back to first position. While at times I listened to the lovely harmony of the chamber orchestra, I often found myself hypnotized by her passionate play.

Listening to the Jefferson Chamber Orchestra performance reminded me a lot of my past experiences performing in a chamber orchestra. Growing up, I played the violin and was a part of the pit orchestra for musicals as well as chamber orchestras for community events. Throughout the performance, I was constantly drifting between the present and the past. I daydreamed about practicing the violin in my house, going to lessons and rehearsals during the weekends, and performing in front of large audiences. Also, my experiences playing the violin complemented my understanding the music. I was able to hear the melody and the accompaniment, as well as feel the flow of the piece. However, it also made me aware of any mistakes that the orchestra made. Being a critical and observant person as well, I noticed mistakes in some violinists that my

friends had not. Some were subtle like missed notes, but others were more obvious like a wrong bow position or a person rushing the tempo.

Moreover, I had a close friend in high school who was as talented as Nataliya, so it was very nostalgic watching Nataliya play the violin. I remember being just as captivated by my friend's talent as I was with Nataliya's. Also, having played violin for 10 years too, I could empathize with the emotion that Nataliya played with. I'm a person who searches for emotion in artwork and music. When I was younger and still playing the violin, I would always sway with the music and vibrantly add vibrato to notes.

While I know I'm a very emotional person, I was surprised with how much I resonated with the Jefferson Chamber Orchestra. Since I played for many years and at a high level, I unfortunately have very high expectations for any orchestra event. Many of the violinists there played with rigidity – to my dismay – but I also understand that these are students with very different musical backgrounds compared to my own. It's unfair for me to compare them to myself since I likely have more years of experience. However, my expectations were also met because of Nataliya's talented violin play. In some respects, I was surprised that Nataliya's play was able to conjure up such distant memories and strong emotions from my past.

Watching the Jefferson Chamber Orchestra perform reminded me of the importance of music. A friend of mine in the Jefferson Chamber Orchestra asked me if I would ever consider picking the violin back up again and join the Jefferson Chamber Orchestra since they were losing a lot of violinists. However, I politely declined. I'm not sure if picking the violin up again is in my future. The reason I stopped playing was because my violin teacher for many years got very sick and unfortunately passed away. Ever since his passing, I feel like I don't have the same joy as I once did for the instrument.

Despite this, I think that this event has helped me remember my roots and who I am as a person. While I no longer play the violin, I am trying to learn the piano. However, in the busyness of medical school, I sometimes fail to make time to sit down and practice. Going forward, I want to establish a routine of playing the piano every day for fifteen to thirty minutes. Hopefully, I can get into a routine and make it a habit. This event reminded me that I still love music and that I should stop letting excuses of how busy I am prevent me from learning the piano. Hopefully, by the time I graduate medical school, I will have developed the ability to perform piano pieces.

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### **Vagina Monologues**

The Vagina Monologues is a series of monologues of various sexual and societal experiences told through the eyes of women of various ages, races, and sexualities. Some of the monologues talked about self-empowerment, body image, sexual experiences, or societal expectations. The auditorium was very packed, and there were also moments during some monologues where the crowd would start cheering. Overall, while there was a total of 23 *monologues performed, I will focus on three: Hair; The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could; The Flood.*

Hair was about body-image, specifically relating to how a woman's pubic hair can symbolize personal identity. It was a story of a young female and her experiences with her boyfriend who demanded that she shave her vagina. During the monologue, the young female discusses the apathy of her boyfriend and the feeling of freedom after shaving. The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could was about self-empowerment and loving yourself. It begins with a young girl recalling the traumatic experience with a mean boy that bullied her. This experience, along with the cultural taboo on sex placed by her parents, made her self-conscious of her own vagina (or Coochie Snorcher, which is slang for vagina and used during this monologue). Then, the young girl details a positive, healing experience with an older woman that helped her love herself and her own vagina. The Flood was a story of an old woman telling a story of how she couldn't help herself from getting aroused when she was younger. She recalls this sexual experience and remembers how it ruined her first date. When they ended up kissing, she couldn't control herself from getting wet from arousal and ended up staining the boy's car.

As a heterosexual male, I found this experience very positive but had some hesitations.

This was my first time attending a Vagina Monologues, so I was unsure of what to expect.

Overall, I am very comfortable around these social issues. This is because of my involvement in the Ultimate Frisbee community, which is very liberal. Ultimate Frisbee is arguably one of the most socially progressive sports in the world. It may be the only sport where it is mixed with both men and female playing together on the same field at the highest level. Moreover, promoting gender equity is a huge focus point for the national governing body of the sport. But, while it was very uplifting to hear the stories of female empowerment at this event, there were some moments that left me very uncomfortable.

The specific moment that left me the most uncomfortable was during *The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could*. The narrator ends up going over to her neighbor's house, but the narrator is a 16-year-old girl and her neighbor is a 24-year-old woman. In this scene, her neighbor gives the underage narrator alcohol and then they engage in sex. The reason why this was uncomfortable to me was because of its implications on rape. Objectively, even though the narrator describes this experience as positive, it is a case of statutory rape. I found it very unsettling when the audience also started cheering too. Isn't the audience essentially applauding statutory rape? If the neighbor's gender was swapped, how would the audience – or even society for that matter – react to this? Even if the young girl learned to love herself from this experience, the fact that she consumed alcohol and engaged in sex with a 24-year-old male should still result in a jail sentence for the man. What privilege exists that should excuse the older woman's behavior in this story? But, because a majority of the audience seemed to react positive to this scene, I felt very confused. What was I missing? I felt as if I was in the wrong for being uncomfortable. Or, maybe because I am a male, I cannot understand how women relate to this

scene. Ultimately, while I was glad it was a positive, healing experience for the narrator, I was left uncertain and uncomfortable with the societal implications of this.

Although there were some moments that left me uncomfortable and confused, my overall experience was positive. I did come to a better understanding of the subjectivity of female beauty. My perspective of female beauty differs from that of a female because I am a male. This experience helped teach me more about female body image since I cannot relate with the societal burdens of physical expectations placed on women. So, this performance reminded me of the importance of listening. I consider myself to be a great listener, and I will continue to strive to be a better listener to all people, regardless of gender, race, or sexuality.

Also, in my past relationships and past friendships with women, I have always been very respectful and understanding. So, the terrible actions by the men of the stories surprised me because many of those actions have never even crossed my mind. This experience has made me more aware of how some other men treat women. While I am not sure how realistic this is, I will try to play a more active role in fighting gender expectations and stereotypical gender norms. On an everyday basis going forward though, I will be more watchful of the behavior of other men and help prevent other men from acting in an apathetic and disrespectful manner towards women.

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### **An Evening with Nick Cave**

Nick Cave, an artist, teacher, and messenger, came to Jefferson to speak about his journey into art and to share some insight into his iconic work, the Soundsuits. Megan Voeller, the Director of Humanities at Jefferson, moderated the conversation in an auditorium that was relatively empty – about 30 people in attendance. In the background, a collection of Nick Cave’s works shuffled on repeat. There were some sculptures and other mixed media works, but for the most part they depicted his unique assortment of Soundsuits.

Megan started the conversations with questions about Nick’s childhood. Nick shared some family information before delving deeper into his artistic beginnings. He had many artistic passions, which included art, theater, and dance. At first, Nick pursued dance and trained under Alvin Ailey at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City. Eventually, he transitioned into the realm of art and fashion at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. When Nick began talking about his iconic Soundsuit works, he highlighted how it was initially a response to the beating of Rodney King. He sometimes referred to the Soundsuit as “armor” and to the collection as “the armory”.

When Megan opened the conversation to questions from the audience, one student asked Nick what he was currently working on. Nick responded with how he has started creating community-based performances and mentioned one performance he did in the NY Grand Central Station. Moreover, he talked about his exhibit at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA) on gun-related violence and racism in society. Afterwards, another student asked Nick to elaborate what he meant when he said that he was a “messenger”. Nick opened

with a powerful quote “I am a messenger first and an artist second” and then proceeded to share his goal of making the world a better place.

As an artist myself, I found Nick’s journey to be very inspiring and relatable. He explored his various passions, and ultimately ended up doing something that he loves. A thought that really stuck with me was his quote of “I am a messenger first and an artist second”. It was reminiscent of a quote Yo-Yo Ma often shares from his mentor Pablo Casals – “I am a human being first, a musician second, a cellist third”. Both these quotes are reminders that we all share the same humanity. Moreover, after hearing Nick’s quote, I thought about what my version would be. My quote would be “I am a human being first, an artist second, and a medical student third”. My version shares my outlook on the world and what I prioritize in my life. Moreover, it reminds me that – no matter how busy medical school gets – I should never forget my passions in life.

I also found it surprising how strongly I reacted to Nick’s Soundsuits. Superficially, they can be mistaken as something different for the sake of just being different. But, when you dissect it, you begin to understand that a Soundsuit is an identity. It is a suit of armor that forces others to engage with you without previous biases. There is no skin color, no gender, no clothing to stereotype. Furthermore, I found it very powerful when Nick explained that the idea began with a small twig. Eventually, his collection of simple twigs turned into a second skin of unknown identity and unpredictable sounds. In addition to the social message it provides, the brilliance of Nick’s work lies in his ability to take excess, discarded material and elevate it into the realm of high art.

When I produce art, my best works have come from flashes of inspiration. In the context of Nick’s Soundsuits, I can relate with his discussion of inspiration in art. He shared how the

beating of Rodney King inspired his Soundsuits, as it was a very profound event that made him question the safety of Black males in America. Moreover, gun violence in our society also inspired him to make a political statement with his recent gun-shaped work in Mass MOCA. While I am not quite at a level where my art can make a societal impact, it is inspirational to see Nick use his talents to create works that promote dialogues on gun safety and that spread social awareness.

Nick's conversation about his Soundsuits really resonated with me as both an artist and a student. First off, since Nick's work is currently on exhibit at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, I need to make a trip over there and to see the exhibit. Also, since Nick's words rekindled my artistic fire, I want to rediscover my creative side. One reachable goal that I now have is to improve my artistic abilities. I grew up drawing and painting every week. But, as I got older, I used the excuse that I was too busy with school and stopped drawing and painting. So, I want to draw or paint for at least fifteen minutes a day.

Furthermore, this experience has changed how I think about myself as a health care provider. I want to go forward with physician-patient relationships not as a doctor first, but as a human being first. With this approach, I will be able to humanize this relationship and better connect with my patients. Also, approaching life with the mentality of being a human first will help me combat burnout. For example, if I am learning about the pathology of the heart, I will learn it with the mindset that it may one day help me save a life instead of learning it because it might be on the exam. This fundamental perspective shift will help me see the long picture and will ultimately help me become a better person – someone who is a human being first, an artist second, and a doctor third.