

Artist Statement

This prose piece reflects my internal world as I navigate my identity as a Black woman scholar. “Ain’t I a scholar?” echoes Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman?*, a speech that exposed how Black women were excluded not only from womanhood, but from the protections and assumptions attached to it. In a similar way, my question interrogates what it means to be recognized as a scholar within institutions that have historically positioned Blackness as incompatible with intellectual authority.

Black women are highly educated, as the percentage of young Black women earning bachelor’s degrees has risen to approximately 38 percent, compared to just 26 percent of Black men (JBHE, 2024). Yet, Black men still hold a majority of Black professorships and senior roles (JBHE, 2019). In my experience, Black women occupy a uniquely demanding position in academic spaces. Societal expectations frame us as inherently resilient, self-sufficient, and responsible, qualities that can translate into persistence and high achievement, but also into silent endurance.

The “Superwoman Schema” articulates this pressure, describing how Black women often feel compelled to suppress vulnerability, overextend themselves, and succeed despite adversity (Nelson et al., 2025). What is framed as strength becomes obligation. What is praised as resilience becomes expectation. And what appears as excellence often conceals a quiet, accumulating cost.

I have felt that cost in my own body. During my time at Vanderbilt University, I have developed a number of health issues, most notably an autoimmune condition, one that is exacerbated by stress, lack of sleep, and the very patterns of overextension that academic success seems to require. There is something deeply unsettling in this: a body turning inward, cells attacking what they are meant to protect. A mutiny from within.

I cannot ignore the parallel. The way I have learned to push past my limits, to ignore signals of exhaustion, to sacrifice care in the name of achievement, mirrors my internal unraveling. I have, in many ways, participated in my own depletion. Not because I am careless, but because I have been taught that to be anything less than exceptional is to risk being dismissed altogether. Mediocrity is not afforded to me as a stage of growth; it is constructed as confirmation of doubt.

So, I strive for excellence. Relentlessly. Carefully. At times, destructively.

But even as I meet those expectations, the question remains unresolved.

Because if excellence is required for recognition, and recognition is always conditional, then what, exactly, is the endpoint?

When does performance become identity?

When will I finally be a scholar?

Citations

- Nelson, T., Oshin, L. A., Shahid, N. N., & Ramadurai, R. (2025). Superwoman schema and perceived stress among Black women: A latent profile analysis. *Ethnicity & Health*, 30(8), 898–912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2025.2553185>
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- Editor, A. (2024, December 3). Young Black Women Are Significantly Outpacing Black Men in Educational Attainment. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. <https://jbhe.com/2024/12/young-black-women-are-significantly-outpacing-black-men-in-educational-attainment/>