

An excerpt from *Black on Madison Avenue*

Chapter Eleven

Working at home

I joined UniWorld at the beginning of September 1990. The agency was in its heyday and was the largest Black-owned advertising agency in the country. The agency had moved into its new offices in a SoHo high rise building at 100 Avenue of the Americas less than a year earlier. Everything was shiny and new and beautiful. It had an air of specialness. And it felt special to be there. But when a colleague asked me if I had a tuxedo during my first week there, I thought maybe things were going just a step too far.

But what my co-worker was asking was if I was ready for the upcoming CEBA Awards, which were just a couple of weeks away. I was

embarrassed to admit that I had no idea what he was talking about. What were the CEBA Awards?

The CEBA Awards (Communications Excellence to Black Audiences) were the multicultural advertising industry's way of recognizing and honoring the great work of our peers. Minority agencies never won any of the mainstream advertising awards. The most polite thing that you could say was that the mainstream advertising award events did not even notice that we were there or the work we did. It was considered inconsequential and irrelevant. Nor was anyone from a multicultural agency ever a judge of a mainstream award. At least not back then. They knew we had our "colored" awards.

Jim Crow had drawn a big, bright line down Madison Avenue.

As it happens, I did not own a tuxedo. But I was a grown man and held a senior level position at the nation's largest Black-owned advertising agency.

Renting formal wear was simply out of the question. It was definitely time for me to purchase my own tuxedo. I chose a very traditional, classic style from Brooks Brothers. (These days, I own three tuxedos.)

The awards that evening were held in the ballroom of the New York Hilton on 54th Street and Avenue of the Americas, an enormous and undeniably first-class venue. My colleagues and I were late to the event and missed almost all of the pre-event cocktail hour mingling. We had changed clothes at the office, something the women at UniWorld simply were not going to do. So that left a bunch of men fumbling with bow ties, cufflinks, and studs without any help. But the greatest challenge was trying to get a taxi to stop for a handful of Black men. Even in tuxedos, it was damn near impossible.

There were probably dozens of things that occurred during my first few weeks of working at UniWorld, new experiences, meeting my new co-

workers, adapting to the new environment and new procedures. But most of those details fade from memory. What I remember, more than anything else, and what I associate most closely with beginning my work at UniWorld, was this night attending my first CEBA Awards.

I walked into the Hilton Ballroom, and it was like a scene from a Hollywood movie. The room felt magical, electric, as though everything had been sprinkled with a gentle touch of glitter. I saw hundreds of African American professionals in black tie and evening gowns, an image I had not seen since I was a small boy attending social cotillions at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem more than twenty years before. I can honestly say that never in my adult life had I seen that many Black professionals looking their finest. This image was so powerful that I felt like the prodigal son finally returning home after a long, lonely absence. It was like the moment in the Wizard of

Oz, when the images suddenly shift from black & white to vibrant Technicolor.

This was a through-the-looking-glass moment for me. And as I entered the ballroom that night, it almost seemed as though hundreds of people all turned in unison to acknowledge me and welcome me with an outstretched hand. I know that my recollection is blended with fantasy and imagination, but that is how I remember that night. I remember that I saw something that had been invisible to me before, but would never be invisible to me again.

I had no idea that so many smart, talented, creative people – Black people – were in the same business where I had just spent the past 12 years. I was so accustomed to working for advertising agencies where it was ‘just me’, or maybe ‘just me and two others’. This was when I began to question the hiring practices of mainstream advertising agencies. This was when the problem first became real for me.

If you have ever been to a mainstream awards show, whether it was the Academy Awards, the Tonys, the Clios or simply some obscure industry event, there was always an element of ironic distance. There was always a hint of, “Yeah, we’re all here, but we don’t really take this thing seriously.” It almost seemed like a repressed need to put down the thing they were celebrating.

That is not how Black people do award shows. There is none of that aloof air of above-it-all. When Black people do award shows, there is uninhibited joy and celebration. There is an explosion of individual and collective pride. There is kinetic energy. There can sometimes be – and often is – bad behavior at Black award show events, but that’s because people become genuinely giddy about the experience. They lose themselves in the moment. For better or worse, it is to be expected.

Even so, at the CEBAAs, there is no bad behavior.

From then on, working at UniWorld had established a new context, a new frame of reference for where I was working and who I was working with. In writing this chapter, I have struggled to find the right way to describe the changes that came with working at UniWorld; the shift in perceptions which in turn led to an adjustment in behavior, which led to a whole new set of emotions. It is very hard to explain to someone who has not had a comparable experience, but anyone who has come to work for a minority-owned company after working for a mainstream company knows exactly what I am talking about.

Most Black people in America live in two worlds; the mainstream majority world and the community of Blackness (not just Black people) that exists as a subset of the majority. W.E.B. DuBois wrote extensively and insightfully about co-existing in these two worlds. Language is one

of the ways that Black people manage that dual existence. But there are also many, many aspects of dress and demeanor, both subtle and profound, that are signals and clues of that dual existence. Code-switching between two worlds is an essential skill set for Black professionals in most businesses, but it is absolutely critical on Madison Avenue, where the unfamiliar and uncomfortable can get you shunned, censored or fired.

When you come to work at a place like UniWorld, you leave all of that excess baggage at home. You save all of that stress-producing code-switching for client meetings. You don't have to be more than one person. You can just be you and perhaps discover that this person is worthy of dignity and respect without the performance element.

Because when you are working for a Black-owned firm, a place like UniWorld, you are working at home.
