

**Wyoming Tribune Eagle of August 25, 2016: "Struggles of a black scientist."  
Casper Star Trib, September 3: "Astrophysicist defies expectations, obstacles."**

(lightly edited after publication)

To become an internationally known astrophysicist may seem like you've got it made. Yet for an African American it means the usual stereotype threat.

"The most well-known astrophysicist of our time discusses a dozen times he's been racially profiled" is the title of a Walter Eienkel essay, dated July 13, 2016, that has been reblogged numerous times. (I posted it on my Facebook page.)

The essay tells of Neil deGrasse Tyson at a conference—a meeting of the National Society of Black Physicists—where, in the course of a night of talking with colleagues, the conversation turned to getting pulled over by police.

"We each recalled multiple incidents of being stopped by police . . . I had a dozen different encounters to draw from," Mr. Tyson said.

One physicist was stopped for driving slowly, another for speeding 5 miles over the limit, another because the license plate on his older car was new. None of the incidents resulted in a ticket; instead, "we were guilty of . . . DWB (Driving While Black), WWB (Walking While Black), and of course, JBB (Just Being Black)," says Mr. Tyson.

In 1991, having earned his doctorate from Columbia and invited to speak at convocation, Mr. Tyson alluded to the stereotype threats he has suffered. "To spend most of my life fighting these attitudes leaves an emotional tax that is a form of intellectual emasculation," he said. By his count, his graduation brought the total number of black astrophysicists nationally to seven, in a field of about four thousand. "Given what I have experienced, I am surprised there are that many," he commented.

Once, in an interview by a local television reporter about solar explosions, he realized that this was the first time he was on television as "an expert on something that had nothing to do with being black."

At eleven, he spoke with a teacher about his fascination with astronomy. "Why do you want to go into science? There aren't any Negroes in that field. Why don't you go into sports?" was the response. A dozen years later, arriving at University of Texas at Austin for postgraduate work, a faculty member wanted him to join the department's basketball team; another suggested he aim at teaching in a two-year college.

And it wasn't just the low expectations of whites that aggrieved him. In his memoir, "The Sky Is Not the Limit," he tells of participating in a wrestling team where another member, the African American Frederick T. Smith, later a Rhodes scholar, criticized him for his devotion to science. "Blacks in America don't have the luxury of your intellectual talents being spent in astrophysics."

“Never before had someone so casually, yet so succinctly, indicted my life’s ambition,” Mr. Tyson wrote of the encounter.

When he was nine and the family resided in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, his parents took him to the Hayden Planetarium. “I was never the same afterwards,” he recalls in an interview with Rebecca Mead of *The New Yorker*. “The lights go off and the stars come out . . . In the city . . . you don’t have a relationship with the night sky. You don’t even know it’s there.”

Since 1996 Mr. Tyson has been the Frederick P. Rose Director of the Hayden Planetarium at the Rose Center for Earth and Space in New York City. At the American Museum of Natural History he founded the Department of Astrophysics. He is the author or co-author of ten books that tackle little-understood subjects like dark matter and dark energy, which together make up 95 percent of the known universe. He hosted the television series, “*Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*,” successor to the 1980 Sagan series, “*Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*.”

Although Mr. Tyson, a child when astronauts first landed on the moon and barely a teen when the missions ended, rarely talks politics in public, he did speak out when the conspiracy theory arose that the landings were a government-sponsored hoax. A widely-viewed Fox television special originated the theory.

“If there were ever a state secret the government wanted to keep, it would be the behavior of President Clinton’s genitals, O.K.? But that got out!” he said in a podcast. “You’re going to hoax a moon landing by telling ten thousand scientists and engineers to keep it secret for forty years?”

Mr. Tyson has been awarded the NASA Distinguished Public Service Medal. He hosted the television show “*NOVA ScienceNow*” on PBS. Since 2009, he has hosted the weekly podcast “*StarTalk*.” Last year the U.S. National Academy of Sciences awarded him the Public Welfare Medal for his “extraordinary role in exciting the public about the wonders of science.” More than 1.6 million people follow him on twitter.

Mr. Tyson is married to the mathematical physicist Alice Young. They have two young-adult children. The Eikenkel essay describes him as “one of the most well-liked people on the planet.”

It’s not easy being male, African American, and an astrophysicist. Mr. Tyson shows--through his determination and perseverance--that it can be done.