



“Duty While Black”: Disrupting Double Consciousness in Residential Communities

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THE PRACTICE OF DUTY ROUNDS (also called community rounds or simply duty) is overdue for critical assessment, particularly because of its reliance on surveillance culture and the potential hazards of such surveillance to building authentic community. In this collaborative autoethnography, one Black residential life professional's experience with duty rounds reveals the burden of double consciousness endured by Black professionals in this role. Remedies for more liberatory community accountability practices and the need to address racist behavior when directed toward any community members are discussed.

Residence halls are the heart of many campuses and provide enriching environments in which students form and foment community in a myriad of ways. Though residence halls are places where students generally congregate peacefully, student or professional staff are often asked to conduct what are colloquially known as duty rounds (also known as community rounds, on-call rounds, or duty), which can sometimes be stressful or even threatening. In this practice, the assigned paraprofessional or professional makes regular walking visits through the entire space they are charged with maintaining and identify and address any disruptions to the community. Additionally, during duty rounds, staff are often called into action when students are in various forms of individual crisis, such as being highly intoxicated or experiencing a mental health issue.

Duty rounds are a form of sanctioned surveillance of residential communities that has been routinely practiced for decades (Blimling, 2014; Winston, 1993). Instituted ostensibly to maintain order, cleanliness, and quiet, duty rounds are an unquestioned aspect of the roles of residence life paraprofessionals and professionals alike, constituting an often unpleasant and at times treacherous experience. Though the literature includes some commentary on the practice (e.g., Blimling, 2003; Haggerty, 2011), it is limited, and detailed research on duty rounds, including their efficacy and developmental impact, is non-existent. We know almost nothing about the impact of duty rounds on those asked to conduct them, including the ways that this responsibility impacts Black residential life professionals. While the format and substance of duty vary considerably across institutions, one common feature of the practice is surveillance.

Recent history suggests that even surveillance practices such as neighborhood watches, which are perceived as benign, can have fatal consequences when coupled with laws that prioritize the rights of the occupant over the rights of the visitor (Light, 2017). While duty rounds are certainly not inherently lethal, the notion that outsider surveillance is essential to maintaining peace in residence halls is overdue for critical reflection. The question is, does this kind of monitoring belong among quotidian residence hall practices that are designed to be developmental and to foster community?

What is the cost for those who perform this task, particularly when they are Black individuals on predominantly White campuses? And what can we learn from the experiences of Black professionals who must confront both micro- and macro-aggressions when conducting duty rounds?

This examination considers the costs of duty rounds through the eyes of one Black residential life professional who had multiple experiences with racialized aggression during his time in the role and whose experiences point to the need to re-examine the practice. After analyzing these experiences through the lens of double consciousness (DuBois, 1940/2012), the authors suggest alternatives to current practice and argue that communities can and must be more responsibly constructed around self-surveillance. Additionally, we assert that leaders can and must develop remedies for mistreatment when racist behavior is directed toward staff, including student staff and paraprofessionals.

THE CONTEXT: BLACK LEADERS IN RESIDENTIAL LIFE

Black leaders in residential communities face numerous unique challenges that have been documented in the literature (e.g., Harper et al., 2011). Resident advisors of color have indicated that they are "tasked with ensuring the satisfaction of primarily white student populations, often at the expense of their own feelings, values, and well-being" (Foste & Johnson, 2021, p. 400). Further, Black residential life staff suffer from unrealistic expectations and the stress of adhering to the rules and regulations of distant, often White-led bureaucracies. Harper and colleagues' (2011) study of Black men serving as resident assistants (RAs) found that feelings of isolation and onliness combined with excessive scrutiny by White supervisors diminished their motivation. These experiences were notably amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as staff of color contended with increased workloads (due to the racialization of uncompensated labor), lack of support from senior leaders, and refusal to honor staff efforts to achieve balance, despite touting institutional missions valuing wellness (Cho & Brassfield, 2022).

The atmosphere in residence halls is challenging not only for leaders, but also for residents. Residence halls are often racially coded (Foste, 2021): Students of color living in so-called White buildings are subjected to verbal microaggressions, racial slurs written on wipe boards and other public spaces, segregation within buildings, and behavioral policies that differ from those for their White peers in residence halls, which may carry over into their perceptions of how they are treated when undertaking an RA or professional staff role (Harwood et al., 2012). The issue of credibility (or the lack thereof) from students, supervisors, and even parents of students arises frequently among Black residence life professionals (Morton et al., 2019). While research on the specific effects of duty rounds on those who perform them is non-existent, Cole (2016) found that residence life professional staff often felt ill-equipped to respond to mental health crises among students. As Codi Charles, author of a personal account of his earlier experiences working in student housing and residential life and

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a self-identified Black, fat, queer residential life professional, noted, "I experienced students at their lowest lows which is honorable and beautiful, but it's not without an intimate price" (2019, para. 1).

Duty rounds can cause emotional strain, self-consciousness, and anxiety for those who conduct them. As Kelvin describes in this article's vignettes, being Black compounds these stressors, especially given the recognition that no single person's experience can comprehensively represent any group. Kelvin's narratives represent some of the daily realities of performing duty while Black, and they provide insight into the urgent need to re-imagine the ways that communities can be more constructively managed. Kelvin's experiences illuminate several features of duty that require examination and suggest the need to interrupt and re-imagine the role of sanctioned surveillance in residence hall communities and the responsibilities of leaders to address racialized harm.

METHOD: COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

This first-person account of the experiences of one Black residence life professional represents a collaborative autoethnographic exploration (Chang et al., 2014) of duty rounds. The process of reflecting on one's experience autoethnographically is a nod to *conscientization* (Freire, 1970), which involves "becoming aware of one's position and creating a space to change the perception of the resultant reality" (Starr, 2010, p. 1). Autoethnography in education is an emergent methodology that allows for deeper analysis of the multiple layers (self, culture, relationships) of experience and "can stimulate critical and creative engagement with diverse personal circumstances and the broader social-historical-political contexts and issues that situate and feed into them" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021, p. 4). Collaboration on autoethnographic meaning-making is enabled when partners consider the narrative side by side to understand the deeper meaning; in cases where one collaborator is a novice researcher, a collaborative approach can enable deeper analysis, even when the co-researcher does not share the experience directly (Chang et al., 2014).

In this case, we engaged in narrative interpretation (Keleş, 2022) and made meaning together of the experiences told in the first person. We share an enduring co-mentoring relationship, born of our former status as student and teacher, which has evolved into a collegial research partnership in which we work together to co-construct knowledge and understanding of Kelvin's experiences as a Black paraprofessional and now a professional in residential life. In this process, Kelvin identified the experience of duty rounds as especially troubling to his emergent sense of himself as a professional.

The narrative inquiry began with a discussion of the myriad duties included in residence life responsibilities and the inflection points that provided Kelvin with the greatest insight about the experience of professionally embedded double consciousness. We engaged in multiple and lengthy reflective conversations about how these experiences shaped his understanding of himself as an emergent residence life professional and what they mean for imagining liberatory possibilities in residential life. During this process, we were committed to maintaining fidelity to Kelvin's narrative and analysis throughout.

Autoethnography as a research method does not trade in positivist metrics of validity, reliability, and/or generalizability (Starr, 2010), but it does depend on fidelity to data (the story) and careful and rigorous analysis of its meaning. This article and its findings are the result of bi-weekly meetings over the course of more than one year, when we engaged in deep, ongoing, and thoughtful reflection and analysis of the issues raised in the vignettes. The following vignettes capture experiences during duty rounds that influenced Kelvin's sense of his identity. They reveal specific moments when his awareness of being watched, even as he was practicing the surveillance inherent in the role, imbued the experience with a burden of double consciousness (DuBois, 1940/2012) not carried by his non-Black peers. In turn, these vignettes invite revisitation of the role of shared community and leadership in fostering liberatory community.

DUTY WHILE BLACK: KELVIN'S STORY

Kelvin reflected on the challenges of duty rounds by examining two specific incidents that typify the experiences he had as a Black paraprofessional performing the responsibilities associated with being on duty. In the first situation, Kelvin contextualized his experience as follows:

The RA I was supporting was the only RA of color in this building, and one of only three RAs of color on the entire staff of 72. When I first came to the institution where I worked as a graduate resident director, I asked the professional staff about the small number of RAs of color, and the answer I was given was that students of color do not want to be RAs because they all are busy with other things. On the particular evening in question, this RA came down to the lobby to get me, stating that there was a large party taking place on the third floor of the building. As we walked up the stairs to assess the situation, we passed by several groups of students heading that way. One of the residents heading to the party noticed me, warned their friends, and left the area. When I arrived at the door to the party, the room was packed from wall to wall. I announced myself and asked the residents to shut off the music and turn on the lights. The first thing I heard was a resident who yelled from the side of the room, "OH, IT'S THE BLACK ONE" when they saw me at the door.

In this moment, Kelvin was instantly reminded of his status as a Black member of the residential life team; his presence, initially intended to be supportive of the RA of color whom he was accompanying, became foregrounded.

As he moved into action, he was put on notice by the resident, who flagged his identity as a factor in the interaction. Nevertheless, he proceeded:

I had to think quickly, mind you. I'm from Mississippi, and we handle disrespect and racism very directly. I knew if I addressed the comment I would end up in more trouble than the students in the party who spoke like that. So I decided to ignore it. That decision haunts me to this day.

Here, Kelvin identified how addressing the inherent racism in flagging his identity would likely be considered inappropriate given the institutional context; confronting the student's behavior would be read as aggressive. He sensed that his role as agent of surveillance and response could never be displaced by asserting himself as a human being and member of the community for whom racism is a daily aspect of his lived experience.

Expecting and acknowledging trouble meant that he was anticipating pushback, perhaps even hostility, from the students. He recognized that this would be considered suspect, perhaps even unprofessional. His focus then shifted back to the team member he was supporting:

My second thought was about the RA: She was the only other Black person on my RA staff. At this point we had had countless conversations about the racism that takes place on campus. I was the person she came to when things like this happened to her. I would be the one giving her words of encouragement when she felt overwhelmed. Having her witness me going through some of the same stuff she had experienced made me feel helpless. I had to think of the example I was setting for her. I wondered, was I just receiving pushback because I was the person coming in to break up the fun, or was my authority being questioned because I was a person of color coming in to reprimand White students, having no choice but to intervene to restore community peace?

Kelvin's focus in this moment was to maintain order alongside the RA, yet here he also acknowledges the expectations of serving as a role model to one of the few RAs of color on his team and the burden of needing to appear unflappable in this situation.

As Kelvin aimed to act professionally, other thoughts were arising—such as who made the comment and whether it might have been another student of color reflecting their own desire to fit in—which interrupted his ability to focus on the task at hand.

At this point I dissociated and went about the protocols for the incident at hand. As we were collecting student IDs, all I could hear was the student's words ringing in my head: IT'S THE BLACK ONE. With each name I took down, I wondered, was this the guy who said it? There were students of color in that space as well. What if it was one of them?

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I had heard stories from some of the students of color that I mentor about how some of their peers would do some degrading things to fit in—what if this was the case this time? This moment helped me face the reality of how I was seen on campus. I wasn't just Kelvin the GRD [graduate resident director]: I was The Black GRD.

Kelvin's experiences in this incident followed several weeks of engagement and effort to build and solidify relationships within the building, which he took as a serious professional responsibility—all of which was decentered in the moment when he was referred to as "the Black one."

This incident happened in early September. I had been working with many of the students in the party for many different reasons, but to them I was still just the Black GRD. The incident took place in the building I manage, and I had been working overtime to properly integrate myself into the culture of the institution in the northeast, going out of my way to make the residents feel comfortable in the space so they would come to me with issues. As I reflected on this incident later, I realized it was less on me and more about the institution itself. I was coming into a culture where respect for staff was not enforced, so adding the elements of race made me a prime candidate for this type of disrespect.

Kelvin endured a persistent sense that students were not expected to perceive and respect staff as fellow community members, let alone as professionals. This culture was not conducive to him feeling inherently valued, which meant that each interaction with a student was laden with the need to re-establish authority. In his case, that burden was compounded by the racism inherent in being singled out as a Black professional.

In the next incident, an intoxicated student referred to Kelvin with a racial slur while he was on duty serving the institution, and instead of receiving support from those around him, he was asked to be empathetic to the resident.

*While on duty I was called to respond to a resident who was extremely intoxicated. Upon my arrival, the campus police and the paramedics had already arrived and were just moments away from taking the resident to the hospital. The student was intoxicated to the point that he had to be held in his seat by the police. As they are working to put him on the stretcher, the student saw me and began to shout "He's a n*****, look, he's a n*****!" At that moment I didn't even hear the word—I felt it. It caused my whole body to tense up.*

In this moment, confronted with the reality of hateful language from a member of the community in which he had fully invested his energies, Kelvin felt personally and psychologically threatened. His awareness of the meaning of the word leveraged against him was more than just symbolic, due to the context in which he was born and raised.

*I'm from the Mississippi Delta, and I know what racism is all too well, but this was my first time ever being called a n***** and it didn't happen in Mississippi. In that instance, my first thought was about the RAs around me, not myself. They were the ones that told the student to stop talking and that he needed to watch his language. The hardest part was hearing his friends apologize, stating that "he doesn't normally talk like that."*

Peers covering for or excusing fellow students committing racist acts is not an isolated phenomenon (Modica, 2015). Yet given that leaders in this college community had invested time and energy in teaching and encouraging respect for all and promoted a mission of true inclusiveness, the excuse was especially hard for Kelvin to accept.

Thinking back, I was less concerned with what he said and more concerned with what I was going to have to go through over the next few days once I reported [to superiors] what he said, so I decided not to. By this time, I knew all too well the action steps that the department would take: I would just end up with another day off, with nothing happening to the resident involved.

Kelvin alluded here to leadership giving paraprofessionals and professionals alike time off to rest and recuperate after a stressful duty incident, a well-meant practice that does nothing to address the behavior that catalyzed the stress. Additionally, his comment about not reporting it signaled that, based on previous experience, he could not expect empathy or a commitment to addressing the language directly. He elaborated on this.

The following morning I received a call from the administrator on duty, stating she wanted to make sure that I was okay. The call would have been thoughtful, if she did not make it clear that she was asked to follow up with me by her superior. I expressed that the duty experience is hard enough as it is, and having to deal with major acts of racism on top of that workload was overwhelming.

Kelvin explicitly and openly identified the burden of performing duty while Black and emphasized the fact that it compounded the burden of completing already challenging duty responsibilities. The meetings were unproductive, as he predicted.

In our meeting, I wanted to know what was going to happen to the resident because of his actions. I was told that they weren't going to do anything to him concerning his comments. The leadership felt that he was simply a product of his environment and of drinking too much that evening.

In this situation, Kelvin faced the reality that the burden imposed on him due to a student's racist behavior would not be addressed through sanctioning and that it was, in a sense, expected behavior from a person with a pattern of abusive drinking. Again, the investment of Kelvin's time and energy was explicitly devalued. He was redirected to take the high road.

The underlying message of the meeting was basically to focus on the positive interactions I had with residents, rather than a negative one like this. It astounded me that the racist words he spoke to me, in front of other residents, RAs, and the police, were in her eyes only a negative interaction. And yet, she also gave me a few days off because the event was so traumatic.

Kelvin experienced the dissonance of being told that the incident was explainable, while also being granted time off to process his feelings, implying that it was more

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serious than the sanction suggested. Rather than naming and recognizing this as an unwillingness to hold a student accountable, Kelvin internalized the situation.

The way this incident was handled made me question my future in this field. I wondered if this will be my new normal if I commit to working in residence life. I felt like I was expected to repress my feelings, emotions, and my need to be treated like a person for the good of the institution.

Kelvin acknowledged how avoiding complaints from both the student and parents was prioritized over addressing the very real harm he experienced. He recognized that this was not a unique response and could likely be repeated in any predominantly White institutional setting. Kelvin's reflections revealed that, for him, the two years he spent learning the ropes as a residential life professional were more than just a period of intense training. He was left with the sense that going above and beyond, while internalizing the emotional pain of having one's authority and even humanity unfairly questioned, is par for the course when working in a Predominantly White Institution:

Being a Black man in a position of authority on campuses like this instantly challenges the culture of a department and an institution. I now understand that as a person of color working in this industry, to succeed is going to take more than just being competent. It takes levels of composure and self-discipline that are not expected of White people. Many institutions seek out people of color earnestly. Yet many of them are not prepared for what is unearthed by bringing them in. These years have made me very selective about which institutions I work for. Now I understand that as long as I am working in higher education, I will have to bear the burden of diversity and inclusion no matter what my role may be.

KELVIN'S EXPERIENCE OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Kelvin's experiences can be at least partially explained by W.E.B. DuBois' (1940/2012) theory of double consciousness, which DuBois advanced as an explanation for the additional burden carried by Black individuals operating in White-dominated society, wherein they must be aware of and attuned to their own feelings as well as the reactions of White people to them, thus displacing the ability to focus solely on one's singular inner consciousness. DuBois described this sensation as follows:

I lived in an environment which I came to call the white world. I was not an American; I was not a man; I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed

primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. All this made me limited in physical movement and provincial in thought and dream. I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful account the reaction of my White enviring world. (1940/2012, pp. 135–136)

DuBois (1940/2012) described double consciousness as consisting of a tripartite veil: One piece prevented White people from seeing Black people as human and American, another from treating them as equals, and the third in turn prevented Black people from being able to see themselves as such. This veil was described as a “one-way mirror” (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015, p. 235) of projected beliefs held by White people about Black people, one that was superimposed on Kelvin during his duty rounds. The veil created a demarcation of experience that is impossible for the Black individual to transcend; it was imprinted on Kelvin, whether from being the Black man entering a mostly White space to break up a party or reacting to a resident’s racial pejorative, which supplanted his sense of his own Blackness. He lamented, “While on duty I could not just focus on remembering the protocols and procedures and assisting residents. I also had to keep in mind that I was a Black man on duty.”

The instances described in this article are normal occurrences within the canon of duty, yet, for Kelvin, showing up to these instances as Black changed the expected outcome. The constant awareness of these possible outcomes became a part of every call he answered, and his reception became at least as central to the experience as how he showed up. The burden of double consciousness (DuBois, 1940/2012) thus detracted from Kelvin’s ability to focus on the work and to fully engage with students in his care because of the constant awareness that some marked him as different. The burden further precluded having authentic relationships with some residents and resident assistants. Kelvin felt it was impossible to be fully himself with them—and thus fully authentic. As such, he was carrying a burden that differed from that of others who were doing the same work but did not have to contend with the presence of the veil.

DISRUPTING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Given the stories outlined here and the pressures they revealed, a re-imagination of duty is not only possible but essential. The contentiousness, the negation, and the deep disrespect that Kelvin experienced from students while serving on duty rounds is part and parcel of two distinct problems with this responsibility: His primary role was to monitor and enforce policy, functions that preclude positive relationship building, and he faced the pressures on Black residential life professionals that demand greater accountability to address experiences when they are subjected to racialized mistreatment. We believe there are several feasible solutions that can reduce and ultimately eliminate the stressors and pressure of double consciousness for Black professionals and paraprofessionals in duty roles.

One important way to reconceptualize the duty framework is to resist the idea that surveillance by a designated staff person is essential; we should instead be willing to scrutinize the very practice of duty rounds. Professionals in residence life, who typically center concepts of community and building developmental environmental contexts, must be willing to reconsider the premise that peace in communities cannot be thoughtfully maintained without an authority figure to manage and respond to disruptions. While not every confrontation (or "care-frontation," as they are sometimes referred to) triggers hostile, racially othering, or racist behavior from students, Kelvin's experiences—and those of his RA colleague of color—reveal some of the very real costs when they do. What if the norm was that residents themselves, working together or in collaboration with residential life staff, set and enforced behavioral expectations in residence halls? And what if they were fully empowered to address incidents of disruption that impeded community harmony, rather than delegating responsibility to paid college officials? What if an elected or voluntary council of residents determined sanctions for other students who disregarded community-based norms, including leveraging decisions such as removal from residence?

While it may sound utopian, we contend that in the absence of expectations for greater resident accountability for maintaining meaningful community norms, professionals (especially those who are minoritized) will always bear the brunt of others' aggression. Clearly one person's experience is not sufficient to abandon a long-practiced form of community surveillance, but we suspect that further research on the matter of how Black professionals experience duty—which we strongly support—would reveal similar harms and similar costs.

Equally important to distributing responsibility for maintaining order in residential communities and reducing the emphasis on surveillance is revisiting the response of leadership teams following incidents where Black professionals and paraprofessionals are subjected to racist treatment. College and university leaders must fully engage all students in sustained dialogue regarding community behavioral norms beyond a one-shot conversation in orientation, and community standards must be expanded to include processes and remedies for times when students direct racist speech at professionals and peers alike. Restorative circle processes appear to be one promising approach to addressing such harms (Karp & Sacks, 2014; Mrowka et al., 2024) in residential communities, for they can foster heightened accountability alongside the potential for repairing harms. Leadership teams can and must engage in thoughtful self-reflection and remedial action when students and colleagues suffer racialized harms, particularly

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when Whiteness is embedded in reactions to them (Robinson, 2021). As Kelvin's story illustrates, anything short of creating such accountability measures will almost certainly result in fewer Black professionals in residential life work.

CONCLUSION

Although Kelvin's experiences are disheartening, they are examples of the state of our current society, the prevalence of racism, and the harms caused to Black residential life professionals, who suffer the burden of double consciousness first described by DuBois (1940/2012) more than 80 years ago. They show that while there is a push for diversity in our institutions, these institutions are often still ill-equipped to support and develop Black residential life professionals and to address micro- and macro-aggressions effectively. Change should begin with a critical examination of the role of duty in the residential setting and an examination of its utility in 21st-century U.S. colleges and universities. Shifting from a culture of surveillance to a culture of shared responsibility and accountability for maintaining peaceful, safe, and mutually empowering communities should be everyone's responsibility, and residential college settings provide an excellent training ground for liberatory practice that transcends surveillance culture. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the concept of double consciousness explain or highlight the burdens placed on Black RAs and professionals conducting duty rounds in residential communities? How might residence life programs be more accountable for addressing these burdens?
2. How can the idea of duty devalue the experiences of or actively harm Black professionals and paraprofessionals in residential communities? What might campus leadership do to mitigate this?
3. In what ways have institutional policies designed to support paraprofessionals and professionals in residential communities failed to account for systemic racism and the impact of racialized incidents on Black staff? How would you approach designing policies that are more expansive in their understanding?
4. How necessary to the structure of residence life and the safety of residential communities are the surveillance aspects of duty? What are other methods of support that might be implemented?
5. Duty rounds constitute an unquestioned practice of residence life staff. What other unquestioned practices might inadvertently harm individuals from minoritized communities? How might you re-imagine that practice?

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