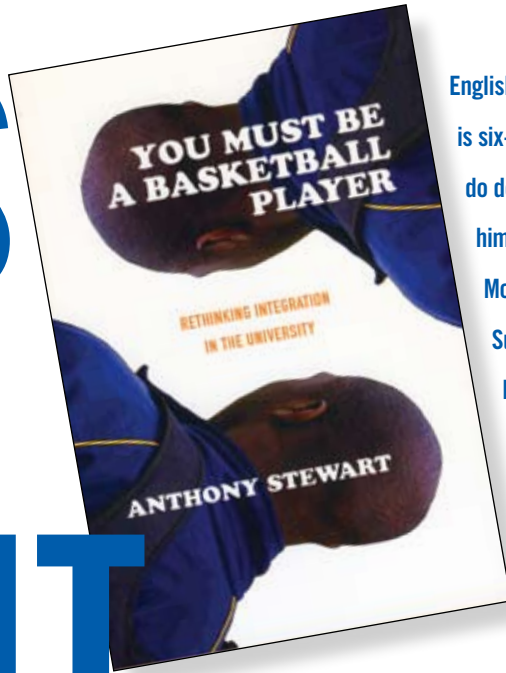


BY MARILYN SMULDERS

# LET'S TALK ABOUT IT.



English professor Anthony Stewart is six-feet-six-inches tall. Students do double-takes when they see him walking down the hall of the McCain Building to his office. Surely he must be a varsity basketball player, or why else would he be at university?

In his book, *You Must Be a Basketball Player: Rethinking Integration in the University* (Halifax:

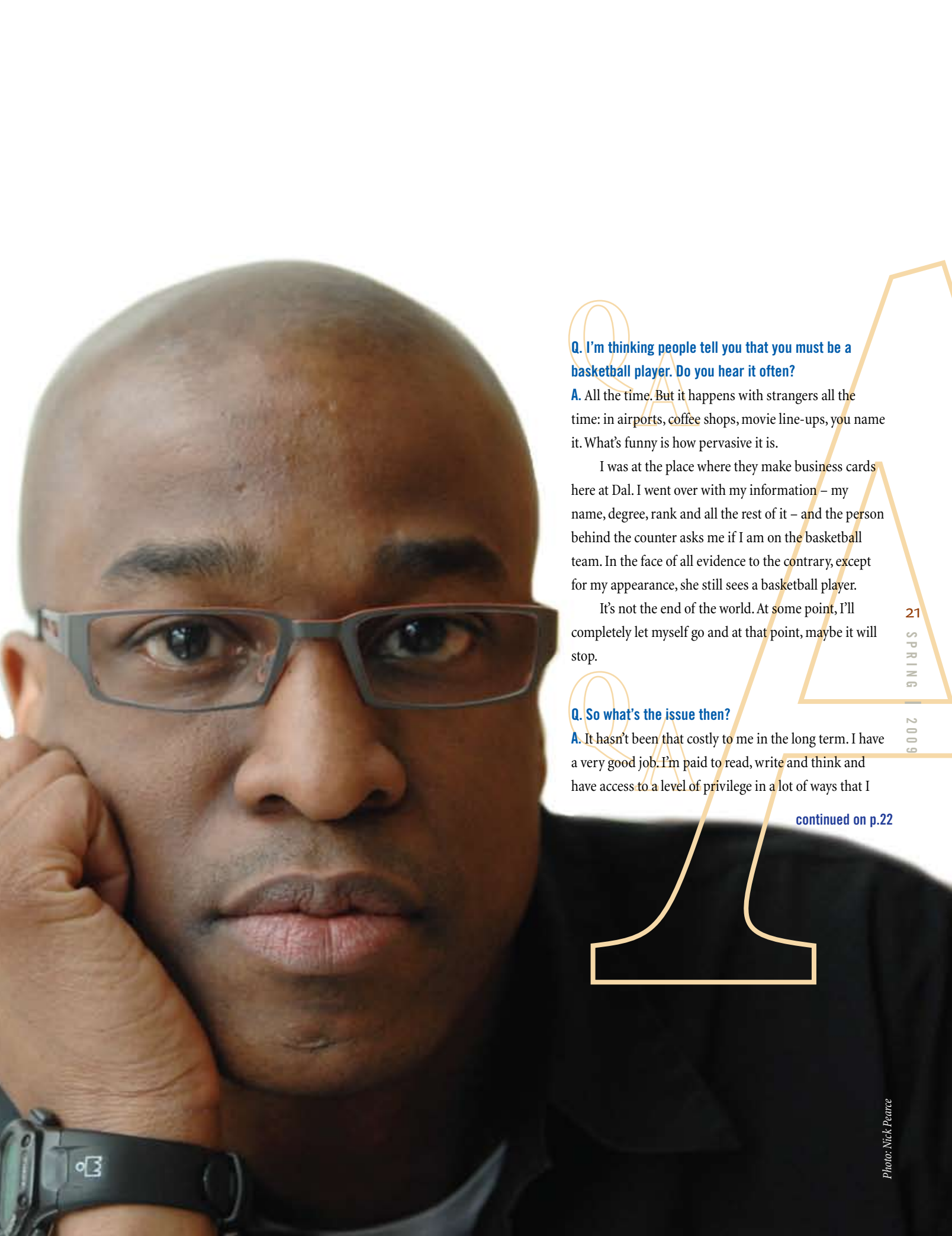
Fernwood Publishing), Dr. Stewart says it

straight out: the university environment is overwhelmingly white and must change. If more “people of colour” taught classes, did research or worked in administration in a university setting, the sight of a black man going into his office wouldn’t be so unusual.

“We must broaden the palette of faces at the front of university classrooms as wide as possible and, as a result, broaden the impression of what authority, expertise and influence look like to our students,” says the bookish, first-born son of Jamaican immigrants.

Marilyn Smulders sat down with Dr. Stewart to ask him about his book.

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**Q. I'm thinking people tell you that you must be a basketball player. Do you hear it often?**

**A.** All the time. But it happens with strangers all the time: in airports, coffee shops, movie line-ups, you name it. What's funny is how pervasive it is.

I was at the place where they make business cards here at Dal. I went over with my information – my name, degree, rank and all the rest of it – and the person behind the counter asks me if I am on the basketball team. In the face of all evidence to the contrary, except for my appearance, she still sees a basketball player.

It's not the end of the world. At some point, I'll completely let myself go and at that point, maybe it will stop.

**Q. So what's the issue then?**

**A.** It hasn't been that costly to me in the long term. I have a very good job. I'm paid to read, write and think and have access to a level of privilege in a lot of ways that I

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## The only time people complain about preferential hiring practices as they pertain to merit is when you're talking about race.

wouldn't have expected. But what kind of effect do you think it has on an 18-year-old boy who just happens to be six-feet-six-inches tall and black? He is constantly being told by the world around him what he can be, what he should be and what he must be and, by extension, what he can't be, shouldn't be or mustn't be.

There are so few people of colour who do this job and more generally, work at the administrative and professional levels. My point is that unless we're more conscious of the implicit messages we're constantly sending to people, the professional class in Canada will continue to look the way it does now. People will continue to wring their hands and say all the right things but unless we are aware and conscious, it will continue to look the same.

**Q. But if we start hiring people based on the need to diversify our faculty, what happens to the best man or best woman for the job?**

**A.** A lot of people believe that if we start making hires in part based on diversification of our faculty, this will be an all-assault on merit. Our university will be filled with unqualified people.

But we already hire for reasons other than strict merit all the time, as a matter of course. Most Canadian universities, if not all, have a Canadians-first hiring policy – is that affirmative action or isn't it? Ninety per cent of the incoming class at Dalhousie's Faculty of Medicine has to have a permanent address in the Maritimes. That leaves nine spots in a national medical school for people coming

from the rest of Canada and internationally. You tell me: Is that affirmative action or isn't it?

Twenty years ago, the issue was getting more female students into the sciences and engineering and everyone was onboard. The main reason we don't tend to talk like that in regards to race is squeamishness. It's uncomfortable.

The only time people complain about preferential hiring practices as they pertain to merit is when you're talking about race. What that says is, 'I don't mind preferential hiring practices if all it means is you're bringing in more white people. My concern is when you're going to start bringing in dark-skinned people because they're not as good as we are.' That's the implication, when you think about it, and it's disturbing.

If we did not have preferential practices in place already, the argument about merit might hold up.

**Q. Tell me about your own Faculty.**

**A.** Let me just say I'm not picking on this university – it just happens to be the university I work in. In the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at this university, the full-time complement, the tenure-track group, adds up to about 130 people. If you were to guess how many people of colour there are, what would your number be?

The number is five. Out of 130.

Five people of colour in the entire full-time complement; they're all black, and all men. And there's a whole other aspect to this, which has to do with the double marginalization of women of colour.

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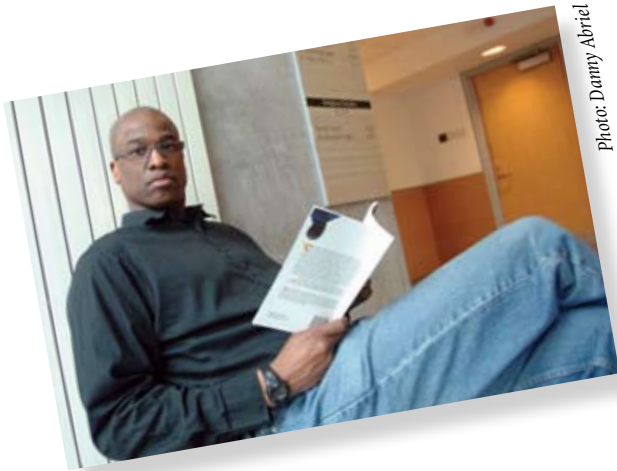


Photo: Danny Abriel

To strip it down, these things happen, in part, because people don't talk about them. We don't get any practice thinking about what might be done differently. That's the issue. What my book does, I hope, is offer a vocabulary for thinking about these issues constructively. Now it's time to start walking the walk.

Universities, like other institutions, are majoritarian – they will reflect in their practices and policies, the interests of the majority; that is, unless and until this is drawn to the attention of the individuals who work there so that something might change. At some point it does start to look unethical.

An epigraph from Edward Said reads: 'Never solidarity before criticism.' What that means is that it's disingenuous and cowardly that everything else is available for your criticism except the place you work. The purpose is not to say the academy is a terrible place. It's not. The fact that I can write a book like this as an academic working in a university bears that out. I can't really think what else I'd prefer to do.

#### Q. Where do you see hope?

A. Changing the way the academy looks will provide young Canadians of colour with a more varied experience of what expertise looks like, what they can aspire to. But not to be missed in all of this are the tangible benefits

to our white students. Why don't we see that our white students will also benefit? These kids are being trained as the elite; most of them will end up working in the professional class. In other words, they're going to be in positions to make hiring and admissions decisions.

On Wednesday, November 5th, I read something to my students that Ralph Ellison wrote 50 years ago, in 1958, on the prospect of a black American president. I choked up and had to stop and restart reading this passage three times before I got through it.

Now, if Obama's election means that much to me, a black Canadian who didn't grow up in poverty and has a great job, what do you suppose the effect has been on poor black kids living across the States, their parents and grandparents? Their grandparents will remember that just registering for the vote could get you killed.

I used to say quite confidently to my students that if I lived to be 150, I'd never see a black president. I guess I have to stop saying that. There is a level of possibility now in terms of what I can imagine that was not in place before Obama's election. It changes how we see.

What I hope to see 20 years from now is the expression to describe a generation of black Americans, Obama's children or the Obama generation.

Even if only a few of the kids who now regard athletics or entertainment as their only option, can now imagine themselves to be prospective presidents, they'll start to accumulate skills that will be useful to them in any number of ways – in a way that having a good jump shot or being able to hit a curveball won't.