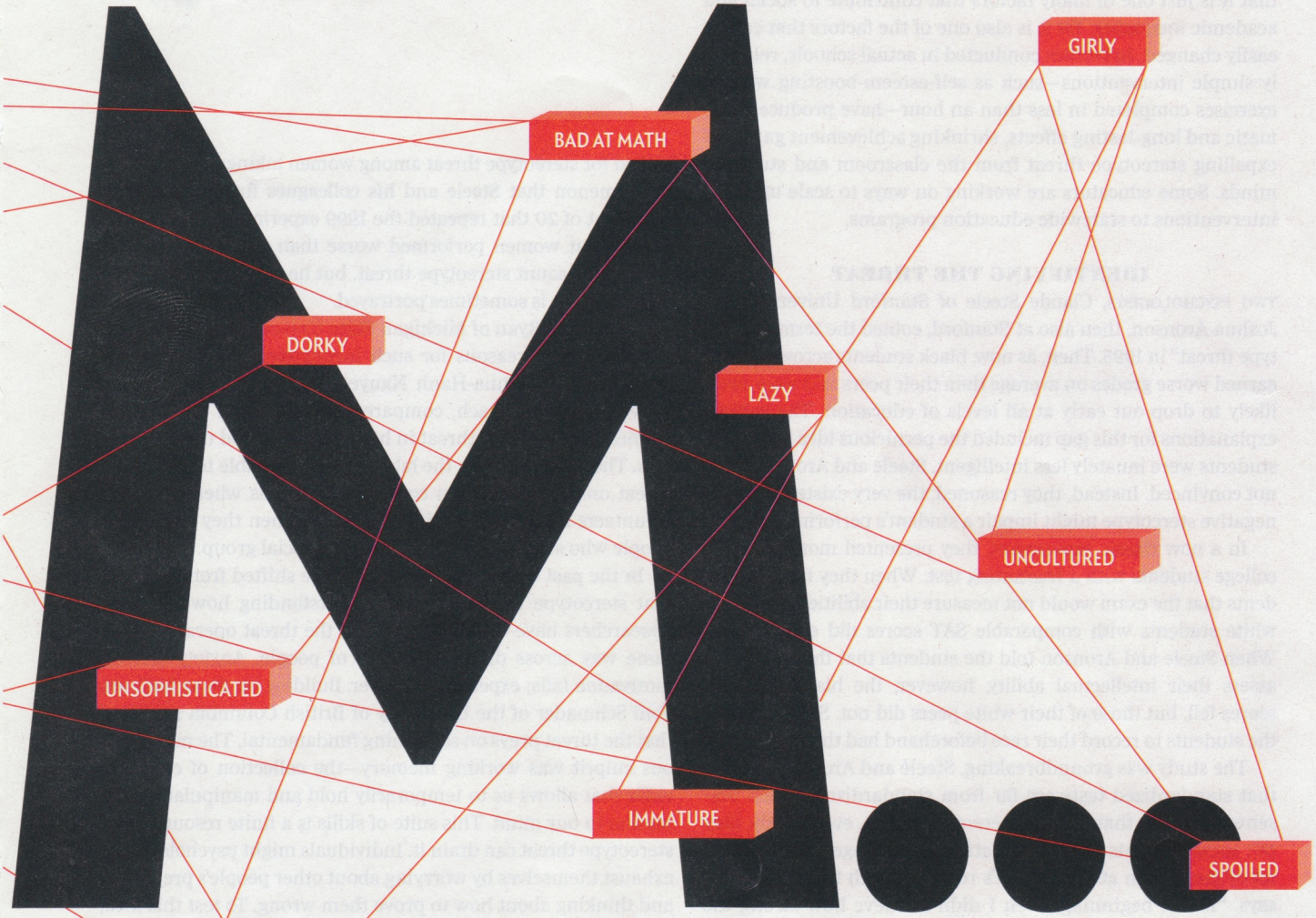

NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON, THE RENOWNED SCIENCE COMMUNICATOR, EARNED HIS PH.D. IN ASTROPHYSICS from Columbia University in 1991. About 4,000 astrophysicists resided in the country at the time. Tyson brought the total number of African-Americans among them to a paltry seven. In a convocation address, he spoke openly about the challenges he faced:

"In the perception of society … my academic failures are expected and my academic successes are attributed to others," Tyson said. "To spend most of my life fighting these attitudes levies an emotional tax that is a form of intellectual emasculation. It is a tax that I would not wish upon my enemies."

Tyson's words speak to a broad truth: negative stereotypes impose an intellectual burden on many minorities and on others who think that the people around them perceive them as inferior in some way. In many different situations—at school, at work or in sports stadiums—these individuals worry that they will fail in a way that affirms derogatory stereotypes. Young white athletes fear that they will not perform as well as their black peers, for example, and women in advanced math classes worry that they will earn lower grades than the men. This anxiety—Tyson's "emotional tax"—is known as stereotype threat. Hundreds of studies have confirmed that stereotype threat undermines performance, producing the very failure they dread. Sometimes people become trapped in a vicious cycle in which poor performance leads to more worry, which further impedes performance.

In recent years psychologists have greatly improved their understanding of how stereotype threat affects individuals, why it happens and, most important, how to prevent it. Although the threat is real, some