

# Pedagogy of the Black academic

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**ABSTRACT** I am just starting my career as a cancer biologist, but I have always been a Black man in America. This means that I have always inhabited a world that generally disregarded my existence in some form or another. It is June 17th, 2020 and protests have been happening for weeks since the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The current state of America may be uneasy for some, but for many Americans, the looming threat of exclusion and violence has been an unwelcome companion since birth. This letter is not about a single person, but the Black academic's experience of race inside and outside of the academy during a time of social upheaval. I have trained in a variety of institutions, big and small, and all the while acutely aware of the impact of my Blackness on my science. The intent of the following is to provoke the reader to reflect on how we as a nation can move toward radically positive change and not incremental adjustments to the status quo. The views expressed are my own and are the result of years of personal experience observing the anti-Black standard in America.

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As a Black scientist, I sometimes have to remind myself that I have never been immune to racism. Because as you spend thousands of hours delving into the microscopic world, the macroworld starts to fade into the background like white noise. And if you get good at it, you almost forget about the strange looks, the excessive questioning, or even the obligatory "tailing" in stores, on campus, or at home. But it is strange to realize how much you have grown accustomed to discrimination and the fact that you unconsciously prepare for it daily, before it ever shows its ugly head, like a prize fighter training months before a fight.

This past month, amid the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the rest of the world has decided to say police are bad, and oh, by the way, Black lives matter too—as if the oppression of Black bodies was new, or as though the recent string of names added to the ever-growing list of innocent Black Americans killed by authorities is an atypical occurrence. Well sadly it is not, and it never has been in this country or any other place with colonial origins. That

is the truth, and there is no other way to state it. America is a country built on and driven by racist ideology.

So, as a Black American in an "essential" worker role (I am now working on COVID-19-related research), I have physically been at work daily during the pandemic, as the spirit of solidarity sweeps the globe. As much as I want to say this is progress, I find myself asking "why now, and not then?" Why didn't this happen when Trayvon Martin was murdered; why didn't this happen when Rodney King was beaten (Alvarez and Buckley, 2013; Mullen and Skitka, 2006)? Is it a sign of the end times, or is it just that racism/White supremacy has finally run its course?

I have a theory about why we are now seeing a mass movement against discrimination and police brutality (a.k.a. state-sanctioned murder). My theory states that had it not been for COVID-19 and the nationwide shutdown of normal life, none of this protesting would even be feasible. Why do you ask? The simple answer is that some people with the financial means can normally find ways to distract themselves with various activities, some noble and some ... not so much, whereas other folks are less able to disconnect from the drudgery of hand-to-mouth living. Leave it to a global health crisis to reprioritize everyone's entire life in one fell swoop. Suddenly, people who had vacation plans are stuck at home, whereas people who were just making ends meet are now unable to make those ends meet anymore. The haves and the have-nots are now both in an altered reality. Does this make them equal now? No, but it does allow people to see who their real friends, allies, and enemies are. I suspect that it's the pulling back of the curtain that has made many

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people ready to fight, not to mention it is also very likely that many folks, after experiencing weeks of cabin fever, just needed some way to let off all that pent-up energy.

Before COVID-19 became a full-time concern, tensions in the United States were already high as the recent killings of unarmed Black Americans (Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery) had gone viral and cries for justice echoed from coast to coast (Lovan, 2020). Once the reality of the pandemic set in and shelter-in-place orders were issued nationally, the situation became a powder keg waiting for just the right moment. That moment happened in North Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. With the release of the video showing the killing of George Floyd, the entire country and much of the world had a reason to go on a “righteous rampage” that has seemed to get the results some thought impossible to achieve. It cannot be overstated how critical social media has been in displaying the oppression of Black Americans at the hands of authorities to the entire world.

Now, several months into the protests, the possibility of a “new” new normal has people dreaming of singing Kumbaya in technicolor. Yet, as one of the few Black faculty on my campus, I still feel like people are watching me, but for a different reason now. As various reforms are broadcast across the university, the random wellness “check-ins” start creeping in, and the requests for feedback on “new initiatives” seem to be like a new flavor of spam in my inbox.

Now, I do appreciate the fact that people are starting to notice the oppressive nature of not being White in today's world (in particular being Black in America), but I have been doing this for a while now, and I am not sure if hashtagged initiatives are healthy for anyone. Plus, it's kind of creepy watching all of these people jump on the social justice bandwagon, when they weren't here 4 mo ago or 4 years ago. For many Black academics, it is not about being involved with something when it's trending; it's about being “about that life” when it is inconvenient as hell. Again, I do appreciate the fact that more people are willing to fight oppression, racism, and White supremacy (even if only digitally), but you will have to forgive me if I do not trust you just yet. I mean, you are just checking in during what could be the last leg of a marathon, and we've been running this whole damn time!

Here is a short answer to every wellness check-in email that many of the Black academics I know have received in the last 2 mo: “we were never okay in the first place, but thanks for FINALLY asking!” We don't need any more bias training, hashtags, or email check-ins. It was a nice start, but it too has become a part of the status quo. The work now and always has been the eradication of underrepresentation, hurtful socialization, and ridiculously skewed power dynamics, not just the awareness of the fact. I don't have all the answers, but if real change is desired, I think we can first start by teaching history accurately to EVERYONE, no more whitewashing the reality of America's story and ignoring the contributions of Black academics (and Black Americans in general). Second, stop being silent when you see or hear racism at work or home. If you do nothing when racism shows up, you ARE a racist! Third, the privileged class must relinquish their “privilege” once and for all. That means the powers that were inherited based on historical (and present day) theft and oppression have to dissipate, with the ultimate goal of power sharing. The country club atmosphere of academia and the “fit culture” must erode in favor of true meritocracy. The best person

for the job and not “the person who won't make me uncomfortable by making me see my own deeply held prejudices and fears.”

Honestly, Black academics SHOULD not be charged with the task of fixing broken systems, along with protecting themselves and mentees, while working toward tenure. But if we (Black academics) are not driving the car, progress will likely go the wrong way again (getting rid of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima does not correct the underlying pathology). Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* speaks to this in saying, “the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human ... the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.” (Freire, 1972, p. 56). This means that if we (Black academics) want to be treated as humans and as scholars, we must show you what that humanity looks like FIRST. Now the question is, are you willing to learn or are you going to co-opt this moment, this movement to make it into something that fits your preconceived notion of the acceptable levels of Blackness in the academy?

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## About the Author



I am currently a cancer biologist at the University of Minnesota Medical School. My lab works to eliminate cancer health disparities in African Heritage communities and investigates the roles of lipids in modifying the immune response in tumors. This is what I do, but not all of who I am. I am also the eldest child of a mother, who managed to convince me that she had eyes in the back of her head (thank you, Mom; it kept me honest). I am a big brother, a husband, and a father. I also consider myself a fortunate Black man in America. I grew up in places where many of my friends did not live to adulthood. If they managed to survive past adolescence, it was usually their dreams that died prematurely. I was lucky to have survived and to continue chasing my dream of becoming a scientist. I never considered myself the fastest, strongest, or even smartest kid growing up, but I was the most determined. Determined, despite the lack of access to role models in science that looked like me or shared my life experience. Now my mission is to increase the number of dreams achieved and impact as many young minds as my time on this planet permits.