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Recommended Citation

Ng, Eddy and Lam, Andrew. "Black lives matter: On the denial of systemic racism, White liberals, and polite racism." (2020) : 729-739.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Black lives matter: On the denial of systemic racism, White liberals, and polite racism

Systemic discrimination, racism, and inequality have garnered renewed and intense attention following the George Floyd murder and demonstrations of Black Lives Matter (BLM) around the world. In sharing our anger and sorrow, we reached out to several colleagues and scholars in the Black community. We wanted to provide a forum [1] for them to express their grief, share their experiences and help us move forward. The response to our invitation to write was overwhelming, but also heartbreaking. Our colleagues were devastated and broken. They expressed immense difficulty in writing because of anger, despair, and sadness. Stella Nkomo (personal correspondence) asked if “the burst of recognition of systemic racism for real this time?” It is our hope that their collective voices, captured in this collection of essays, will help us find a way forward as academics, researchers, and mentors. We need to refocus our efforts to combat anti-Black racism, dismantle systemic discrimination, restore racial justice, and enable Blacks and other racially oppressed groups to fully participate in society and life.

Given the overwhelming response, *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* (EDI) will publish two issues comprising viewpoints and essays that offer constructive perspectives and reflections to engage readers on the deeper issues of White supremacy and systemic racism. The collection includes personal accounts of racist experiences, observations on the relics of colonialism and slavery, an acknowledgment and frank discussions on White supremacy, and critical recommendations for moving us forward. They include what police departments, White Allies, academics and sports coaches, librarians, mentors, CEOs and corporate leaders, organizations and businesses, and universities could do and need to do. These essays extend the conversation from the original special issue on BLM edited by Thomas Kecia and Leslie Ashburn-Nardo in 2017 in this journal.

What is different this time?

The BLM movement (see [Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2017](#) for a brief history) has taken off in unexpected and significant ways since the death of George Floyd. First, the reenergized BLM demonstrations across the country are said to be, collectively, the largest in US history. Estimates vary, but commentators report that between 15 and 26 million Americans took to the streets over the past months (cf. [NY Times, 2020](#)). George Floyd became a symbol and rallying cry which prompted similar demonstrations against anti-Black racism around the world. Second, unlike past civil rights demonstrations, an overwhelming majority of protestors are non-Blacks, suggesting broad public support for social justice for Blacks. BLM supporters and White Allies cite anger, unfair treatment, and tensions between police and Blacks as the key behind their protests. Many Americans have reported that, as a result of

The authors would like to thank Helen Beddow, Cedric Dawkins, Charles Gossett, Greg Sears and Sanh Brian Tran for their feedback in this editorial. The authors are also grateful to Kecia Thomas and Leslie Ashburn-Nardo for getting the conversation started back in 2017. The first author gratefully acknowledges support from the James and Elizabeth Freeman Chair in Management at Bucknell University.



Floyd's murder, they have had conversations about race, posted on social media sites about BLM, donated to social justice organizations, and wrote/contacted their elected public officials (cf. [Parker et al., 2020](#)). Third, Derek Chauvin, the police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck, along with the other officers at the incident, were charged days after killing him. Officers in other police killings of Black citizens that followed the George Floyd murder, e.g. Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, were also swiftly charged. This is a marked departure from past histories of police brutality against Blacks, where officers were rarely held accountable (see [Roberson, 2020](#)). Lastly, governments and municipalities have removed – either voluntarily or under immense pressures – monuments and statues honoring confederate leaders, slave traders, and other contentious and racist historical figures. The legislators of Mississippi, often regarded as the last bastion of the old South, finally voted to remove the racist confederate emblem in its state flag. Some businesses and sports organizations – most notably the National Football League (NFL) which previously condemned Colin Kaepernick's silent protests during the national anthems at NFL games over the killings of Blacks by police (see [Hylton, 2020](#)) – also joined in the public support for BLM and antiracist movements ([Livingston, 2020](#)).

In this editorial, we identify several reasons why, despite corporate diversity efforts and earnest White Allies, systemic racism is persistent and why the struggle for BLM will continue to exist. First, we focus on the denial of systemic racism as the first line of defense politicians and leaders use to disown and disavow the issue to avoid any responsibility they play in contributing to systemic discrimination against Blacks and racialized groups. Second, we highlight that some diversity efforts (including antidiscrimination or implicit bias training) often backfire and can result in producing the opposite effects, including generating compensatory backlash. Third, we call attention to the hidden dangers of White liberals who are complicit in perpetuating systemic racism and reinforcing White supremacy in unknowing and unsuspecting ways. We acknowledge that while most White liberals are not hypocrites, we call out those who “fake good” to avoid a redistribution of power and resources. Finally, as Asians living in North America, we feel it is important to discuss our roles within the context of BLM and systemic racism. Asian-Americans have benefited from the “model minority” myth and being adjacent to Whites, and it is time we stop abetting in the reproduction of White supremacy.

Denial of systemic racism

One explanation for the persistence of racism despite decades of anti-racist efforts is the denial of systemic racism. Even in Canada, which has been touted for its tolerance, welcoming attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and espousing an official policy of multiculturalism, incidents of police brutality and violence against Black and Indigenous Canadians are frequent and widespread ([Estrada, 2020](#), also see [Waldron, 2020](#)). Influential White Canadian journalist Rex Murphy, along with politicians and premiers question or deny the existence of systemic racism. When interviewed about systemic racism in policing, Brenda Lucki, Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) responded,

I have to admit, I really struggle with the term “systemic racism.” I have heard about five or ten different definitions on TV. I think that if systemic racism is meaning that racism is entrenched in our policies and procedures, I would say that we do not have systemic racism. ([Globe and Mail, June 10, 2020](#))

If politicians and civil servants are ever “confused” or cannot comprehend the definition of systemic racism (see [Feagin, 2013](#), for a definition), they need to look no further than to the statistics on unequal outcomes for Blacks and racially oppressed groups particularly in major life domains such as employment, housing, health, education and the criminal justice system (see [Bell, 2020](#); [Danso and Grant, 2000](#); [Galabuzi, 2006](#); [Gilbert et al., 2016](#);

Owusu-Bempah and Wortley, 2014; Slaughter, 2020). In the words of Ingrid Waldron (2020), author and producer of *There's Something in the Water*, "...White people need to lay down their weapons and the worst weapon they have is denial" (cf. Linnitt, 2020).

Simply put, systemic racism refers to institutionalized policies and practices that discriminate against Blacks and racialized groups in favor of Whites (Jones, 1997). It is built on an ideology of White supremacy – racialized social systems that reinforce White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) – which permeates individual and organizational actions (Feagin, 2013). Governments, businesses, and universities have poured billions of dollars into diversity training (also referred to as implicit bias or antidiscrimination training) as a panacea to combat systemic racism and to improve their diversity outcomes. Yet, research suggests that this form of training does not work; the number of Blacks and racialized minorities hired and promoted actually decreases after organizations implement diversity initiatives and training (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). Dobbin and Kalev (2016) observe that diversity efforts fail because managers (who are in charge of hiring) do not like to be “strong-armed” into correcting their biases [2]. In other words, diversity training may be counterproductive to diversity efforts because it fails to change the attitudes (e.g. implicit biases) and behaviors of organizational actors who enact and enforce these policies and practices in organizations in the first place.

Why implicit bias training fails

Psychological studies show that implicit bias or antibias training does not last over time nor change people's attitudes (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018; Forscher *et al.*, 2019; Noon, 2018; Paluck and Green, 2009). Furthermore, ingrained negative biases against Blacks (and other racially oppressed groups) are difficult to change (Gregg *et al.*, 2006), yet positive stereotypes are easily switched to negative ones upon a single piece of negative information (Van Dessel *et al.*, 2019). This suggests that it is easy to turn positive views into negative ones, and negative views about a stigmatized group may be more difficult to change despite the presence of positive information. Implicit bias training and dialogs about diversity also have an unintended effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes about Blacks and racialized groups (Amoroso *et al.*, 2010). In short, the implicit bias training favored by organizations does not reduce bias or change attitudes.

On White liberals and “faking good”

Researchers devote a lot of attention to studying racism, racists behaviors, and how to interrupt them. In contrast, we have not devoted nearly enough attention to White liberals or Allies who purport to be “anti-racists,” but who can in fact be more dangerous to the achievement of equality in the long run (Chotiner, 2018; Edwards, 2020). There is a general assumption that we should be concerned with overtly racist Whites with lower levels of education or cognitive ability, but Whites with higher cognitive ability are no more likely to support dismantling systemic racism (Wodtke, 2016).

Some White liberals outwardly project progressive and tolerant views but crumble in the hypocrisy of White fragility (Garzia, 2019; see Ng *et al.*, 2020). Because of their education, White liberals can offer more sophisticated justifications for defending their privilege (Ray and Aja, 2020), which Martin Luther King calls “polite racism” (cf. Theoharis, 2020). When these White liberals experience the slightest inconvenience, they will not hesitate to quickly move to restore their privilege or think twice about jeopardizing the lives of Blacks and racialized groups (think Amy Cooper [3] (see Al-Gharbi, 2020)).

White liberals are often highly educated and raised in middle-class environments, which have enabled them to be social justice warriors and “champagne socialists” (cf. Mullane, 2016). They are socialized to embrace equality and run in social circles that denounce racism.

These “professional liberals” are particularly adept at impression management and faking good and will publicly [4] break into tears at the first suggestion of inequality (Accapadi, 2007). This allows them to publicly affirm their commitment to racial equality and establish the “moral credentials” to act in selfish ways (cf. Al-Gharbi, 2020; also see Brown *et al.*, 2011). In this way, many White liberals can come off as virtuous or moral but are prejudiced and harmful to Blacks and minority groups (Bradley-Geist *et al.*, 2010; Monin and Miller, 2001). Indeed, many White liberals actively engage in performative acts of allyship (see Holmes IV, 2020), but do not see the hypocrisy in reproducing White supremacy in everyday lives. Such performative acts (e.g. joining BLM demonstrations and expressing moral outrage at police brutalities) allow White liberals to absolve themselves of their own racist complicity and guilt (Rothschild and Keefer, 2017). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many White liberals often have difficulty understanding and seeing past their racist behaviors (cf. Al-Gharbi, 2020).

Consider the following email exchange from a college listserv [5]:

White (full) professor: “*Congratulations [White associate professor]! Well deserved.*”

Same White professor: “*Atta boy [Racialized assistant professor]!*”

White liberals may also display more subtle and nuanced racist behaviors, including patronizing and dumbing down their interactions with Blacks and racialized groups (see Garzia, 2019, for example). This allows them to appear likeable and friendly to Blacks and at the same time make them feel good about themselves. Dupree and Fiske (2019) describe this as “competence downshift” when White liberals draw on stereotypes of Blacks and racialized minorities and represent themselves accordingly in their desires to interact with these groups.

Indeed, White liberals expend a lot of energy trying to affiliate themselves with Blacks and racialized groups as a validation of their progressiveness. These professional liberals flock together to convince themselves they are not racists which in turn gives them the moral credentials to engage in subtle racist acts (Kouchaki, 2011; Krumm and Corning, 2008). White liberals tend to do well on implicit bias tests (and thus are labeled as “non-racists”) but they can behave in damaging ways over time. While diversity researchers are preoccupied with reducing xenophobic attitudes and changing overt racists, we allow White liberals’ intentions and behaviors to go unchecked as they quietly perpetuate systemic racism and reinforce their supremacy (see Hayes and Juárez, 2009). In fact, it is in the interests of White liberals not to dismantle systemic racism [6] because it allows them to keep power and resources (cf. Ray and Aja, 2020).

The complicity of Asian-Americans

As Asians living in North America (both the US and Canada), we offer our thoughts on BLM and systemic racism. Tou Thao, the Asian-American police officer present at the Floyd murder, raises questions and guilt in many Asian quarters (see Gibson *et al.*, 2020), particularly on whether Asians are bystanders (see Murrell, 2020) who witness harm but stay silent and are therefore complicit in all the anti-Blackness. This calls for some reflection in our (Asian-American/Canadian) collective self-interest and pursuit of the American Dream on how we are complicit in perpetuating systemic racism and reinforcing White supremacy.

Asian-Americans have long been touted as model minorities, and we have generally benefited from this helpful moniker as it has provided us with socioeconomic mobility. Many Asian-Americans are too eager to “whiten” themselves – a process in which they rush to assimilate to White culture in order to be viewed and treated by Whites as “fellow Whites” (cf. Kuo, 2018, also see Kim, 2007, Warren and Twine, 1997; Prewitt, 2013; Yancey, 2003).

Asian-Americans have looked past overt acts of discrimination, including the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment camps, and have worked hard, kept their heads down, and followed the law to prove their “Americanness” [7] (cf. Guo, 2016). Many even succumbed to Pinkerton Syndrome, which is a tendency of some Asians to regard Whites as superior or more desirable especially for marriage or relationships (also see Chew *et al.*, 2019).

These efforts to assimilate and be viewed as “fellow Whites” have not insulated Asian-Americans from bouts of anti-Asian racism or being vilified (e.g. Chinese virus, “Kung flu”). Despite their ingenuity and hard work, Asian-Americans encounter the bamboo ceiling at work; they do not fit White models of leadership and are passed over for promotion especially to upper-level management (more so than other racialized groups) (cf. Kuo, 2018, also see Berdahl and Min, 2012; Chin, 2016; Sy *et al.*, 2010). Whites, on the other hand, find it convenient to point Asian-Americans as exemplary immigrants in their denial of systemic racism toward others (cf. Guo, 2016; Pandika, 2020). Whites also find Asian-Americans to be helpful Allies in their quest to dismantle affirmative action, particularly for elite college admissions (cf. Chow, 2017; Kuo, 2018). To be clear, Asians also experience discrimination. The pandemic has shown us that that White adjacency has not taken us far and we need to tell ourselves that we are not immune to racist views and behaviors (McMurtry *et al.*, 2019; Ruiz *et al.*, 2020).

Filipino-American activist, Kalaya’an Mendoza, reminded us that it was the Black Civil Rights Movement that “*paved the way for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which replaced a racist country-of-origin quota system that systematically excluded Asians*” (cf. Pandika, 2020). Asian-Americans need to stop being a wedge group between Whites and racialized groups (e.g. by refusing to recognize anti-Blackness in our own cultures and by perpetuating the model minority myth, see Chow, 2017). We need to recognize that the systemic forces that are holding one group down are also keeping all other racialized groups from advancing. We cannot stand by idly and remain silent as we watch the harm that is heaped upon Blacks. Black people are exhausted and vilified in their fight against racism (see Boykin *et al.*, 2020). We have kept silent and invisible for too long. We need to stand up and demand racial justice and fair treatment, not only for ourselves but also for others. After all, if Asian-Americans need to show that we belong, it is our civic duty to protect the civil rights of all others.

Essays in this first special issue

Kecia Thomas and Leslie Ashburn-Nardo lead this collection by reflecting on higher education and the ignorance and indifference which exists in academia that has perpetuated discrimination. They argue that the focus for change must begin with students who are the future of the profession. Specifically, Black students need to be supported in institutions of higher education through better representations in the student body, the faculty, and leadership. It is critical to have mentors and role models who Black students can relate to. In addition, the curricula must also reflect the contributions made by people of color and women.

Myrtle Bell joins the conversation on what the academy could do. She shares her personal experiences with anti-Blackness and surface-level diversity in academia. Anti-Blackness is experienced in day-to-day living through unique experiences of discrimination of which non-Blacks are privileged to be unaware. Teaching diversity to students, faculty, and staff members in academia is a significant step toward addressing this by building awareness of disparities in wealth, health and overall quality. This must be reinforced by hiring more Black faculty members and closely monitoring racial climates at universities.

This special issue also illuminates the lived experiences of racism and discrimination by Black people. Despite enjoying a successful career, Patrick MacKay sheds light on the personal emotional, physical and social toll discrimination he had experienced in his life as a

Black academic. In doing so, he discusses the day-to-day differences experienced by Blacks and Whites which reflects social dominance orientations.

Derek Avery and Enrica Ruggs provide a guide to understanding the value and importance of empathetic responses when conversing with Black people on topics like police brutality and racism. Despite the goodwill, it is important for Whites to personally face unearned privileges and let go of the need to be educated on Black sufferings or centering the discussions on themselves. He closes by offering ways to foster productive two-way interracial conversations which allow Whites the opportunity to learn about Black experiences beyond a singular event.

To round up the lived experiences of racism, Malik Boykin and colleagues (Mikki Hebl and 13 of her former and current students got together) cowrite about Black and Allies' feelings of anti-Blackness racism. They identify five key points on the existing state of Black people's lives, critical reasons behind this state of being, and crucial steps for fighting racism and moving towards vital reform. The authors elucidate the depth of mental and physical exhaustion that Black people experience on a continuous basis. This is also exacerbated by non-Black people relying upon their Black friends for resources and guidance to giving well-meaning sympathy. The authors stress that education is critical in fighting against racism, and enacting antiracist policies and keeping accountability are helpful to ensure structural change.

Next, Quinetta Roberson focuses our attention on justice. While businesses have been vocal about supporting diversity and inclusion, they do not address the foundational problems underlying racial crises, where justice is not uniformly available to all. She advocates for organizations and corporate leaders to take actions to ensure fairness in policies, practices, and outcomes in the organizations they lead, and to build a sense of justice in the work experiences of Black workers.

Paulette Meikle evokes how Blacks have been suffocating ("I cannot breathe") for years and extends the discussion on racial injustices in the political, educational, social, economic, and legal structures. She stresses the importance of tension, disruption, and action to initiate change. Such changes must occur at racially delineated borders that have become tangible in residential areas, neighborhoods, postsecondary institutions, and spiritual sanctuaries. At the same time, Merkle points to mental borders, like "moral oblivion" and "tension and despair," which resulted in social and economic segregation. She observes that the protests, not only in the US but also around the world have relaunched the civil rights movement.

In addition to violent forms of discrimination, like police brutality, Oscar Holmes IV highlights overlooked ways that are killing Black people every day. Performative activism and allyship in organizations and among individuals for reasons of self-interested gain diverts attention and resources from legitimate peoples and causes resulting in the maintenance of the status quo and the continuation of systemic oppression. Blacks, especially in organizations are expected to adjust their behaviors and put extra effort to neutralize prejudice. At the same time, education, mentorship, and wealth are offered by institutions as solutions or a panacea for racism. Yet, this simply bolsters the meritocracy myth and does nothing to address systemic causes.

This special issue concludes with a contribution by Stella Nkomo who calls for a new direction in diversity theorizing. In this essay, Nkomo draws parallels between the viral nature of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and systemic racism which she describes as pandemics affecting the world. She expresses dismay at the surprise elements expressed by many on coronavirus and systemic discrimination. Nkomo finds commonality on the denial by leaders and policymakers, the continued replication and spread, and the capacity for both to survive. She suggests that both pandemics face two possible paths. The first is to mitigate damage and return to "normal" which is not an option, while the second is to reshape the

future by identifying, recognizing, and naming systemic racism. She closes by proposing an agenda for theorizing and researching systemic discrimination. Guest editorial

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Notes

1. This Special Issue is not without controversy. One reviewer wrote the Editor to “gently tell the AUs [authors] to tone it down. . . and worry that this [special issue] may alienate many White readers. . .” The reviewer was also concerned with “. . .statements urging Asians (along w Black communities) to “dismantle white supremacy. . .”
2. One of the authors has witnessed a White “liberal” colleague advocate for a preferred White candidate by pointing out that the [White] candidate’s spouse is African-American during a search meeting.
3. Amy Cooper is not “categorically” conservative – she is a well-educated liberal who weaponized liberal ideas of racial bias in policing.
4. One of the author’s White colleagues would put on a show of “tears” on Zoom and department meetings when social justice issues are mentioned, but do not see the irony in her own microaggression and “othering” behaviors. It leaves one wondering if these professional liberals would repeat their acts of tears in the absence of an audience. Also, see [Accapadi \(2007\)](#) and [Wong \(2019\)](#) on how White women tears oppress racialized women.
5. Actual email exchanges at an elite liberal arts college contrasting how a White full professor praised White vis-à-vis racialized junior professors. “Atta boy” is colloquially used to show encouragement to children or pet dogs and considered to be a derogatory term used on a person who seeks constant affirmation for their work or achievement.
6. Elite liberal arts colleges continue to reproduce their Whiteness by shutting out minority representation on search committees. See [Lehr and McInnis \(2020\)](#) for satire on institutional efforts to combat systemic racism.
7. As an example of this, 2020 Presidential candidate Andrew Yang asserted, “*We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our Americanness in ways we never have before . . . We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need*” to fight xenophobia (cf. [Zhou, 2020](#)).

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