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Black Out: Backlash and Betrayal in the Academy and Beyond

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Abstract

This article examines the backlash and betrayal that many individuals and organizations, including professors, K–12 schools, and college and universities, have faced in the aftermath of the so-called racial awakening that followed the horrific killing of George Floyd. Using the lens of Derrick Bell’s racial realism, I examine the predictability of efforts to silence conversations and actions related to combating anti-Blackness in America and the continued use of Black deaths to further the social, economic, and political progress of non-Black groups in the academy and beyond. I conclude with recommendations for righting racial wrongs, especially in American colleges and universities.

Individuals and organizations far removed from the academy often mythologize it as the home of liberal ideas where fairness, justice, ethics, morality, and equality are the signature characteristics driving what happens on and around campuses. Those with an insider-outsider perspective, particularly Black students, Black faculty, and Black staff, know that such claims are at best aspirational and at worst falsehoods (Finley, Gray, and Martin 2018). Nevertheless, there was a perception that perhaps American social institutions, including education, had turned a corner with respect to racial relations in America after the horrific killing of George Floyd. Specifically, it seemed to some people that perhaps more members of the dominant racial group in America and other non-Black people were finally starting to see Black Lives Matter not only as a clever

hashtag but also as a rallying cry or declaration about the unequal treatment Black people have historically received and continue to receive in America (Horowitz and Livingston 2016).

Recall that the murder of George Floyd came more than eight years after the killing of Trayvon Martin, with many more unnatural Black deaths in between (Lane et al. 2020). In February 2012, Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, was doing what many other people were doing: enjoying the festivities of the National Basketball Association (NBA) All-Star Weekend (Fashing-Varner et al. 2014). He took time to go to a store to get a snack and a beverage. Upon his return to the subdivision where his father lived, he was confronted by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman determined that Trayvon was out of place. The encounter ended with Trayvon's death. For hours, his parents were unaware of his whereabouts. It took far too long for Zimmerman to even be arrested. Ultimately, Zimmerman was not held accountable for stealing the life of Sabrina Fulton's and Tracy Martin's son. The outrage was felt by many and captured in the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017). As powerful a declaration as it was, it was not the rallying cry, especially for non-Black people, that some had hoped. The killings of Black men and women like Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Breonna Taylor elicited even less support from non-Black people (Martin 2022). I argue that the killing of George Floyd was different. At the time of Floyd's death, Americans were living through two pandemics: COVID-19 and anti-Black racism.

Two years after the killing of George Floyd and the onset of the global health pandemic, there is mounting evidence that those moments after the racial awakening represented what Derrick Bell (1992) called "peaks of progress." Bell presented what he called racial realism, the realization that "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies" (373).

Using the lens of Bell's racial realism, I examine the predictability of efforts to silence conversations and actions related to combating anti-

Blackness in America and the continued use of Black deaths to further the social, economic, and political progress of non-Black groups in the academy and beyond. I conclude with recommendations for righting racial wrongs, especially in American colleges and universities.

A Tale of Two Pandemics: COVID-19 and the Killing of George Floyd

It quickly became apparent that 2020 was going to be a year like none other. By February, people throughout the United States and across the globe were taking measures to prevent the spread of a new form of coronavirus that few truly understood (Katella 2021). March 2020 saw the shutdown of the NBA and the abrupt cancellation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's basketball tournament in Nashville, Tennessee (Aschburner 2020). Shortly thereafter, local governments and states were passing mandates forcing many businesses, schools, and faith-based institutions to close their doors (Ballotpedia 2022). Many people in the United States and across the globe were following the latest COVID-19 news on TV, radio, or their various smart devices, which meant that the eyes of many people in the United States and across the globe were on the recorded lynching of George Floyd, a human being, on May 25, 2020, by police officer Derek Chauvin.

The world watched as Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck, while other officers restrained Floyd and another looked on (Forliti, Karnowski, and Webber 2022). Millions witnessed the last nine minutes of Floyd's life taken from him as bystanders, including several children, could do no more than record and memorialize the moment, which proved vitally important for what would happen in the days and year that followed (Deliso 2021). Many onlookers, both in person and watching virtually, cringed at the sight of a man lying on the ground, pleading for assistance, gasping to say he could not breathe, even calling out for his deceased mother (O'Neal 2020). The killing of George Floyd, a father, brother, uncle, cousin, and friend, motivated individuals and organizations already involved in addressing racial inequities in America to use the moment to highlight what they have argued for generations—that Black lives should matter in ways that do not put them at risk for all types of violence and other assaults on their bodies, characters, and communities.

For other individuals and organizations, the killing of Floyd prompted them to identify ways to do more than they had in the past to show solidarity with Black people in America or at least express empathy for what Black people witnessed and may have been feeling. To be sure, some individuals and organizations acted to support the ongoing struggle for Black liberation, if only for a moment, because it made good business sense or because similarly situated individuals and groups were doing it (Sherman 2020).

For example, following Floyd's murder, many colleges and universities issued statements (McKenzie 2020). In the statements, many college administrators, for example, wrote about their institutions' values and affirmed commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Martin 2022). Some colleges and universities went as far as to hire faculty from diverse backgrounds (Schwab 2021). Others filled or created positions related to DEI in academic and athletic departments (Iacobelli 2022). Many college athletes used their status on campus and in their conferences to create organizations to address racial and other inequities in college sports (Blinder and Witz 2020). Black student athlete associations formed at predominately white institutions. It is hard to imagine that the US Supreme Court decision in *Alston v. National Collegiate Athletic Association* (July 2021), which focused on college athletes and the use of their name, image, and likeness, would have been possible without two pandemics and the show of empowerment by college athletes and their supporters.

Writers, including William Rhoden in *40 Million Dollar Slaves* (2007), had long been critical of Black athletes' lack of engagement in issues of concern to the broader Black community. After Floyd's murder, we witnessed the activism of athletes in college and professional sports, such as men's and women's basketball, as players wore statements on their bodies drawing attention to ongoing racial injustices (Goldberg 2020). We even saw professional leagues, including the NBA, embracing mantras like Black Lives Matter (Deng 2020).

Donations to historically Black institutions by white individuals and white-run businesses seemed to flow more freely in the aftermath of Floyd's murder (Allassan 2021). However, as in the past, the words and

deeds of far too many individuals and organizations moved almost exclusively by the killing of Floyd or by social pressure to act were short-lived and nontransformational. Unsurprisingly, the period was followed by intense backlash and betrayal.

Reneging on a Racial Reckoning

Evidence that many members of the dominant racial group in the United States reneged on the so-called racial reckoning can be found in (1) the removal of statements against anti-Black sentiments, (2) the misrepresentation of critical racial theory, (3) the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol, and (4) in the minimization, and in some cases erasure, of Blackness, particularly Black deaths in conversations and plans regarding DEI initiatives.

A year after Chauvin murdered Floyd, statements like Black Lives Matter were no longer visible during many athletic competitions. Public service announcements denouncing anti-Blackness seemed to disappear. People ceased having uncomfortable conversations about race and returned to business as usual, as though the racial disparities and racial inequities in areas such as health, criminal justice, education, wealth, and sports had disappeared (Martin 2021).

The killing of Floyd was followed by a movement to limit or end discussions about America's ugly and violent racial past (Ray and Gibbons 2021). Critical race theory, a field of study that comes out of a critique of the law and education, was used as a catchall term to describe anything related to understanding the causes and consequences of a racialized system in America that reaps benefits for white people while placing Black and other nonwhite people in a feedback loop of violence, disadvantage, and despair. Traditional and social media were filled with stories about angry white parents not wanting their children to learn about the truth of America's racial past and present. There were also accounts of teachers not wanting to talk about race, especially Black-white relations, in K-12 settings. Some state legislators went so far as to introduce legislation prohibiting teaching about individuals and events related to race, not only in K-12 settings but also in colleges and universities (Ray and Gibbons 2021). While some Black faculty and Black

students and their non-Black supporters called for required Black studies courses at their institutions, many colleges and universities resisted (Snyder 2020). Members of the dominant racial group in America did what they have done in the past, such as in the misuse of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at the March on Washington. They co-opted language intended to draw attention to ongoing racial injustices and used it to support claims about the victimization of white people in America (Bonilla-Silva 2018).

Yet another example of how quickly some in the nation reneged on this period of so-called racial reconciliation was the January 6, 2021, takeover of the US Capitol by mostly white protestors inspired by rhetoric from Donald Trump and others (MPR Staff 2021). Not only did a group of angry, overwhelmingly white people show up on the grounds of the Capitol to stop the peaceful transition of power from Trump to President-Elect Joe Biden, but they did so while carrying symbols, and acting in ways, that were clearly anti-Black. One cannot overlook the individuals captured roaming the halls of government carrying Confederate flags or using anti-Black language as they fought federal law enforcement agents seeking to protect legislators, their staff members, the public, and American democracy in general. It was not by happenstance that many of the domestic terrorists storming the Capitol were asserting not only their political allegiance to Donald Trump but also their racial ideology. Many understood their whiteness to have value but worried that it too was somehow at risk.

Backlash and Betrayal

The backlash and betrayal that soon followed the killing of George Floyd and the implementation of state COVID-19 mandates were perhaps best illustrated in the minimization, and in some cases erasure, of Blackness, particularly Black deaths in conversations and plans regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The diversity statements made by college and university administrators were soon followed by diversity strategic plans and roadmaps destined to go nowhere fast, in part because the plans and maps began off course. Few institutions would even be addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion were it not for Black deaths and the

continuous labor of Black faculty, Black students, and Black staff calling for colleges and universities to address persistent racial injustices. Yet the goals and objectives of these plans often do not mention Black people specifically. This is often done intentionally, in large part because administrators know that the plans will not receive widespread support from the predominately white men and women professors and staff members who would be responsible for carrying out the changes. Perhaps this is most clearly evident when white administrators fear that an initiative, event, or program not explicitly under the DEI umbrella will be perceived as serving an antiracist agenda and thus not supported (Finley, Gray, and Martin 2018).

Other examples of backlash and betrayal may be found in the experiences of Black administrators and Black professors, many of whom were hired soon after Floyd's murder. I refer to them as *George Floyd hires*. They are the men and women hired as a show of good faith, a down payment on promises that colleges and universities would do better. However, as Bell's (1992) concept of racial realism predicts, these Black administrators and Black professors experienced more of the same. In the case of Black administrators, for example, many have expressed concerns that white administrators with whom they work have little confidence in their abilities to perform their jobs, often expressing surprise at Black administrators' work ethic and creativity. Far too many white administrators demonstrate a lack of trust when it comes to Black administrators doing the jobs for which they were hired. It is clear that the white savior trope that can be found in so many movies, for example (Ash 2015), is alive and well on college and university campuses. Far too often, white administrators overstep their boundaries under the pretext of preventing a problem from getting bigger, without consulting the Black administrator responsible for the area. Often they solicit other white administrators and even white employees of lower rank to help them "save the day." Black administrators do not need white saviors. They are capable of doing the work and deserve the same respect and appreciation as their white counterparts for the expertise they bring to their positions.

Further evidence of the backlash and betrayal of the momentum that seemed to be building toward better race relations after Floyd's murder

was the explosion of mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings that not only largely ignored the experiences of Black people but also used Black people, almost always Black women, as facilitators. Mandatory DEI trainings at colleges and universities are almost always constructed with white men in mind, particularly white men who deny or fail to recognize their privilege (Kowal, Franklin, and Paradies 2013). Forcing groups, like Black faculty and Black staff, to attend such sessions is akin to requiring a survivor of intimate partner violence to attend anger-management sessions with their abuser. It does not make sense, and then it makes perfect sense because DEI trainings are often about checking boxes and not real change. The one-size-fits-all approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion has not worked, is not working, and will not work.

Conclusion: From Here to There

In this article, I have examined the backlash and betrayal many individuals and organizations have faced, including professors, K–12 schools, and college and universities, following the so-called racial awakening after the murder of George Floyd. Using the lens of Derrick Bell’s (1992) racial realism, I have shown the predictability of efforts to silence conversations and actions related to combating anti-Blackness in America and the continued (mis)use of Black deaths to further the social, economic, and political progress of non-Black groups in the academy and beyond. I conclude here with recommendations for righting racial wrongs, especially in American colleges and universities.

If American society, including social institutions like colleges and universities, are serious about addressing the ongoing pandemic of racism there are a few things that must happen. First, we must listen to Black scholars who study race. There is no need for colleges and universities to pay tens of thousands of dollars for consultants or to hire another staff person to do the work that scholars have dedicated themselves to doing. This is particularly true at research institutions where Black scholars are creating the very knowledge that should be central to diversity, equity, and inclusion matters. Second, colleges and universities must provide support and resources for Black faculty associations and mandatory course requirements rooted in Black studies.

Moreover, colleges and universities should upgrade Black studies programs to departments. The institutions must then fund the new departments in ways that set them up for success.

We cannot rely on the interpretations of history fed to us by elected officials, many of whom have self-serving agendas. We must be brave enough to know that taking a stance against misinformation may come with personal and professional risks. Threats to defund public institutions when we stand on the right side of history are credible and have been carried out in the recent past. The termination of folks speaking truth to power is also possible but is nonetheless worth the fight.

We must abandon the idea that many people exploited in the late 1970s following the publication of William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Race, especially anti-Blackness, has not declined in significance. An individual's or a group's class is not a greater predictor of their life chances and opportunities than their race, as Wilson and others claimed. Race not only still matters, but, as sociologist Joe Feagin has shown in his many works, Black people in what are considered middle-class positions often experience more overt racism than others because of their proximity to white people, including in their workplaces (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Feagin and Elias 2013; Feagin 1991; Feagin 2013). Although Feagin and others acknowledge that race and anti-Blackness touch all Black people, they dismiss the claim that Black people in the middle class are somehow immune from such pain (Feagin and Sikes 1994).

We cannot simply *Black out* people of African ancestry in America from the nation's history. We must not equate their experiences with that of every other group. The experiences of Black people in America are distinct. We must center those experiences and not attempt to minimize the significance of race, which may lead to the creation of so-called race-neutral policies that do Black people more harm than good. Without question, there is a need to address the challenges facing other historically marginalized groups, including Indigenous populations, but this should not happen at the expense of Black people to the point where non-Black groups benefit from Black deaths as what social movement scholars call

free riders, profiting from the sacrifices of others without absorbing the risks or harms (Vasi and Macy 2003).

Black people along with anyone supporting an end to anti-Black sentiments and actions should not be surprised that, ten years after the killing of Trayvon Martin and two years after the killing of George Floyd, the nation by all accounts is back to business as usual in relation to race. Derrick Bell's (1992) concept of racial realism is hard for some people to embrace, but American history regarding the treatment of Black people continues to support his thesis that the subordinate position of Black people is permanent. Bell does not conclude that because of that fact no action should be taken. Instead, he argues that there is power in the struggle, which is why many continue to fight on.

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