

ON RACE AND ACADEMIA IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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As I start writing this on May 29, 2020, Minneapolis is burning. It is the fourth night of protests since George Floyd's murder, bookended by the viral video of a White² Canadian woman calling the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who asked her to leash her dog in Central Park. Before that there was the video of Ahmaud Arbery, gunned down while jogging in his neighbourhood in South Georgia. Demonstrations continue for Breonna Taylor, murdered when police broke into the wrong house in Louisville, Kentucky. These are just some of the stories emanating from my newsfeed for the month of May during COVID-19.

As I reflect on what is occurring now in the United States, I wonder if these growing protests will have any resonance in Canada. We are often quick to condemn racism south of the border, while allowing a conflated sense of Canadian superiority erase our own systemic racism. There is a strange amnesia about Canada's past; for example, the Sixties Scoop and residential schools, Japanese internment camps, the Chinese head tax and *Exclusion Act*, Komagata Maru, legalized slavery, Africville.³ There is silence about the ongoing violence and brutalization of Indigenous peoples. Canadians prefer to pretend we live in a decontextualized, ahistoric reality in which racism is always over there, but never here. I am so used to Canadian politeness and passive-aggressive mannerisms that I always find myself somewhat startled by the American frankness in talking about race. We have a deep reluctance to acknowledge racism until racial hierarchies erupt into murder or hate crimes (caught on video) – which we can all easily say we abhor. Racist events are compartmentalized as isolated acts until there are too many to do that anymore. Then, for a period, we draw links, only to later forget what that linkage reveals about the structures and institutions central to our social, political, and legal systems. Why do we, as Canadians, have so much

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² Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton, "Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize 'Black' and 'White,'" *Centre for the Study of Social Policy* (23 March 2020), online: <<https://cssp.org>>.

³ Credit to Alicia Elliott @WordsandGuitar (2 June 2020), online: <<https://twitter.com/wordsandguitar>>.

difficulty admitting our own racist history and how this history continues to shape the present?

I suppose my reflections may be flowing from my experiences over the past few years conducting workshops on gender and race to corporate boards with my industry partner, Shona McGlashan. In those sessions, Shona and I address colonialism, misogyny, and systemic racism immersed within corporate culture. We point executives towards the overwhelming research in order to raise awareness and have those difficult conversations on how to elicit change within their organizations. Every time Shona and I do our sessions with boards, I confess that I feel like I am giving up a piece of myself. I speak so carefully, with such concern over the defensiveness that is lurking if I suggest anything is the fault of anyone in the room. I have trained myself to educate people on race within a White system, and it drains me. It is not as easy for me to talk about these things. I often need to siphon energy from Shona to push through these sessions. But the strange thing is that I prefer running these workshops ten times over attempting to raise any conversation about race within my own institution.

I live in the world of academia, where there is ample resistance in acknowledging privileges and complicity in systemic racism. We are conditioned to protect Whiteness; this protection manifests itself in how we appoint faculty members to the academy, how we support them, how we choose to amplify or silence them. I have lost count of the number of White colleagues that have told me they are “colourblind” or “don’t see race” and who have shut down any discussion on the lack of racial diversity in our professorship. I have lost count of the meetings where I am the only racialized person in the room, and the panels where I am the only non-White speaker. Power disparities within faculties flow from deep-seated structural inequalities, and academia is rife with them. Yet White supremacy is not something you say in the halls of academia unless you are referring to someplace else.

The issue of racism has us both coming and going, a bit like a pushmi-pullyu.⁴ Prior to George Floyd's murder and the growing protests in the United States, I heard many people in Vancouver state that anti-Black racism cannot exist here because too *few* Black people live in Vancouver. After the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation invited me to write an opinion editorial on anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, I had numerous people express surprise that this was possible given how *many* East Asian people there are in the city. It seems racialized people are either too few to matter, or too many to matter. So the Goldilocks question: what is the *just right* number of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) needed before people are willing to recognize White supremacy and the existence of racism?

As a Taiwanese Canadian, I know I have benefited from systems of White supremacy and White adjacency, both rooted in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. The selective recruitment of Asian people and their perceived successes within White supremacist systems are designed to bolster the status quo and minimize the role racism plays against BIPOC groups. Yet the model minority position has its limitations – butting up against the bamboo ceiling⁵ and demanding conformity within these systems. The increased anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 is just another reminder of our conditionality. It is important to also recognize how anti-Blackness and White supremacy are steeped within Asian communities – look at the shadeism, the lightening creams and eye-widening surgeries, the rampant interminority racism, for example. It is time for us to confront these issues head on within our communities and our own institutions.

In April during COVID-19, the exponential rise in anti-Asian hate crimes amidst the pandemic was something I could have predicted from miles away. I knew by January that I was not to cough or sneeze in public for fear of terrifying anyone around me. On two occasions that month, I had people decline to shake my hand and then promptly shake the hand of

4 Hugh Lofting, *The Story of Dr. Doolittle* (1920). A pushmi-pullyu “had no tail, but a head at each end, and sharp horns on each head...[and] no matter which way you came toward him, he was always facing you.” The pushmi-pullyu is also a fitting example given the author Lofting was known to be “a white racist and chauvinist, guilty of almost every prejudice known to modern white Western man.” Jeva Lange, “A Tribute to the Pushmi-Pullyu,” *The Week* (16 January 2020). Thanks to Margot Young for the example:



5 Jennifer L. Berdahl and Ji-A Min, “Prescriptive Stereotypes and Workplace Consequences for East Asians in North America” (2012) 12:2 Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology 141.

the White person next to them, with no shame. My face reddening as I tried not to take it personally. Politicians like Trump were inciting hate over the airways, calling COVID-19 the “Kung Flu” and “China” virus. Reports of East Asian people getting shot at, punched, kicked, spat on, or yelled at started popping up in the news, some accompanied with videos. By mid-March, when COVID-19 began affecting everyone’s routine, my siblings and I called our elderly parents together and we told them not to go anywhere in public, even for groceries. It was not worth the risk. As the hate crimes against any Asian-looking person began to increase in Vancouver, my parents and I stayed home and my husband, who is White, picked up the groceries for both our households every week.

Of course, anti-Asian racism in Vancouver is nothing new. Reporters ask if the racism due to COVID-19 is as bad now as it was during the SARS outbreak. Wrong question. I do not have to look back 18 years to find examples of anti-Asian racism in this city. In the past several years as Vancouver’s housing prices have skyrocketed, there has been a great deal of collateral racism. I’d be having coffee with a group and overhear the person one seat away declare that she did not want to sell her house to an Asian person, as people nodded in agreement. “The neighbourhood is changing,” said another, looking straight at me with some indignation. Or there was the time when a man shouted a racial slur at me as he drove past me down a narrow street in Kitsilano; my three young children were in the backseat of the car, hearing it all. The man was not some lunatic as some may assume. He was White, probably in his early thirties, and there were two White women in the car seated next to and behind him. His blue eyes bore into me as he shouted, “Get out of the way, Chink!” and then drove off. It still upsets me to this day that my children had to witness that. These examples are recent and they were pre-pandemic. I have an extensive collection of these stories and countless micro-aggressions from childhood to present day; most BIPOC do. Why are White people surprised by this?

If this essay in the collection is meant to be a time capsule of what is going on right now in terms of my “learning” during COVID-19, it is that Canadian legal academia is due for a racial reckoning. The stories of the past few months during COVID-19 have been preceded by years of research on racial injustice across our academic institutions. We know a lot about this phenomenon. White fragility runs deep in the ivory tower, forcing pre-tenure faculty to conform to standards of White supremacy

for that all important future tenure vote. Any challenge against racial hostility or inappropriate behaviour is met with “a tsunami of hysterical defensiveness”⁶. So it feels safer to stay silent. White faculty members select which BIPOC voices they amplify and which they reject (as the model minority myth goes), and those same members are then disproportionately and publicly rewarded for such efforts. Moving beyond White fragility demands that the self-rewarding cachet of seeming “woke” must be surrendered and not leveraged against racialized and Indigenous faculty when they assert their perspectives. That is the start of how colleagues can truly be partners in creating fairer, more inclusive, anti-racist institutions.

It is beholden on all of us to recognize where we are situated in White supremacist institutions. I would have never written a piece like this but for the tenure letter I received in March. So this is the freedom many of my White colleagues have enjoyed. I hope I never forget the feeling of systemic silencing I had as a racialized female pre-tenure faculty member. Our institutions are structured to preserve White supremacy and those it benefits, and you cannot change what you refuse to see. I hope now, with the growing protests in the United States, we can spend less time discussing whether racism actually exists within our institutions and focus more on what can be done about it. We need deliberate, ongoing anti-racist interventions from both individual and organizational levels. We need to amplify Black and Indigenous voices, racially diversify our leadership, put in place whistleblower protections and non-retribution policies for BIPOC and allies, show demonstrable inclusion practices, and have actual accountability on the power dynamics within our own institutions and what constitutes inappropriate conduct by senior faculty and administration.

Change is the result of concerted, persistent, and ongoing efforts of many individuals that collectively build anti-racist communities. I suppose this essay, though doubtful it will be read as such, is a love letter⁷ to my institution – I still have faith and hope for change, though the mechanisms for accountability are weak. But the weight of fostering change is borne unequally. Being tenured brings great relief; it also brings

⁶ Aisha Ahmaud, “A Survival Guide for Black, Indigenous, and Other Women of Colour in Academe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (6 July 2020), online: <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Survival-Guide-for-Black/249118>>.

⁷ Credit to Patricia Barkaskas and Elsir U. Tawfik who, in separate conversations on different topics regarding resistance, gave me the inspiration to use this terminology.

feelings of responsibility and, oddly, sadness. There is a lot of meaningful work to do, but I believe the opening to really discuss race within a White establishment will soon die down and those who have spoken up from the margins, and others who have spoken up in allyship, will be systematically punished. I wish I felt more positive that global events could change things within our organizations. But time alone will not change things, and White supremacy is a powerful drug.