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RACE

Academia Isn't a Safe Haven for Conversations About Race and Racism

by Tsedale M. Melaku and Angie Beeman

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We're having hard conversations about racial justice in corporate America and academia right now. We have seen a flurry of company statements about diversity amid nationwide protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. Will these conversations yield anything?

Our research, personal stories, and the experiences of many others don't offer much cause for optimism. Why? When people of color give voice to the discrimination they experience, they are often silenced by their white colleagues, many of whom purport to be liberal progressives. And although there is a perception that academia is a safe haven for these kinds of honest conversations, it is often the opposite. Until this changes in education and beyond, it's our view that we will be unable to reach racial equity in white institutional spaces.

We know firsthand what it means to be part of a white academic institution — we write as scholars of color who have committed a lifetime to anti-racism and cross-racial alliances. The two of us bonded and built a friendship over our shared experiences with racial hostility in the workplace. In this article, we want to share our personal stories and some of the relevant research to identify some of the common themes that underpin what silencing and sidelining looks like, especially from white progressive colleagues. We believe that our personal experiences — along with the experiences of so many others — will help illustrate the barriers still in place for how we talk about, analyze and take action around racial justice.

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The Burdens of Invisible Labor and the “Inclusion Tax”

Tsedale’s research focuses on how race, gender, class, diversity, and workplace inequality play a major role in the professional experiences of women of color. Her book, *You Don’t Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism*, specifically examines how race and gender impact the career trajectories of Black women lawyers. In it, she describes the concept of the *invisible labor clause*, which is the added “invisible labor” marginalized groups are required to perform in order to navigate their daily existence within social and professional spaces. She also introduces the *inclusion tax* concept to describe the additional resources “spent,” such as time, money, and emotional and cognitive energy, just to adhere to the norms in these white spaces — all of which contributes to the silencing of people of color in white institutional spaces. Their competence is questioned daily in ways that their white counterparts are not. And Black women are often made to bear the brunt of doing the diversity work in order to have their organizations perceived as progressive.

Angie’s work has included research into how women and faculty of color teach about racism. She addresses invisible labor in terms of the added burden faculty of color face in teaching their courses and taking on the disproportionate level of mentoring students of color. Faculty of color dedicate a great deal of time preparing for and managing student resistance to their teaching, but that work is rarely recognized in tenure and promotion decisions. In fact, this added labor takes away from writing and publishing, which, in turn, hurts their tenure and promotion chances.

Angie, like Tsedale, has also found that people of color are pressured to conform and manage their emotions to suit the comfort of white people, often as a means of professional survival. Faculty of color may feel pressure to remain silent about injustice or inequalities until they are tenured or promoted. Furthermore, faculty who have faced hostility in departments tend to withdraw from department functions or resign. White colleagues may resort to criticizing these faculty of color for not being engaged or interacting with them. Again, this can have very real consequences on tenure and promotion.

Black women are significantly underrepresented in academic departments, as well as across various industries. As a Black woman traversing academia, Tsedale has experienced how white people, many of whom may consider themselves progressive, devalue Black bodies. When she was about seven months pregnant, she had a troubling encounter with an older white male faculty member. On an elevator filled with students, he saw her pregnant belly and said: “Oh my God, Why? Your life is going to be over. Come on!” This remark reinforces sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield’s concept of systemic gendered racism. Wingfield argues that Joe R. Feagin’s concept of a white racial frame — a dominant white perspective that only sees things from a white point of view, including ideologies, images, stereotypes, assumptions, and racialized narratives that posit whites as superior to people of color, thereby reinforcing white privilege and power and maintaining racial inequality (although people of color can also adopt this frame) — is also gendered.

Systemic gendered racism denotes that there is an inextricable linkage of race and gender that leads to differentiated outcomes. Black women therefore experience racial and gendered domination in ways that are unique to their social identity. What Tsedale had to do next is an example of the invisible labor Black women have to perform as a result — she had to directly address the racialized and gendered nature of his attack. This was not just a careless remark in an elevator. All of these everyday interactions add up to an exhausting burden on people of color.

Angie is Korean-American and grew up in a predominantly white community where she was called a “chink” and harassed on a daily basis. The discrimination she has experienced — from watching her mother be mocked for her accent to

being taunted, bullied, and physically attacked by white neighbors and classmates — exacerbated her instinct to remain silent so as not to risk further antagonizing anyone. Some of Angie’s experiences with white colleagues, many of whom call themselves progressives, have included everything from being asked what her ethnicity is during interviews, being referred to as a “favorite food,” to being told her personal and professional experiences do not matter because she is not Black, to being sexually harassed by faculty who have told her they like Asian women.

The emotional and cognitive energy Angie has exerted to deal with daily, racialized aggressions from her white colleagues is part of her invisible labor. That’s often prevented her from engaging fully with her department and feeling like a valued member of her academic community. Like many other faculty of color, she has to spend extra time and effort to ensure that her reputation, as well as her work, is not derailed.

Racism-Evasive Rhetoric

Angie studies liberal ideology and how it contributes to organizational silences on racism. She argues that external racial ideologies of “color-blindness” interact with internal organizational cultures to produce something called **racism-evasive responses**. Racism-evasive rhetoric denies naming and addressing the significance and realities of racism. Examples include: emotional responses, such as crying, to deflect from hard conversations; using African Americans as **color capital**; the performance of **sending white children to racially diverse schools** as a way to deflect from problematic or racist behavior; and claiming special insights due to traveling the world or having **intermarried**. In Angie’s experience, all of these racism-evasive tactics have surfaced in everything from departmental discussions about racism to cynicism and incredulity about her research on the experiences of faculty of color.

When discussions of systemic and institutional racism do happen, white people often want to run the conversation. In her forthcoming book, Angie names this phenomenon “**liberal white supremacy**” — the tendency of white people to constantly place themselves in the superior moral position. This takes many forms. Some want to compete for the title of most “woke” progressive. Some show up to insert themselves in conversations about racial and economic inequality only when it becomes popular or high-profile to do so.

In line with Angie’s research, Tsedale has experienced how white colleagues use racism-evasive tactics to avoid engaging issues that push Black voices from the margins to the center. One such incident occurred when Tsedale was working towards incorporating more diverse programming for academics and practitioners in her field. To her dismay, her ideas were met with skepticism by a white liberal colleague for actively promoting too many voices of leading Black scholars. This colleague was concerned that the event, which traditionally centers white academics, would turn into a “Black thing.” This staved off the centering of Black voices in a predominately white organization, while simultaneously silencing Tsedale. One of the worst parts of this interaction is that this white liberal colleague would probably never imagine herself to be participating in anti-black racism-evasive tactics.

Defining Who Gets to Be An Ally

Angie’s experiences differ from her African American colleagues, but the issue that unites them is that none of them share in white privilege. Angie has had strong African and Asian American mentors, who supported her scholarship, but also listened empathetically to her experiences with racial discrimination and helped her combat it. These mentors of color never denied her experiences or claim that they did not matter. That is a level of disrespect Angie has only encountered from her white, presumably progressive colleagues.

When Angie united with African Americans in a people of color caucus to address racism in academia, her white colleagues responded by questioning her racial identity and her right to these associations — questions her Black colleagues never



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identity and her right to these associations — questions her Black colleagues never asked. Some of her white colleagues have gone so far as to tell her Black colleagues that she is an “honorary white” and should not be allied with them. This behavior is another example of liberal white supremacy. White faculty are dictating which people of color are allowed to share connections while failing to recognize their own racial status and privilege as white. These divisive acts further silence and control people of color.

Angie has found that her white colleagues often react with denial when she discusses the racist bullying, harassment, and trauma she has faced as a person of color. They discourage her from talking about how this trauma informs her teaching and research on racism, anti-blackness, and why academic departments have an obligation to address racial hostility. They certainly seem to like her better when she is a silent [model minority](#) sharing her bulgogi recipe.

Going forward, we need to redefine both who gets to be an ally and what that role means — in part, to recognize that the assumptions and biases that preserve white spaces are reproduced over and over by the same white faculty who argue that racial equity is part of their narrative. In our view, it is not.

Normalizing White Experiences

Another point of convergence in Tsedale and Angie’s research is how dominant white culture in American society operates to [normalize the white experience](#), frequently excluding all other racial groups. As illustrated in [sociologist Wendy Leo Moore’s work](#), in order for students and faculty of color to be successful in white spaces, they are often required to put their own experiences aside to “fit in” to the existing culture.

Tsedale has been questioned in her work as to whether she should center the experiences of Black women in her research without including the voices of white women. Here, white liberal faculty worked — knowingly or not — to shift the intellectual discourse back to their white voices, making them seem superior. Thankfully, Tsedale had a champion who stood up in that moment so that she would not have to legitimize Black women’s voices — including her own — through the lens of a white female narrative.

In Tsedale’s research, individuals in organizations who publicly align themselves with those who are vocal on issues pertaining to race and racism tend to be marginalized. Taking a stand on strong issues of racial justice and equity, calling out racist practices, or identifying ways that the institution participates in maintaining the status quo is frowned upon. Therefore, individuals who engage in this “political” work in institutions find themselves in difficult positions. This often equates to being “too Black” in white institutional spaces. Raising issues about racialized aggressions large or small and aligning oneself publicly with individuals who share in this mindset, is viewed as problematic and can lead to [being penalized](#) in the future.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given all of this context, we return to the question we started with: Is it possible to have the kinds of constructive conversations that will lead to real change? Can the silencing of people of color be shifted? What will happen after this sudden scramble of predominantly white institutions writing statements on racial justice? Are they trying to performatively jump into the excitement of the movement?

We believe the most important thing organizations can do is outline clear, actionable steps to create change, not only at the administrative and leadership levels, but also in the behavior and mindset of white colleagues. For academic departments issuing racial and social justice affirmation statements, ask yourselves honestly: Why now? How many full-time Black faculty members do you have? Do you respect your colleagues of color by taking their complaints seriously? Do you promote their work? Do you recognize the invisible labor your colleagues of color engage in, or do you pile more work onto them expecting them to be your teachers?

Have your colleagues complained of mistreatment in your institutions? How do you treat people of color who are brave enough to point out your racist practices? Do you engage in racism-denial or [racial ignorance](#) and subject your colleagues to dehumanizing [white fragile](#) behaviors? For those of you in leadership positions, have colleagues of color asked you for help? How have you responded? Have you used your voice to push for needed changes when you're at the decision-making table?

We hope that by sharing our stories, more of our colleagues in academia and beyond will be inspired to speak out — even when the crowds have gone home and if that support comes at a personal cost to you. There needs to be accountability. Progressive white people, we see you. Do you see us?

A note on style: In her academic work, Angie Beeman prefers to put the word "white" in quotation marks when referring to race to reflect the scholarly position that it does not represent a biological reality, but a harmful identity created over time to divide people.



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Angie Beeman is an Associate Professor at Baruch College, City University of New York. She is currently writing a book entitled *Liberal White Supremacy: How Progressives Silence Racism and Class Oppression*. Follow her on Twitter @AngieBeeman.

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ROBERT E CHEW a month ago

This reminds me of something I heard on NPR a couple years ago, and that was a study about how liberals and conservatives talk to people of color. Specifically, the study analyzed the content of speeches given by politicians to predominately black audiences. The study found that liberals tend to change how they use language, often "dumbing down" the content. Conservatives showed less tendency to change what they said and how they said it. Of course, this doesn't fit the stereotyping of liberals vs. conservatives on race issues, does it?

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