

## Q&A

# On the Experiences of Black Historians

Stefan M. Bradley, Amira Rose Davis, Adriane Lentz-Smith, and Chad Williams

During the summer of 2020, as crowds worldwide poured into the streets in grief and anger over the continued police killings of Black Americans, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the scholars Shardé Davis and Joy Melody Woods began a Twitter hashtag, #BlackInTheIvory, which quickly caught fire. Contributions from Black academics across the disciplines piled up, testifying to the scope of anti-Black racism on university campuses as well as its connections to broader, persistent inequalities in American society.

To build on this conversation—to highlight the particular challenges faced by Black historians and to reflect on the important role historical awareness will play in confronting the nuance, depth, and stubborn durability of anti-Black racism—*MAH* reached out to dozens of Black historians, many of whom shared insights about their own experiences.

Brooke L. Blower and Ashley D. Farmer then asked the leading modern American historians, Stefan M. Bradley, Amira Rose Davis, Adriane Lentz-Smith, and Chad Williams, to reflect on what had been learned from this information gathering, and share their own insights.

### **Based on your own experiences, and those of others you've heard from, what are the most pressing challenges Black historians face inside and outside of the academy?**

**Davis:** This answer will be watered down. Perhaps that in and of itself reveals the position of Black historians in and out of the academy. Black historians are Black people, and like so many Black people in a variety of occupations or existences, we have become used to displaying what the author Kiese Laymon calls “black bombastic grace.” We have become so used to recounting our traumas, telling our stories, performing our subjection in an effort to “prove” racism, because our word alone will not suffice. I might share how I dressed myself in head-to-toe in-school apparel lest I be labeled a “non-affiliate” and attract the attention of campus police. Or how for four years the professor next to my advisor’s office asked me if I was lost when he saw me waiting in the hallway. Or the time in grad school, on a voluntary professionalization panel, when the faculty member in charge, unprompted and in front of the entire audience, asked if it was possible for me to write history without being “angry or aggressive.” The time a progressive feminist scholar, upon learning of my tenure-track job asked if my school was “just so desperate for diversity” and on and on and on. Yet these stories are the tip of the iceberg. The visible, smaller part of the iceberg. Underneath the water is a jagged mass of stories we do not tell. We might whisper them to each other, share pieces here and there that float up to the surface, but generally speaking these are the stories too painful to tell for one reason or another. Or the names that cannot be named. The known racists in the department, the letter writer who tried to sabotage your career, the search committees, the email folder of all the hate mail, the weight of mentoring, the physical toll of oppression, the guilt of facing our micro and macro aggressions from a relatively safe position in the Ivory Tower, yet also rethinking the “safety” of that ivory tower.

No. We don't say all that we could say. We show grace, we soften words, we push just enough to compel the creation of a diversity committee, which we'll ultimately have to chair, or get an opportunity hire we will have to mentor or admit graduate students in the departments and spaces that are slowly suffocating us. We will grind toward tenure, all the while hearing about the ways the systems make it hard for us to get there, and yet when we fail it will be held up as an individual failure—another young Black scholar, disposable and forgotten, who couldn't jump through the never-ending hoops in just the right way. We will keep teaching, reading, and writing through it. On the days when Black death is a trending spectacle, on the days when white supremacy is unabashedly marching through the streets, on the days when you want to scream and cry and hold on to each other, we will instead put on our face, wield that grace, and sit up on someone's panel, or Zoom or TV, and explain and teach and perform our trauma yet again, in mostly soft and graceful words while the hidden underbelly of our iceberg grows and hardens just out of sight of watching eyes.

**Lentz-Smith:** Most of my personal stories about Academicking While Black are minor echoes of stories found elsewhere, mundane examples of my being alternately hypervisible, invisible, or interchangeable. Historians at conferences walking up and enthusiastically greeting me as someone decidedly taller/shorter/older/younger/lighter/thinner or more Caribbean than I. Strangers on the Paris metro following me off the train because they saw my blackness and heard my American accent and felt compelled to tell me how lucky I was to be in a nation “devoid of racism” (as one man put it, a few seconds before saying something vile about Algerians).

Historians in some hoary subfield continuing to converse as if I had never spoken when I ask a question that challenges whiteness as normative or reframes their analysis through Black ontologies. White male students who go on Wikipedia to fact-check my lectures as I am giving them because they signed up for a course in *American History*, not *African American History* and can't imagine that I could possibly know how to teach the former. Readers of my book who write to tell me they found it interesting but that I needed to be a bit more generous toward white people.

Some of this feels innocuous. Some of it makes for good storytelling among friends who start laughing before the punchline because they have lived a version of this story and know that laughing keeps us from internalizing the insult. But here's the thing: the world intrudes. And sometimes I am livid.

One cannot talk about professional challenges without talking about societal and political challenges, because as much of a haven as I have found my intellectual life, it does not exist in a place apart. The professional challenges for Black historians within the academy resemble those faced by Black workers and intellectuals in jobs ranging from law to entertainment to engineering: challenges of access, of being treated as legitimate and worthy, of working to have their presence and work transform the organizations they join. For all the talk of diversity and inclusion, diversity seems to many folks more cosmetic than substantive and inclusion partial and conditional. This comes through in the experiences collected for this Q&A and in myriad conversations with students, of which we have many because students in pain seek out sympathetic ears (Black students seek out empathetic ones). Books like *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* and *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* remind us that these challenges are longstanding and deep-seated in our profession; but I am struck when I listen to my sisters tell stories about working in the federal government or for print media by how much they resonate with stories I hear from academia.

So at moments like this raw summer of 2020, when I experience the history of American white supremacy less as intellectual puzzle and more as a burning lash, even the mundane things threaten to break me. Personally, I think that's the hardest part, the disorientation of going from utter (some would say smug) confidence in being well-adjusted to feeling like I cannot recapture my emotional equilibrium. Not iatrogenic but racismogenic vertigo.

**Bradley:** I must also say a word about the context of my answers to your queries. I make these responses days after the attorney general of Kentucky decided not to indict police who killed Breonna Taylor in her own home, weeks after a police officer in Wisconsin shot Jacob Blake seven times in the back, and after police in New York asphyxiated a man having a mental breakdown, months after vigilantes in Georgia shot a jogging Ahmaud Arbery to death and a policeman in Minnesota knelt on George Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, killing him. The list goes on, but space is limited. Having a daily awareness of these and so many other episodes frames my thoughts on the moment.

In my observation, the most pressing challenge facing Black historians is balancing multiple identities for survival in the academy. At this moment, that means not telling non-Black colleagues precisely what I am thinking or feeling when they tell me how awful it is that police and vigilantes are killing Black people or how important it is to now make Black lives matter. If I said what I actually thought about the killers, vigilantes, judicial system, and the families that have enabled all of this, there would be many hurt feelings and salty tears (not mine) watering the ground. So, communicating with colleagues in a way that I can continue to exist as an employee is a major challenge these days.

There are other challenges worth mentioning. While some non-Black colleagues can specialize and study the most esoteric aspects of history, African American historians, if they want a place in a history department in a predominantly white institution (PWI), are called on to be experts of all things Black, irrespective of time period and geography. That means in the department's curriculum, an African Americanist must be prepared to cover Africa, the African Diaspora, and all of African American existence. They must also be able to cover all aspects of the American history survey as well. That, however, is not the greatest difficulty. The hard part comes when students, who have been starved of Black role models and who are suffering from racial battle fatigue on campus, find out that a new Black professor exists. They, by and large, will not be history majors or minors, but they are looking for ways to survive and the Black historian becomes the lifeline. Many of us joined the professoriate to become role models and to help students develop, but it costs us time and energy. Black historians will be asked to advise the affinity groups, judge the talent shows, and to speak for free (especially in Black History Month). And, of course, they are supposed to be publishing. This is all a blessing, but it is not without burdens.

There are other identities that have to be juggled. For instance, many Black historians have affiliations with Black Studies departments. That means for the sake of job security, a Black historian must be willing to perform double duty as it concerns meetings and other matters. I, for one, would not have taken a job at one institution if it had not been affiliated with the Black Studies program, but having obligations in two academic units is stressful and time consuming, not to mention risky. The potential to make a political or interpersonal misstep doubles in such circumstances.

Another identity one has to play is representative of the institution. That becomes difficult when, by virtue of being Black and a historian, one can easily identify the ways that the institution has either marginalized Black lives or fallen short of its declarations of inclusiveness.

Providing a face and voice to the obvious can potentially damage a Black historian's status, not among opponents of diversity and equity, but among self-professed liberals who believe they have done quite enough to create opportunities for Black people. That sets up an impossible situation for some Black historians who are benefitting financially from the institution but who also cannot close their eyes to racial realities. As representative of the institution, some Black historians have to prove themselves as trustworthy to Black off-campus community members who may have been harmed by the institution. Without commitment and consistency, some off-campus Black community members will always remain skeptical of a Black historian's loyalties and authenticity, which can be personally hurtful. If, however, trust is won, a Black historian will have that much more support if (and when) the stresses of university life get to be too much.

**Williams:** I agree, Black historians, as do Black scholars in every discipline within the academy, certainly face a wide range of challenges. However, I am hesitant to make broad generalizations, because I believe that Black historians enter the academy in different ways, from different places, and from varying levels of personal experience and maturity. In my case, I entered graduate school directly from college and was truly naïve to what being a Black historian in the academy entailed. All I knew is that I had a passion for studying history and wanted to continue pursuing that passion. I honestly gave little thought to what entering graduate school would mean in terms of a career in the academy and, subsequently, the challenges I would face, both subtle and substantial. My learning curve was certainly steeper than some of my Black peers who entered graduate school older, had previous work experiences, and in some cases were more steered in the realities of academic life by having already obtained an advance degree. This is all to say that Black historians, like all historians, are a diverse lot with complex identities that inform our relationship to the academy.

One issue that I do feel cuts across our experiences inside and outside of the academy is the creation of community. The traditional places for community building—our graduate school cohorts, department faculty meetings, annual professional meetings—are all too often places of discomfort and outright hostility. The need to seek out alternative intellectual, social, and political spaces, as a matter of survival, assumes an added sense of urgency that I believe is unique to Black historians. This of course is not new. Carter G. Woodson established the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) to provide a space for Black historians marginalized in the academy due to segregation and institutionalized white supremacy. While Black historians, due to the efforts of pioneering scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, now have greater opportunities to earn PhDs, explore new topics, and employ innovative methodologies, the challenges of loneliness, isolation, and ostracization remain. That is why for Black graduate students, study groups, oftentimes across disciplinary boundaries, are so important. That is why the ASALH annual conference continues to be such a vital communal gathering, with historians, spanning multiple generations, along with scholars and activists from outside of the academy confirming the legitimacy of our work and very existence. The same can be said for other professional organizations like the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora and the Association of Black Women Historians. That is why alternative spaces ostensibly outside of the academy, like Black Twitter, have become not just sites of escape, but for critical intellectual exchange and professional development.

**To what degree is prejudice against Black historians similar to the kinds of discrimination experienced by other people of color, and in what ways is it unique?**

**Davis:** This is a difficult question in some ways because of how intertwined and overlapping such discriminations are. But I do think it is worth trying to parse out a bit. I think, certainly

for Black and Native scholars, there needs to be a specific conversation about how the institutions we often occupy were built from land grabs of Indigenous lands and labors and/or finances from chattel slavery. These institutions were built to exclude us, and forcing the doors open to all does not necessarily uproot the foundations. These origins cast long shadows. I went to graduate school on a former plantation. Many others walk the corridors of buildings named for slave owners. The built environment reminds you that you don't belong.

I also think that the narrow way blackness is drawn in the academy can lead to a flattening of other intersections. I am thinking here of the way Afro-Latinx scholars, Black Native scholars, Black immigrants, and queer Black scholars can be rendered invisible, especially if they do not study some facet of their identity. The anti-blackness that too often assumes Black scholars are only in the academy to study blackness (an assumption that is paired with devaluing the field of Black history) grants us no multitudes or authority on our experiences unless it is our specialty. The other side of this same coin can assume knowledge and require labor of us based on our *perceived* identity. I am thinking here of a story one colleague told me about being asked to teach Caribbean History (outside of her training) because she was West Indian.

I must admit that the first memory that came to mind when thinking about this question was about the ways in which my Middle Eastern and Asian American graduate school colleagues talked about how they were often assumed to be "internationals" and constantly dealt with questions about where they came from, and yet racist perceptions of so-called model minorities meant that their right or ability to be in the academy was never questioned. I was also hyper-aware that as one of three Black graduate students at the time, I was the only Black American and in comparing experiences we realized that my colleagues' accents and internationality rendered them "special Black" in the eyes of some faculty members, who never questioned their aptitude in quite the same they challenged mine. The sharing of these stories with each other and placing them in juxtaposition illuminated the web of interlocking and overlapping discriminations.

**Bradley:** I am sympathetic with the discrimination that other people of color experience, but I would not feel comfortable speaking on behalf of it. Having worked in PWIs, I know personally how it feels to have my work thought of as "cool" or "interesting" but rarely as essential knowledge. I know what it feels like when I observe white scholars, whose work cuts across Black people, classified as African Americanists or presented as scholars of African America or to watch non-Black scholars win awards for doing the "unique" work of studying Black people. I am quite familiar with the rat race of academia that has Black scholars (and those posing as Black scholars) jockeying for the few token spaces in departments. I know what it is to never be paid equitably for the vast amounts of work done to advance history and humanity by outworking, outloving, and outpacing other colleagues because there is no home for a mediocre Black scholar; they must be markedly better to evade the pitfalls that petty academicians construct. If they are only mediocre and do no more than their non-Black peers, Black scholars and their work will likely be policed by colleagues and administrators alike.

**Williams:** A few thoughts on this. First, it is important to emphasize that Black historians face discrimination in different ways based on our various identities. Part of the dehumanizing logic of white supremacy is assuming that all Black people are the same and thus the challenges we face are all the same as well. As the number of Black historians in the profession has increased, so too has our diversity along multiple axes of identity. The experiences of Black women in the academy are unique and, in many cases, much more perilous. Indeed, I am very much aware of the privilege I have held as a Black male within a space that deems the presence of Black women as disruptive. We can also point to the ways in which discrimination against Black historians

plays out in terms of class, age, sexual orientation, region, ethnicity, color, and multiple intersections of each. This is in part what makes being Black in the academy so exhausting. With that said, as challenging as being a Black historian can at times be, it is important to recognize and acknowledge our privilege relative to other people of color within the space of United States history. African American history is not new. The place of Black historians in the academy is not new. Because of the doors opened and foundations laid by earlier generations of Black historians, a level of acceptance exists for Black historians that does not necessarily exist for Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian American historians. I have personally witnessed the ways that white historians treat other non-Black historians, because of who they are and what they are studying, with skepticism, derision, and racist caricature all as ways to mask their ignorance. Discrimination against Black historians of course continues to exist. However, the challenges that other people of color face are indeed different and oftentimes especially pernicious.

This speaks to the importance of Black historians serving as allies. The academy breathes on hyper-individualism and competition for resources. Black historians can easily succumb to this mentality. It is tempting to think that we are special, that in comparison to other marginalized groups, we have made it. We should never be deluded into thinking that the academy will be a “home” and that our struggles are somehow disconnected from the struggles of other people of color for recognition and respect.

**Lentz-Smith:** Well, white supremacy is a problem for everyone, white folks included. The experience of people of color in the academy is shaped by whiteness as norm, and by many white scholars’ unwillingness to think critically about white supremacy as an ideology conjoined to a system of political economy that has built, sustained, and shaped universities from the get-go—and that continues to do so. This is an issue in the humanities and critical social sciences, but even more so in other fields that have not turned a critical eye on how subject position shapes intellectual imagination. Black people are not the only ones who have fought to be let in, continue fighting to prove they belong, and work to demonstrate that belonging does not necessarily mean conforming.

Of course, differing histories of colonialism, settler colonialism, chattel slavery, state violence, etc. produce overlapping but not identical encounters with white supremacy. For those of us whose family histories are shaped by chattel slavery, discrimination is built into the walls, as in Georgetown and its financial origins. Or discrimination is embedded in the soil, as in Clemson and its recently discovered unmarked graves. Lately, I have been thinking about criminalization as a site of overlap but also about how the extremes and persistence of the “condemnation of blackness” have marked Black people as differently other and perpetually suspect.

The narratives of criminalization that stick with me aren’t even my stories to tell. They happened to others—around me rather than to me—but that’s the thing about racism; its ambience produces its weight. There was the email on my graduate school department listserv from a white woman graduate student complaining that there were too many “non-Yale-looking people” in the library and demanding that campus security clear them out. That garnered a gratifyingly withering response from a Black woman a year behind me in the program (but years ahead of me in rhetorical thunder). I think most often of my friend, perhaps the most brilliant person I knew in graduate school, who passed a faculty member in the History department only to have her recoil and pull her purse closer to her chest. By the time he got to the second floor, he was being stopped by campus police who demanded to know what he was doing in the building. He never told me this story. I heard it from other Black graduate students because



it circulated among us—a signal to all of us that we would only fully belong in the version of grad school that we built for ourselves.

This world-building only provides so much armor, and it takes energy. To come back to points of overlap, I long have been struck by the number of Black women academics who die young because, I suspect, their wells run dry. It turns out, weathering a system of racialized patriarchal power is bad for one's blood pressure, blood sugar, and cortisol levels. I don't know what the data look like for Native American and Latina scholars, but I bet it's similar.

### **What impact does anti-blackness have on scholarship and teaching in the field of modern U.S. history?**

**Williams:** I really appreciate this question. A tendency exists, when absorbing the catalogue of experiences of discrimination in a forum such as #BlackInTheIvory, to think of anti-blackness as interpersonal as opposed to structural, as individual as opposed to systemic. This is essentially a mirror of the “bad apples” argument for racist policing against Black people and just as flawed. Anti-blackness seeps into every aspect of the experiences of Black historians, from graduate school general examinations, to job search committees, to course evaluations, to journal peer reviews, to academic press acquisitions, to classroom allocation. I could go on and on.

Underlying much of this is an assumption that centering the Black experience in modern United States history does not demand scholarly and pedagogical rigor. This is especially acute in the classroom. I vividly recall a moment during my first semester of teaching out of graduate school. I was offering the first half of the African American history survey course. About two weeks in, a white female student came to my office hours to express her concern and disappointment with the amount of readings I had assigned. She informed me that she had only wanted to take the class as an “elective” and felt that this was not what she had signed up for. Although I gladly signed her drop form, I was struck by her view of African American history as supplemental as opposed to central, as tangential as opposed to essential, and that as such it did not necessitate serious work on her part. This anecdote also reflects the specific challenges that Black historians face when we enter the classroom. Because of racist assumptions about Black intelligence and even what a professor looks like, we must constantly prove ourselves, even if it is subconsciously.

**Davis:** I am constantly surprised about how little my fellow Americanists have to know about Black history. How major graduate programs can bestow degrees in American History without requiring their students to take so much as a single course on race, African American history, or colonialism. Perhaps surprised is not the right word. Disappointed. Frustrated. Appalled. I recall the early lessons I learned in graduate school—that too often books about Black folks were only called upon to talk about race, were seen as only documenting the history of African Americans, as if they weren't labor history or political history or military history. This of course is a sentiment echoed every few months or so when some gatekeeper takes to Twitter to bemoan the death of political history or some such, while ignoring the multiple, usually award winning, political history monographs centered on African American history that came out that year. Over and over again I feel like I receive messages that say Black history only barely matters. I once listened to a spirited discussion about a diversity program in which historians offered reminders that Black historians don't just “have to” write African American history and discussed ways to show aspiring Black historians that there were other histories they could study. The only other Black historian in the room quietly texted me “do they realize they keep talking about our field as if it's subpar, settling and ‘history-lite’?” “No,” I responded, “I don't think they hear themselves at all.”

In a more insidious way, these prevailing ideas and subtle lessons are hard to avoid absorbing. I initially shied away from writing about Black women in sports, afraid that I would be typecast as a historian and not taken seriously because I choose to study Black women. Or that I would somehow be confirming the worse of the academy's expectations. Where had I learned that? One month into grad school, three months removed from undergrad, and I had already taken in ideas about the value of Black history and my place in the academy.

In terms of teaching—well that could be its own special issue alone. I'll simply say I join with many others who have talked about the way anti-blackness and misogyny can make the classroom a challenging, unsafe, and hostile place for Black women professors.

**Bradley:** Anti-blackness and white supremacy have had immense effects on the scholarship and teaching of modern U.S. history. My first thoughts go to the great efforts that John Hope Franklin, Darlene Clark Hine, and so many others made to merely classify African American history as a legitimate field of study. In an earlier period, anti-blackness led oft-lionized white scholars to write incomplete histories by either mischaracterizing the contributions of Black people or by leaving Black figures out altogether. A brief survey of "American" historiography reveals the lengths that celebrated historians went through to center whiteness, maleness, and elite statuses. For instance, before Black historians took up corrective intellectual work, the Civil Rights Movement was presented as a matter for white politicians, with some being portrayed as virtuous and others villainous in terms of their stance on racism. And, apparently, many non-Black historians did not know what to do with Black Power as a movement; most simply referred to it as the decline of the "good" and "sensible" activism associated with Christian ministers and nonviolent passive resistance.

Thankfully, African Americanists rescued that narrative to place Black activist groundwork in the center of the intellectual framework associated with what has become known as the Black Freedom Movement. It was not as though politicians played no part in advancing freedom rights, but neither was it the case that they led the effort to manifest racial justice. The same has been true of discussions surrounding anti-Black racism in general.

Traditional (meaning that of mostly white historians) scholarship led people to believe that all the evil racial oppression was reserved for the American South and that Black people in the North had escaped extreme racism. That painted northern and western white people as less interested in marginalizing Black people, which was not the case at all. Along those lines, in traditional scholarship, Black people were nearly always portrayed as the downtrodden poor. By not featuring scholars who could cover the nuance of Black existence, the field of history was doing a disservice to learners and promoting white supremacy. It is anti-Black to deny a diversity of depiction. Generations of Black scholars have been calling these problems to the attention of the field.

Then, of course, there is the tokenism of opinions that has occurred. For instance, when I was doing my graduate training there were just so few Black scholars whose work appeared in "top" American history journals. I knew of many Black scholars, but rarely if ever did I see the work of Black historians in the "best" journals. The gatekeeping of these periodicals made for a situation in which only select Black voices were ever heard or trusted. This is not to say that all voices need to be heard or broadcasted, but I (as well as so many of my scholastic peers) knew that if one was not recognized by certain white gatekeepers, there was little chance of one's work making it through the pipeline to publication in mainstream journals. This is crucial because history educators at every level were taking their cues from the journals and presses, which determined what history was essential learning and whose work was important.



Things have loosened some, but still it seems there is a small cadre of Black historians who have their work featured time and again. When meeting a non-Black scholar of prominence at major conference, one (if one is Black) can count on being asked if one knows someone from that small cadre of mainstream-approved Black historians. This is not a personal plea for my own work (or that of anyone else) or recognition but rather a statement about how much good history can be missed if the scope of editors, editorial boards, and association administrations is narrow.

**Lentz-Smith:** I am going to come at this question sideways, but I swear this is not a tangent. I recently read an article in the *New York Times* about the Criterion Collection, the DVD archive that helps to define the canon of modern cinema. As of August 2020, the collection had over 1,000 films. Only four of the directors included were African American. The executives who curated the collection have become aware that they have a problem and that the problem is their fault. They have had blind spots. Commenting on the bewildering and shameful exclusion of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* from the collection, Criterion's president explained that when he first saw the movie, he "didn't understand what [he] was looking at," and he "wasn't talking with people who were going to help" him. In other words, he had the privilege of being ignorant and uncurious while still getting to call himself an authority.

In the Criterion example, as in our field of modern American history, anti-blackness—either as a deliberate position or as the entitlement of people who aren't interested in asking what whiteness obscures—shapes a canon that overlooks much African American intellectual production while limiting the questions asked. That's not uniformly true; some of our field's most exciting and innovative work is beholden to African American Studies and African American historians. But that does not mean presses or departments or professional organizations always work to accommodate that flowering of scholarship. It's easier to find a few known quantities than to engage broadly.

To answer this question more directly, I tell this story: An acquisitions editor once furiously told me that I was "no John Hope Franklin." He was livid that I had given a verbal commitment to publish my book with his press and then changed my mind during the several weeks I spent waiting for a written contract. When I wrote to say that I had decided to go with a different publisher, he sent back a long email telling me that I was unprofessional to the point of being unethical and that he could sue me to hold me to my word. His closing line: "You are no John Hope Franklin." The closer felt a bit random but then, on reflection, not random at all.

"I think I just got called a Bad Negro," I told my husband in bemusement. Bemusement, and in a perverse sort of gratitude because I had felt horribly guilty about changing my mind—not unethical, per se, but perhaps unprofessional—and the editor's response scrubbed that guilt away. Maybe he snatched his John Hope Franklin Seal of Approval back from every historian who upset him, but I bet Black authors were special in that regard. When I am feeling generous, I try to imagine that he also had a C. Vann Woodward Seal of Approval that he awarded and rescinded from white scholars as the mood struck him, but I suspect not. In any case, we have never spoken again.

In the catalogue of academic stories, I would probably file that one under "White People's Foolishness" rather than "Running Aground on Racism." Of course, those two subject headings often have overlapping entries. In this case, the experience was more instructive than consequential: a reminder that what people say in their ire tells you much about how they think when they are calm. I am more careful, now, not to be anyone's exception.

### What concrete steps can departments, colleges, and universities take to oppose racism and promote racial justice?

**Bradley:** Departments, colleges, and universities can commence the journey by determining that racial justice is in fact what they want. I am sure most do—in the abstract—but I am dubious as to whether most are willing to take affirmative steps to achieve racial justice. A positive early step is designing and executing a strategic plan that would include hiring and retaining Black scholars, staff, and administrators. In addition to recruiting alumni of the prized Ivy League, highly ranked flagship universities, and other “renowned” institutions, PWIs at all levels need to admit and hire alumni of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as well as those from institutions that do not always get mentioned on television or in the journals.

If serious about racial equity, then institutions should then pay the newly hired Black employees (and those already in employ) the highest market rates possible. Racial diversity is literally an investment in human capital, so institutions should mobilize the resources knowing that the investment will eventually pay dividends.

These entities should decentralize whiteness as the default of intellectual inquiry. Humanities departments should be sure to adequately cover all aspects of the Black experience from the international to local. This should shine through in the curricula but also with the programming and speakers brought to campus. Decentralizing whiteness will likely incite a cold war among the disciples of the status quo and those who are imagining a different future by examining different pasts. It is literally a war for posterity.

Finally, institutions need to include racial justice and equity as significant parts of their major funding campaigns initiatives. All of the above steps are diminished if these institutions cannot make an honest and direct appeal to donors about the institution’s desire for racial equity. These efforts should be pursued with the same vigor that university coaches pursue stand-out Black high school athletes. As is the case with athletic teams, the likelihood of institutions winning is directly linked to their ability to find and develop talent. That requires racial justice and equity at each level of the academy.

**Lentz-Smith:** Wouldn’t you know, my answer for this question is a lot shorter than my answer for the others! Maybe it is short because I am a better diagnostician than I am a surgeon. Or maybe, just because my ideas are relatively commonsensical. Departments, colleges, and universities need to acknowledge the histories of their institutions. They need to give substance to abstract notions of structural racism by demonstrating through their words, in their landscapes, and through curricula how the history of white supremacy has shaped not just the nation’s political and financial present but also the very institutions where we teach and learn. With that acknowledgment comes a responsibility to change the structures. Pursue and defend policies that prioritize admissions and financial support for historically exploited groups. Make an admissions strategy that does not reinforce the notion that better schools and white, wealthy schools are synonymous. Colleges can incentivize secondary schools’ diversifying.

Institutions must also hire and promote more Black people in every kind of role: ladder faculty, administrative positions like Deanships, financial and fundraising positions, alumni services. Hire so many Black people that they don’t all know each other.

I understand that representation alone is not transformation, but we have to be in the room learning how decisions get made, questioning how decisions are being made, and making

decisions ourselves if we want to embed the change in the structure. This requires holding departments and searches accountable when they are not going out and finding Black candidates and candidates of color. It exasperates me when people say the problem is the pipeline, as if we, the universities, *aren't* the pipeline. So build that pipeline. And stop searches that go forward without any candidates of color.

And finally, universities reflect and reify what's happening in the communities around them. So those universities need to be responsible members of those communities. Pay their workers enough; don't treat gentrification and displacing communities of color as the solution to white students' discomfort with cities that don't look like their hometowns. Penalize campus police for racial profiling, and advocate for students who are profiled off campus.

Perhaps these are small solutions to huge problems, but they feel like a start.

**Davis:** Yes, less words, more actions. Less committees and task forces. More actions. Forming a committee is barely the first step and it is certainly not the last. To work with the example of teaching. There has been a considerable amount of data, articles, task forces, etc., demonstrating how student evaluations for marginalized professors—especially women of color—are often severely impacted by racism and sexism. How many more reports do we need on this issue before we fundamentally change how we use evaluations for tenure and the methods in which we collect them in the first place? We can talk ad nauseum about racism in academy. Black women historians before me have done as much. *Telling Histories* is now 12 years old!! I clearly have more questions than answers at this point. Questions. Fatigue. Trauma ...

I am not sure of all of the steps to move from words to actions. Is it a question that should even be asked of us? Can we fix a problem that's not of our making?

**Williams:** I would also like to complicate, and perhaps even push back against, the framing of this question just a bit. The question aligns with our current en vogue academic framework of antiracism. Indeed, we see how universities are now increasingly moving from the language of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” to “antiracism.” This is, on the one hand, noble and reflects the impact of Black historians, like Ibram Kendi, in shifting the national discourse and lexicon. However, we are already seeing how easily antiracism can become yet another buzzword and easily corporatized. More pointedly, antiracism becomes a problem when its genealogical roots in Black studies and Black history are not acknowledged. This is itself a form of anti-blackness. As a result, antiracist initiatives end up centering whiteness and white feelings more so than actually addressing the root of the problem. So for me, the question is what can universities do to concretely address institutionalized legacies of white supremacy and oppose anti-blackness?

My university joined the chorus of other universities committing to comprehensive antiracist initiatives in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the summer of 2020. It has, not surprisingly, been a long and, quite frankly, disillusioning process. At a recent department chairs' meeting, the first 45 minutes were devoted to an “Anti-Racism Workshop” ironically facilitated by the university's Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The entire time was spent proffering a definition of the terms “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (not antiracism mind you) and suggesting strategies for department chairs to have “hard” conversations. So much was missing, but I was particularly struck by the complete lack of concrete recognition of institutional legacies of anti-blackness and the need for historical reckoning. This dovetailed with absolutely zero mention of the issues facing Black faculty.

So I would certainly offer this as an example of what colleges and universities should not do. Instead, what they can do is very specifically identify the ways in which racism has historically functioned to limit the opportunities for Black people—students, staff, and faculty—and from there develop concrete forms of restitution and policies for moving forward. They also need to resist the temptation to reinvent the wheel and create new shiny things. Revisit the previous demands of Black students and recommendations of earlier task forces. Invest in Black Studies departments and programs before throwing money into creating new antiracism centers. Recognize and uplift the expertise of Black faculty and the work that they have produced. Finally, I will say that leadership matters. Like any institution, colleges and universities operate in accordance with embedded structures of power. These structures have historically worked against the interests of Black people. Disrupting these structures is imperative, and that requires bold leadership and risk taking from trustees and presidents, down to deans, provosts, and department chairs.

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