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Move: We Don't Need To Convince You That Our Oppression is Real

Dr. Frederick V. Engram Jr.

This article will address the lived experiences of Black people (faculty, staff, students, student athletes) who navigate academia in majority white spaces. Black people have known throughout time that the Black voice is not valued. We constantly find ourselves embattled in our personal lives, at work, and on social media. The constant and incessant need for whiteness to tell us how we should feel, respond, and react to acts of white supremacy, white manning, sexism, and misogynoir are triggering. The system of higher education is a constant reminder that academia exists comfortably in a bubble. A bubble that remains firmly entrenched around the institution, unless you are bold enough to burst it. Perpetuating false diversity and inclusion efforts and employing individuals who do not really care about marginalized groups is dangerously problematic. Time's up! This article will take the reader on a journey through our blues, understanding of well-intentioned whiteness or solidarity, interest convergence, and ultimately the mattering of Black lives.

Keywords: anti-Blackness, critical race theory, white manning, misogynoir, higher education, anti-racist

Come A Little Closer

In 2002, Brandy Norwood sang a love song instructing us to “Come a Little Closer”. The song resonates with me because it talks about how engaging in a close love will allow us to forget about tomorrow. As I think about who this piece is for, I am reminded that unfortunately Black people are not allowed to forget about tomorrow, today, or yesterday. The act of disruption is not solely the responsibility of Black people. We constantly find ourselves having to explain how or why we should be left alone. How or why, we deserve to exist, to experience happiness, and to give and receive love without the constant fear of that love ending because the world does not see its value. This piece is for any of you who understand that Black liberation is an act of social justice and social disruption. This piece is for white liberals in higher education who find themselves engaging in discussion

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without having done the reading. It will also serve as a source of emboldened liberation. A gift given to each of us is the ability to speak truth to and or about the beauty of Black people and our royal power. At times when white persons show up as “allies” it often appears as a self-serving practice. The appearance is due largely to the absence of those very same allies in later occurrences which stem from the same root cause. That root cause being directly linked to racism and white supremacy. As Derrick Bell once told us, interest convergence occurs when whiteness benefits from the very slow systemic changes to the Black lived experience.

Interest Convergence

In 1980, seminal CRT legal scholar and founder Derrick A. Bell Jr. taught us about the meaning and dilemma of interest convergence. Interest convergence directly speaks to the dilemma in the battle between dismantling white privilege and providing equity for Black people. As noted by Bell (1980), some white people have long agreed that Black people deserve some measure of civil rights. However, many will draw the line when providing equity to Black people in any way shifts the authority and privilege of whiteness (Bell, 1980). As Bell (1980) states, the unwillingness is illustrated by controversy over affirmative action programs, particularly those where whiteness must move aside to make space for Black people whom they consider less deserving. True equality for Black people will mean that white people agree to surrender rights afforded to them by racism (Bell, 1980). As I consider the scope of many institutions of higher learning and the constant harm done, I am reminded that there is still so much work to do. The work of Joy Melody Woods and many others resounds like an echo in my ear more and more each day. This past summer, UT Austin doctoral student Joy Melody Woods used Twitter to co-create a healing space for Black faculty, students, and SA pros. The space was intended to allow us to congregate and share in our experiences of being Black and working in the ivory. The number of stories shared would either empower you or break you. It is hard for many non-marginalized persons to fathom the lived experiences of Black people in America even when it is occurring in front of them. Many will still seek to justify the maltreatment of Black people by asserting that there must have been something they did that warranted the behavior.

As a faculty member I often find myself having to restrain my thoughts regarding the lived experiences of Black people in the eyes of white colleagues and students. It is hard to hear someone tell you that cops are rarely racist, police brutality is a myth, and if Black lives matter, so do blue ones. Black lives are constantly discounted, undervalued, and mistreated. The only other group disrespected more are Black women. Misogynoir is often displayed whenever a Black woman comes across as too confident in the opinion of a white person. Unfortunately, you do not have to be a white person to be an upholder of misogynoir. This can be an isolating

feeling for many Black women who have to carry the weight of being othered simply because of their race and gender. To understand the notion of interest convergence in a most simple definition it means that in order for white people to agree with a benefit for Black people they must also benefit. As we consider the response and reaction by many of the higher education institutions, corporations, local government, and elected officials toward the Black Lives Matter movement. We have to understand that many of the previously mentioned began supporting the movement because not doing so could have negative financial implications. This next section will address the exploitation of the Black experience for the benefit of whiteness, while simultaneously ignoring the true lived experience of Black persons in the system of education and society at large.

Enjoying Our Rhythm While Silencing Our Blues

Similar to Ladson-Billings (1996), I also wish to reexamine the role of race and racism. As a researcher and African American, I constantly find myself embattled with scholarship and practice in academia. I often find that the visible positioning of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) versus the actual institutional initiatives displayed are often disconnected. A simple e-stroll through social media platforms such as Twitter (*Black Twitter more specifically*) will highlight the traumatic lived experiences of Black students, faculty, and staff. Social media has a very distinct role, and that role is to allow its users to be their authentic self or the version of their self that is most pleasing to society. However, in the deepest corners of social media the reality of people's lived experiences is baring their bones. Unable to hide and unable to disappear because the reality is that hiding from the truth is what causes the deepest pain. Silence causes the trauma to spread like an unidentified cancer. See, PWIs like to position themselves as innovators of diversity and inclusion work. However, they often intentionally or unintentionally "forget" about the equity piece. They will never publicly admit to this but their efforts, lack of distributed resources, and ease to release this responsibility amid Donald Trump's executive order are very telling.

Since the world shutdown due to the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, institutions have showed their stakeholders what was most important to them. Many staff, non-tenured faculty, and students were the most negatively affected by the shutdown. Institutions often benefit from the appearance of Black faces and a Black presence, but institutions do not always do right by these individuals. Students who are housing insecure were asked to leave campus without a definite place to go (Engram, 2020). As stated by Engram (2020), the most vulnerable employees were furloughed or asked to take pay cuts whereas the most comfortable barely felt a pinch. As someone who has worked in higher education since 2006. According to Engram (2020), the individuals who labor at PWIs who are the most vulnerable are Black and Brown people. The students who are dealing

with housing and food insecurities consider college a refuge from their otherwise unsatisfactory living conditions. According to the census 21% of people who are impoverished in the United States are Black, and Black people only make up 13% of the general population (Wiltz, 2019). There exists an overwhelming probability that the most affected by university furloughs and insecurity of housing are Black.

In 2018, 56% of division 1 men's basketball athletes and 48% of football student athletes were Black (Burns, 2019). Colleges and universities generate millions of dollars in income from their recruiting and retaining Black athletes for their sports. The trade-off is a “free” education with various amenities offered by the select institutions that enroll each of these students. According to Harper (2018), many of these students are first generation and are overly represented on revenue generating NCAA sports teams. However, their graduation rates disgracefully pale in comparison to their white counterparts (Harper, 2018). What this data indicates is that Black students are being ushered into athletic mills with or without promise of a complete education. The institutions are directly and indirectly benefiting from the physicality of Black athletes, but the Black athletes are unable to profit off of their own athletic acumen. When suggestions are made in favor of paying athletes, they are met with great disdain from such an assertion. That disdain is typically espoused by privileged white people. The establishment of PWIs and their athletic mills have benefited hand over fist from Black athletes, while choosing to stand silent in the face of great issues that directly affect Black people in the communities they reside in and recruit from. Black athletes have been benched and silenced for speaking out in regard to the injustices (Davis, 2018). How can any rational individual reasonably assume that Black students would or should be silent about these issues? This next section will address the issue of solidarity or obtuse well-intentioned whiteness.

Well-Intentioned Whiteness or Solidarity?

On a fall Friday in 2016, the chancellor of the UT System issued a memo that suggested but did not urge athletes to stand for the flag, hand over heart, and melody in their mouths (Jaschik, 2016). I question any white person, place, or institution that take issue with protests about police brutality. Protesting and assembling are rights granted directly by the constitution. However, it only ever becomes an issue when the parties gathering, and protesting are Black. Black athletes facing ridicule for refusing to simply shut up and perform is not new. White people love to watch Black people as a form of entertainment without exception. The moment that Black people provide any since of disruption not otherwise permitted by whiteness it becomes an issue. Imagine having to check in with the group of people responsible for the birth of systemic racism and the keyholders of your oppression for permission to resist. If only white people considered how violent their requests for our silence actually are. To request that a group of people be

silent, respectfully receive abuse, injustice, and live-in constant fear of death by cop is asinine. Censuring of Black voices, especially athletes, are as constant of an occurrence as racism is pervasive. Professional sports and collegiate sports in 2016 provided a vivid picture to all Black Americans of what they think of our plights as citizens in this country. The murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin and his band of sworn misfits brought about a change in discussion.

We began to see a difference in the ways that universities responded to the unrest that followed Floyd's senseless murder. Universities, local government, and major corporations began to participate in the Black Lives Matter movement even if only for profit. I find myself being a bit suspicious at the timing of their support. To me it seemed like an opportunity to appear to be on the right side of history but current policies and Black stakeholder narratives prove that "support" to be questionable at best. My reservation is due to the fact that Black people should not have to die on national television for our humanity to be believed. It comes across as if our lived experiences without any video were not worthy of believing or supportive action taken by white people, institutions, and corporations without witnessing the death of an unarmed Black person. Only seeing Black persons as bodies for sport and entertainment or hashtags is inhumane.

I view the current state of higher education as performative regarding the acknowledgement and handling of widespread systemic racism. This past summer we saw an overabundance of reading lists created in an effort to quickly teach white people how to become anti-racist. White people were demanding reading lists and requesting panel discussions as if becoming an anti-racist could occur over a weekend accompanied by a certificate, pin, and handshake. I am not sorry to serve as the bearer of bad news, but anti-racism is life work. It is not something that can occur from one kind gesture, or the completion of a reading list. As stated by Davis (2020), over the summer Black athletes at the University of Southern California formed the United Black Student Athletes Association, (UBSAA). The purpose of this group was to take a bold and decisive action regarding supporting Black students and combating racial inequality (Davis, 2020). Black athletes across the country began threatening to boycott by mobilizing, leaving programs, choosing HBCUs, and demanding that institutions begin to reckon with their racist pasts and present (Davis, 2020). Their intent was to create environments that are healthy and safe for non-athletes as well as athletes (Davis, 2020).

As indicated by Davis (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled the resistance of Black athletes who understand now more than ever that the sports system cares little about their safety and health. It is clear that the system has repeatedly displayed that it only cares about the profit that their Black labor generates (Davis, 2020). Davis' (2020) research shows us that Black athletes are beginning to use their platform to amplify other concerns of Black students across campus and in

the broader community. One year ago, the University of Alabama's (UA) flagship campus in Tuscaloosa made national news. The university recruited Dr Jamie R. Riley and lauded him as "invaluable" and praised his "proven track record with students" (Rojas, 2019). Seven months after Dr Riley arrived, several of his old tweets resurfaced (read as someone searched for them). His tweets spoke directly to the known historical tie between policing, the American flag, and systemic racism (Rojas, 2019). Since his tweets resurfaced and were the cause of commotion on campus, the university and Dr Riley decided to part ways. This immediately caused the Black students on campus and their supporters to demand answers from university administration. His resignation became a release valve of pent-up frustration from marginalized students on campus (Rojas, 2019). The university has grappled with its racist past where cross burnings and blackface were common practice (Rojas, 2019). One year later head football coach Nick Saban is leading a Black Lives Matter march on UA's campus. Where was Coach Saban a year ago when Dr Riley was asked to resign? The timing of his agreeing to be in support of Black athletes protesting seems performative and proves the presence of interest convergence, a tenet of critical race theory.

Coach Saban's actions and the actions of countless other coaches and team owners each towed the line of white manning. White manning directly speaks to the manner in which white men take up unnecessary space when they are out of their lane (Engram, 2020). Drew Brees and so many others who considered Black athletes kneeling as disrespecting the flag is an example of white manning. It is the willful act of being obtuse to the real reason for protesting and civil unrest, yet these men have made it about them and their privileged perspectives. Well-intentioned white people who are often more liberal leaning often miss the point regarding race relations, privilege, and the mattering of Black lives without objection.

The Mattering of Black Lives

The history of this nation is a constant reminder of the importance of recognizing the mattering of Black lives. The role of white supremacy, violent white feminism, sexism, and white privilege have cost thousands of Black Americans their lives. Although indisputable evidence of Black American trauma exists, the upholders of whiteness and its supremacy would still prefer to ignore our claims. Black massacres in the United States post the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 have been a constant American staple. There have been 24 Black massacres in America since 1863 where white mobs or individuals murdered Black Americans simply for existing. They are as follows: New York (1863); New Orleans and Memphis (1866); Opelousas, St. Bernard Parrish, and Camila (1868); Colfax (1873); Vicksburg and Eufaula (1874); Clinton (1875); Thibodaux (1887); Wilmington (1898); Atlanta (1906); Springfield (1908); Slocum (1910); East St. Louis (1917); Elaine, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. (1919); Ocoee (1920); Tulsa (1921); Rosewood

(1923); Detroit (1943); Philadelphia (1985); and Charleston (2015). The legacy of racial inequality in America was shaped by the profit of enslaving millions of Black people (Initiative, 2017). It would appear that since the enslaved Africans in America were granted their freedom by blood and war, there has been a constant movement by the losers of that war to create a lifelong system of uninterrupted subjugation in various forms.

Consistently asking us to prove our claims of systemic racism is insulting to our intelligence and to our humanity. There is not a racially conscious person alive who would wish to be oppressed for the sole purpose of receiving some form of pity. We do not have to continue to prove to any non-Black person that our oppression is real. My response for anyone who dare request that any of us provide receipts of our lifelong racial suffering is simple; move! Move out of our way because your desire to silence us for personal enjoyment or racial privilege is violent. Move out of our way if your idea of becoming an anti-racist is rooted in reading a couple of books and declaring that you are not a racist. Move if you consider holding white people and this country accountable for not dismantling white supremacy “unfair”. Move if you think simply because a white family adopts Black children that they are exempt from racism. It is almost as if Dr Stephanie Jones-Rogers did not write an entire book explaining to us about the violence of white feminism and their “property.” Move if your response to our requests for abolishing police due to their ties to slavery, racism, and insufferable desire to brutalize Black people is to remind us of the on-goings of Chicago. Move if you continue to remind us of your “Black friend” when your card is pulled regarding your maltreatment of Black women, due to your deeply rooted misogynoir. If you cannot find empathy for our suffering at the hands of whiteness and its tenets simply put, move. Black lives matter and blue lives do not exist. If you do not understand that being “blue” is a job and not a racial or ethnic identity, then you really need to move. Our oppression should not be fodder for feeding your ego. The greatest threat to white supremacy is change, and the greatest threat to our democracy has always been white supremacy.

Conclusion

Change is not an easy thing to accept. However, as a country we should ask ourselves how continuing in this direction will improve our standing in this world or our race relations in this country. White people created the concept of race and forced everyone else to adhere to its pecking order. If there is one thing that we all know it is that you cannot control people who are tired, angry, frustrated, and ready for change. Oppression only works when the oppressed party allows the mistreatment to occur. Individuals looting following George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, and Jonathan Price’s murders should be the least of everyone’s concerns. Capitalism should under no circumstance be

more important than the lives of people. You cannot be pro-life and not believe that Black lives matter. You cannot say that Black lives do not matter and not be a racist. We know each of these things to be true. It is up to you to decide which side of history is most important for you to be aligned with.

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