

VOICE(S) OF A BLACK MAN

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Abstract:

Since March of 2020, two pandemics have hit the United States of America like a bag of bricks. The health pandemic as a result of Covid-19 that has killed over 180,000 Americans and the racially-charged genocides that continues to murder our Black brothers and sisters. As a result of constant disregard for Black lives, in part 1, we analyze the ongoing threat on Black bodies by police officers while simultaneously illustrating why Black Lives Matter. Additionally, in part 2, we explore what it means to be a Black person on America's post-secondary campuses while naming "privilege" and illustrating what White allies can do to support their Black peers, colleagues, friends, families, and communities. Moreover, in part 3, we wrap it all together by illustrating the importance of voting in the upcoming election and why this is the election of our lives.

Keywords: Black, Black Lives Matter, Privilege, Police, Vote

Part 1: Why My Black Life Matters

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term *double consciousness*. This term refers to the "inner battle of 'twoness'" that at the time (and still) African Americans experience/d because of our racialized oppression and devaluation in a White-dominated society" (Ponti, 2019). Subsequently, more than half a century later in 1965 when the great American novelist James Baldwin was asked about being Black in the United States, he responded:

In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 1-3)

Almost a century after Du Bois's piercing novel and Baldwin's truthfully exhilarating words, we find ourselves still fighting the racial injustices that have plagued this nation since its inception. Like Du Bois, I constantly feel my identity within the lived reality of double consciousness. Whether it is being a Black man in a space where my identity is not celebrated or affirmed or trying to encourage my White colleagues that I'm not threatening or attempting to convince others simply that **Black Lives Matter**. As ridiculous and ludicrous as it may sound to you, in 2020 we as a Black people are still attempting to convince America that **OUR LIVES MATTER**. Not that our existence is greater than any other race, no. Simply that our Black Lives actually Matter. I am the son of an immigrant woman from Cameroon. Growing up, my mother would often tell me, "do well in school, listen to your teachers, respect adults, go to college, and you will do well in life."

As I reflect on her words, I often think, was it her ignorance of the racial injustices that Black people have faced and continue to face in this, her new country? Or was it aspirational—more so her hope and prayers, that if I followed this path, I would not end up like Emmett Till, Rodney King, Trevon Martin, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, George Floyd, and the countless other names of Black men and boys that we know and **yet still do not know**?

While I have been educated on the racial injustices that Black people have endured since the arrival of the first African captives to the Jamestown Colony, in 1619 (Ponti, 2019); throughout my life, I have tried to follow the path that my mother set out for me. I graduated from high school, completed both an undergraduate degree and a master's degree, and now, I'm a little over a year out from being awarded my doctorate from an Ivy League institution.

But so...what?

Does the accumulation of these degrees and the educational, financial, and social benefits that come with them grant me

immunity from being killed senselessly by the police? NO. Additionally, at graduation, do I receive a special card that illustrates “I’m a good Black, please don’t kill me”? Or do my educational achievements grant me the right to traverse this world with the false notion that I’m better (and thus safer from White terror) than other Black people—meaning somehow impervious to all that they face simply because I got myself a top-shelf formal education?

I often ponder the idea that following “the right path” will keep Black men like me safe. About a month before the world shut down due to Covid-19, and two months before George Floyd was murdered in my hometown, I was pulled over by a police officer in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. As the White police officer approached my car, I found my head racing with thoughts, my body flush with fear. First, I began recording on my phone in case a violent incident did occur. Second, I began praying to God for my safety and for compassion from the officer not to take my life. And third, as the officer approached my vehicle, I nervously assembled my state-issued ID, my registration, and also my University of Pennsylvania (Penn) issued graduate student ID. Thankfully, the stop went as it should. The officer informed me of what I did wrong, gave me a warning, informed me that a citation would be mailed to me, and kindly allowed me to go about my day. But secretly as I drove off, I wondered, “did everything move smoothly because he was a good cop, or did he treat me with the respect I deserved because I was a student at one of the most prestigious institutions in the Nation?” We never know the answers to these questions, and the questions themselves are the wrong ones to ask, actually, since this is all about structural racism and White-on-Black violence.

As a graduate student, one word I hear continuously thrown around is *positionality*. Relating to research methods, Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), define positionality as “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group (p. 628).” So, to this end, I ask you, the reader, this question: *Was my life spared by the officer because I was a graduate student at a place of prominence? And if so, was George Floyd’s life taken because officer Derek Chauvin decided that his life wasn’t worth living given his history and lack of such credentials?* Subsequently, would Amy Cooper have frantically called the police to threaten the life of Christian Cooper if she knew he was a Harvard graduate, pioneering comic book writer, and a biomedical editor for Health Science Communication? These questions, because their answers are embedded in a racist system, remind us of our own dehumanization and that even with our individual paths to secure self and family, the system is gunning for us as a whole.

Hindsight is 2020, right? Unfortunately, we will never know the answers to these questions. But one thing we do know, and that we should continuously reflect on and discuss, is the importance and relevance of equity for Black Lives. As Emmanuel Acho (2020) recently stated, “HIV, cancer, and chronic diabetes have been killing people for decades, but right now Covid-19 is killing more people than any of these illnesses combine. As such, right now what’s important is focusing our efforts on the pandemic” (E. Acho, personal communication, June 5, 2020). I wholeheartedly agree that all lives are important. But Black Lives are the lives under attack, and if you truly consider yourself a friend, family member, ally, advocate, or accomplice of a Black person(s), then you should be fighting for Black people’s place at the table of life, health, equity, fairness, and humanization. Because for far too long, we have been the servants to the patrons at this table, not the ones being afforded the opportunity to be served justice.

Part 2: Black on America's Campuses and White Privilege

Building from the recent protest, dislocation of students due to Covid-19, and the frequent disregard for and of Black lives, this section addresses issues related to being Black on America’s post-secondary campuses while traversing being Black in this Nation. Additionally, it lifts up the constant otherness many Black students and people feel at these institutions, and in the Country as a whole. Recently I came across a post on my Instagram timeline that read:

In college, White students get to be students. Whereas students of color (Black) serve as recruiters, diversity models, affirmative action admits, and a way to show America that postsecondary institutions value people of all races (Author unknown, n.d.).

Although these two sentences speak volumes, it’s the words in-between the lines that get to the core of the constant threat against the humanity of Black lives in our Nation’s ivory towers. For those who may be a little confused, let me explain what the naked eye may not see. As a White student(s) at a U.S. university, if your racial group publicly spews hate speech and mocks Black people (e.g., Lambda Phi Epsilon), your chapter may get slightly punished, but no real consequence will be dealt to your individual members (Fischetti, 2020). If you sexually assault a female student while she was unconscious, people will say as they did in 2015 at Stanford, “well... but what was she wearing?” “He’s a good upstanding student, and kids make mistakes, right?” (Stack, 2016) But if you are Black, your acceptance and character is constantly questioned, your positionality as a college faculty member is suspected (e.g., a Harvard professor jailed; a university officer is accused of bias, Goodnough, 2009), or you may be stopped by the university police and questioned for being on a campus that you, in fact, are a student and pay tuition to (N.W. Anyu, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

If the aforementioned is not enough, we as Black people are constantly living in a never-ending trauma-infused loop of watching our brothers and sisters die at the hands of those who are sworn to protect “us”. In case you didn’t catch it, the “us” I’m speaking about, seldom includes Black people. But recently something interesting happened, because of the death of Auhmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor (her murderers are still yet to be arrested), and most notably George Floyd, the United States was literally lit on fire. On May 30, 2020, my fiancé and I watched the news as major metropolitan areas across the nation from Los Angeles to our very own Philadelphia went up in flames, ablaze with the dignified rage of this pernicious time. Peaceful protests aimed at bringing awareness to the injustices faced by Blacks in this nation quickly turned into riots due in large part by police agitation (Del Pozo, 2020). People from coast to coast have decided that BLACK LIVES MATTER (Buchanan et al., 2020). Black businesses have seen a 7,000 percent increase in searches and sales (Clarke, 2020). Moreover, a nationwide campaign has begun to defund the police (Stockman & Eligon, 2020). And like a shock across the Nation, something powerful began to happen.

Nationally known companies and brands started airing commercials showing their support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement. After pressure from its cash cows... I mean national football association (NFL) players, the League commissioner declared “the NFL was ‘wrong for not listening’ earlier and encourages all to peacefully protest” (Seifert, 2020). Messages of equality and hope are written across the backs of jerseys of NBA players (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Say her Name, No Justice, No Peace) (Zagoria, 2020). Netflix committed to supporting Black banks by investing \$100 million in them (Mihalcik, 2020). And Black Lives Matter was painted across public streets from Los Angeles-to-Charlotte-to the nation’s capital (Culver, 2020). The *Breonna Taylor* Law was passed to ban no-knock warrants in Louisville.

But guess what? Breonna Taylor’s murderers (Brett Hankison, Jonathan Mattingly, and Myles Cosgrove) are still free to walk the streets, and George Floyd’s killer (Derek Chauvin) has been released from jail. But we are told we should believe that we live in a just society, right?

Now let’s take a step back and analyze something mentioned earlier. When I was pulled over, was I in the wrong? To be honest, I was. I had unknowingly made a wrong turn. But as I saw the police car behind me, my thought was not “damn, I’m about to get a ticket.” No, it was the same thought many Black men have in this country when a cop approaches them; it’s the same fear many Black mothers have when their sons and daughters leave the house; it’s the same prayer that many Black grandparents across the nation pray about on almost a daily basis, “Please let my baby come home.” If this sounds absurd or surprising to you still, congratulations, you have this amazing thing allocated to a select few people in the United States called privilege—which becomes a toxic entitlement unless you deal with it so that you stop hurting us, individually and collectively.

What is this “privilege” you asked? Well, let me explain. If you walk into a store and the entirety of the time you are in there, you are not followed, that’s privilege. If you feel safe walking or jogging or running or biking in an upscale community without fear of being questioned and possibly assaulted and arrested or even killed for being there, you have privilege. If you apply for a job, where you meet less than a fourth of the qualifications but get the job anyway, you have privilege. If you live in a country where every single president in its nation’s history, except one, who is vilified daily by the current POTUS, looks like you, you have privilege. Additionally, “if you generally have a good relationship with the police; being favored by school authorities; learning about your race and history in school; escaping violent stereotypes of your race; stating ‘you don’t see color’; or being ignorant of the dire state of racism in this country, then my friend you have a special kind of privilege”(p. 1), called White Privilege (Greenberg, 2017).

At this point, if you do indeed possess these privileges and are just now realizing it, don’t be appalled, don’t turn away. No, use that privilege to create and encourage real change around you, in your spheres of influence. Below I’ve listed 10 things you can do today to put your privilege to work to help support your fellow (Black) human beings:

1. Use your money to support Black businesses, Black Banks/Credit Unions (i.e., One United Bank, The Harbor Bank, Mechanics & Farmers Bank), Black educational institutions and HBCUs, Black-written school and children’s texts, and Black scholarships (i.e., United Negro College Fund).
2. Stop saying that “I don’t see color.” This statement is disrespectful and ignorant, it implies that we (Black people) share the same liberties and freedoms as you (White people) when in actuality we do not, and you know it.
3. Stop asking your Black friends, family members, co-workers, and acquaintances “how are you?” Instead ask, “how can I support you?” Educate yourself and do not put the emotional labor on Black people. Instead ask yourself, “what resources can I read, watch, or access that will educate me more on racial injustices (because every Black person does not have a Ph.D. in all things Black and we are all different contrary to popular belief?”
4. Stop making excuses for racist family, friends, colleagues. If you truly value BLACK LIVES, challenge these ideologies every single time. Use fact, not opinion, to combat racist ideologies. For example, I often hear, “Slavery ended over 400 years ago, Black people need to move on.” To this statement there is a whole category of texts that provide factual evidence of the inequalities Black people currently face in America (i.e., The New Jim Crow, How to be an Antiracist, White Fragility).

5. When you hear or see Black men and women murdered throughout our Nation, imagine how you would feel if that was your spouse, child, family member, or friend? If the person looked like you, lived near you, or reminds you of someone in your immediate family. And jump into action to create and implement change.
6. Do some research on what is going on with your local community's Black Lives Matter groups, NAACP chapter, or civil rights organizations, and see how you can support them (i.e., community organizing, food drives, voter registration).
7. Seek out and read the works of experts on civil rights, African American history, African(a) studies, and all other areas of Black culture you do not understand (i.e., Howard Stevenson, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Michelle Alexander, James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Marian Wright Edelman, Toni Morrison).
8. Fight for policies and elect officials that support issues related to the Black community (e.g. education, housing, income-equality, gun safety, racial inequality).
9. Watch and share Voices of Black Folk, as we discuss issues important to the Black community and highlight Black people in careers we seldom get to see them doing.
10. Vote, Vote, Vote!

Part 3: Vote on November 3, 2020, because our lives literally depend on it!

On Monday, August 10, 2020, the presumptive Democratic nominee (Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr.) announced Kamala Devi Harris as his running mate. Now before we move forward, let's just let that sink in. For the first time since the inception of this nation, a Democratic Vice Presidential nominee is a Black/South Asian woman from Oakland California, who attended the mecca of Black colleges (Howard University). Not only is she well versed in government, but, before serving as a senator, she also served as the first African American and first woman attorney general of California. I'm biased, but in my opinion, if you want to get something done right, hire a Black woman.

But before the news of this historical selection could get the acknowledgment it rightfully deserved, the onslaught of berating racist and sexist attacks began. Now, am I saying Senator Harris is perfect? Not by a long shot. As a Black man in this country, am I angry about her history with policing and imprisoning people of color? Absolutely! But like my grandmother often said, if you are going to judge someone, judge them for all they have done. Do not pick and choose what you feel defines that person. With this being said, I don't judge Senator Harris, by her time as the head prosecutor in the great state of California. Instead, I judge her by her actions throughout the totality of her life.

Honestly, I was not surprised when Trump called her a "disaster for the party, a socialist, and extraordinarily nasty" (Rogers, 2020). Sadly, at this point in his presidency, there is simply nothing that he could say nor do that would honestly surprise me. But what I did find shocking was the reaction from family and friends who I look up to and admire. Someone I regard as a mentor posted on her social media feed that, "Due to the pick of Senator Harris, I have decided not to vote in the upcoming presidential election this year" (n.d. personal communication, August 13, 2020). Another individual who I regard as a brother informed me today, "I don't understand how Black people can vote for her after all she has done" (n.d. personal communication, August 14, 2020). I welcome free speech and I believe people are entitled to their opinions but to these notions, I bring up The New Testament, the Book of Matthew 7:1-3 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." With this being said, if we choose to attack Senator Harris about her past, let us keep that same energy with her and former Vice President Biden's Republican opponents. So, in case you forgot about that part of the picture, let me jog your memory.

Since being in office, the Trump administration has:

- Overturned the Obama-era regulations on greenhouse gases (Mufson, 2020).
- Removed illegal immigrants from the 2020 census reporting (Frey, 2020).
- Forced the reopening of schools during the deadliest pandemic the world has seen in over 100 years (Milman, 2020).
- Further destroyed the financial future of this nation (Luhby, 2020).
- Attacked foreign-led businesses and commerce (Wang, 2020).
- Created confusion about safety measures during the pandemic (Verhovek et al., 2020).
- Fomented petty and self-serving fights with foreign superpowers (SCMP Editorial, 2020).
- Dismissed coronavirus cases in children (O'Grady et al., 2020).
- Used coded racist rhetoric to inform suburbia that under his leadership they no longer have to worry about low-income families bringing down property value (Fias, 2020).
- Criminalized immigration, locked adults and children in cages, and separated migrant families (Moya-Smith, 2019).
- Deserted the Paris Climate Accord and eroded US standing with allies (Harrabin, 2019).

And all this with the exception of the last two points happened in August of 2020 alone. So back to Joe Biden's pick as his VP running mate. Is this the team I hoped to see take on this current administration, no. But am I happy to see it? Absolutely! If we

truly seek to make this nation a place where all (wo)men are created equal, a place where we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among those rights being Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness (Declaration of Independence, 1776), then it is imperative that we vote for what's best for the majority and not simply oppose a party because we disagree with views of individuals. This is myopic when the freedom of our country is truly at stake.

On November 3, 2020, **please vote**. We have seen the worst of times and, we have seen the best of times. Personally, the last three-plus years of this current administration have been a soul-crushing train wreck. I love this Nation and I became an American citizen because I believe in the ideals of the United States. Although I identify as Cameroonian American, I've spent the last 23 of my 29 years in this country I call home. On November 3, 2020, I will be at the polls casting my vote. Leading up to the election, I will do my part to encourage my community to register and vote. But most importantly, I will do my part to ensure that my unborn son grows up in a nation that he is proud to call home.

So, my question to you is, will you do your part? And HOW?

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