

# Courage under Fire: Handcuffed and Gagged by the Streets

Yvette LaShone Pye

**Abstract:** My university invited me to lead a discussion on a panel titled #Black Lives Matter and the Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement. I had many thoughts about the invitation to this event: 1). It occurred to me that the mostly White audience might not know about the trauma being Black in this country causes, and how much Black lives actually do matter. 2). They also might need to be reminded that Whites are just as responsible for the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement as everyone else. 3). Would I be fired for speaking truth to power concerning our social dilemma? 4). Alternatively, would leading this discussion help me regain my voice stolen from the turbulent life experiences as a Black woman, mother, professional, sister, and daughter, surviving environments that seem to need to annihilate anyone like me? 5). How could I help my audience understand the trauma of institutionalized racism and offer meaningful solutions? First, I offered a geo-historical examination of Black lives ending in urban areas at the hands of Whites and law enforcement. Then, I offered scientific strategies that could change perceptions on racial interactions, and therefore, impact social and moral equity.

**Keywords:** Black Lives Matter, geo-historical trauma, urban violence, neurotransmission redesign

“Dr. Pye, I hope you don’t mind that I submitted your name to lead a discussion panel on the other campus?” asked a former student standing in my office doorway.

“Of course not, if you think I can help,” I responded, not revealing my reservation and suspicion having just re-read an email about the event in my inbox.

## Introduction:

### Consideration and Preparation

So the mystery of how they chose me to invite was solved; it was my former student’s idea. The invitation was to be the discussion leader on a panel at my university titled #Black Lives Matter and the Unfinished Business of the Civil Rights Movement. I remember looking at that email repeatedly to make sure they had sent it to the correct person. “Me”? I thought. My nearly all-White university wants me to come and talk about how Black lives matter? Don’t they know about my radical bent? Aren’t they afraid of what I might say? Would my husband’s fear, of me getting myself fired, finally be realized? Maybe these people were not there when I was repetitively calling attention to the lack of diverse faculty at our university. Then again, perhaps it was not much of a mystery at all because there were not many Black faculty members to choose from to speak to these matters. These thoughts raced through my mind during the several hours it took me to formally accept the invitation.

What is important for me to convey to this mostly White audience about Black lives and the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement? I asked myself continually while pacing my office, living room, and then dining room floors.

“Hunny, I’ll bet you’ll never guess what I got in my inbox today?” I baited my husband on the phone.

“News about a raise,” he quipped knowing how much I complain about the low pay.

“Yeah right; I would not keep you guessing about that,” I laughed in response.

“An invitation to lead a discussion on how Black lives matter and the unfinished business of civil rights.”

“Wow. And they asked you? Do they know what they are asking for?”

“Wait, it gets better. It’s on the Winona Campus! Can you believe it?”

“Okay now sweetie, tread lightly. It could be a set-up,” he cautioned me.

“Thanks a lot for fueling my fears. Goodbye; I have a ton of work to do and now I have think about that.” I said, as if those thoughts hadn’t already darted through my head.

I hung up the phone more perplexed than when I picked it up. Is he right; will this be the way they get rid of me? My husband had warned me about my risk-taking behavior several times over our 18-year stint in the upper Midwest. Even as a graduate student, he cautioned me not to be so emotional when discussing topics of racism, discrimination, and oppression. Of course that was code for: radical, passionate, foolhardy and irrational. However, I identified that my philosophical stance possesses characteristics of love, conscientious, and courage.

I have found it very difficult to compartmentalize my vocation, my job and my concern about our societal dilemmas. It seems the more I'd learn the more I'd hurt. I have vivid memories of discoveries I made in old dusty books written largely by White folks collected in the stacks inside libraries probably never really meant for my eyes to see. On more than one occasion, I discovered some awful atrocity in our human history, which sent me running from the University of Minnesota's Wilson library, bawling like a baby, making it difficult to clearly see my way to my dorm room; only to collect myself a half hour later and charge back to stacks to bravely face the horrors of knowledge. So yes, it's safe to say I may be a bit radical, ardent and emotive when it comes to human equality. Having said that, I have realized my husband's concerns are valid. In his terms: what I say and do have direct and indirect impact on my family. What is at risk is not simply job security, or physical security, but actual civil rights security.

The dangers of activism were really driven home, during my latest clash on Twitter, when I questioned the mayor of Minneapolis and the police department's decision to erect a fence around the 4th Precinct. They did so after forcibly clearing the area of Black Lives Matter demonstrators following the death of Jamar Clark.

I tweeted: "Why all the fear? #takedownthewall." Amidst many positive responses and re-tweets was this rather veiled response:

"Not fear; just sick of trash." Represented only by an American flag.

To which I replied: "Trash? So that's what you think of peaceful protesters?"

This person responded: "Yes, trash when you act like animals with no self-control!"

Livid, I challenged: "No fear; yeah right. While hiding behind the US flag. Show yourself and take responsibility for your words."

After another response or so, it occurred to me to look at the person's profile to see who was angry enough to keep this going. Then I saw it. It was a uniformed police officer sitting at his desk with his head in his hands covering up his face! I was struck with fear as my husband's words came flooding over me: "It's not just about you." My mind raced. What if he's mad enough to track me down? What if he retaliates and causes trouble for me or my family; or something worse? I panicked and hit BLOCK. Being relatively new to twitter, I ignored the warning message, and just like that all of the tweets were gone. I was on my phone and I didn't know how to take a screenshot and I had no proof that this actually happened.

Thinking back on the Winona invitation, I remember the first thing that came out of my husband's mouth that evening.

"Have you decided to accept the invitation yet?" He anxiously inquired upon his arrival home from work.

"Of course I'm going to do it," the confident words spewed out in pretense that I hadn't been wrestling with the decision at all.

"You know you've got to watch what you say, right?"

"Don't go there. You know how much I hate it when you start that. I know what to say; and if I say something that bother people, then good. I'm bothered; maybe they should be bothered too!" I retorted, hoping to save us both from having The Talk again. I had heard every version of the safe, mild and meek Black person not causing any trouble speech, so I moved out of earshot so I could concentrate. I replied yes to the invitation that night and began to brainstorm.

It occurred to me that 'place' has played a significant role in the recent incidents of Black people dying at the hands of White men, and that 'place' should be addressed at this forum. The subsequent uprisings that took place in these cities with high concentrations of

African Americans by African American protesters were of consequence. The reoccurring themes of African American deaths, US cities, and uprisings speak to how spatialization, racism, and placemaking (creating a place with specific intention) mattered in shaping the world into the one in which we currently live as well as shaping the world in which we want to live, looking forward.

By accepting the invitation, I could share research on how human emotions, experiences, and motives shape the ways people handle racial interactions. However, the very pressing issues for me were our limited examinations of how geography matters in recent years and past disruptions of the status quo. How does space and place influence what is happening in this country that's lead up to widespread protests and uprising in reaction to the murders of African Americans by police officers and White Americans? For instance, there is a strong case being made that urban areas of violence in the US (i.e., Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, etc.), their under-employment, and their achievement gap, are the result of the confluence of institutional racism, environmental gaps, and opportunity gaps (Nisbett, 2005, 2009; Porter, 2007). Much of the rebellion taking place on urban streets is the result of decades of frustration exacerbated by increasing militarized police. In terms of the role of economics, it has been suggested that the cure for the killing is more jobs. Since the latter would take far more time than I had been allotted to speak, I chose to concentrate on the former.

I thought about the fact that it is neither an accident nor coincidence that the violence and uprisings against the unjust treatment of African Americans are happening in urban areas; there are politics to placemaking. Traditionally, the definition of placemaking is a process that is a means to an end; that end is the creation of quality places. Folks know and understand what Quality Places are when they are in them (Wyckoff, 2014). They are the opposite of ghetto spaces. What I am struggling with is that my ideas are the antitheses of that traditional definition. Instead I want to look at menacing facets of placemaking that give way to places resembling where I grew-up, places of poverty, disenfranchisement, and crime. Since the 1960's, cities with high concentrations of Black people have been sites of over-surveillance, hyper-policing, and

systemic criminalization of Black bodies. Historically, this nation has enslaved, segregated, and displaced people of African descent as matter of form and function. Placemaking has also taken the forms of plantations, Sun-Set-Towns, and ghettos. The forms may have changed over time but their meaning never has—controlling people in place. Immanent Domain initiatives of highways and redevelopment, while proliferating during the 1960's and 1970's and dismantling Black communities, have resurged as recently as 2010 with projects like the Light-Rail in St. Paul, MN.

My part in the discussion included the opening presentation, so I thought I should set an educative tone and not take this as an opportunity to vent. Besides, I didn't want to be seen as the "angry Black woman" even though I had plenty of cause. As I sorted through my thoughts, I was haunted by the legacy of placemaking that resulted in the displacement of Native Peoples onto reservations, and Japanese Americans into internment camps, just to name two. Overlooking the belonging and dis-belonging that operates in our lived experiences causes serious inaccuracies in interpreting the societal landscape. We would do well to consider how race, class, poverty, and discrimination shape place, through a politics of belonging or dis-belonging, happen whether one is engaged with creative placemaking practices as an artist, funder, developer, NGO, or governmental agency (Bedoya, 2013). Furthermore, Bedoyo wants us to consider if what he calls 'Creative Placemaking' is different or complicit with these devastating actions. At this point in my preparation, I had not figured out how to articulate these things in a way that others could understand them sufficiently.

It would be risky no matter which path I took. I thought repeatedly over the two weeks leading you to the event.

As early as childhood, I often wondered and remember asking some dicey questions about why some people lived in ghettos and others did not. What is this ghetto? I pondered. Moreover, why are Black people stuck there? When it was time to declare a specialization within Education I wanted to study urban social geography in order to figure out why the ghetto space affected the lives of brown people in such phenomenally horrible ways. And why these effects were not experienced by all of the other people groups

that passed through that same space? In the 1990's when I began my early research in college, I found that sociologists and geographers were the vanguard disciplines interested in cities primarily because that is where the so called "riots" of the 1960's occurred.

An interpretation of the so-called riots happening in cities across the US places them, as well as the ongoing social deterioration of these communities, into larger structural contexts and processes. Alternatively, viewing the uprisings as the cluster of acts in a stream of pathologies practiced by low income Blacks can be understood as responses to conditions that were brought on by forces partially beyond their own control. These forces include a continuation of racist policies and practices by the larger American society and shifts in the US and global economies (Whitehead, 2000).

This is a more nuanced view of the build-up and release of frustration with inequality and unjust treatment in what is supposed to be a democratic system that turns out to be biased in favor of White Americans. According to Michel Foucault, anywhere there is power, there is resistance (1978). Geo-historical events demonstrate that, although African Americans have fought for freedom, for the right to vote, and for affirmative action. Black lives are still perceived as less important and valuable than White lives.

So then, when the news reached me that George Zimmerman, the murderer of Trayvon Martin, was found not guilty, my reaction was less than scholarly, professional, or diplomatic. I took to Facebook using expletives to express my disgust and utter disappointment as well as disbelief that this could be happening in 2013. Really? A young Black man could be shot and killed walking from a store eating Skittles in a hooded sweatshirt that caused a White man to feel nervous and suspicious? I often feel nervous and suspicious but that doesn't give me the right to kill another person, so why does he get the right to kill based on his comfort level? Moreover, my youngest son loves hoodies and graphic tees and we have shared beautiful bonding moments choosing styles and phrases to suit his self-expression. The thought of him, being gunned-down because of a sweater that he and I picked out together, made me ill on a visceral level that I still cannot fully express with words. That

could be my boy! That is my boy! That was my boy! I am in mourning.

Perhaps that accounts for my interesting reaction to the news of Michael Brown's death. I did not take to Facebook or to Twitter. Previously, I had been outraged and was consistently outspoken about the Trayvon murder acquittal. I had been photographed wearing hoodies in official meetings and posted responses on my office door about the incredible injustices. This time however, I felt gagged, stifled, muted, and even somehow handcuffed by the tragic events surrounding the death of Michael Brown. As I reflected on my inability or unwillingness to engage in recent protests of injustices and racial discourses, I recognized the symptoms of traumatization in my own set of experiences. I had studied the impact of traumatic stress from urban violence on youth, but until very recently I had not considered that trauma had stolen my voice and rendered me suddenly useless in the struggle for equality. Researchers have acknowledged significant relationships between experiencing and witnessing violence in urban area on youth behavior and academic achievement as a result of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in varying ways that needs to be addressed by professionals (Thompson Jr. & Massat, 2005).

Family often tried to engage me in debates on the injustices, politics, and the socio-economics involved in what was happening in Ferguson Missouri.

"Let's hear how the professor weighs-in on what's been going on," was a common statement either on Facebook or at family gatherings.

Nothing. I had nothing to offer it seemed. Instead, I had flashbacks to the Rodney King beating blurred together with the images of the at least 100 unarmed Black men and women who were killed by police in 2015, according to [mappingpoliceviolence.org](http://mappingpoliceviolence.org). However, we will never know the actual number because of words strung together such as 'justified police homicide' that is being used as a proxy for the polices' license to kill.

The brutality and killings did not stop. As result, I found myself just existing with these awful truths. It was as if I was bleeding into the pool of Tamir Rice's unfinished childhood, and it had scarred my psyche and left me speechless, inapt, and powerless. Maybe it

was the reality of how close my brothers had come to meeting similar fates as these young Black boys and men that had tied a muzzle around my mouth so as not to speak of what could have been or was yet become. Or, perhaps it was the pool of my father's blood that stained his floor when murdered by still unknown assailants' years ago in Chicago that had taken my ability to speak out. Was it because I could imagine my own sons' lives being snuffed-out that left me silent and more than willing to let others speak instead?

Sometimes I would suddenly start sweating when the subject of Black death would come up. It turns out that I was most likely experiencing what was closer to a lifetime prevalence of stressors manifesting in a major depressive episode (MDE) according to Journal of National Medical Association (2006). At times, I felt like I had a pit in my stomach at the mention of still another murder. It was just too much; I could not seem to handle it. I noticed that I became startled very easy and often. Whether it was the loud door, something hitting the floor, or even the telephone, I felt like I was jumping out of my skin with increasing frequency. I found myself disengaging with colleagues wanting to talk about the latest police-involved shooting reported on the news. They are more than news stories to me and I couldn't make small talk about them. Most of the time though, they wouldn't mention anything at all; it was like nothing was happening. I don't know which one was worse: their curiosity or their dismissiveness. My nerves were absolutely fried. It is said that the body will tell on you and the body would always win. So something had to give but what? I did not know what to do.

In one of several e-mail correspondences with a member of campus ministry who was hosting the event, I was told to telephone upon arrival on campus and would be met and taken to dinner by one of the staff. Upon arrival, I was greeted by an excited twentysomething White female graduate student worker, who shook my hand and introduced herself as the person behind the e-mail responses.

"It's nice to finally meet you in-person after all the emails," exclaimed Cindy.

"Thanks so much for honoring my strange requests," I responded.

"Hope the drive was okay."

"It's not my favorite thing this time of year but this seemed important," I admitted to her.

The real truth is that I abhorred that long drive; it was two hour and 15 minutes southeast along flat US Highway 52 to the Winona campus from my Twins Cities home in central Minnesota. I'd driven enough at this point to last a lifetime. When my mother was locked up, I was the only driver in my Chicago household. And now when we visit, we are on a constant Westside to Southside trek that almost makes me not want to visit at all. In fact, I probably wouldn't if it was not for my grandmother who still lives in my last childhood home.

"You have no idea how important it is that you are here," she confessed. "Or maybe you do. You spend much time on this campus?"

"No, only a couple of times a years for Founder's Days and Convocations mostly."

Thinking back on those events over the last nine years, it has always been hard to find more than a handful of non-White faces on campus. It used to bother me to the point of distraction, but somewhere around the fifth year, I began to accept that maybe diversity was just not a concern for our institution. I find myself in a paradox: feeling awful while simultaneously being complicit in my own oppression for a paycheck.

"Are you ready for dinner"? She asked.

"Sure." And I was quickly ushered up to the campus dining hall.

"I'm so excited that you are here," Cindy told me as we ascended the extra wide spiral-like staircase.

"I am glad I can help." As the words came out of my mouth, I must admit I was a bit disappointed that the promise of dinner meant going to the cafeteria. I had arrived early enough and was hoping for a good meal after that long drive especially since they had not offered me an honorarium. I had had some notion of dining at a local eatery and then making our way back to campus in time for the talk. Wrong. Instead, I had the typical Midwestern dairy latent college fare (i.e.: pizza, cream based soups, pastas, and hot dish). Like

many African and Asian Americans, I am lactose intolerant, an idea that seems to be lost on my university, so I took my chances with a little pasta with marinara and a huge salad. Underwhelmed by the dinner, I was looking forward to meeting the rest of the team who had invited me.

We made our way to the faculty lounge where we were quickly joined by a professor from the biology department. Making the introductions, Cindy said “this is Dr. Pye from the Twin Cities Campus, and this is Dr. Phillips who teaches in our biology department here.”

“I almost never get to the Twin Cities these days except when we have visiting family that insist we go to the Mall of America, ha, ha, ha.” He laughed alone as his humor was lost on both of us.

Hmm, so what should I’ve made of all those memos practically mandating us to make biannual pilgrimages here while their faculty get to choose to come near our city for leisure. I just added it to the long list of double standards and top-down decision-making typical between the “traditional” campus and our “urban” campus.

“Hello, I’m Aaron from Campus Ministry,” a welcomed announcement came with an out-stretched hand and finally broke the professor’s verbal stream of consciousness. Aaron was an African-American man with long dreadlocks that extended past his shoulders and had been at the university for twelve years.

“We have been anticipating your visit for a while now,” he declared with a wide smile.

“I only hope it does some good,” as I tried to doctor-up the meal with copious amounts of pepper and olive oil.

“I hear you are from Chicago.”

“Yes, I’ve been here for 18 years; I came for grad school and then I got a job teaching here.” Detecting a non-Midwestern accent I ventured, “Are you from here?”

“Oh God no! I’m originally from Kansas City.” I was not surprised given most Black folks I run into

in Minnesota seem to have come from somewhere else.

“It can get lonely on this campus; don’t know what I’d do if I wasn’t so involved with the ministry,” Aaron confided while leaning toward me. Perhaps his comment was not meant for general table consumption. “We should start to wrap things up and head down stairs soon,” Cindy suggested not long after.

“I have the videos all cued up on my computer. They are both ready to go as people file in like you asked,” Cindy assured me as we gathered are things and headed down to the Toner Student Center Lounge.

“Great! Can you also play them after the talk is over?”

While preparing for the talk, I had sent her links to two videos that would hopefully encourage the people to make connections between the lyrics and images of America’s social dilemmas while inspiring redemptive hope and action.

“I have to leave at one point to keep another appointment but I should be back by the end to play them,” she said, admitting that she was double booked. Oh well, so much for the cause, I thought. She then quickly gave me a compliment:

“I love your video choices, by the way”! Actually, I didn’t especially care if she approved or not.

“I choose them to draw people deeper into the discussion and bring about a collective desire to change the tragic trajectory of America when it comes to equality.”

“No, I so completely get it,” she declared while stopping in mid-stride and making intense eye contact with me. I guess she was attempting to show of solidarity but she could have been trying to make-up for skipping out in the middle of the discussion.

I also remember wanting to shock them a bit. The need to disrupt their complacency had become a key part of my plan. I want them to feel disturbed when they see State Troopers attacking peaceful Black marchers with clubs in scenes from the movie *Selma* as Common’s lyrics flash boldly across the screen as he rapped:

Freedom is like religion to us

That's why Rosa sat on the bus

That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up

I wanted them to shift in their seats as at least two senses experienced a modicum of what it is like to walk-while-Black in America as Lecrae's lyrics from "Welcome To America" are glaringly displayed and fill the room with sight and sound:

Man I'd die for America

Though America ain't feeling me

I went to war for this country

Turn around came home and you rid of me

### **The Talk**

The room was on a north-facing wall of the Student Center. Its most prominent feature being the tall tinted windows faintly revealing the randomly shaped snow mounds just on the other side.

It was filled with two sets of thinly cushioned dark seats, about 30 on the right and 30 on the left of the media island. The media island was really nothing more than a two-tiered cart equipped with a laptop and a projector pointed towards a screen on the opposite wall. The podium, adorned with the school's emblem in brass, separated the two tables where the other three White panelist and I sat flanked by the white projection screen. The room was warm despite the cold 21 degrees outside. That is, warm if you ignore the fact that all of the Black students sat on the left side of the room while the right side was nearly exclusively White.

After looking over the crowd of 20 to 30 audience members (about 10 undergraduates, one Black staff member (Aaron), and the rest White faculty and staff). Just then I noticed to my surprise setting on the front row was the university's vice president. "I knew this was a setup," I thought. "Okay Yvette, are you going to change anything? NOPE!" I thought resolutely to myself.

I thanked them for the opportunity and then I announced:

"I have titled my talk: *Courage Under Fire!*" Then I asked the crowd: "Are you ready? Are you sure?," hoping to prepare them to become uncomfortable with the truths that we needed to face as Americans with a shared ideological history of White supremacy and its ramifications, which were being played presently out in cities across the United States. I had also hoped to allow them a few minutes to brace themselves before I began asking them what they are willing to do personally, professionally, and publicly to ensure that Black lives indeed do matter, while working toward the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement.

What I attempted to convey to the audience was that, when examining what we experience from the murders of Trayvon Martin to Tamir Rice, there is a noticeable arc of issues at hand including institutional racism, corrupt communication, and economic inequality, which have historically taken place in urban areas. What I had been experiencing for years was great angst being caused by competing thoughts, and a sad truth that young Blacks had been killing each other at alarming rates in the ghettos of large cities in recent history. I have been wrestling with these ideas for most of my life, but never as much since this rash of killings. Therefore, what I was submitting was that it is through a geo-historical lens of trauma that is useful in bringing about understanding, healing, and reconciling race relations in this country.

I was silent until I was not silent anymore; I opened up the discussion panel on #Black Lives Matter and the Unfinished Business of the Civil Right Movement and felt released from my shackles.

As I was listening to the other three all White panelists talk about the Prison Industrial Complex and how 'othering' of people groups shape our society, I could not help but think that no matter how many efforts to explain our common humanity, White privilege creates a safe buffer from which they could speak from abstractions that Black people like me are not afforded. Looking at them and over the mostly White the audience, it struck me that they would never know the life altering impacts of geographies like the one from which I had transcended. I thought of all of the cameras, blue and white flashing cameras, on every other corner identified with police placards throughout

my grandmother's West Humboldt Park neighborhood on Chicago's Westside. The more I looked the more of them I would find on that spring day we visited my old stomping grounds. Historically, black communities have been under-protected, while simultaneously experiencing hyper-surveillance. It is then no surprise that the Cook County Jail, located in Chicago, is America's largest jail with a daily population of about 9,500 (maximum capacity 10,136), according to their website. It may not come as a surprise either, given city's high level of segregation, that jail's population is disproportionately Black and male (cookcountysheriff.org).

The struggle to maintain power often involves hegemonic maneuvers and devices of the government and the wealthy such as surveillance, power and knowledge, and mental health to control and delegitimize the 'other'. The works of Michel Foucault are well known to cover these facets of society. Foucault's spatialized reasoning proposed that houses of surveillance (prisons, schools, barracks, hospitals, factories, etc.) and their tools maximize the visibility of the subject (Crampton & Elden, 2007). Consequently, the placement of all those blinking blue and white police cameras high atop preexisting street lights and telephone poles helps us understand how power, communication, and surveillance is working in relation to that poor Black part of Chicago and other areas of the like.

### **Recommendations: Toward Changing Minds**

Before the official closing, I posed some key questions and purposed some solutions to the mostly White audience because there is indeed much work to be done to address the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement.

"We can start by seeking answers to some critical questions, intentionally strategizing, and implementing practices that include the following:"

- As academics, we should be courageous enough to learn and teach how to evolve in our thinking to change institutions, and systems, so that they are just and right to all people.
- Leaders should challenge the ideology that has spawned this continual institutional racism from

the top-down by recognizing the universal inherent human value and potential, regardless of color or place of origin.

- Educators and law enforcement should purposely stop the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

For instance, researchers at the University of MN found that in US schools Black students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended even though Black students are no more likely than other students to be involved in rule-breaking behaviors at school (Gibson, Haight, & Kayama, 2015). Americans have to face up to what is really going on here – deferential treatment based on racism. As early as third grade, these misunderstood and oppressed children become part of Industrial Prison Complex.

"I know what I am doing through teaching, research and activism toward a more equitable society starting with the academy." I told them before continuing.

- K-12 and Higher Education administrators must be willing to diversify our teaching professionals and increase Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) strategies.

But what disturbs me is the reaction I get when I talk to some educators about Cultural Responsive Pedagogical strategies. Invariably they respond in ways that indicate "we did that already." There is a gap in the practices of teacher preparation and professional development concentrating on CRT. Current practices are obviously not sufficiently prioritized but the leadership seems perfectly fine with checking the "Diversity Training" box.

"On another front, ethical communication involves authenticity, openness, and transparency and the need supersedes hierarchies and across industries."

- We all have to be willing to change in order to truly communicate with each other instead of fearing one another.
- We should all examine the types of relational networks needed to be established that encourages social constructions that lead to trust rather than mistrust.

- We all need to clearly and intentionally think about how we plan to course correct from here to ensure that Black lives really do matter.

As I spoke, I noticed nodding heads as if in agreement with the need to find answers to these questions. I could not know how really committed they were, but I reminded myself that I first had to demonstrate courage and faith to speak truth to power before I could challenge and lead others to do the same.

Some additional recommendations toward moving in the direction of equality in the nation and in the world come from the research findings of Neuroscientist Caroline Leaf, author of *Who Switched Off My Brain* (2013), which showed that we can detox our thoughts. “We are able to break the cycle of toxic thoughts and renew our minds towards one another,” I restated the finding of Leaf’s research to the audience. I told them that these were learned behaviors that we could unlearn and change if that was our desire.

“It is possible to redesign the neurotransmissions of our brain by looking at positive images rather than negative images,” I relayed.

As a social experiment and a teachable moment, I commenced showing positive images of Black people, young and old, at work and play, experiencing love and joy. Who is to say if they really got anything out of it, but I sure did relish the opportunity to open, and perhaps even change, peoples’ minds about our collective humanity and the fact that we are more alike than we are different. Besides, at least now they would have gotten a glimpse into and experienced a science-based practical exercise in how we can indeed change our minds if we care to do so.

“These findings suggest how people that typically think negatively about ‘the other’ can change the way they think on purpose with practice,” I suggested.

In fact, published in a recent volume of *Poverty & Race* researchers reported there are at least three psychological phenomena that impede institutional change and block society from achieving racial equality. Rachel D. Godsil (2015), pointed out that

implicit bias, racial anxiety (discomfort about the experience and potential consequences of inter-racial interactions), and of stereotype threat (the pressure felt when people fear their performance may confirm a negative stereotype about their group) are at issue. In addition, some best practices found to be effective in improving racial interactions were offered. The interventions proposed include debiasing and preventing effects of implicit bias by stereotype replacement and perspective-taking. Interactions to reduce racial anxiety by both direct and indirect forms of inter-group contact proved useful. Lastly, was reported that stereotype threat interventions such as social belonging and growth mindset strategies have been shown to alter behavior of those who want to change. The article ended with a sobering thought about what we are really facing concerning broader cultural and ultimately our opportunity structures, institutions, and systems: “Yet for lasting change to occur, the broader cultural and ultimately our opportunity structures also need to change for our society to meet its aspirations of fairness and equal opportunity regardless of race and ethnicity” (pg. 10).

- We can start with the churches, schools, the justice systems, or the other structures that have socio-economic power.
- No institution should rest unless they are actually doing their part to be more just and equitable in all their practices.
- We need to strategize how to employ the love of humanity in dealing with the continued practice of differential treatment based on skin color.

This will require that we seriously consider ways to practice Agape love. Agape love is the kind of love Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for and practiced throughout the Civil Right Movement. Agape love factors into how people treat one another as fellow human beings. According to Cornel West (2011), it is impossible to lead the people if you don’t love the people and can’t save the people if you don’t serve the people. So, he asks: What kind of courage have you demonstrated in the stances that you have taken? It a great question for each of us to individually and collectively answer. I personally believe that love is the most powerful force in the universe (Pye, 2012).

“What do you believe?” was the question I left the

audience with.

### **The Discussion**

The discussion portion spilled over into the next hour where many interesting questions were asked and addressed. These are but a few examples:

“Shouldn’t it say: All Lives Matter then?” asked the only Asian undergraduate present.

“While all lives matter, we are highlighting the need to practice and live out that fact for Africa Americans in February, which is Black History Month, and at a time when we are dying at the hands of White people at an alarming rate,” I responded with a sense of frustration that he still didn’t seem to get it.

“Well clearly everyone does not value Black lives as much as others judging by the increase of these incidents lately,” responded another discussant with seemingly equal frustration.

“I volunteer as a teacher in a nearby elementary school. What can I do to be more helpful to diverse students?” asked one of the White undergraduates.

“Well, you can read as much as you can about their culture so you can build a rapport with them,” answered the only other female professor on the panel.

“You can also talk to them. I mean, ask them about what they like. Ask about their favorite activities inside and outside of school; things like that. Really try to get to know them and request that they be allowed to bring some of their culture into the classrooms and into the school for that matter,” I added from a culturally responsive position.

An exasperated Black student exclaimed from the middle of row on left side of the room: “I’m just tired of having to speak for all Black people. I mean in every other class or so there will be somebody asking how do African Americans feel about this; or handle that or the other thing? First of all, I cannot speak for all Black people. And secondly, most of the stuff they are asking about I would feel the same way they do in a similar situation; right is right, no matter what color your skin is.”

“I truly understand and that’s why I impress upon my students that we are more alike than we are different,” I responded with probably obvious equal irritation.

His question seemed to open up some invisible door for other Black students in the crowd because there was lots of nodding and the darker hued hands started going up.

“Why are there so many assumptions about people who are not White?” asked an African American young woman. “So, I ‘have’ to be here on a scholarship? Can you believe that is what was conveyed to me several times since I have been here? Every Black person is not poor and how dare someone look at someone and automatically conclude that is the case. It can be rough being here,” she continued as if to pled with her fellow Whites students and faculty to acknowledge their biases and change their behavior.

Another Black student’s raised hand was recognized by the moderator.

“It’s good and all that we are up here at a college discussing these things but who really needs to hear about this are the folks in neighborhoods, like where I come from. See, I came here from Chicago and there are some horrible things happening on some of those streets; folks killing each other like crazy,” explained this worried undergraduate.

His words pierced the already wounded heart of mine as I quickly responded: “Yes, sadly there is indeed much work to be done for those young people who have seemingly lost hope.” This was an unsatisfactory answer to a complex situation but this acknowledgment is necessity to do a better job at reaching out to the hard to reach.

The moderator soon closed the Q&A and we milled around talking and networking a bit.

“Sounds like more questions than answers,” is what I heard from one of the middle-aged White women.

“These discussions often generate more questions than answers but that is not necessarily a bad thing; it shows that we are thinking critically about things that don’t have simple answers” I heard a middle-aged White male professor respond. Straightway, I turned and motioned to shake his hand, as this would have

been my identical answer.

### Conclusion

The event ended and a White administrator, the one who had given my name to the event committee, asked to speak to me.

“Thank you so much for doing this; we really needed it on this campus,” shaking my hand lingeringly with empathic eyes expressed by my former student.

“Thank you for thinking of me,” I responded with a renewed sense of hope.

“No, I knew immediately who to ask; it just had to be you!” he said with a wide-eye expression of assuredness while still shaking my hand.

“Why, because there are not many of us to choose from?” I queried, referring to handful of Black faculty at our combined university campuses, not missing an opportunity to point out the obvious.

“Well there is that; but no. Really it’s because of what you taught us and the passion you always had in class that made this perfect for you to do. I really mean: it had to be you!” he insisted.

“In the last analysis, I want to know that I did something toward getting us prepared to help heal our distressed society,” I expressed to him before we said our goodbyes.

As I lay in bed that night I felt somehow lighter and freer. I think being asked to speak about that which I had been unable to articulate prompted this healing process in which I find myself today. Seven months later, I was no longer handcuffed or silenced; I had re-discovered my voice and the courage to put it to use.

### References

Alim, N., Graves, E., Mellman, T., Aigbogun, N., Gray, E., Lawson, W., & Charney, D. (2006). Trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress disorder and depression in an African-American primary care population. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 98 (10): 1630-1636.

Bedoya, R. (2013). Placemaking and the politics of belonging and dis-belonging. *GIA Reader*, 24, (1).

Crampton, J. W. & Elden S. (2007). *Space, knowledge and power: Foucault and geography* UK: Ashgate Books.

Foucault. M. & Hurley, R. (1990). *The history of sexuality, vol. 1: An introduction*. Random House. Inc., New York.

Gibson, P., Haight, W., & Kayama, M. (2014). The out-of-school suspensions of black students: a racial and social justice issue. *CURA REPORTER*, 44 (2).

Godsil. R. (2015). Breaking the cycle: implicit bias, racial anxiety, and stereotype threat. *Poverty & Race Research Action Council*, 24 (1).

Leaf, C. (2013). *Switch on your brain: the key to peak happiness, thinking, and health*. , Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Nisbett, R. (2005). The influence of culture: Holistic versus analytic perception. *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (10).

Nisbett, R. (2009). *Intelligence and how to get it: Why schools and cultures count*. New York, NY: Norton.

Porter, A. (2007). Rethinking the achievement gap: A Review of Research. @ PennGSE, *A publication of the University Of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE)*, 5, (1).

Pye, Y. L., (2012). *Going from the projects to PhD: Transcending my geography*. Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris.

Thompson Jr., T. & Massa, C. (2005). Experiences of violence, post-traumatic stress, academic achievement and behavior problems of urban African-American children. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 22 (5-6).

West, C. (2011). *Hope on a tightrope: words and wisdom*. Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, California

Whitehead, T. (2000). The formation of the U.S. racialized urban ghetto. *CuSAG Special Problems Working Paper Series in Urban Anthropology*, 15.

Wyckoff, A. (2014). Definition of placemaking: four different types. MSU Land Policy Institute, pdf. [www.cookcountysheriff.org/doc/doc\\_main.html](http://www.cookcountysheriff.org/doc/doc_main.html)

***About the Author:*** Yvette L. Pye, Ph.D., is Associate Professor in Doctor of Leadership, Saint Mary's University of MN (612-728-5139, [ypye@smumn.edu](mailto:ypye@smumn.edu))