

# My Reckoning

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**Abstract:** This is a personal reflection of my work as a macro social work academic in 2020–2021. As a migrant woman of color, I reflect on how my lived experiences intersect with that of my professional work through the global lens of critical race theory. I reflect on the evolution of my work around teaching, scholarship, and service during this time and address strategies on how to move forward.

**Keywords:** belonging, macro social work practice, personal intersects professional, academic

In trying to comprehend the events of 2020, I need to provide some context. When people look at me, they presume that I am from India. When I begin to speak, they realize that I do not have an Indian accent, but neither is it American. I see their struggle of trying to place me in a box—but which one? Having lived in three different countries spanning three continents, I have come to the daunting realization that racism and discrimination exist everywhere. I have experienced racism and discrimination since my childhood, and it has continued into my adult life. I have never felt like I belonged anywhere. I grew up in one country, but my grandparents constantly reminded me that my identity was always tied to another, their homeland, Sri Lanka. When I finally visited Sri Lanka, the country that I perceived to be home, I was made to feel like a tourist, an outsider. These lived experiences of racism and discrimination, along with the internal battle with my sense of belonging, intersect with my professional life daily. Critical race theory from a global lens recognizes how my race (Ceylonese Tamil), gender (female), and social class intersect daily with my professional and personal life (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Simatele, 2018; Weiner, 2012).

I accepted my first and only academic position at a small private university in the northeast, which was and is predominantly white, about seven years ago. My first semester at the University was intimidating. As I stood in front of my class, I felt my brown skin pop out. This heightened sense of awareness was present during the entire semester. I was comfortable teaching about white privilege, oppression, and discrimination, but I did not realize how uncomfortable it would be doing so in a class with a majority of white students. One of the five themes of critical race theory is to challenge dominant ideology (Solorzano, 1997). I constantly challenge students around their “I am not a racist” mindset along with their color blindness and notions around equal opportunity in every class I teach. This has been a constant struggle for me every semester, but I persist in the hopes of doing it better with practice. Regardless, it is a mentally draining task, especially for a person of color. I simultaneously realized as my children were going through the education system locally that the history taught in schools is whitewashed. My children, for example, were taught to celebrate Thanksgiving and were told stories of the natives and pilgrims, and I had to constantly counter these stories at home. So, in class students and I would discuss the version of history they were taught, and I realigned aspects of history, especially facts that have impacted black communities and communities of color, in the hopes that these discussions would raise further curiosity and the will to further their personal understanding of history. I was ready to quit by the end of the semester. After a month of processing, I realized that I would probably have to “beat this drum” regardless of the

academic setting as a macro social worker. So, I stayed. But it has been a journey that I reflect on in this essay.

2020 has been a reckoning for me, but the last four years have been a living hell. I cannot discount the years under the Trump presidency when discussing 2020 as it provides vital context for me. I watched in utter dismay as events unfolded after the 2016 elections. I could see this country becoming openly divided under the Trump administration. It was equally worrying when nationalistic policies gained prominence overseas as this has implications on social policies such as immigration (Bieber, 2018). Born and raised in a country that was once colonized, I did not have to live through colonization to experience the racist discriminatory and oppressive practices that still manifest today.

My first series of tasks revolved around the curriculum and my teaching. I reviewed the curriculum that I was responsible for in 2018, as I did most summers, but from a different angle. My goal when teaching has always been to both challenge students with the content and to provide space for introspection. When teaching a course on “Global Human Rights and Social Justice,” I covered global social problems. In the first couple of weeks, we discussed the Declaration of Human Rights, the functions of the United Nations, and the roles of international organizations. I realized that it was insufficient. Students needed to understand what European nations did when they explored, conquered, and exploited countries. The impact of colonization, slavery, and neocolonialism and the resulting race-based discriminatory practices are very much alive today (Weiner, 2012). My curriculum needed to reflect this fact. So, I changed the readings and tweaked assignments accordingly. I also started prefacing the class by asking students to apply their knowledge from other core general education classes such as English, history, or anthropology to the content in this class where appropriate. Interestingly, students have been more vocal in this class since the changes to this curriculum, applying their general knowledge or information around certain topics or stories they read about in another class or worked on for an assignment. Talking about the content in class provides simultaneous opportunities to pause and work on introspection, giving space to challenge students’ ideology. In doing this work, I have shared not only personal experiences of racism and discrimination but also my implicit biases that give students the space in the classroom to challenge and engage in discussions around their own experiences and ideologies (Solorzano, 1997).

My next charge came when I had to review the social welfare policy curriculum, as we were reducing it to one course in Fall 2020. Something had to give, but I had to be very thoughtful in what had to be taken away. Providing historical context was important but including narratives on how we continue to oppress and discriminate was equally important. In doing so, I also realized that I needed to teach policy practice through various lenses such as feminist policy and trauma informed policy. We definitely needed to discuss the historical contexts but having lived under the Trump administration (2016–2020), I wanted to ensure we taught our students to be activators, not just allies. I do not want another thought and prayer after a shooting. This meant incorporating action assignments. I found that attending macro social work conferences and presentations in the past, along with engaging in the Voting is Social Work campaign (<https://votingissocialwork.org>), was useful in adopting and creating action assignments. Having taught this class twice to date, I have observed that students begin the class overwhelmed with

the content and work but are appreciative of the skills they develop by the end of the semester, which has been noted in their reflection of the action assignments.

In Spring 2020, as I was juggling transitioning class to online synchronous learning and having my family learn and work from home, I literally “looked up” one day and realized the expanse of this pandemic, and the glaring racial, economic, and environmental disparities that bubbled to the surface very quickly. There was a brief moment of helplessness, but I very quickly started thinking about opportunities to learn and use my skills. With respect to teaching, I first tweaked the curriculum in the remaining weeks of class. It was critical to incorporate the disparities that the pandemic brought to the forefront nationally and globally since April 2020. This was especially important as the majority of students were dealing with issues of their own during this time. The discussion started with the recognition that the pandemic had unsettled most of us to varying degrees, giving students a space to reflect on how it impacted them from the loss of their waitressing job to losing grandparents. We then shifted the discussion towards the clients they served at their internships and then more broadly addressing the disparities locally, nationally, and internationally. Students reflected at the end of the semester that they appreciated the class discussions around the pandemic as many of them were struggling to cope with the changes themselves and were unaware of the inequalities. I realized that students were more engaged in discussions and assignments became relevant when incorporating current problems around the pandemic. Teaching being one aspect of my profession, I naturally turned my attention to other possible projects as classes wound down at the end of the semester.

With scholarship interests around migrant experiences, I connected with an agency working with migrant communities through the school’s networks. They expressed various concerns such as access to healthcare, lack of protective equipment, and food insecurity that their clients were facing and expressed the need to document these experiences. After multiple discussions around the methodology and creation of the survey, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval and started the process of data collection. Migrants have been deeply impacted by the pandemic globally. Attending webinars organized by the Civil Society and other international organizations has been vital to my growth and learning on this topic and, in return, has informed my scholarship and service to the field. During this time, I also became more engaged with the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Migration (<https://ngo-migration.org/>). In May of 2020, a horrific event would have a dramatic impact on the coming months and a change in my sense of purpose.

The passing of George Floyd and what followed changed me. I have participated in the Black Lives Matter, climate, and immigration protests in the past, but this felt very different. In those four years, I had been processing my personal identity and sense of belonging, and this moment triggered something in me. It felt like a reckoning. It was now or never. I felt inapt to deal with this, but I had to figure it out. I had to learn, engage, and practice. Conversations mattered to me over the summer of 2020. I had many conversations with colleagues within the School of Social Work, across departments on campus, and beyond. It helped me process my feelings and experiences and learn about what others were planning and doing, looking ahead to the work to be done. This was also my way of seeking support and mentorship which has been vital during this time (Robinson et al., 2019).

The renewed awareness around systemic racism across the nation spilled into our campus community during this time as well. Students on campus were engaged and formed a new organization fighting for systemic change. Social Work Society (a student group on campus) board members were equally engaged with this newly formed group, simultaneously planning their annual “Teach In” on the timely topic of how the global pandemic shed light on pertinent issues. Student engagement was key for me during this time as this was an opportunity for me to engage them outside the classroom. By July 2020, the university had an anti-racism commitment statement and there have been changes since. I participated on a panel of faculty of color discussing our research and struggles. It felt like these were initial efforts towards creating a more integrated racial space on campus (Burrell-Craft, 2020; Kendi, 2019). My work over the summer may have been mostly outside of the classroom, but my learning from these experiences has informed my teaching.

The 2020 elections were also looming in my mind, and I knew I could not live through another four years of the Trump presidency. I had been learning about voter engagement, and having attended webinars on voter registration thanks to the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign, I conducted one-hour “lunch and learn” sessions on the importance of voting in social work directed at field agencies. These conversations continued into the fall and involved sharing information with faculty and encouraging field professors to engage in conversations around voting rights. Although there was some relief from the election outcome, something inside me was unsettled: January 6th solidified that our work is far from over. This was the first time I took interest in watching the electoral college vote count after a presidential election. I watched with interest, but this turned to shock and horror as the events unfolded that afternoon. As I started processing this event, a part of me strongly felt that I had failed as an educator. This is a failure on our education system. If only people truly understood slavery, colonization, and how policies historically and today continue to impact Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. I have been thinking a lot about my teaching since.

As a school, our mission is driven by human rights and social justice. It never occurred to me that we needed to have an anti-racism statement until recently. I am glad that in the last year our school came together to initially do work around introspection and are now working towards an anti-racism statement. Introspection was a struggle in 2020 as everything was very raw personally, which intersected professionally. I could not complete the required activities, and I asked to be excused from the group. I was not even sure if I could participate in the creation of the statement, but I slowly but surely started engaging. In addition to these various tasks, I took on an organizing role with our faculty union. We are undergoing contract negotiations and core concerns have come to the foreground that intersect with the current problems. Organizing around union-related issues with faculty from various departments has provided another space for race-related conversations. I have also established working relationships with colleagues from various departments through my involvement with the union, and this has led to working together on non-union-related projects. I have been able to connect with faculty of color to reflect, process, and discuss the work that lies ahead of us. Reflecting on this last year, I am cautiously hopeful. Here’s why.

Black Lives Matter. Having listened to multiple webinars on migrant issues including racism and discrimination, along with my humbling knowledge on Black history, I see clearly that we need to explicitly fight around issues of systemic racism, especially that against Black and Indigenous populations. The University has established an anti-racism commitment statement, and the School of Social Work is in the process of creating our own statement. I am very mindful that we need to have action beyond the statement and will continue to advocate for implementation in all space across campus. Ongoing introspection is vital during this time. I need to continue to check my personal implicit biases and work on addressing microaggressions when they do take place. In addition to ongoing introspection, I will continue to work on the curriculums that I teach, looking for ways to incorporate content and activities around anti-racist policies. There is a definite need to engage further in voter registration and mobilization. My plans include further outreach to social service agencies in engaging social work interns to do this work at their placement. These are just a couple of examples of the work that can be done in the short term. There is also much to be done across the campus such as continuing my organizing and advocacy work with the faculty union and ongoing engagement in dialogue that leads to action and implementation around the university's commitment to anti-racism.

The global landscape around immigration policies and the race discourse that has come to the forefront is one that I also cannot dismiss. In working with the mixed migration subcommittee on the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Migration, I will be mindful in reviewing the work from a global race theory perspective (Weiner, 2012) and what the implications of this mean in terms of migration policies and practice. Doing this work through my teaching, scholarship and service, ongoing personal training, and education when I see gaps in my knowledge is vital to this process. Participating in various activities has provided support and mentorship in the past, and I believe will continue to do so as I maintain my work in these spaces.

I do not want to be a check box. Reflecting on the past year, there is a resurgence on the work around anti-racism. However, I am increasingly feeling that the wheels are turning too quickly. I caution that the attitude around anti-racism has become a check box in need of ticking off to maintain relevance rather than any substantive changes in social work practice and beyond. In keeping with the concept of *interest convergence* in critical race theory, which denotes that race equality is used to maintain White interests, I question if we are moving towards inclusivity to serve the current dominant system (Burrell-Craft, 2020). With everything that has taken place this last year, I have been involved in various efforts to bring awareness on this topic to the campus community. I would like to process as a group, where we are and how we should move forward. This requires the commitment for integrated racial spaces (Kendi, 2019) for honest conversations which then I feel provides opportunities towards organizing and action.

This has been a period of turmoil personally and professionally. I realize that it is not going to get better anytime soon or even in my lifetime. However, I strongly believe that the time is now, and I need to act! I have become increasingly mindful that I do not have the time and energy to actively participate in multiple activities. Working on the process of tenure, I struggled with how best to spend my time this last year. From a traditional standpoint of requirements for the tenure process, I am struggling to justify how my actions this last year have contributed significantly to

my scholarship and especially to my service. While being involved in these various nontraditional service activities, I have continued to uphold my roles in the typical service requirements. This is an issue that other faculty of color also grapple with (Baez, 2000). I have come to realize that race-related service on campus and beyond is something I cannot sacrifice. This will be an interesting balancing act and hopefully will be looked upon with approval during my tenure process. As I have mentioned throughout this essay, my lived experiences intersect with my professional work in every aspect. Similarly, I am realizing that my teaching, scholarship, and service are interconnected, informing the work in each of these areas.

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