

# Reflections from the Guest Editorial Team: Black Racial Injustice: Personal Reflections to Change Strategies

Priscilla A. Gibson, Valandra, Patricia A. Gray, and Rebecca Chaisson

**Abstract:** Antiblack racism is a system that is rooted in policies, practices, and institutions such as education, health care, and justice that reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, oppression, discrimination, and marginalization towards people of Black-African descent worldwide. As the first in a trilogy of Special Issues, this issue of *Reflections* focuses on experiencing and witnessing this type of racism from authors across racial groups. The images of brutality, death, family grief, and funerals supported the need for expression over the past year. Antiblack sentiment exists, creating stressors for those who live and experience them daily. Finding the antidote for antiblack racism is critical for the billions of Black people across the globe affected by its practice.

**Keywords:** antiblack, racism, African Americans, oppression, narratives

## Priscilla

I conceived the focus of this Special Issue on personal experiences with and witnessing antiblack racism in isolation due to COVID restrictions after many days of self-reflection about the murder of George Floyd in 2020. As I sat in my house about a mile from the site of Mr. Floyd's murder, I struggled with intense feelings about my role and sphere of influence. I wondered if and how I allowed antiblack racism in my interactions with Whites in both my personal and professional spheres. In my self-ascribed status as wise elder having lived seven decades on this earth, I continue to be aware of the dilemma of perceived racial discrimination and its effect on my psyche. I don't want to ignore it, nor do I want to over-react. Yet, I know on many levels that the pervasiveness of racism is interwoven into the fabric of my existence.

I thought about breaking my isolation to join the crowd of protestors to follow my newly formed views of "no justice, no peace." Or should I add my voice to the many editorials about the injustice of violence against Black bodies connected directly to historical surveillance of Black folks. Or should I walk my talk by continuing to just talk my walk. My wisdom was silent, and I felt useless until I decided to start writing my thoughts. I focused on words associated with Mr. Floyd and his murder: "I can't breathe" and "get off my neck." Those words put me in touch with the deeply buried feelings of physical harm inflicted on my enslaved ancestors.

I started experiencing and witnessing antiblack racism as a young child growing up in a rural area of Southwestern Louisiana in an economically depressed community. Economic insecurity did not deter wanting an education, going to church, following family and community rules, and having what is now called "black joy," but the existence of antiblack racism placed severe limitations on them. Inherent in my life and those of my peers was this overriding struggle to "be" and to be worthy of attention—the kind of attention that allowed White children to drink at clean water fountains, sit downstairs in the movie theater, have a high school with a band and football team, and have teachers who look like them. And yes, some of us achieved a measure of success with the support of elders who instilled the importance of education and hard work.

Currently, I often think about how those experiences have informed my wisdom today and its strong quest to highlight the resiliency of Black people. I also wanted ways to deal and cope with experiencing and witnessing antiblack racism. I know this is emotional labor, and I accept it as my responsibility of being an elder and paying it forward. Part of my work is incorporated in Experiential Learning in the African American Community (ELAA), an annual, two half-day program I developed that shifts the learning of Child Welfare Fellows (MSW students) from the classroom into the African American community in the Twin Cities to focus on resiliency of Black families. Another aspect is capturing strategies to deal with racism from the stories of African American elder women and how they might transmit lessons learned to our younger generations.

In this Special Issue, I build on my work with the narratives of a village of like-minded scholars who share strategies that they have successfully employed in various venues and spaces. My wants are not without challenges, as you will see in Patricia and Valandra's introductions. Yet, I support highlighting the diversity within to illuminate our thinking and, hopefully, increase our spheres of influence on matters of antiblack racism. We must continue our efforts.

### **Patricia**

My introduction to identifying, understanding, and addressing racism has been a lifelong journey. As an immigrant to the United States of America, my relationship with race centered on the deception of class. Being born into one of the poorest communities of Jamaica, where the mantra is "out of many, we are one," provided a sense of pride that hid the everyday occurrences of racism in the open—racism such as those who are light skinned are the workers in the bank, seen on the television as newscasters, or are often property owners. Further, because of your last name, your status in the community is cemented, revered, and respected. I remember being asked, "Pat, where in Jamaica are you from?" When I answered and said, "Jones Town," the response was, "Oh, I am sorry." When asked why he was sorry, he got red in the face and said, "Oh, no reason." I knew why he said he was sorry; he was a "light-skinned, pretty hair, uptown" individual living with the privilege of seeing me as someone from one of the poorer communities of the Island who needed his sympathy.

What I believe continues to be missing for those born on the other side of the community is that we all have pride in being Jamaican; where there is a will, there is always a way, and a big ax will cut down tall trees. Wilkerson's (2020) notion of caste being the bones and race the skin is apropos in the moment, understanding and accepting how racism and classism in the culture created this ranking of human value. Despite being Jamaican, the system produced supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups based on ancestry, residential community, and educational attainment.

Like most Caribbean Nationals, education then became the focus of improving your class status regardless of skin color. Unfortunately, you remained in the class you were born in without meeting those educational milestones. I remember not passing the common entrance exam to move me from primary to high school and felt like the world ended. To this day, when asked which high school you went to back home, the hair on my neck stands up as I know what my answer would conjure. The "oh," then they'd move on as if I had not spoken.

In America, you not only have to deal with classism, but the ever-present racist society, which creates another layer of oppression. As a Black immigrant woman living in this country since 1977, the dual stressors of classism and racism are present daily. Although I understand that within a class—a social construct designed to keep you in your place until either through education, marriage, or migration—you find a voice which propels you to seek, learn, strive, and shed the cloak of classism, it remains.

I recall being pregnant at the orientation to attend college. The instructor asked all the young pregnant women to stand up. She then let us know that she did not expect to see us when class started in three weeks. Once class started, we met, and she asked the girls who were pregnant at orientation to stand up. Of the six of us, I was the only one standing. She was proud of herself that she was proven right. I told her in her arrogance, which seemed to be based on classism, that she probably caused the other young girls not to come as she took away their dream of a future. I vowed then and there to become an advocate for others.

My first experience with racism occurred as I worked in a major department store. The customer asked to see the sunglasses, and I asked her to give me a minute as there were other customers I was dealing with in the summer where name-brand sunglasses sold like wildfire. The customer banged her hand on the counter and said, “‘n’ stop what you are doing right now and come and serve me.” I looked at her and then behind me to see if someone else was standing behind me. She said, “‘n’ yes, I am talking to you.” I looked at her and told her a few choice words not only in patois but in English when I saw that she had a blank stare. The manager was not happy, and I was transferred from the department. Grappling with DuBois’ (1953) double consciousness of how I am seen within and outside the community remains a struggle. Similarly, Glaude (2020) discusses this phenomenon in his interview with James Baldwin sharing that it remains rampant.

While attending a training, the lecturer, Dr. Henri Clarke (personal communication, n.d.), spoke about the importance of Black people in America living together in harmony as no one knows where you are from or how you deal with situations until you open your mouth and speak. Dr. Clarke stated that White people would only see you differently, but it will not matter as they will continue to split the groups, insinuating and suggesting that one is better than the other. Black people in America, he stated, must remember that race, racism, and classism are about dismantling, separating, and destroying communities. This is a lesson I remembered years later.

As I continue to work through and address class issues and center it on race, I provide a holistic viewpoint both professionally and personally. Teaching practice lab at a school of social work allows for open conversations with students, especially those of similar backgrounds whose eyes and minds were closed to understanding that within classism, racism exists. I have had feedback from students, like “I never thought of it that way” or “Wow, we don’t do that in the Caribbean.” I would counter. “Yes; we do, and here is an example of how classism and racism intersect.” Finn (2021) describes how people give meaning to their experiences to make sense of their world. Migrating from the Caribbean, living in America for 44 years, and using the lens of classism to link racism has helped me understand oppression and the brutality leveled at individuals because of a caste system or one’s skin color. The audacity of hope to move out of the class you were born into where you want to not take away the pain but give alternatives to

fight oppression and Black racism!

### **Valandra**

The invitation from Priscilla to serve as a Co-Editor of a Special Issue of *Reflections* about “Black Racial Injustice” came at a time in my life when I was really questioning, and I still am, my ability to effect change in a profession that I was drawn to precisely because of its social justice mission. The invitation came at a time when I was feeling enraged by all the rhetoric, platitudes, and pronouncements about racial equality made by universities and organizations, including the social work profession, after the murder of a Black man, Mr. George Floyd, by White Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The invitation came after my visit, in the aftermath of Mr. Floyd’s murder, to the South Minneapolis neighborhood I lived in for 20 years. My old neighborhood looked like a warzone with barricades blocking the streets and demolished, abandoned, and burned buildings. I was reminded of an earlier summer when I visited Minneapolis, the summer when Philando Castile, another Black man, was fatally shot in front of his girlfriend and her 4-year-old daughter by another police officer, Jeronimo Yanez of the St. Anthony police department in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. I attended a chilling, thought-provoking play about his murder at Penumbra Theatre, an African American theatre company in St. Paul, Minnesota, before heading back to Arkansas.

The invitation to co-edit this Special Issue came shortly after I experienced academic censoring because I used critical race theory in a report about Black students’ experiences of racism at a Predominantly White University in the South. The report was gutted and essentially whitewashed to appeal to a conservative White audience. The invitation came after me and several members of the Fayetteville, Arkansas, community in which I live now partnered with the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) to erect a memorial marker and held a dedication ceremony to honor three Black male victims of racial terror lynchings that occurred in the area in 1856. The invitation came at a time when I was recognizing the frequency with which White social work educators overwhelmingly and persistently vote to recruit, hire, and promote other White social work educators while professing their commitment to addressing racial inequality and meeting their university’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals.

The invitation came at a time when Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton, a White man, introduced legislation, along with other White Republican senators, to stop the *New York Times Magazine*’s *1619 Project* (Silverstein, 2019), the brainchild of a Black woman journalist, Nikole Hannah-Jones, from being taught in federally funded public K-12 schools. The invitation came after I learned from a friend that my 3rd-generation grandmother, Willie Ann Rogers, was mentioned in another *New York Times Magazine 1619 Project* article about slave auctions that ripped apart Black families, written by another Black woman, the historian and author of *The Weeping Time*, Anne C. Bailey. I would subsequently find out that Willie Ann’s mother, Lizzie Spotsell Johnson, my 4th generation grandmother, was sold as a young woman on the auction block in Richmond, Virginia, to a White man named Ephram Hester and that she would eventually escape enslavement.

I grew up listening to my grandmother, Berdine Hall Williams, talk about how as a child, she accompanied her grandmother Willie Ann who delivered babies and cared for the sick in their

community and how it inspired my grandmother to want to become a doctor, but she couldn't become a doctor because of Jim Crow laws in the South and White segregationist laws in the North. The invitation came after the magnitude sunk in that my grandparents were born in Arkansas in 1919, less than 60 miles away from the 1919 Elaine Massacre of hundreds of Black sharecropping families who were murdered with impunity by a mob of White plantation owners because the Black families demanded a fair price for their cotton. My great grandparents had a farm in Brinkley, Arkansas, and worked as sharecroppers (among other jobs) along with many of their 14 children and successive generations of my relatives.

Black racial injustice has persisted in this country for over four hundred years. My ancestors have also persisted in their insistence on living as fully as possible while resisting White supremacy and domination through enslavement, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The mythology that we live in a race neutral, colorblind, merit-based society, with equality for all is an impenetrable barrier to real change. In my article, "Living and Learning While Black: Navigating White Supremacy," included in this Special Issue, I share some personal and professional experiences with Black injustice and use critical race theory to frame strategies for disrupting structural Black racism within the educational system. I hope that our collective narratives provide the impetus needed to move readers to commit to taking action to dismantle racism before passage of the next four hundred years.

### **Descriptions of Articles**

Authors in this Special Issue, provide us with detailed accounts of experiencing and witnessing antiblack racism. Their stories offer diverse perspectives across time, and space as well as different stages of development. They demonstrate how personal experiences can translate to social justice action in the form of strategies and recommendations. We know that racism is a public health crisis (Benjamin, 2020) that affects every aspect of a Black person's life. Despite its daily presence, talking about it can be difficult. In this Special Issue, 10 brave souls narrate such experiences not only to illuminate the pernicious hold that antiblack racism has on society but also to advance strategies for addressing it.

The theme of "I can't breathe," described as restricting one's ability to live creatively and exercise agency, forms the backdrop of three authors' narratives of historical and contemporary experiences of being racially restricted. In "Lingchi: Living and Learning While Black," Sober takes us to task about unrealistic expectation we place on Black children to behave in a certain manner and strongly urges "Whites" to unlearn and relearn the concepts of race and race construction. In "KG to PhD: How Antiblack Racism Shaped My Educational Experiences," Fields takes us on a journey starting with kindergarten where her experiences of antiblack racism can be aptly labeled as microaggressions. Valandra's "Living and Learning While Black: Navigating White Supremacy" gives voice to lived experiences that White supremacy labeled as inferior in many aspects of her life; using tenets of critical race theory, Valandra offers a framework for addressing antiblack racism in the education system. In a "Professor: A Reflection on Racialized Labor and White Fragility," Grier-Reed explains experiences with White fragility resulting in fatigue and recommends strategies for raising the awareness of

Whites to racialized labor as a burden for Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). Using the title, “Trauma Triggers and Resilience: Reflecting on the Death of George Floyd and Its Impact on a Social Work Practitioner,” White describes a more contemporary experience regarding how the murder of George Floyd triggered buried traumatic experiences and offers strategies to eliminate racial injustice in public policy, programmatic initiatives, and policing. Williams provides rich and searing narratives congruent with bringing Black women into the conversation about antiblack racism; using an intersectionality lens of race and gender in “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Leaving Academia When the Pain Was Too Much: Strategies for Black Survival,” Williams gives voice to the stresses and challenges Black women face in academia and offers trauma-informed strategies focusing on self-survival.

Highlighting “get off my neck” strategies to deal with restrictions and barriers, the following articles interweave stories by and for Black people. Ogongi and Gitau’s “Reflections from Facilitating Difficult Social Justice Conversations: Utilizing African Concepts of Restorative Dialogue” details their experiences incorporating an African concept, Ubuntu, when facilitating conversations about antiblack racism to engender powerful and genuine dialogue. In “Black Males’ Plight to Breathe in America—Black Racial Injustice,” Wright relates the use of an Afrocentric Perspective focusing on experiences of Black males’ encounters with structural racism and White supremacy. Using the concept of safe space, Williams and Rios offer strategies for engagement in mental and behavioral health services for Black males who experience the cumulative effects of racial oppression in generations and communities in “Chop It Up! A Clinical Reflexive Case for Barber Shops as Safe Havens for Black Men During the Pandemic.” In “Reflections on the Meaning of Jacksonville 60 Years Later by a Jewish Girl from Brooklyn: From Ignorance and Innocence to Awareness and Action,” Mizrahi describes how having multiple identities in oppressed and oppressor groups while also observing antiblack racism resulted in heightened awareness of racism in her formative years; numerous strategies are offered to deal with racism including self-reflection.

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