

REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

Racism, White Supremacy, and the Survival of Women of Color in Academia

By Elizabeth Farfán-Santos

On May 25, 2020, at the height of a raging pandemic, in the Ramble of Central Park, a white woman cried wolf. [Amy Cooper](#) called the police on avid-birdwatcher, Christian Cooper. Like a well-trained damsel in distress, Amy, who was very clearly breaking park rules, got so offended that Mr. Cooper had the audacity to tell her to respect the rules and put a leash on her dog, that she called the police. In footage that is now well known, Amy puts on a stellar performance. Her voice quickens and her breath shallows as she desperately, and falsely, tells the dispatcher on the line that she's being "assaulted." What's worse, before she calls the police, Amy tells Mr. Cooper that she's going to tell the police that "an African American man is threatening [her] life." Amy's call didn't kill Mr. Cooper that day but it very well could have.

After the Amy Cooper incident went viral, and before we could fix our faces from the shock, we were slapped with footage of a white police officer murdering George Floyd in broad daylight. The nation reacted and thousands went to the streets demanding justice and an end to the murder of Black men, but also to the persistent demonization and criminalization of Black and Brown communities in the United States. Almost immediately, academic inboxes around the country were flooded with official university statements on racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. Universities created task forces and special reading groups and lectures on racism and racial justice. It was all "official," on letterhead even, and stamped with the company logo. As I read these statements, I thought to myself, as likely many people did, would universities institute systems of accountability for all the acts of racial injustice and violence that happened within academia every single day? What's more, would universities finally recognize the existence of racism within their own spaces—not in some theoretical, abstract "academic culture," but within their own walls? After all, you can't fix a problem until you admit it exists.

On another day in 2020, another white woman, a British woman, I'll call her AB, cried wolf. AB was invited to the University of Houston to give a Zoom talk on her research in Mexico. AB's talk was about the followers of a fringe religious group in Mexico. In her talk, AB argued that this particular group that she studied was stigmatized. She emphasized that this group fell victim to racist discourses in Mexico but that she "didn't have enough time" in her presentation that day to go into the specifics, or to give us a critical analysis, of how this happened. So, instead she decided to show us. [Trigger warning: When I first wrote this essay, I told myself I wouldn't share the slurs, it hurts even to type them, but I decided that it was important to include them here in hopes that this will never be repeated.]

In a dramatic and carefully exaggerated Spanish accent, AB proceeded to perform racial slurs she learned in Mexico. "Pinche Indio," AB sneered dragging out the sound of the 'i' in pinche and deepening her voice to sensationalize the weight of "Indio." She followed this with "Pinche naco," adding the same dramatic emphasis. The former translates to "f-ing Indian" and "naco" is a racist and classist term used to denigrate indigenous peoples and dark-skin Mexicans. The term naco weaponizes indigeneity, race, and class status as insults. These slurs, which AB didn't take the time, or perhaps didn't know how, to examine, come out of a racist colonial history of Mexico. They are born of a colonial racial hierarchy, or casta system, that for many generations ordered the peoples of Mexico by color and blood lineage. The casta system placed Indigenous and Black peoples at the bottom of the social/racial hierarchy—these were represented as slaves, servants, and property of the white, Spanish elite. Out of this racist hierarchy grew the systemic and everyday marginalization and

denigration of Indigenous, Black, and dark-skin Mexicans that can still be seen in the racialized class divisions of contemporary Mexico.

To say that I was shocked to hear and see AB perform these slurs over and over, is to put it lightly. The abrasiveness of the slurs, hearing them and seeing them so gratuitously performed by a white woman who could barely speak Spanish felt like being stabbed in the gut. Every time AB curled her lip, to really drive home the disdain that dripped from each slur, I closed my eyes and held my breath. My body contracted with each stabbing expression. I felt awful, embarrassed, humiliated, attacked as I sat there surrounded by all my white colleagues listening to this white woman perform words that were used to humiliate my great grandmother, grandmother, and my father. Everything else AB said after that only added insult to the injury. She talked about bringing “exotic” Mexican foods to her classrooms to shock and amuse her students. She called the Virgen of Guadalupe “weak” and “passive,” again without any critical reference, theoretical grounding, or historical understanding. All the while, my white colleagues smirked and nodded in agreement. I just wanted it to be over.

The slurs AB used that day, without consideration or context, carry the weight of the N-word in the United States. They were created by the white elite to demean and dehumanize and to remind certain groups of people of their place in the social hierarchy. Slurs are imbued with hate and thus trigger pain and humiliation, they trigger generations of trauma, especially when used by a white person. In order to drive home her point, AB used these slurs emphatically and repeatedly.

As a Mexican American faculty in my department, I was deeply offended by AB’s insensitivity and the subsequent lack of response from my colleagues. How could anthropologists just sit there and allow that, I thought afterward? Of course, I knew how, as I know the colonial history of my own field. What’s more, I have been an academic long enough to learn that many anthropologists, themselves predominantly white and from privileged class backgrounds, are unable, or perhaps unwilling, to see racism outside of carefully crafted theoretical models and jargon-laden texts—to see racism in their own lives, in their own practices, in the very quotidian ways in which they walk in the world and relate to their own colleagues.

This was the case with AB who could, apparently, recognize and even perform racist discourses from Mexico but was completely oblivious to her own, and this too was the case with the handful of white anthropologists present in that virtual room. After all, the slurs weren’t targeted at them, and none of them had stopped to interrogate their whiteness as it related to their own research on communities of color. AB’s racism that day was born of white supremacy’s long-crafted delusion of authority to speak about anything and everything it desires without regard or context or humility; however, it was also born of an anthropological training that still treats “culture” and any “social problem” like objects that exist in the theoretical and “primitive” “out there.”

I was scheduled to have a meeting with AB the following day. After her offensive presentation and the general acceptance by my colleagues, I was weary of meeting with her. What if she used the slurs again, and I had to sit there quietly watching her perform words that like perfectly sharpened knives, had been rabidly spewed at my family and ancestors? Words that were meant to degrade people I love.

The next day, I met with AB.

I summoned all the patient professionalism I could and asked her more about her work. To understand better why she needed to use racial slurs to make her point, I asked her how she conceptualized her whiteness in her work and whether she had considered that using racial slurs could be offensive and triggering for Mexican and Mexican American students or faculty. Questions of positionality and critical reflexivity are basic now in anthropology. Our undergraduate students learn in their introductory courses that researchers must always interrogate their own identity and biases in their work. I went further, and in true anthropological decorum, I emphasized the local. I informed AB, who was not from Texas, that Texas was a border state with a deep and long history of discrimination and violence against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. I highlighted that the

very university where she was presenting was a Hispanic Serving Institution where a large majority of our students are Mexican and Mexican American. “Your use of slurs was offensive to me and if you walk into a classroom and use these slurs, you will offend our students,” I emphasized. I explained that even I would never use these slurs in a classroom or presentation, or in any setting, but that it was especially violent coming from a white woman.

She didn’t get it.

My colleagues were irresponsible bystanders, silently gawking, the weight of their gaze adding to the violence. I could feel Fanon rolling over in his grave—so many years and so little has changed.

AB proceeded to repeat the slurs, several times over. She defended that her work was beyond race, which was interesting considering she was talking about race and racial discourses in Mexico. I suppose her work wasn’t beyond race, just beyond *her* race. AB kept going, arguing that her rapport with her Mexican subjects gave her license to use these slurs “as critique.” Every time she repeated the slurs, this time directly at me, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, my body working hard to keep me safe and grounded in the face of attack. I continued to engage AB critically and intellectually.

In retrospect, I gave her more consideration than she gave me and certainly more than she deserved at that point. I hate that I felt compelled to be considerate and professional with a woman who was clearly being racist and aggressive. But I can be angry and professional at the same time, and AB wasn’t my first racist, so I continued to do my job despite the aggression.

I gave AB examples of critical reflexivity in anthropology. I shared my own work in critically engaging my race and ethnic identity while I was writing my book on Blackness in Brazil. I recommended Chicana scholars she could engage to add critical depth to some of her arguments, especially on the Virgen of Guadalupe. It didn’t matter, though. This wasn’t about my intellectual engagement; this was about whiteness. AB’s lack of critical self-reflection meant that she repeatedly used racial slurs to “make a point” without any consideration of how that reproduced violence on the people listening. Even after I expressed my discomfort, she continued to use the slurs and, again, no one in my department interjected. I wish I could say this horrible experience ended there, but it got worse.

The next morning, I woke up to an email from AB addressed to my entire department. I double checked the name because for a second, I thought the email could be from Amy Cooper, the language similar and exact. In an email titled “Unprofessional Experience,” AB called me “offensive” and “highly unprofessional.” She said, “the tone, nature, and insinuations of [my] comments” “grossly misconstrued [her] work and constituted verbal assault.” And then, in a tone that screamed entitlement, she added an exasperated, never “have I encountered such hostility.” Of course, she presented no proof because there was no assault. There was only an appropriately critical, engaging, intellectual, anthropological discussion, and a request for reflexivity from a fellow scholar with a Ph.D. in anthropology and years of research on racial identity formations and the impact of racism on Black and Brown communities. Not to mention, a Mexican American woman that didn’t appreciate hearing racial slurs targeted at her racial group.

It was the kind of discussion I had been trained to conduct in my decades of academic experience and in my training from one of the top anthropology programs in the nation; it was the kind of discussion demanded of any Research One institution such as the University of Houston. In short, what AB called “assault” was just me doing my job and doing it well—and if I were a white man, that’s all it would have been. White men in academia are not only celebrated and lauded for their ruthless intellectual criticism, but they’re also promoted and widely published. The more ruthless and biting their critique, the more praise they collect. But for women of color, the expectations are different—for us the expectation is quiet acquiescence to white supremacy’s authoritative command.

AB’s performance was calculated. AB, like Amy Cooper, used all the right words and hit just the right level of

victimhood and fear. Like Amy, AB strategically chose the words “hostility” and especially “assault.” No other word would activate the generations-old construct of the angry and threatening woman of color like “assault.” Like Amy, AB knew that my predominantly white colleagues would understand what she meant, that they would read in-between the lines and agree with her. A threatening woman of color, of course! These constructs are not accidental or immediate. They have been developed over generations of colonization, eugenics, and segregation. AB cried wolf and white supremacy went running to her rescue.

Such is the place of women of color in academia. Our professionalism, intellectual ability, and rights are always in question. Our voice, no matter how polished or prepared, is always too loud, too sharp, or too angry. Our years of study, of crafting our intellect, of publishing and conferencing, and editing, and teaching, and reading, and learning, ignored, made invisible by our deep, brown skin and the reign of terror that is white supremacy. Our professional degrees, proud accomplishments that reflect generations of ancestral survival and resistance, rendered invisible in an academic culture built by and for whiteness. As women of color, no matter how far up the ladder we move, we always have to defend our right to speak and our right to exist in academic spaces not made for us—academic spaces threatened by our very existence.

AB wasn't assaulted that day, and she wasn't even threatened by my critique. AB was offended by my very existence. How dare a Black man tell a white woman to follow park rules, and how dare some Chicana critique a white woman's research? How dare a woman of color express any intellectual authority? For AB, Mexican women are only recognizable as objects of study, as exotic totems useful only to elevate her authority; however, Mexican women as free, intellectual critical thinkers, that's “offensive,” “aggressive,” and threatening. Of course, there's a radical difference between having my job jeopardized and, like Christian Cooper, having my life threatened. However, the viciousness of white supremacy is expansive and while it attacks the physical lives of Black and Brown people every single day, it also threatens our livelihoods, our ability to do our work, our creative and intellectual freedom, and our physical and mental health. Whiteness and white supremacy are deeply embedded in every single structure of society and that includes the everyday workings and interactions of academia.

Black and Latinx faculty [make up less than six percent](#) of the professoriate nationwide, and as you move up in rank and leadership positions, the numbers decrease. That's not accidental. Black and Brown scholars are regularly denied promotion and tenure; they get pushed out, and worse fall ill from the stress of dealing with everyday racist aggressions—of dealing with ABs and their supporters. AB could've ended my job with her email, and it was clear she tried. Acts of racial violence like this happen every day in academia but are rarely recognized as such. Like water droplets slowly but intently collecting and weighing down an eventual storm cloud, these everyday aggressions build up in the lives and bodies of scholars of color. If we're lucky, and have a strong support system, we notice the pooling before the downpour.

But this essay isn't just about AB. Honestly, she's just one person, unwilling to learn and unwilling to show humility, but one person, nonetheless. No, this essay is about what gave AB the power to do everything she did. It's about the department leadership that responded to AB's cry and without proof or evidence, believed it and immediately and aggressively responded. A leadership that didn't take the time to get the full story, or even have the decency to speak with me, before rendering me guilty in front of all my colleagues and initiating an investigation against me—shortly after even removing me from a critical committee without explanation. This essay is about how white supremacy not only allowed that to happen but also defended it as necessary and normative. It's about university statements on diversity and inclusion and their utter failure to uphold their commitment to anti-racism, equality, and inclusion *in practice*.

Because I found myself under attack and without the support of the people that were supposed to support me, I contacted the Equal Opportunity Office (EOS) to file a racial discrimination and retaliation grievance. EOS conducted a preliminary investigation to determine if there were any breaches to the university's anti-discrimination policy. After a little over a month, the EOS concluded that I had not been racially discriminated.

The initial investigation was closed and, while I was allowed 180 days to file another report, the investigator made it clear that the second process would be much longer and likely not yield different results. My choices were clear, I could spend months and even years of my life reliving the trauma with administrators who had already negated my experience, or I could pretend that it never happened and “move on.” In academia, racists with tenure, and especially those who bring in grants, don’t get fired or disciplined, they get protection. In academia, racism gets scrubbed.

At the time, my university leaders weren’t responding to me, much less reaching out. The EOS investigator, and others, explained that nobody would speak to me if I had a discrimination case open. The investigator suggested that once the case was closed, that might help me communicate with my leaders, and possibly even help me find a more immediate solution. I had asked the investigator how I was supposed to keep working in a hostile and unsafe work environment where I was still being harassed by my department leadership. The investigator emphasized that filing another grievance would surely prolong the silence from my leaders and possibly any resolution for my situation. I was led to believe that by not continuing my case with EOS, I might obtain more immediate resolve from other processes with my provost or dean. This was not the case. Later, I received an official letter from university administrators restating EOS findings and asserting that my provost would not be able to speak with me given potential conflicts of interest. The letter added, however, that the university had noticed climate and collegiality issues in my department that would be addressed with a diversity, inclusion, and climate workshop led by an outside consultant.

I had to pause.

The university had just officially, on letterhead, told me that no racism or discrimination had occurred, however, it would create a diversity and inclusion workshop to resolve a “climate” issue? Months later, college leadership would hire an outside consultant and veteran lawyer with no training in diversity, equity, and inclusion education (DEI) to lead the “workshop.” A “workshop” that was instead a series of obligatory one-on-one meetings with this consultant that I, and allegedly all department faculty, were supposed to attend. This is what [institutional gaslighting](#) looks like. This is also when I realized I needed to stand up for myself in a different way.

Almost six months after the incident with AB, I had gone through every single process available to me to have my voice heard. But none of my leaders cared to listen to my story—to listen, in good faith, to what I needed to repair this injustice and to allow me to feel safe, supported, and included in my work environment. Even the university ombudsperson was speechless and admitted that my story seemed to be a clear case of racism and discrimination. He lamented that he didn’t have any other advice for me because I had already done everything I was supposed to; I had already gone through every institutional process. He also acknowledged that he had no institutional power to help me. “I can’t even tell the dean what we discussed,” he sighed.

With every administrator I spoke with, I was forced to relive the trauma of what I had experienced—the violent slurs, the repeated humiliation, being slandered in my department, and the retaliation of my department leadership. I was done reliving that trauma. My racial experience had been denied and erased and replaced with a workshop that I didn’t ask for and that included no accountability for racism. Perhaps there was nothing I could do about it, but I wouldn’t participate in my own erasure and oppression, and I wouldn’t facilitate the oppression of other scholars of color, especially women of color, who speak out against racism in academia. What is the purpose of a task force, a lecture series, and a workshop if when an actual act of racial violence occurs it gets denied – erased - scrubbed? How many workshops before there are more workshops than scholars of color? In the words of my university president, in her June 10, 2020 message to the university on “[Confronting Racial Injustice](#),” “... our responsibility as human beings compel[s] us to take a stand.” So, I’m taking a stand, for my own life and dignity, and for the life and dignity of others like me. My life is not an insensitive ethnographic performance, a lecture series, or a workshop. Without accountability for racism, there will never be justice and a productive way forward.

I learned from this process that a lot of people decide never to follow through with their discrimination cases

because of the time and emotional toll it takes on them—a toll made of a drawn-out process that was never meant to protect us, but rather that is meant to exhaust us. Instead, we take the well-meaning advice of our colleagues to “put our head down and focus on our work.” So, we keep working, harder even, in toxic environments where we continue to be bullied, harassed, and threatened—where the water continues to pool and weigh us down. I also learned in a deeply embodied way, that many people don’t file grievance reports because it marginalizes you even more, especially if the institution decides against your grievance. Retaliation is, of course, explicitly prohibited, but so is racism.

In academia, task forces, lectures, book clubs, and workshops are part of a culture that necessitates racial inequality and exclusion for its very existence—a culture that requires that racism be theorized and conceptualized beyond recognition and discussed only as an abstract social issue. The task force serves as a symbol of recognition of “the issue,” lectures and book clubs discuss “the issue” ad nauseum, and workshops train people to live with “the issue” because its all-encompassing and “just how it is.” The existence of racism is normalized, and racism is made elusive. It exists but it doesn’t. It’s out there, but not here. It’s a hypothetical subject, but “not me.” It’s a perpetual intellectual project and therefore, productive, and even profitable. In the meantime, real, living, breathing scholars of color collect scars of racism on our bodies—the only proof of a trauma that isn’t supposed to exist.

I started at the University of Houston in 2014 as a post-doctoral fellow in the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS). With support and advocacy from CMAS leaders, and a strong CV, I eventually earned a tenure track position in anthropology. My line was supported by a university NSF ADVANCE grant that is intended to increase the recruitment and retention of women in science, technology, engineering, math, and behavioral sciences. It was an honor for me to not only represent women in STEM, but to be the only first-gen, Chicana, medical anthropologist at the University of Houston, a Hispanic Serving Institution in the city where I was born and raised, and where I saw members of my community be the first in their families to get college degrees.

However, being the only one is not a desirable position anyone wants to be in. My first two years on the tenure track were marked by violent opposition from my department. The faculty called me an illegal hire and carried out a campaign to have my line, and that of another woman of color hired at the same time, revoked. AB wasn’t the first incident of discrimination in my department—it wasn’t even the second or the third. It’s been six years and many grievance, emails, administrators, and meetings. I could have already written a book just from all the documentation. This essay is long overdue. Universities have the choice, power, and resources to change and to do the right thing. They know what to do and they know exactly what they’re doing. But me, I’m not sitting around waiting. My life, our lives, our talents, our futures as women of color are much too valuable to waste waiting for white supremacy to see itself.

In the end, this essay is about documenting my story, because pretending like it didn’t happen, pretending like racism doesn’t happen every single day within the walls of the ivory tower, pretending like racism is out there but not right here, is what is making scholars of color sick and strategically keeping us out of the university.

This essay is for all the women that feel like me, speak like me, sound like me, and who have experienced racist attacks over and over in academia. For what it’s worth: Your experience is real, and it matters. You are not alone. You did not deserve this, and you will not be defeated.

Writing this essay is my act of healing, of removing the poison so it never festers inside. My grandmother taught me that. She taught me to undrown myself, to speak confidently from my heart, to stand up for myself, and to never remain silent when faced with injustice. As women of color, we don’t have the privilege of hypothetical racisms and theoretical racial fantasies—it’s all personal and our lives are always on the line. As women of color, we have already been pre-defined and pre-determined within a long history of racism and patriarchal objectification and exclusion. We’ve already been determined guilty just because of the color of our skin and the origin of our ancestors. We can keep fighting to prove we’re innocent, to prove we belong, and we deserve

respect—hand over our lives and our health to a perpetual life of explaining and defending our right to exist—or we can say, no more.

“The very serious function of racism is distraction,” said Toni Morrison. White supremacy is distracting and exhausting, and it means to exhaust us. That’s how it wins. We win when we refuse to play. We win when we stand firmly and courageously grounded in our inherent value, turn confidently toward our communities, and tell our stories without fear.

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