

are experiencing racial discrimination, you are part of the problem.

Dr. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe

This series is a platform for black authors to share personal accounts about their life experiences in research and academia, as well as reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement, the current state of affairs and where we go from here.

Our guest author this week is Dr. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe, Professor of Soil Biogeochemistry, the Ted and Jan Falasco Chair in Earth Sciences and Geology at Department of Life and Environmental Sciences, and Interim Associate Dean of the Graduate Division at University of California, Merced. Dr. Berhe is active in efforts that aim to address persistent issues of lack of diversity in STEMM and works to empower scientists in addressing harassment and discrimination in STEMM workplaces.

This is the second part of the blog "The convenient narratives that perpetuate racism". You can read the first part [here \(https://www.springernature.com/gp/researchers/the-source/blog/blogposts-life-in-research/amplifying-black-voices-the-convenient-narratives-of-racism-pt1/18415774\)](https://www.springernature.com/gp/researchers/the-source/blog/blogposts-life-in-research/amplifying-black-voices-the-convenient-narratives-of-racism-pt1/18415774).

To be clear, racial discrimination from any one person affecting a single soul is terrible. But, in my experience the people who actively discriminate against people who don't look like them or share their experience—you know the ones calling us the n-word, or actively withholding opportunities from us—are typically few and far in between in the academy. But, a whole lot of people participate in

perpetuating racial discrimination, and upholding structural racism with acts they wouldn't accept are equally damaging. The people who readily believe the convenient narratives like the one above are plenty in the academy, and continue to help perpetuate the discrimination, marginalization, and minoritization of black and brown people in institutions of higher education. Saying I am not racist, I didn't do anything to harm the victim cannot and should not allow people to absolve themselves from taking responsibility. No matter how you look at it, either trying to take a neutral stance when you are witnessing discrimination, discounting discriminatory acts or their impacts on people with less privilege than you or their harasser, and/or taking what racist people tell you about minoritized scholars at face value are all damaging acts.

Trying to convince oneself or others that you are/were being neutral in a situation that involves racial discrimination and that you are not racist as you did nothing when witnessing racial discrimination is at best silly, and at worst gaslighting—where gaslighting is a type of psychological manipulation where an individual makes others question their perception, judgement, and even sanity in denying or contradicting things that happened, in particular in situations that involve harassment and abuse. There is inherently no neutral stand when it comes to racism and racial discrimination, no matter where it happens. You either actively oppose racism, or you inflict it on to others or let it happen. If you are idly standing by when other humans are experiencing racial discrimination, you are part of the problem. If you are declaring your neutrality when another human

being is suffering (mentally, physically, or in other ways due to racism, including being distracted from their education and research, and even losing opportunities that have dire consequences for their work or life) then, you are part of the problem. And you are definitely part of the problem if you take what racists tell you at face value and believe them, gossip about it with others, or even use it to deny scholars from minoritized population chances for education, funding, job, or similar opportunities.

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Granted, in the typically hierarchical and connected academic world, one person might be afraid to directly confront a racist in their institution, conference, or whatever for fear of being attacked themselves, or even professional retaliation. But, that is not reason enough not to report wrong things you witness (or are reported to you by your colleagues, students, or others) to the responsible authorities. Among the accepted rules of bystander intervention when you witness harassment and discrimination are direct confrontation, delegation to higher authorities, delay and check on the victim and document[1]. Which means, if you witness racism or if racism is reported to you, you have a responsibility to at least support the victims and help them document it; even if you can't confront the perpetrator(s) or delegate the responsibility of addressing the issue to others

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And, this has to be said, believe minoritized scholars, including early career researchers, when we tell you we have been discriminated against. It is not your job to reinterpret our experiences. It is not your job to tell us that what we clearly recognize as racial discrimination is not. This is especially true for members of the majority who have no clue, no matter what your best intentions are, what it means to be black in society, and be on the receiving end of repeated discriminatory acts in every aspect of your life. Academics are quick to accept that sexism in the academy is unacceptable and that we should talk about it openly, and deal with it legally and by changing cultures and climates in our institutions. But, the minute you talk about racism in the academy (esp before 2020) you get a clear message, verbally and non-verbally, that it is a taboo topic that no one wants to raise or discuss, let alone acknowledge its existence and how it affects members of our academic community. This has to change.

We need to listen to and recognize the many different ways racism plays out in workplaces in order to create lasting solutions to address racial

discrimination and subsequent underrepresentation of members of minoritized communities in the academy. Choosing not to accept convenient narratives that are motivated by racial biases is one step in the long process of transforming our academic workplaces for the better.

[1] *Derived from the 5D's model of bystander intervention by Hollaback, an organization that serves to create bystander intervention training to address street harassment*
<https://www.ihollaback.org> (<https://www.ihollaback.org/>)

Explore Springer Nature's collection of research content amplifying Black voices and the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. (https://www.springernature.com/gp/researchers/campaigns/black-lives-matter?utm_source=the_source_blogs&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=null&utm_campaign=CMTL_1_RS_CMTL_ABV_The%20convenient%20narratives%20that%20perpetuate%20racism)

About the Author

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