



Remarks by Professor Anita Chikkatur
#BlackLivesMatter
Conversations for Change
Carleton College, January 20, 2015

The day that a New York grand jury decided not to indict a police officer for the choking death of Eric Garner, my friend and colleague from graduate school, a Black male professor at a large research university, posted this statement on Facebook:

"I keep trying to get my work done, but I keep getting distracted by this uncontrollable combo of anger and anxiety. And then I walk around my office or sign onto Facebook and see people moving on with their lives, and I think, "How can you not be as distracted and paralyzed as I am?"

I'm NOT trying to make anybody feel guilty, I'm NOT trying to blame anyone for not being as outraged as I am. I just offer this for those who can't understand why protestors are trying to shut down life-as-normal in major cities across the country. Maybe if ALL of us find ourselves not being able to function, then something will be done."

Soon after the New York grand jury decision was announced and my friend wrote this status update, there was also a twitter hashtag that started to trend—*#crimingwhilewhite*. White Americans shared stories of when they were caught doing something potentially criminal but were not fined, arrested, or killed by police officers. The stories that people shared were both an indictment of White racial privilege and an exemplary moment of White privilege. As one of the tweets in response pointed out, it's the epitome of White privilege to declare publicly all kinds of wrongdoing and have people call you brave and courageous for doing so.

I start with these two moments as a way to think about the various manifestations of racial privilege and racism in our lives as residents of the United States and as members of the Carleton community. While the twitter hashtag points to an explicit form of racial privilege, racial privilege, as my friend pointed out in his FB status, is also the ability to go on with life as usual, to ignore not just what is happening currently in reaction to the murders of Mike Brown and Eric Garner, but to remain ignorant of the history, systems, policies, and discourses that make commonplace and justifiable the death of Black men and women by police. What would it mean for all of us NOT to carry on with our lives as usual at this moment, especially for those of us who

do not walk around Carleton, Northfield, the Twin Cities, or our hometowns afraid that any encounter with the police might lead to arrest, injury, or death?

For me, it means that I support the protests in whatever way I can, including attending them—but it also means keeping in my mind, in my sight, the many causes and consequences of a racist society. It means remembering that it's not just about insisting on independent prosecutors in criminal cases involving possible police misconduct, though yes, certainly that is important. It's about keeping in mind that racism is certainly about the violent deaths of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many other Black men and women at the hands of the police. Racism is also about the fact that Black pre-K to 12 students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students ("Data snapshot: School discipline," 2014). It's about a system of mass incarceration in which “nearly half of all Black men by age 23 will have been arrested, and in which 3,000 prisoners—65% of them Black—currently languish in prison for life for nonviolent crimes” ("Why Ferguson burns ", 2014, p. para. 4). It's about the fact that at least half of the public schools that serve mostly Latino and African American students also enroll students who mostly come from low-income families (Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014, p. 15). Because of how schools are funded, these students are provided with fewer educational resources than are their White peers, even their poor

White peers who tend to go to better-funded schools with far fewer students from low-income families (p. 16). In other words, while it's important to pay attention to the racism undergirding the specific cases of police brutality and killing brought to national attention by recent protests, it's also important to remember the longer-term disinvestment and disregard for Black youth, families, and communities.

And why do I need to keep all these things in mind? Because it's easy for me to claim that I'm not a racist, because hey, I'm an immigrant, and my family had nothing to do with slavery or Jim Crow laws. We weren't here. It's easy to keep living my life.

But I know that racism isn't just about what happened in the past, though that past is important to learn, especially as an immigrant, especially as someone who's benefitting from what educational scholar Carol Lee has called the foundational holocausts of the American nation— the loss of life, land, and cultures experienced by indigenous groups and the loss of life and liberty and the uncompensated labor of enslaved Africans (Lee, 2008).

I know that racism isn't just about ending formal discrimination in the laws— it's also about racist assumptions that, for example, lead people to feel less empathy for Black people's pain (Trawalter, Hoffman, & Waytz, 2012); it's

about new forms of old racism—school choice and honor classes rather than formally segregated schools.

It's about paying attention to racism not just outside of Carleton but also inside. It's about looking around my classes and the campus to see which students are here and which students are not. It's about remembering the story an African American student told me about how a classmate told her that where she was from—Chicago—was “the ghetto.” And it's about remembering what a Black male student told me just last term—how he makes sure to wear Carleton gear and be super friendly when he's walking around campus so as to appear non-threatening.

It's about knowing that I need to be honest about what I know and don't know, and about the racism that infects my thoughts and actions. It's about figuring out what my role and place is in a movement about Black lives mattering as a non-Black person of color. It's about being honest about what I am willing to sacrifice about my life or not sacrifice about my life—it's about acknowledging that in many ways my life DOES go on as usual, and that's part of the problem.

Works Cited

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