

THE RACIST EXPERIENCES OF A BLACK POST-SECONDARY STUDENT IN CANADA

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Before the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in June, following George Floyd's undeserved death, I would have claimed that there is no anti-black racism in Canada. I wouldn't have said that because I didn't experience it, but because I, like many other Black women, had become so skilled at gaslighting myself that I convinced myself it didn't exist.

The #blacklivesmatter movement “woke” me up.

I came to Canada in 2014 from Harare, Zimbabwe and completed my BSc. with a First Class with Distinction. Now that I'm currently halfway through my MSc. program, I say I was one of the lucky ones; mentally strong enough to rise above the racism I've experienced, but weak enough to gaslight myself, and take the blame for failures when systemic racism was responsible.

Much of the covert anti-black racism I've experienced has been from my peers. In my third year of university, I was assigned a group project in a class with all white peers. I didn't know that this was going to be the worst group project of my undergraduate career. My ideas were completely ignored. My groupmates acted as if they didn't hear me speak, then later repeated some of my suggestions and accepted them as their own. In the few instances when they did listen, I was told my ideas were “too complicated” or “too detailed”. Eventually, I felt defeated and contacted the professor for help.

Professors are key players in the class setting; their actions have an immense, long-lasting impact on all students. Unfortunately, I've often found myself in several classes with covertly racist professors. To some professors, all Black students looked similar. It didn't matter if there were two or ten of us in the class, or if the other Black people were men! How was I supposed to stand out? To others,

I was a walking African “Siri” whom they could access if they had questions about Africa or Blackness. My professors would spend more time asking about how the length of my hair dramatically changed overnight or how my famous Zimbabwean president stayed in power for over 35 years, than on my academic progress. While I agree that professors should get to know their students, talking about my culture and background shouldn't be the main topic of conversation when I come to office hours for academic help.

The worst racist experience of my undergraduate career occurred outside the classroom. We went on a class field trip in 2016. As usual, I was the only Black person in the class. At the end of a long day hiking and collecting data, our class went for dinner at a local restaurant. The waitress came over and asked all 15 people at the table what they wanted to order except for me. I thought she would come back for me, but she never did. I tried to get her attention several times, but she simply ignored me. She only came over when my white classmates waved at her. Once she arrived, she asked them what I wanted, as if I wasn't there. My classmates had to put the order in for me because she wouldn't interact with me. I was so afraid that in her disdain for me, she may have contaminated my food, but after a long day I had to eat something.

My racist experiences outside the classroom also include encounters at research conferences. I signed up for a particular poster competition at an annual conference where, unsurprisingly, I was the only Black participant. I stood by my poster for 10 minutes before anyone came over. The first visitor — a middle-aged white man — approached me and asked me where I was from and how I got to Canada. He proceeded to leave without asking me anything about my poster. A few minutes later, another white man came and asked me what my poster was about. Before I could finish my sentence, he told me to “hurry up” and that he “didn't have all day”. The same man went on to spend the rest of his 30-minute break at the other white girls' posters.

Professors focusing on our identity, rather than our education, limits our learning and feeds into the many difficulties Black scientists have to overcome. Dealing with these encounters at conferences, rather than answering questions and receiving scientific feedback, make it difficult to network and attain the standard of excellence we know we are capable of.



SUMMARY

This testimonial will detail my racist experiences as a black post-secondary student in the sciences in Canada. I will discuss the everyday racism I experience from peers and professors in my courses, as well as the covert racism that hampers my ability to communicate my research during scientific conferences.

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