

# Reflections from the Guest Editors: A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism Within Social Work Programs

Tiffany D. Baffour and Shonda K. Lawrence

**Abstract:** Anti-racism is defined as “an action oriented, educational and/or political strategy for systemic and political change that addresses issues of racism and interlocking systems of social oppression” (Dei & Calliste, 2000, p. 188). This first of a two-part Special Issue of a trilogy on race and racism describes anti-racism efforts to dismantle racism in social work programs and departments. Individual transformation, organizational change, movement-building, and efforts to create more equitable and inclusive classrooms and racial equity in policies within social work programs are described. Counter-storytelling, using identity as its central theme, is used to discuss personal and/or institutional strategies for addressing, confronting, or dismantling systemic constraints that inhibit institutional change.

**Keywords:** anti-racism, systemic racism, social work education, reflection, higher education

## Tiffany

This Special Issue came out of several conversations with my friend and Co-Editor, Shonda Lawrence. We met several years ago on the Commission on Membership and Professional Development at the Council on Social Work Education. As fellow change makers and disruptors, we often share our collective experiences with misogynoir in social work programs at predominately white institutions (PWIs). At the time, I was reading about Black scholars’ experiences with racism (and other interlocking systems of oppression) in their careers. This powerful dialogue initiated by two Black women, Joy Melody Woods and Shardé M. Davis, was not happening in peer-reviewed journals but on Twitter via @BlackInTheIvory (#BlackintheIvory). Simultaneously, there was a growing movement happening informally within social work education through discussion and meetings during the pandemic that began to highlight the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty with racism. I was interested in documenting these experiences with institutional racism more formally. My experience is that many of our fellow social work educators believe that as a profession (and as individuals) we are above racism. Even after the death of Mr. George Floyd and countless others, I have watched how this lack of action erodes the values and ethical core of our profession. If our profession is to become anti-racist, *we must address our own house first before we tell others theirs is in disarray*. We must be willing to move from conversation to action.

Like many of my colleagues describe in [V28\(2\)](#), the first Special Issue in the trilogy (Gibson et. al., 2022), I grew up experiencing the sting of racism but continued to be inspired by a legacy of social change agents. Odell Sanders, a prominent member of West Tennessee’s Rural Freedom Movement, fought for civil rights under insurmountable odds. Among other leaders in West Tennessee, Sanders was a key organizer of welfare leagues in the early 1960s (Ballantyne, 2021). Local, Black-led organizations, along with donations from organizations such as the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Sharecroppers Fund, and the American Friends Service Committee brought needed aid to scores of evicted and blacklisted sharecroppers who had been displaced following their successful participation in voter registration drives (Ballantyne, 2021). Sanders was a key leader in voter registration and the desegregation of public schools as well as chief plaintiff in a lawsuit asserting discrimination in jury selection in rural West Tennessee. Sanders and many others made an indelible mark to humanize Blackness and fight for basic civil rights. He went on to become the first Black member of the school board in Haywood County, TN. He also made many sacrifices to his family's safety and financial well-being to fight for what he believed. In 1965, a cross was burned on his front lawn following the enrollment of several of his children into newly desegregated public schools (Voogt, 2005). Following a Ku Klux Klan rally and reports of gunfire in town, Mr. Sanders' home was bombed by dynamite in 1966 (Voogt, 2005). Although no one was severely physically injured, the perpetrators were never prosecuted for their crime.

Odell Sanders was my paternal grandfather. Thus, I cannot remain complacent in my success because of his sacrifices. I recall how he paced the floors at night checking to make sure we were all safe. This was one to two decades after the crosses burned and the house was bombed. He lacked a sense of physical and psychological safety. Many BIPOC, including myself, also lack a feeling of physical and/or psychological safety in higher education institutions and within social work programs today. Our encounters in social work education don't typically involve crosses or bombings but institutional trauma and betrayal in the form of the denial of racist incidents, intentional disadvantage, isolation, microaggressions, racial gaslighting, and differential workloads to name a few. *Who is checking to ensure the psychological safety of BIPOC in social work programs?*

My grandfather passed away before my 16th birthday. I recall a picture of him and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the mantle in the family sitting room, the place I spent many of my childhood summers and Christmases. He always made me feel special and, that even at a young age, I was somehow ordained to break barriers. Racism continues to function as a system, not a character flaw, a mental health condition, or an innocuous boogie man. My fight is to dismantle racism within the profession I love, including our curriculum, faculty development (hiring, retention, promotion and tenure, funding, pay equity, pedagogical strategies), student development (recruitment, retention, scholarships/funding), practicum-based education, and program assessment. Honoring his memory means that I must continue to break through concrete barriers and ceilings. I have a vision for social work education as a place of belonging and equity *for all*, not just the chosen few. *Thanks, Granddad, for your example.*

My world transformed around age 11, when I relocated to rural Chester County, PA. My mother had recently acquired her PhD and was teaching at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in our new community. Chester County has a distressing history of racism and segregation. While *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) made state-sponsored school segregation illegal in the United States, the Oxford, PA, School District did not fully integrate until 1970. The court ruled that total integration had to be enforced in the School District in 1970 ("50 Year Anniversary," 2020). I genuinely had no idea I was entering middle school

approximately 12 years after the forced integration of public schools (or even what that meant). I was the only individual in my class that identified as Black and female. I was regularly bullied by my classmates which included being slapped, kicked, spit at, and called derogatory names including racial slurs. Often as these things were happening, I would see the teacher looking directly at me while pretending that he didn't see anything. I never remember him intervening. I always received the lowest grade in the class and never any encouragement. Eventually, feeling defeated, I would spend most of the school day with my head down on the desk. Part way through the seventh grade, I relocated back to the Washington, DC metro area, living with my father in a working-class Black community. I rarely spoke of those experiences for decades until after the death of George Floyd. I didn't have the words to express the racial trauma I experienced. I integrated into my new environment, attending a state-of-the-art racially diverse school, compliments of court rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), pro-busing policies of the 1980s, and the innumerable sacrifices of the brave children and their families who were trailblazers in the desegregation movement. *Thanks, Grandad, Mom, and the millions of others who stood on the front line.*

I struggled with lack of achievement motivation throughout middle and high school which continued to impact my academic performance. In retrospect, I understand the clear link to unprocessed racial trauma. I am thankful for two tenacious parents who always recognized and encouraged my potential. My last few years of high school in post-colonial Zimbabwe and my college experience at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) were much needed healing experiences marked by mentorship, empowerment, and support from administrators and faculty. I went on to receive two master's degrees from PWIs and a PhD from an HBCU.

My first graduate experience occurred less than a thirty-minute drive from my rural Pennsylvania middle school in a neighboring state. This experience too mirrored my childhood, rarely being encouraged or supported for my academic talents by my professors, only for my creative hairstyles and clothing. I received lesser grades than other students although I gave my all. I often went to see my professors to ask how I could improve. I remember the disapproving look on one professor's face then being told, it was "my writing" (without elaboration about what that meant). [Note, I have often heard this as a reason not to admit students of color to social work programs because "their writing is not good."] I spent hours upon hours in the writing lab with tutors who reviewed every assignment. I attached the feedback from the tutors and proof of every appointment related to the assignment at submission. My grades didn't improve significantly despite my efforts. I completed the required two years of course work with mostly Bs. I am thankful for two steadfast and encouraging mentors, a Black woman, and a white woman. Neither were my instructors, but they met with me regularly, and checked in on me. When I gave up on completing my thesis, they continued to contact me and support me. I dropped out and worked for several years as a case manager before coming back to finish. It took me five years to complete my first masters, two for my second, and four for my PhD. My experiences with intersectional discrimination have continued through my many roles and positions in social work education.

Social work education should be an exemplar for institutional equity. To the contrary, throughout my twenty-plus years in academia, I have noticed a pattern of behavior within social

work programs. Many white educators profess their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion goals while simultaneously participating in policies and practices that exclude and minimize the BIPOC scholars (Gibson et. al., 2022) and students. What responsibility do we have to each other to ensure workplace equity? How do we truly engage in equitable policies and practices?

After the death of Mr. Floyd, I began to think: What can I do so others don't experience the racial trauma I have within academic institutions? How do I become a more active agent for change in my institution and within my profession? How do I become a more active and effective mentor and support system to support students of color and allies on campus? How can I facilitate my own post-traumatic healing from the racial trauma I experienced in past and present? Challenging systemic racism often feels like challenging a brick wall. I use the influence I have as a tenured faculty and administrator to develop and evaluate programs and services that encourage racial and gender equity within higher education. I work with lots of students across disciplines, as many as I can, on projects that forward racial justice from service to research. This work has facilitated institutional change and my own post-traumatic healing. I am hopeful that things will be different for the next generation of social work educators and in turn our students. These narratives demonstrate that social work institutions can support and promote structural and institutional transformation. They illustrate, with unflinching candor and courage, that racism experienced by BIPOC in social work education is normative, and we need to work collectively to change it. We need all aspects of our profession focused on eliminating institutional inequality. This must be the job of everyone, including Deans, Program Directors, Field Directors, and other key institutional leaders. I implore each social work educator to carve out your space and dedicate yourself to engagement in changing our institutions.

### **Shonda**

This two-part Special Issue is part of a trilogy sharing unpleasant and rarely discussed inequitable experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) social work educators within institutions of higher learning. When my friend and colleague, Tiffany, and I began to discuss our own experiences of racism, microaggressions, and unfair and unjust treatment, we also began to recount many related untold stories of our BIPOC colleagues. We realized there were few, if any, safe spaces that allowed for the expression of these experiences. We also realized that the impacts of these experiences were not new and deeply rooted in existential realities and familial experiences. The alignment of fear of retribution, unwarranted use of power, privilege, and oppression in our stories was all too familiar. This alignment also helped to explain our need to create this space.

I was born in Greenville, MS. In 1965, when I was eighteen months old, my family became a part of the second phase of African American great migration in the United States. My parents moved to the westside of Chicago, IL, a predominantly African American area. They were looking for a better life for themselves and their children. At the age of nine my father was shot and killed. My mother quickly moved our family to Markham, IL, a southern suburb of Chicago. At that time, Markham and the surrounding communities were predominantly white. I continued to attend a parochial school. It is at this time that I would first become aware of the feeling of

inferiority. One devastating and long-lasting impression comes to mind. While in class, our teacher, a nun, asked that all of the Black students come to the front of the class. She then went on to explain to the rest of the white students that they were the good vanilla babies and that God had left us in the oven too long. As a 10-year-old child, I was embarrassed and did not feel good about myself. I was also angry and became disinterested in school and would not become interested again until high school when an African American counselor saw in me what I could not see in myself. Interestingly, I never told my mother or any other adult. I just carried it. I continued to carry that experience as I graduated from high school, two master's programs, and a doctoral program. It continues to resonate with me and continues to remind me of all the baggage that BIPOC have to carry as they matriculate through institutions of higher learning and as they become a part of these institutions as staff, faculty, and administrators.

As we recruited and advertised for authors to submit manuscripts for the issue, I heard many comments like “What are you all trying to do?” and “I don't know; I'm not trying to get fired.” Although we continued to explain that this was an opportunity to provide real life accounts of their experiences that could help in addressing issues of racism and its sub-parts to enhance our social work programs and working environments, the fear of writing and publishing an article that could, or was believed would, impact their working environment, relationships, promotion, and tenure was real for many of our colleagues. It was not that they did not want to share their experiences; however, it was clear that power, privilege, oppression, and retribution were pushing them into silence. My Co-Editor and I were then led to create a space that would allow some authors to share freely through drawings, artwork, poetry, and photographs. This helped, but I believe that the greatest influence was the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Thanks to our courageous and fearless BIPOC colleagues, we don't have to “just carry it.” We can identify it, address it, and find solutions that will strengthen our social work profession, working environment, and programs in a way that will not only benefit those in institutions of higher learning but those that will come behind us.

### **Highlights of This Issue**

In this Special Issue, authors present reflective accounts that describe and explain personal experiences of institutional racism within schools, colleges, and departments of social work. They discuss the process of developing personal or institutional strategies for addressing, confronting, or dismantling racism within institutions, as well as structural constraints on institutional change. What systematic changes should schools, colleges, and departments of social work aspire to address regarding issues of systemic racism? Start with being open to listening and understanding these counter-stories. As Khan and Wilson assert in one of the articles, “it takes moral courage to share personal experiences of institutional racism and to challenge whiteness in all its forms” (p. 94). Thank you to the brave BIPOC and our allies in this issue for your moral courage in choosing to share this sacred space and tell your stories to make the social work profession more equitable.

In this issue, *social identities* provide an important theme for describing the experiences of authors from multiple perspectives and voices. Identity can be defined as an individual's sense of self as well as a unique set of characteristics, relationships, and social norms that shape one's

worldview (Yilmaz, 2022). Intersectional characteristics may include (but are not limited to) “age, caste, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, generational status, immigration status, legal status, marital status, political ideology, race, nationality, religion and spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status” (CSWE, 2022, p. 9).

In “Melanated and Educated: A Scholarly Personal Narrative,” Curiel uses scholarly personal narrative as a research method to explore his experiences as a Latinx male in social work education. LatCrit and intersectionality provide an important theoretical framework for understanding the context of systemic racism and oppression including assimilation and acculturation, micro-aggressions, racial gaslighting, and cultural taxation. Curiel discusses the need for a more diverse social work workforce and BIPOC initiatives focused on retention.

In “Changing the System While You Are in the System is Not Easy: Creating Cultural Safety for Native American Students on Campus,” Devereaux and Walker explore the practicum experience of a Native American undergraduate social work student implementing a program evaluation at a campus-based Native American student services center. The authors assert that the social work curriculum often “[lacks] relevance” (p. 34) to the underrepresented communities our profession seeks to serve. Thus, centering student voices as well as their expertise of ancestral practices and traditions (rather than research methodology learned through their academic program) allowed for the primary author to create a safe space that maximized dialogue about challenges and needed action strategies to implement institutional change. The authors identify innovative qualitative data collection strategies that can be replicated.

The article from Alvarez as well as the article from Rodriguez-JenKins, Hunte, Mitchell Dove, Alvarez, Ouanesisouk Trinidad, and Mehrotrautilize are literary formats that highlight systemic racism through powerful narratives. In “three nine twenty-one,” Alvarez’s poem discusses hate crimes committed against the Filipino community and the frustration of “waking up to another headline for ‘no apparent reason’” (p. 49). Alvarez confronts the emotional complexity of teaching and learning about hate violence and the change that can occur through transformative pedagogy.

In “Love Letters for Liberatory Futures,” Rodriguez-JenKins et al. utilize letters to narrate courageous conversations in opposition to white supremacy in academia. The authors use their identities and intersections of experience as “Black, Asian/Asian American, Latinx, Multiracial, queer, first generation, parents, daughters, tenured, pre-tenure ... from diverse geographies and class backgrounds” (p. 52) to create messages of hope for a liberatory future. With their past selves, children, future social work students, and new BIPOC faculty as their intended audience, the authors impart lessons of love, light, and hope using their experiences in higher education. Together, they allow us to envision an anti-racist society and profession.

Five narratives by Valandra; Coles; Khan and Wilson; Mitchell Dove; and Wade Berg, Robinson-Dooley, Kennett, and Collard interweave personal experiences regarding structural racism and anti-Blackness with a call to action for facilitating social change within the profession. In “Social Work Educators in PWIs: Betrayed and Triggered Regularly,” Valandra

explores anti-Black racism in social work education through key concepts such as racial battle fatigue; reproduction of whiteness; and performative diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. Concrete strategies and resources that prioritize the wellness, professional development, and advancement of Black faculty in the academy are forwarded.

“In My Own House: Experiencing Racism and Discrimination as a Black Academic in a School of Social Work” describes Coles’ experiences with racial discrimination and trauma *within* a school of social work. The author describes encounters with excessive critique, microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations from senior colleagues, as well as a lack of action taken by administrators to address discriminatory practices, and urges social work education specifically to take a critical step in identifying ways the cycle of racial bias and discrimination is perpetuated within our own walls and to create strategies for change.

In “We Have Some Work to Do: Kitchen Table Conversations Between Black and Brown Scholars in Canadian Academe,” Khan and Wilson explore several themes such as anti-Black sexism, racism, and tokenism. The authors provide suggestions for creating alliances to address structural racism.

Like many Black women in academia, Mitchell Dove ponders “how [she] ended up here in academia, occupying this space” (p. [108](#)). Like others, Mitchell Dove asserts education is a practice of freedom. Further, her counter-narrative is a powerful testament to the politics of refusal (Karera, 2021). She asserts responding to racism and anti-Blackness from a place of empowerment in which she emphasizes the need for healthy boundaries, protecting her space and energy.

Similarly, “Reflections on the Climb to Promotion and Well-Being: Confronting the Discipline, the Department, and Drama” provides an account by four Black women. Wade-Berg et al. explore differential treatment, inequitable workloads, unfair scrutinization, micro-aggressions, stereotyping, isolation, pay inequity, and cultural taxation. Importantly, Black women in the academy must support each other through building professional networks with each other.

Lastly, Brown suggests strategies for confronting bias. In “White Like Social Work,” Brown uses both personal narrative and a book critique to engage in critical thought about anti-racism and white privilege. Brown provides practical strategies such as “calling out” vs. “calling in” (p. [116](#)) to examine institutional policies within social work programs. Further, Brown identifies *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* by Tim Wise (2011) as a resource for white social work students to challenge their biases and for all students, including BIPOC, as a tool to critique anti-racist rhetoric.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would especially like to acknowledge and honor [Dr. Ruby Gourdine](#) (1948–2022), Professor, Howard University School of Social Work, who passed away before the Special Issues on A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs were published. She was incredibly encouraging and excited about this

work. Dr. Gourdine was a tireless supporter of *Reflections* and an incredible social work pioneer who dedicated her life to the work of civil rights activism, mentorship, and teaching social justice. We would also like to thank Genesis Diaz, MSW and Audrey Pozernick for their assistance in helping compile materials for this issue.

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**With Deep Gratitude...**

We want to recognize and thank the reviewers who contributed their time and invaluable assistance to *Reflections* V29(2):

Mari L. Alschuler, Rosemary Barbera, Manasseh Begay, Shena Brown, Margaret Counts-Spriggs, Shadonna Davis, Nanette I. Fleischer, James Angelo Forte, Caren Frost, Ruby M. Gourdine, Anthony J. Hill, Rosa James, Leroy Curtis Johnson, Shonda Kaye Lawrence, Nicole Nicotera, Arlene Reilly-Sandoval, Joi Showell, Desiree Stepteau-Watson, Tracy R. Whitaker, Gerry L. White, Darrin Wright

We appreciate your commitment to this journal and its authors!!

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