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Talking Loud and Saying Nothing

Kicking Faux Ally-ness to the Curb by Battling Racial Battle Fatigue Using White Accomplice-ment

ABSTRACT The road a predominantly white institution (PWI) takes to maximize diversity, inclusion, and equity can be fraught with challenges. One midsize institution learned through an assessment of its campus climate that its institutional practices and arrangements impeded diversity, inclusion, and equity despite white administrators' beliefs to the contrary. To help quell systemic racism habits, monthly campus-wide workshops focused on several key racial injustice habits and hurtful microaggressions generated from white privilege. A faux social justice allure to white allies who considered themselves advocates of nondominant people is one that should ultimately call into question the genuineness and true nature of their support. This semi-autoethnographic essay is a plaintive call to white colleagues in the academy to earnestly acknowledge white privilege and to use it to actively fight the destructive force of racial battle fatigue and institutional racism. **KEYWORDS** Racial battle fatigue; Ally; Whiteness; Race

*You're like a dull knife
Just ain't cutting
You're just talking loud
And saying nothing
Just saying nothing
Just saying nothing*

JAMES BROWN/BOBBY BYRD 1972

PART I: IN THE BEGINNING WAS RACIAL BATTLE FATIGUE

Earlier in 2019, against my better judgment, I decided to attend a special campus-wide diversity training workshop titled “Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF): Recognize, Heal, Be an Ally,” sponsored by our Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This threefold-purpose training was supposed to be one of those self-betterment cultural enrichment programs “designed to help attendees to name and recognize

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indicators and signs of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) which plagues many marginalized and minoritized groups.” Eventually I decided to attend because, more than anything, I wanted to learn more about William Smith’s RBF theory to see whether it could really be used as a healing salve to metaphorically soothe the painful sores that frequently resulted from the racially fraught intellectual and cultural battles that I engaged in on campus. What I knew about RBF was basic yet profound. The theory’s cooling balm contours people of color’s experience and cumulative impact of endless battling in white institutions (e.g., academia), and hurtful words and phrases such as racialized insults, stereotypes, microaggressions, and discrimination.¹ The restorative effects and curative portion of conferring about RBF in this workshop were specifically hyped to those like me who were neatly (or not so neatly) tagged as marginalized group members.

Workshop coordinators promised to expose the devastating impact of RBF to racially dominant group members (whites) who were causing the fatigue in the first place. They would become “effective allies for peers, coworkers, classmates” and learn to quell their own usage of RBF/microaggressions and that of other dominant group members. This short semi-autoethnographic essay is a straightforward callout to white colleagues to stop self-congratulating their habitual practice of using “ally speak,” especially when it comes to halfheartedly lending their “help” to victims who do the real battling against RBF as people of color doggedly fight the destructive, mutilative force of microaggressions/blatant racism every day.

PART II: STOKING WHITENESS AND ITS PRIVILEGE IN THE PWI SUNKEN PLACE

Over the past two years, several racially surreal events had me wondering if I had at times time-traveled from my campus back to the vaunted “Rosa Parks crowded bus ride special, ‘We Shall Overcome’ (maybe), Truly Separate and Nowhere Equal” days of the not always nonviolent 1960s. When I arrived on my campus, I had promptly learned that having a PhD in communication and my retired United States Air Force officer military status barely afforded me the modicum of academic credibility that it brought any of my white colleagues of similar stature; other colleagues of color received far less regard. Coupled with that eye-opening revelation, for 14 years, at and away from my campus and with other colleagues in my discipline, I’ve had many philosophically (and not so philosophically) intense conversations with white colleagues at National Communication Association and Southern States Communication Association

conventions. These sometimes anger-inducing conversations ultimately convinced me that the overall concept and cultural construct of unabashed whiteness (specifically whiteness's individual and corporate rightful use claim of privilege), and the oppressive, socially dominating empowerment that frequently accompanies it, is often completely invisible to those who possess it. Self-described white educators (and allies of people of color) Lisa A. Miller and Victor W. Harris note that whiteness is a prevailing culture and a concrete mind-set that seeps deeply into every facet of who and what whites are. Whiteness is unapologetically systemic, deeply and traditionally rooted—so much so that the mere mention of unrooting any of its negative attributes tied to racism would be met with incredulity and disbelief.² I can't tell you how many times I've heard from white colleagues and students alike: "I don't have a racist bone in my body," or "I was never raised to see color." These types of microaggressive statements, however short or seemingly slight, are painful and oppressive and can initiate and foster a "dark sunken place"³ for the marginalized. In truth, whiteness and its accompanying privilege unless challenged (usually by marginalized/oppressed peoples) can go unchecked in its tendency to dominate people of color. When whites are challenged (again, usually by marginalized/oppressed peoples) to acknowledge the pain-inducing damage these microaggressions inflict and concede their individual or collective inability or refusal to see and to confront the privilege that whiteness brings, the calling of the proverbial race question can be disturbing and uncomfortable, especially for whites.⁴ Explaining the complexity of this intractable refusal to fully own up to the racial collateral damage white privilege brings, Timothy Wise notes: "Privilege to us is like water to the fish, invisible precisely because we cannot imagine life without it."⁵

PART III: "I KNOW WHAT RACISM LOOKS LIKE": RBF COMES HOME TO ROOST ON CAMPUS

Near the end of 2017, the specter of RBF became frighteningly real when an anonymous domestic rhetorical terrorist ominously inscribed a graffiti message on a bathroom wall in our campus's Science building that simply said: "**Today is the day that all the niggers will pay. He's coming. Bang! Bang!**"⁶ Over the next 24 hours, word about that stark graffiti got around campus quickly and that week achieved the desired effect of the coward who penned it: African American students became afraid to come to class; many didn't. African American faculty and staff members were also afraid to come to work, some took sick days and didn't. I was infuriated and just plain pissed off at the initial

secrecy, indecision, and inaction of white administrators who were handwringing over how they were going to “handle it” by wordsmithing their campus and subsequent media releases so people would not know that the threat was against African Americans. Meanwhile, the lightning speed of social media quickly spread a screenshot of the image all across the country. The fear was real. African American parents were threatening to withdraw their kids from school, and their threats were serious. For the rest of the year, campus police had a heavy presence on campus. However, the rhetorical terrorist has not been found.

In 2018, a white female athlete took steps to meet her new African American female roommate. Both apparently had been getting along on social media “swimmingly” until the white female athlete sent a text (meant for someone else) to her Black soon-to-be roommate that said “Her ‘insta’ looks pretty normal, not too niggerish.” The athlete claimed it was a spell-check error; she had been typing the word “triggerfish.” Again, the university (now larger, consolidated into one from three culturally diverse different campuses) only reluctantly responded when Black social media featured the story on several African American, local, and regional news media outlets. Citing the white student’s First Amendment rights, the administration weakly decried her use of the offensive slur but kept her anonymity intact.

A final campus event (which actually sparked the need for this RBF workshop) was a classroom lecture given by a white colleague who read passages from a textbook where a Black author used the word “nigger.” When an African American female student complained about how that reading made her uncomfortable, the professor silenced the student and told her the word “nigger” was really just a “word” that she (the white professor) had the right to use in her classroom since she was just “quoting a Black author.” African American students on that campus protested and walked out of their classes en masse while Black students, faculty, and staff on all three campuses supported them in solidarity.⁷

PART IV: KICKING FAUX ALLY-NESS TO THE CURB: CONFRONT AND DISRUPT WITH ACCOMPLICE-MENT

As the RBF workshop progressed and delved into a serious discussion of allies, I reminisced about these three events, and I suddenly realized why I didn’t relish being in the midst of these workshop attendees—a majority of white female colleagues, staff members, administrators, and students. Looking around the room, I noticed I had had several intense conversations about race with many of these same white women. On the surface these women would have considered

themselves as allies or allies-in-training, because in their minds they didn't revel in their whiteness and privilege. Fully caped, they could provide support, or what they envisioned as support, whenever asked or not asked. However, as Kimberly Harden and Tai Harden-Moore suggest, white allies' actual strain of support comes from supporting those in which they have a common interest. "In terms of diversity, equity and inclusion, ally is an empty buzzword. It takes more than support to make a difference."⁸ These white workshop attendees were members of an imaginary platinum-level ally-ness club; I could tell by their thin-lipped smiles as they looked around the room at each other. Seething, I could not take it anymore. I raised my hand and candidly shared my thoughts about RBF, thoughts I knew were not being appreciated as I watched their self-congratulatory smiles morph into collective crestfallen puzzlement. First, I told them I didn't remotely believe in ally-ship because it was mostly all talk and very little if any action. I reminded them that merely engaging in ally-ness is not something that whites should be rewarded for. Being an ally means being willing to walk away from one's privilege in order to use one's social dominance to help those who are marginalized. In other words, you don't get a cookie for being moral, social justice oriented, and righteous. In fact, today's white allies seem to spend their time spouting "I am your savior" banalities and equally meaningless mantras that they actually believe bring about a sufficient modicum of authentic social justice disruption. Nothing could be further from the truth. White allies need to determine just how willing they are to personally disrupt the powers of whiteness in their jobs and lives in order to keep people of color safe from any form of abuse, especially those brought on by microaggressions. In other words, actively help marginalized and oppressed peoples accomplish the work of obtaining equity and bringing about diversity and inclusion by taking an active part in it. Don't just talk about it, *be* about it. ■

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