

A year since George Floyd

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ABSTRACT The murder of George Floyd sparked an awakening, long overdue, which reverberated throughout society. As science begins to acknowledge its role in perpetuating systematic racism, the voices of Black scientists, which have largely been absent, are now being called on. As we rightly begin to make space for diverse voices and perspectives in science, we all must think about what it is we are asking minoritized individuals to do.

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It has been roughly 1 year since the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, who was killed over an alleged counterfeit 20 dollar bill in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Hill *et al.* 2020; Kaul, 2020; Levenson, 2021). In many ways, his murder was no different than the murders of thousands of other murders of Black people in this country (Thompson, 2020; Lett *et al.*, 2021; Tate *et al.*, 2021). However, what distinguishes George Floyd's murder from many other high profile cases is that it was unambiguously captured on video (Alexander, 1994), an act of bravery by Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old Black woman (Izadi, 2021), at a time when the world was mostly housebound by a raging global pandemic. As a result, his murder reverberated through society in a way that has not happened in my lifetime. While there have been other high profile cases of murders carried out by police (Treyvon Martin, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor, and Philando Castile, among many others), these cases failed to fully sustain the attention of a national and international audience (Chan *et al.*, 2020; Chughtai, 2021). The murder of George Floyd was fundamentally different, and for once, more than just Black people were paying attention. His murder sparked protests across the nation led by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Day, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Banks, 2018; Taylor, 2021), and the demands for change were so loud people could not help but hear.

As a Black, gay man who is also a scientist, I was thrown into despair. All of my life I have thought if I just worked hard enough, if I am kind and unthreatening, if I play the game and keep my head down, maybe I can make it in academia. Maybe then I will be seen and accepted, not just by society, but by the scientific community. George Floyd's murder reminded me, and many of my Black colleagues, that our degrees can't protect us, that our privileged middle-class upbringing (if we had one) was not a shield. Our lives were not worth more than a counterfeit 20 dollar bill.

Science, which has always been a product of society, was not impervious to these reverberations. By late June my inbox began to slowly fill with invitations to speak at several institutions for their seminar series, retreats, or special symposia. It felt as if the scientific community, for the first time, realized that there were Black scientists among them. In the throes of my own despair, and the feeling that I needed to be doing something for my community, I began to say "yes." I was not going to participate in the nightly protests that occurred in my newly adopted hometown of Portland, Oregon. Aside from fearing I could be next to lose my life at the hands of the police (Edwards *et al.*, 2019), these protests were happening in the backdrop of a global pandemic. I came to the conclusion that by accepting these invitations to speak, this could be my activism, my way of sparking change, increasing visibility, and being seen not only for my own sake but also for other Black scientists.

Before I write anything else, I want to be clear: I am extremely thankful to all the institutions and organizations that invited me and gave me a platform. I am extremely proud of my students' work and of the research we produce. I am sharing my experiences with the hope that they can be instructive to the greater scientific community, but if I am being frank, there is a bit of anger.

I received over 15 invitations and gave an additional three or four interviews over the course of the year. Most of these came with the expectation that I would also talk about my work in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. But here's the lowdown: prior to this year, I did not view myself as someone who did Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work. I am co-chair of the LGBTQ+ committee of the American Society of Cell Biology and a member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee of the Genetics Society of America. I volunteer for both of these committees because they speak to something I care deeply about, the advocacy for minoritized¹ scientists. I also embody both of these axes of diversity; so, in some way, I am only looking out for myself. This is far from being a scholar or doing

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¹"Minoritized" (verb) is used here instead of minority (noun) to specifically capture that people who belong to this group have had this word (and all the biases and stereotypes that come along with it), forced on them. It captures the active dynamics that create the lower status in society (Ozlem and DiAngelo, 2012).

"Diversity work." I fully recognize that there are individuals who have dedicated their lives to this type of work with entire academic fields populated with accomplished scholars. So, I started this year of talks being invited because I am a Black, gay scientist at a time when science was grappling with its own systematic racism, under the guise of my nonexistent Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work.

What has this year actually taught me? The first thing it taught me is that I have been missing out. Prior to George Floyd's murder, I had only received three seminar invitations from major research institutions and unfortunately all within a year of being posttenure. That is after nearly 6 years in my current position.

In giving these talks I got the opportunity to meet with some of the giants in my field, people I have looked up to for years. I received reagents, offers to collaborate, and a litany of great ideas that will help drive my research program for years to come. I left some of these meetings truly inspired and excited to start experiments. These opportunities would have been invaluable to me, pretenure. One could argue, I did not need it. I made it even without this networking and the advantages these visits bring. Before you applaud my ability to persist and be resilient, we should take a deep look at the systems that have forced people who look like me to be doubly resilient. If George Floyd had not been murdered, would any of these invitations have happened? If the previous 6 years are any indication of a trend, I would have to say most certainly not. Why did it take a murder and the reignition of a Civil Rights movement for me to have the type of interactions I now know many of my straight, white counterparts have had from the very beginning of their independent careers? Let me be clear: this is a form of systematic racism, plain and simple.

As I began to make the rounds, I was often asked to either share a bit of my journey or include my Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work in my talks. This sometimes came at the expense of sharing my lab's work. While I was very happy to do so, this was very much implicit in the invitations I received. At times it did feel that my inclusion was only checking a box, placating the graduate students so that they could see that their department or institution was responding to their demands. This also had the consequence of making me feel as though my science was merely performative. I was being invited to do the Diversity work institutions did not want to do. This is the tension I, and many other minoritized scientists, face. I want to share my experiences with the hopes that the next generation will have it better; but, my scholarly work is not in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. I fully recognize that it is my embodied diversity that is bringing me to the table; but, it is the science I want to share.

On the first invitation to give a seminar, I promised myself that I was going to be honest. This meant that I would tell the truth about my experience and bare my soul over and over again. What I had not counted on was the emotional toll this would take on me. Reliving my own trauma, on a regular basis, left me emotionally drained after these visits. In one of my "stops" (I use quotes here because these "visits" were all virtual), I met with the queer, person of color (POC), graduate students. This session quickly turned into an emotional support group where I heard stories of mistreatment, racism, and discrimination. It was nearly impossible to maintain my composure. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work is clearly extremely important, but, maybe, we could just start by listening to the needs of the students and having a bit of humanity.

The trial of Derek Chauvin has come and passed, and much to my surprise, and to the surprise of many other Black people nationwide, he was found guilty and was sentenced to prison (Arango, 2021; Cooper and Fiegel, 2021). This, of course, is not justice, not even close. Justice would mean that George Floyd is still alive and

MEET THE AUTHOR



I am currently an Associate Professor of Biology at Reed College (<https://www.reed.edu/biology/applewhite/index.html>), which is located in Portland, Oregon. I arrived at Reed in 2014; prior to that, I was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I received my PhD from Northwestern University in Cellular and Molecular Biology and a BS in Biology from the University of Michigan where I was also a 4-year letter winner in track and field. My research focuses on the cytoskeleton where I study cell motility and morphogenesis using *Drosophila* and *Drosophila* derived in tissue culture cells to explore actin, microtubules, and molecular motors. My current lab is composed of fierce, determined undergraduate students. I am a member of the American Society of Cell Biology (ASCB) and the current chair of the LGBTQ+ Committee (<https://www.ascb.org/committee/lgbtq/>). I am also a member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for the Genetics Society of America (<https://genetics-gsa.org/committees/>). I also serve as an editor for MBoC's Voices series.

would get to live out his life in the way he chose. We are also at the beginning of the end of the pandemic. In 6 months or less, we may all be returning to life, more or less, as it was before George Floyd, before COVID-19. Does this mean we stop fighting? Does this mean that I, and many other Black scientists, suddenly disappear? For George Floyd, for countless other faceless Black people before him, I sincerely hope not. We need to continue to give Black scientists a platform. We need to ensure that they, too, are given the opportunity to network, collaborate, and interact with the larger scientific community. This means the invitations cannot stop. To further this, we need to ensure that Black scientists are included in every grant review panel, are included on speaker lists at every national and international meeting, are funded, and are in the room where funding, tenure, and other critical decisions are being made. We need to recognize that systematic racism has not gone away with Derek Chauvin's conviction and sentencing. We need to continue to push forward. And, for all of you young, minoritized scientists (and allies) reading this, demand change and do not take "no" for an answer. I am truly sorry this has fallen on your shoulders, but enough is enough. The next generation of minoritized scientists should be

recognized for their science without the additional burden of creating their own space.

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