

June 8th, 2020

Dear colleagues,

Over the past few weeks, we have observed events unfolding in the USA and in Canada that have focused our attention on horrific continued systemic anti-Black hatred and violence.

I have been pondering what we as the McDonald Institute community of astroparticle physicists should do in response. Do we reassure the world that our scientists are good people who are “not racist” and do we issue a statement reasserting our core values. Having observed a plethora of such statements from institutions across Canada, I was uncomfortable with this approach.

- How can we claim that as a community we value Black equality when we have gross under-representation of Black scientists in that community? Would this not come across as declaring virtuous ideals for our own peace of mind?
- Should we decry decades of killings by state-employees, now that the consequences finally disturb our peace and comfort? Can anything change as a result?

I have no expertise in this area, and yet I feel that the current situation may allow an opportunity for real discussion, and real change, and that this might be a moment in history, if we wish. Perhaps a line has been crossed that has shaken us sufficiently that we will risk emerging from our safe places to take some meaningful actions.

While I have been pondering the situation and having many discussions with others on the topic, I have come to understand it is no longer good enough to merely be understood as “not racist,” or content ourselves with passive non-racism. We need to learn how to be actively anti-racist, which is a state of *doing* things that make differences rather than *saying* things that defend our complicity.

In the past few days the world has reacted, for example with a call for this Wednesday to be a general strike by particle physicists (<https://www.particlesforjustice.org/>). This day is meant to be a day of action and reflection, and hence **I am inviting the astroparticle physics community to join me on Wednesday as we set up an impromptu townhall meeting to discuss the issues, and possible actions we might take.**

We as a community have a valuable asset to help guide this discussion. The science around systemic racism is not my area of expertise but I have had very valuable input from Ed Thomas, which I share below, and which I hope might seed the discussion if you are able to join on Wednesday. Ed Thomas has agreed to participate in the event to share some of his learning, as a part of the conversation.

For those who have not yet had the pleasure of meeting Ed Thomas, by day he is the associate director, external relations, of the McDonald Institute. In his spare time, he somehow manages to work on his PhD in Cultural Studies (in History, Critical Theory and Analysis). He was recently co-awarded the Queen’s University Human Rights Initiative award for the research and actions he took that led to the creation of the Commission on Black Medical Students. The citation reads in

part: (<https://healthsci.queensu.ca/administration/announcements/dean-reznick-dr-mala-joneja-edward-thomas-awarded-queens-university>)

“In 1918, Queen’s School of Medicine banned Black students. In 2019, as a result of Edward Thomas’ research on the subject, Dean Reznick and former Queen’s Principal Daniel Wolfe signed a public apology for this discriminatory policy. You can read more about Edward Thomas’ research on the ban and the public apology [here](#).

Realizing this was an area of need, Dean Reznick went on to form the Commission on Black Medical Students, made up of faculty, students, and staff from Queen’s, including Dr. Joneja and Edward Thomas, in order to address the historical injustice”.

We will benefit from Ed’s research experience in this area on Wednesday. What follows are some initial brainstorming comments / suggestions that Ed has provided to me, in point form, which I am sharing with you in raw form for consideration before the meeting.

I look forward to a difficult, stimulating and hopefully rewarding discussion amongst those able to join. We have, we hope, found a time for this call which is not in conflict with other initiatives on this topic, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts, experiences and ideas.

Sincerely,



Tony Noble

REFLECTIONS:

- Stop focusing on “not racist” as a personal identity (or innocence claim), and **start moving toward "anti-racist" actions** in your work and living spaces. Learn the difference between a **racist** (perceives people of different racial identification as not inherently equal), and **racism** (consciously or unconsciously operating or accepting procedures or policies that create or perpetuate racial inequality), and **anti-racist** (challenges and dismantles/fixes/reforms policies or procedures that create or perpetuate racial inequality).

Consequently:

- *Anyone or any organization can be racist, regardless of racial identity*
 - *Anyone or any organization can commit racism (being “not racist” offers no exemption)*
 - *Anyone or any organization can do anti-racist work (even a racist can be made to do it)*
- **Adopt a healthy internal dialogue about diversity statements from institutional authority** (universities, corporate offices, government departments, etc.). Institutions reflexively point to substantial non-White inclusion as proof of “non-racism.” That is not the way systemic racism

works. Racism is not a White/non-White binary -- it targets specific identities at specific times in specific spaces. Before producing or consuming diversity statements, ask these three questions:

- Who (social identity) is not included, or not treated equally in this community?
 - Why is that the case when people are inherently equal?
 - What will I/we do to change the action or manner-of-doing things that perpetuates exclusion or inequality?
- Because systemic **racism does not operate as a White/non-White binary**, you should understand that **anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, anti-Asian** and even incidents of **anti-White racism emerge from unique** policies, procedures, ideas, attitudes, power dynamics, politics and historical **circumstances**.
 - Understand that there are systemic advantages in society for people who are not specifically harmed by racist ideas or policies. This kind of advantage is often referred to as “white privilege,” which describes an *absence of racial-disadvantage* accruing from systemic racism. Racial privilege does not disqualify anyone from doing anti-racist work, nor does it diminish their responsibility or moral agency in the performance of such work.
 - Racial identity is a particularly important framework for inequality, but **racial identity does not operate independently from other identities** (class, gender, physical ability, language, ideology). Depending on the contexts, a Black woman in physics has a different social identity from a Black man in physics, so both scientists can **experience systemic racism in different ways**.
 - This is an emotionally and intellectually difficult topic for most people. It’s OK to feel uncomfortable -- this is our problem, too. If we attempt to disengage ourselves with claims such as “I’m not racist,” or “I don’t see colour -- I’m a scientist,” we make ourselves complicit in perpetuating systemic racial inequality. There is no place for us to hide.

DO:

- Check in with your students and fellows. Let Black, Indigenous, and Visible Minority lab members know that you will do what you can to support them in coping with the escalated threat posed by systemic racism. A quick email invitation with a follow-up phone call or Zoom meeting is recommended. If you do not have Black, Indigenous, or Visible Minority students or fellows in your lab, see Point 2 in “Reflections”
- Be aware of, and intervene to disrupt, instances of racist comments or micro-aggressions (with particular attention to anti-Black discourse) in your department. [It is easier for you than for the person who is being targeted.](#)
- Provide space for your students, RAs and fellows to share their concerns about systemic racism, state violence against vulnerable people, emotional and mental health, or barriers to career building, etc. If you are not equipped to lead this conversation, find someone who can, and do the work that will support them in helping you meet your leadership responsibilities (convening, scheduling, note-taking).

- If a student is likely to face career disadvantages after graduation, do they have a mentorship network of career scientists? Do they all have at least three career scientists to talk to on a regular basis? What barriers might they be facing between themselves and optimal career impact? As a supervisor, or teacher, it is your job to build opportunities for your students – you are failing if the opportunities you build are not effective.
- If you have never done so, test implicit biases to find out about your subconscious perception of social identities <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. Note that results are shaped by your lived experiences and are not specific to your ethics or moral judgement. If you would like to learn more about dealing with implicit bias in yourself and others, we would be glad to connect you with online training resources developed at Queens’.
- Get some help on planning your anti-racism work. The McDonald Institute is piloting an individual equity tool that will not only help you identify opportunities to reduce recruiting/retention barriers and build stronger lab groups, but to efficiently track what you’ve done for funding agency’s purposes.
- Are there social identities that have never applied to join your research group? There are easy to reach associations and HR tools that make it easy to open up your recruiting network. We will help you find them.
- Last. Do not be tempted to imagine this issue does not concern you. History teaches us how scientists fare when nation states are no longer capable of conducting peaceful politics through social differences. Our work depends on the safety and international mobility of an increasing diversity of people, the goodwill and financial generosity of the public and the multi-decade sustainment of communities who can leverage each other’s unique perspectives and experiences to advance the scope and impact of scientific research. What will happen over the next few months has significant bearing on our ability to train, recruit, staff and fund the work that gives us so much meaning.

This terrible year has made us think a lot about the kind of world we live in and the special opportunities we have to do some good. But those good things need to be done, not just said. If you would like to join us in these efforts, we will help you in any way that we can.

RESOURCES (Recommended by Edward Thomas)

USEFUL INSIGHTS ON RACISM & ANTI-RACISM:

Baldwin, James. 1962. “Letter from a Region in My Mind.” *The New Yorker*, November 10, 1962. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2011. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (3): 54–70.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2019. "White People Assume Niceness Is the Answer to Racial Inequality. It's Not." *The Guardian*, January 16, 2019.
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/16/racial-inequality-niceness-white-people>.

Kendi, Ibram X. 2016. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. PublicAffairs.

———. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. Random House Publishing Group.

INSIGHTS ON RACIAL POLITICS, POLICING & ANTI-BLACK TERRORISM:

Serwer, Adam. 2018. "The Cruelty Is the Point." *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2018.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/>.

Smiley, Calvinjohn, and David Fakunle. 2016. "From 'Brute' to 'Thug:' The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America." *Journal Of Human Behavior In The Social Environment* 26 (3-4): 350–66.

Staples, Brent. 2019. "How Italians Became 'White.'" *The New York Times*, October 12, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ([Anti-Racist Lit Starter Kit](#))

Available as audiobooks to borrow for free through [hoopla digital](#):

A People's History Of The United States <https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/11586893>

Stamped From The Beginning
<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/11812946>

So You Want To Talk About Race
<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/12376341>

Tweeted from Aaron Vincent: <https://oyc.yale.edu/african-american-studies/afam-162>