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Death and Dying as a Black Studies Professor

The toxicity of racism at Portland State

By Ethan Johnson

While some might think it hyperbole to begin a paper claiming a relationship between death and dying, I was delivering a tenured professor at a large public university, I think it is a valid claim. It is just a fact that many of the Black people, most of them men and some of whom were and are my friends, at Portland State are sick, dying or dead.

After the PSU Board of Trustees, an unelected group of overwhelmingly white men, voted to arm PSU security, the first person campus police shot and killed was Jason Washington, a Black person, married and a father of two. A fight broke out in front of a bar on campus and he was carrying a gun which he was permitted to carry. It fell out in the front and when he tried to grab it the cops shot and killed him. As is usually the case, the rule of impunity prevailed here and no one was held accountable in any substantive way. The struggle against arming the police force was strong and overwhelming students and faculty expressed they did not want an armed police force on campus. We already have one, the Portland Police Bureau, who have a long history of killing Black and poor people with impunity.

I have taught in the Black Studies Department for 15 years at PSU. One of the courses I teach is called Racism. For years I have used a video in this class called Unnatural Causes, which has a section in it called “When the Bough Breaks.” This part of the documentary makes the case that racism not only maintains inequality across institutions, it also makes us sick. The literature is well established here with many peer reviewed articles documenting how the stress of daily racism gets into our bodies and over works us causing breakdowns in our hearts, reproductive systems and other areas of our bodies. I remember one young Black woman realizing after seeing the video that if she wanted to have children she should have them young because if she did not, the compounded stress of racism on her reproductive system could very likely endanger her child. This is pre-implantation mutation.

Mainstream white society has the facts to show that racism makes us sick and causes premature death, but does nothing to change the conditions. A very frustrating part about this is we Black people can sometimes and often do blame ourselves for our failing physical and/or mental health. However, as when I first arrived to PSU, I was hired to fill the position of a young Black man from South Africa. As I understood it, he was popular among his students. The then chair of the Black Studies Department did not recommend him for tenure. When I walked into his office, which became mine, what I could not take my eyes off of was a plaster sculpture of a white man almost life size with a removable stick up his butt. I didn’t know what to think when I saw this and it quickly disappeared. In hindsight, what it probably indicated was his upfront resistance to anti-Black racism, which was why he was popular with his students. The chair of the department who did not support his tenure and rarely uttered the struggle just to walk the streets of Portland. The Portland metropolitan area is the whitest large city in America, which is no accident. Oregon is the only state in the Union to have in its original constitution of 1857 an exclusion clause that made it illegal for Black and other people of color to live here. Today, Oregon has the highest pushout/dropout rate in the country for Black high school students, most of whom live in the Portland area. Furthermore, the homicide and incarceration rates in the Portland area are higher than national averages for Black people. The original state constitution of exclusion helped pave the way for a white homeland, and while removed from the constitution in 1926, the injustice is nevertheless still with us in spirit.

More than ironically, Portland and much of Oregon benefits from having a reputation as one of the most politically progressive places in the whole country. I jokingly tell my students you can smoke weed here legally, ride your bike with thousands of other mostly white people naked (Portland has a naked bike ride every year) and Oregon has its own public defender specifically hired to protect animals, something which Black people do not have. More seriously, Portland also has a politically progressive reputation for having a descent public transportation system, probably one of the most extensive bike path systems in the country and a no growth boundary to prevent sprawl. Oregon, which is much whiter than Portland, also has one of the most accessible voting processes in the country. However, as I and others have pointed out these policies are due to the city and state being so white. Without a large non-white population, struggles over transportation, housing, schools, voting and other public services don’t confront resistance because these institutions generally serve the majority white population. White middle-class people in particular in the Portland area don’t have to share buses and housing with Black people because of our small numbers, so they fund their public transportation system, libraries and schools.

Someone who I considered my friend used to be the coordinator for what is called the Multicultural Center at PSU. Much of the student activities on campus that serve non-white students come out of this center. An African, he was very supportive of the Black Studies Department. He regularly made his space available for the department to conduct what we call the Black Bag Speaker Series. This event invites people and organizations doing work that focuses on Black life locally and nationally to share their efforts with students and faculty. The topics include police brutality, art, music, literature, health, gender, immigration, sexuality and many other issues. It was the only Black-centered forum on campus, but never received institutional funding from PSU. My friend collaborated with me often to share expenses to help run the event. My friend also supported the Muslim students on campus for which I am sure many were not happy. He opened the Multicultural Center’s doors to the Muslim students on campus to hold prayer in the main room of the center on Fridays. I remember...
Land Police Bureau hired as their chief of police a Black woman from Oakland.) My friend was made to disappear from PSU. Two years ago, I received an email from a colleague telling me my friend had died of a stroke. I was very upset. My friend was under much pressure as a Black African person coordinating the Multicultural Center. I wonder how it felt for him to be removed from his position with so little appreciation? My friend was in his early 60s when he died. Was it his bad eating habits and lack of physical activity that killed him or might it have been the stress that came with his job and being summarily removed that contributed to his early death.

While I know of no other deaths of Black people who worked at PSU, two of the previous chairs of Black Studies are both showing signs of wear. One has cancer and had to retire and the other is suffering from physical ailments. He too has retired, but continues to teach as an emeritus professor. One of the current professors in the Black Studies Department is also suffering from health issues and is going to have to retire this year. Another Black colleague of mine, who worked in the School of Urban Planning, has fallen sick and had to retire. I attended her retirement party during the summer. As far as I know I do not have cancer or some other disease. I regularly do get check-ups for prostate cancer because my dad died of this. Black men have the highest prostate cancer rate in the country. I did though have to take a leave of absence because of the stress I have felt working at Portland State. I have twice now admitted myself to the hospital because of chest pains to see if I was having a heart attack.

The Black Studies Department is a stressful place to work. Our students for example are constantly expressing to us the racism they experience in their classrooms. We regularly have to beg for resources to hold events. Being the smallest department on campus means if one of us fall sick or leaves, it causes a huge disruption in the daily running of the department compared to larger departments. Lastly, thinking about Black Life (inequality, resistance, death, joy) takes its toll on you. Similarly, a professor who worked in the Black Studies Department, but left last year because he found PSU to be a toxic place, also had to take a leave of absence due to stress. Last year alone 10 Black administrators and faculty left Portland State University joining the many others from previous years. I talked to most of them and asked why they left and each expressed to me they ‘got out’ because they did not feel supported. The anti-Black racism on campus is so thick and unacknowledged that they did what is best for them and ‘got out’. I completely understand.

This year the Black Studies Department is supposed to be celebrating and honoring 50 years of existence at Portland State. I am the chair of the department and I am the lead organizer of the events we are going to put on. The president of the university provided 5,000 dollars to the Black Studies Department to support the 50th Anniversary. PSU is a large public university with over 27,000 students. The money allocated would easily be used up in expenses for food, flying a speaker out, paying for their room board, providing an honorarium and paying for the venue. I see this as more than a slap in the face.

PSU regularly uses the Black Studies Department and the Chicano/Latino Studies and Indigenous Studies programs to tout itself as addressing diversity. If you look at the university’s main website Black and other people of color are usually central. However, the Black Studies Department is the smallest department on campus and the other two do not even have departmental status. The last time I looked we are on Indigenous land and the Latinx population is the largest non-white population on campus. Portland State likes to claim it is the most racially and culturally diverse university in Oregon, but it does little to substantively address the needs of Black students and faculty. Black students have the lowest graduation rate on campus (their grades are on par with other groups. They mostly leave due to stress and financial reasons), but there is not one university wide initiative to address this. The one initiative they do have focusing on Black people is providing opportunities for mostly white students to come into prisons to teach writing classes to Black and brown inmates. Why don’t they invest in Black students so they don’t have to go to prison in the first place?

Last year, two of the faculty that left PSU came from the Black Studies Department. The administration of the university has refused to offer to hire new faculty so that Black Studies can replace these positions. The administration’s answer to my request for replacements is ‘budget deficit’. Black Studies has lost half of its tenure line professors, while other departments that are much larger have been able to replace theirs. So, in celebration of Black Study’s 50th year in existence, we also get to watch its death. Without the faculty to run the department, Black Studies will not be able to fulfill its course rotation, student advising and research responsibilities. It will disappear. An external review conducted by Portland State two years ago on the Black Studies Department found that faculty in the department are “exhausted” and “overextended” and without new faculty, the department is unsustainable.

Like my friend who was made to disappear from his position, and the death of the South African professor who was here before me, and the many others that are sick, including me (I suffer from depression because of this job), Black Studies under the stress of denied white supremacy is on death row.

Ethan Johnson is Associate Professor and Chair of the Black Studies Department at Portland State University.

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Food

Slow Cooker Mock Lasagna

**Ingredients:**
- 1-10 oz pkg lasagna broken into bite-size pieces
- 1 lb. ground turkey
- 1/2 lb Italian Sausage
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 12 oz Mozzarella cheese, shredded
- 1 12-oz carton cottage cheese
- 2 6-oz cans tomato paste
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp pepper
- 1 1/2 lbs dried parsley
- 1 tsp basil

**Directions:**
Cook noodles according to package directions until tender, drain. Brown ground turkey and sausage. Drain. Put in lightly greased Crock-Pot. Add all remaining ingredients. Stir to mix thoroughly. Cover, cook on low 7 to 9 hours (high: 3 to 5 hours). Makes 6 servings.