

# A Call to Action for an Anti-Racist Science Community from Geoscientists of Color: Listen, Act, Lead

☰ Menu

## The Call

This is not a letter that has been days, weeks, or even months in the making. As Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, as well as Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) scientists, we have known the pain of racism for the entirety of our careers. We recall the silence from the scientific community in the aftermaths of the killings of Tony McDade, Nina Pop, Muhammad Abdul Muhaymin, Jr., Stephon Clark, Philando Castille, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and thousands of others dating back to Rodney King's 1991 beating and before. It is commendable that many scientific organizations, professional societies, and alliances are now issuing statements of support in the aftermath of the recent murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Dion Johnson, and Ahmaud Arbery. We know that the names of our brothers, sisters, and kindred killed only this year could fill this page.

The inhumanity of racism in this country has yet again been made unavoidably clear through the racist cruelty of our law enforcement officers, the atrocities of COVID-19 health disparities, and the malfeasance of leadership across all levels from local officials to the executive branch. For many Black scientists, these experiences form a rite of passage and a common bond. We share these traumas with our Latinx and Indigenous brothers and sisters and have for as long as this country has existed, and before. We cannot watch mutely, nor look away.

Finally, the scientific community seems to recognize that now is not a time to be silent. Silence at this time is equivalent to implied consent. To be silent is to be complicit in our own destruction because racism destroys us all. But not being silent entails more than publishing statements. There is also the collective silence of inaction.

It is not enough to be disgusted with endless police murders only as they appear in the ebb and flow of news cycles. We must undertake sustained and meaningful counter-action. It is also not enough to be disgusted with racism that happens "out there," while ignoring the racism within our own institutions. The hundreds of Black people murdered at the hands of the police every year (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>) are reflective of a pervasive "white gaze (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FA3E1AgNeM>)" that Black citizens must battle in every environment. This same gaze accounts for the racially skewed career barriers faced by Black scientists. Both are the result of pervasive racism in American society. Scientists should have a positive impact on broader societal issues and act out against racism and police violence as a matter of basic humanity. We also need to root out the racism in our own institutions.

This is particularly necessary within the scientific community, where the impact of racism has limited the representation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people across all sectors of the scientific enterprise. We recognize that the racism that plagues the criminal justice system and society at large also afflicts the scientific community. Over-policing, stereotyping, inhumane treatment, disregard of humanity, and silencing is epidemic in all scientific fields. In place of mass incarceration, there is mass exclusion. In place of police brutality, careers are killed through forced attrition and under-investment. Black people

struggle to break through the barriers placed in their paths to get to and through college. Black faculty are subject to biased reviews of job applications, grant proposals, and promotion packages, as well as the refusal to mentor them in an appropriate capacity. Black Lives Matter at home, at school, in the community, and at the workplace.

It is not enough for scientists to simply say that we believe in equality, equity, full inclusion, participation, and voices of all people in the scientific community. We must take action in a meaningful way to ensure these goals are met, and demand our collaborators and stakeholders do so as well. We call upon non-Black colleagues and collaborators to listen and act to dismantle structures that perpetuate injustice and white supremacy.

Further, it is not enough for those of us who work at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) to assume we are automatically partners in the struggle for advancement beyond racism and bigotry. Our silence makes us dead weight and is a betrayal to the very community that sustains us.

The time has passed for hand-wringing and inert sympathies. The time has passed for predominantly white scientific organizations to post photos of happy, multiracial groups on their websites in place of actually diversifying their leadership and members. The time has passed for academic units to use images of their isolated Black student/postdoc/faculty member to project more racial harmony than actually exists. The time also has passed for letting a misplaced sense of politeness silence our anguish. It is neither a time for reactive posturing nor the tired responses of “more research is needed” and “this is a difficult problem.” We are scientists. Solving difficult problems is what we do.

Finally, the time has passed for the scientific community to simply take a stand with their Black colleagues. We all need to take decisive actions that call on leaders in the academy, industry, state and federal government, professional societies, and the nonprofit sector to develop substantive and multi-pronged strategies to remove systemic racism in our community. Black voices should not be silenced in this discussion, as they often are.

We are concerned with the lack of leadership in the sciences to address the prevalence of racism and inequity. Accordingly, we offer a challenge to action and a list of actionable strategies.

## **We challenge our partners to work together with us to:**

1. Stand with the activists committed to ending police violence and murder, support activism to end police brutality, and increase the accountability of police departments to the communities that they are sworn to protect and serve.
2. Demand that the Department of Justice (DOJ) reinvigorate its Civil Rights Division as a staunch defender of the rights of Black and Brown people. The DOJ must also reinstate policies rolled back under the Trump Administration, such as consent decrees to curb police abuses and stop-and-frisk. There should also be a commission to investigate and curb the hyper-militarization of police departments throughout the nation.

3. Promote the protection of Black Americans' right to vote by asking your senators to support the Voting Rights Amendment Act (VRAA) ([https://action.aclu.org/send-message/senators-protect-our-voting-rights?ms=wwwactionpage&initms=wwwactionpage&ms\\_aff=NAT&initms\\_aff=NAT&ms\\_chan=web&initms\\_chan=web](https://action.aclu.org/send-message/senators-protect-our-voting-rights?ms=wwwactionpage&initms=wwwactionpage&ms_aff=NAT&initms_aff=NAT&ms_chan=web&initms_chan=web)) and fight voter suppression.
4. Challenge and eliminate racist policies in colleges and universities, such as admissions policies and practices that systematically exclude Black students and other students of color. Perform regular culture surveys and use their outcomes to improve inclusiveness and equity. Eliminate normative grading (<https://ceils.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/11/Enhancing-Student-Success-Building-Inclusive-Classrooms-at-UCLA-Report-December-2015-Hurdado-Sork-Report.pdf>), remove the GRE as a graduate program entrance requirement, require inclusive and equitable classroom practices, and provide equitable access to mentoring and inclusive administrative practices. Implement practices that promote equity across the board. Draw from (and credit) the best practices of successful programs at HBCUs, MSIs, Tribal Colleges and Community Colleges.
5. Cultivate an environment and practices that are inclusive and not simply a superficial response to the systemic exclusion of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern and North African groups. Tokenism is pervasive as a response to broadening participation in Geosciences.
6. Make it a personal matter to champion and advocate for the complete inclusion of students of color as important and necessary participants in the scientific community. This can be done by amplifying and including underrepresented voices in all decision-making matters that affect them rather than making decisions on their behalf.
7. Implement meaningful and robust mentoring and retention programs. Implementation requires adequate resources, including funding and diverse staff. Such support mechanisms must serve the culturally-specific needs of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern and North African students, postdocs, research staff, and faculty.
8. Advocate and promote the hiring of postdocs and faculty of color. In conjunction, develop faculty mentoring programs that recognize their unique talents and contributions, e.g. that address the innovation-diversity paradox (<https://www.pnas.org/content/117/17/9284>). Listen to their voices, acknowledge and help eliminate the barriers they face, and support their efforts.
9. Broaden your professional networks to include, rather than exclude, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern and North African scientists. We urge that you be intentional with regards to ensuring the full engagement of LGBTQ+ and individuals with differing abilities in your professional circles.

**We call on:**

1. **Scientific professional societies**, in particular those in the Geosciences, which have one of the lowest representations of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern and North African students and faculty in the scientific community to:

- a. Develop robust and meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic plans.
- b. Fully implement strategic plans with all necessary resources.
- c. Track progress against traceable metrics that hold professional societies accountable.
- d. Diversify their leadership and staff with scientists drawn from underrepresented racial/ethnic, cultural, and ability groups. Diversification requires sharing both the responsibility for power (membership on advisory boards and councils) and power itself (membership on executive councils governance, and on the boards with policy decision-making authority).
- e. Diversify the selection process for invited speakers and invited papers with respect to underrepresented racial/ethnic, cultural, and ability groups.
- f. Examine why the award recipients are not diverse and make an effort to encourage nominations for awards – especially the early career awards to be diverse with respect to underrepresented racial/ethnic, cultural, and ability groups.

We applaud the recent statements of the American Meteorological Society, the Geological Society of America, and the American Geophysical Union and now call on them for decisive action.

2. **The National Science Foundation (NSF)** to:

- a. Diversify its science leadership (e.g., Assistant Directors, Division Directors) and workforce to realistically reflect the community it purports to serve.
- b. Require and provide multiple diversity and intervention trainings for all employees of NSF, such that Program Officers are capable of stopping racist behaviors and rhetoric when it occurs in panels and advisory committees.
- c. Take concrete measures to ensure all NSF-funded research and learning environments are free from racism. Communicate and enforce NSF policies so that organizations understand the consequences of racism. Specifically, enforce the NSF anti-racism policy to institute consequences (e.g., revocation of funding) to those found to violate, perpetuate, or be complicit in violating the policy.
- d. Stop using nepotistic practices to select who conducts evaluations of NSF-funded programs and federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs).
- e. Measure and eliminate the many flavors of racism in the appraisals of grant proposals. For example, stop inviting scholars who are known racists and those who have written racist reviews in assessing grant proposals to participate in further review panels.
- f. Ensure that funding decisions done via panels involve racially diverse membership.
- g. Adopt a concrete accountability system to ensure individual investigators, academic institutions, and NSF itself adhere to the spirit of “broader impacts” requirements.

- h. Consider requiring grant applicants to answer the question, “How will this project specifically support the inclusion and participation of people from communities commonly underrepresented in the (insert discipline here)” in their broader impact statements.
- i. Require reporting of broader impacts in annual reports, with input on outcomes, reporting both their successes, or lack thereof, when reviewing subsequent grant applications.
- j. Direct resources to institutions and organizations that have meaningful track records of addressing an issue that has not been met in most national labs – true diversity. Decades-long excuses; e.g. 40+ years of “we have been trying” is not acceptable.

**3. Community science organizations and federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs)** like the National Center for Atmospheric Research, the NOAA Cooperative Institutes, and the National Laboratories to:

- a. Critically examine why their diversification efforts have not resulted in an appreciable and quantifiable change, including their lack of success in hiring and retaining Black scientists. This will require changes to existing search and evaluation processes.
- b. Move beyond superficial relationships with HBCUs and MSIs to meaningful intellectual exchange and engagements in partnerships. These must involve more than the simple extraction of student talent.

**4. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)** to:

- a. Deepen and strengthen the investment and engagement with Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as Minority Serving Institutions through its Educational Partnership Program (EPP), which has yielded unprecedented returns in human capital for the agency and the nation.
- b. Expand opportunities for entry to the agency (e.g. the Direct Hire Authority and the NOAA NWS Mentorship Program) to develop clear pathways for growth into leadership roles for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian/Pacific Islander students and early career individuals.
- c. Ensure that funding decisions for scholarships and proposals involve racially diverse panels or decision-making bodies.
- d. Adopt a concrete accountability system to ensure individual investigators, academic institutions, cooperative institutes, and NOAA itself adheres to the principles of equity and inclusion by requiring reporting of broader impacts in annual reports, with input on outcomes, reporting both their successes, or lack thereof.
- e. Direct resources to institutions and organizations that have meaningful track records of addressing the diversity and inclusion issue that has not been met in most labs.

**5. Agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the US Geological Survey (USGS), and the Department of Energy (DOE)** to:

- a. Implement programs modeled after NOAA’s successful Educational Partnership Program (EPP) to ensure full participation of Black and communities of color in their education and science missions.

- b. Ensure that funding decisions for scholarships and proposals involve racially diverse panels and other decision-making bodies.
- c. Adopt a concrete accountability system to ensure individual investigators, academic institutions, and the federal agencies themselves adhere to the principles of equity and inclusion by requiring reporting of broader impacts in annual reports, with input on outcomes, reporting both their successes, or lack thereof.

#### 6. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to:

- a. Revisit the goals of the NASA Earth and Space Science Fellowship (NESSF) and now Future Investigators in NASA Earth and Space Science and Technology (FINESST) and ask the question – Is NASA satisfied with having near zero scientists of color in these programs and those funded by them? Again, make a serious effort and avoid tokenism! The silence from the “science” side of NASA when the education portfolio was defunded by the current administration spoke volumes to communities of color. NASA has created a funding mechanism to attract foreign graduate students – this is commendable. Now is the time for NASA to do more to attract domestic students of color.

#### 7. The leading academic departments in geosciences to:

- a. Commit to hiring, promoting, supporting, and retaining faculty of color instead of offering continual excuses that cloak racist policies. The freshness date on the unsubstantiated claims of “I can’t find...,” “Not a good fit...,” “Not as qualified...,” stereotypes, and double standards have expired.

Now is the time for all of us to act responsibly. While Black scientists appreciate empathy, **we need** comprehensive measures enacted across multiple levels to protect Black Life. **We need** Congress to advance meaningful legislation to protect Black communities from the systemic perils of over-policing, which include police brutality, misconduct, and harassment. End the impunity with which officers take the lives of Black people. **We need** academic institutions to promote and reward ethical anti-racist policies and to penalize systemic racism in their hiring, admissions, and promotion practices. **We need** federal agencies to install programs that will root out bigotry and bias in hiring, funding and legal practices.

**We stand** with Black Lives Matter against racist cruelty, bigotry, and violence.

**We stand** with the Black community for its uplift to full and equitable participation in society.

**We stand** with all Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern and North African communities in their fight for actualization of their rights to full inclusion and access. We believe that the steps listed above are the same steps that will increase participation of all peoples subjected to racism and bigotry in our society.

#### **Speak. But Let your Actions Speak Louder Than Words**

We, the undersigned, welcome the opportunity to meet and confer with leadership of any of the organizations listed above. Thank you for your consideration.

June 8, 2020

Dr. Vernon Morris, Professor; Founding Director, NOAA Cooperative Science Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology, Howard University; Founding Director, Atmospheric Sciences Program; Founder, Colour of Weather

Dr. Lisa White, Director, Education and Outreach, Museum of Paleontology, University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Jose D. Fuentes, Professor of Atmospheric Science, Pennsylvania State University

Dr. Christopher L. Atchison, Associate Professor and Executive Director, The International Association for Geoscience Diversity, University of Cincinnati

Dr. Wendy F. Smythe, Assistant Professor, American Indian Studies and Earth & Environmental Science, University of Minnesota Duluth

Dr. Melissa Burt, Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion, Walter Scott, Jr. College of Engineering; Research Scientist, Department of Atmospheric Science, Colorado State University

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Dr. Belay B. Demoz, Professor of Physics, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) and Adjunct Professor, Atmospheric Sciences Program, Howard University

Dr. Roy A. Armstrong, Professor of Marine Sciences, University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

While this letter originated from academics of color in the Geosciences, we ask that all organizations and individuals that are committed to taking action to achieve an anti-racist scientific community endorse this letter by signing [here \(https://notimeforsilence.org/sign-on/\)](https://notimeforsilence.org/sign-on/).

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