

## **Anti-racism? Perspectives of Black women mathematicians**

We are living in a moment in which the emblematic phrase of the U.S. Black activist Angela Davis "it is not enough not to be racist, you have to be anti-racist" has become the backdrop of (pseudo) international approaches to combat racism. The agenda gained momentum after waves of protests against the genocide of Black people sparked around the world as a response to the murder of George Floyd—a Black man cowardly killed by a white police officer in the United States.

In Brazil, police violence against Black people is nothing new. Names like João Pedro Matos Pinto (14), Kauan Peixoto (12), Jenifer Silene Gomes (11) and Ágatha Vitória Sales Félix (8) are part of the no-longer-surprising statistics of daily police brutality endured by many others whose names have been camouflaged by numbers. It is not only police brutality that kills. Death begins long before physical death. It begins with the look of dehumanization and carelessness, with even animals being given more access to humanity. Miguel Otávio Santana da Silva (5) died when he fell from the 9th floor of a building in Recife, after being abandoned inside an elevator by his mother's white employer while his mother—a housekeeper—walked the house's pets. In predominantly white spaces, it is preferred that Black people are quiet, 'well-behaved', and subservient. Marielle Franco (38), an elected councilwoman in Rio de Janeiro— a black woman, lesbian, mother—paid with her life the price for not accepting being silenced.

While unrest and feelings of solidarity are important, it is necessary that we critically understand how our individual and collective positioning—as a mathematical community—perpetuates structures, institutions and practices that normalize racism, patriarchy, homophobia and other systems of oppression that take away Black lives.

We start our reflection by talking about invisibility, a form of violence imposed on us, Black women in mathematics and other STEM areas. Guided by values of whiteness that position white men as the only legitimized creators of knowledge, the mathematics community at large fails to recognize the many ways in which Black women contribute to the advancement of the field. Our contributions materialize not only as research, but also as dedication to teaching, community outreach, and administrative labor. We cannot forget the many Black women who—historically subjugated to servitude—work behind the scenes as nannies, housemaids, and secretaries caring for children, homes, and offices so members of the mathematics community can undertake long working hours and dedicate themselves almost, if not, exclusively to the academia—labor demands that are historically based on the possibilities of the white male elite.

The few of us who go through admission processes and enter mathematics spaces face racism, sexism, elitism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and so many other forms of discrimination. Discrimination takes place in classrooms, meetings, laboratories, conferences, funding related decisions, and in the insistence on

marginalizing our voices. Recent research indicates that faculty, students, colleagues and employees perpetuate—consciously or not—discriminatory practices that not only reduce our professional opportunities but also interfere with our right to live fully<sup>1</sup>. Today, thanks to the arduous work of Black feminists such as Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, Nilma Lino Gomes and many others (see Santana, 2019)<sup>2</sup>, we have theoretical and methodological tools to understand that such practices are normalized by systems that dehumanize us and protect those privileged by whiteness.

We, Black women mathematicians, are certain that for the antiracist struggle to be effective we must critically reflect on the privileges that whiteness produces and how it benefits—whether we like it or not—many members of the mathematics community. We are not only talking about the privilege of occupying the majority of power positions inside and outside of mathematics. This package of countless advantages includes:

- the privilege of denying racism in spite of robust evidence proving otherwise
- the privilege of being seen as victims and not criminals
- the privilege of finding, without any difficulty, children's books that positively represent your racial and cultural group
- the privilege of coming and going without the fear of encounters with the police
- the privilege of having a good relationship with the police
- the privilege of de-racializing yourself and learning about race and racism from others
- the privilege of consuming media—TV, magazines—that promote white Eurocentric standards of behavior, beauty, and culture
- the privilege of entering a classroom and not feeling or being seen as an impostor
- the privilege of escaping the negative stereotypes that violates your right to individuality
- the privilege of running in the streets with ease
- the privilege of shopping without being followed
- the privilege of wearing your natural hair without fear of repercussions
- the privilege of practicing your religions
- the privilege of expressing emotions without being stigmatized
- the privilege of leaving your children in the care of Black women knowing that they will be cared for and alive when you return
- the privilege of being, first and foremost, considered human.

We know that many of the above privileges are actually rights. But we also know that within a society grounded on whiteness, such rights become privileges of a few.

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<sup>1</sup> See *references*.

<sup>2</sup> *Vozes insurgentes de mulheres negras: do século XVIII à primeira década do século XXI*, edited by Bianca Santana.

It is important for mathematics communities to release statements against the neglect of Black lives. However, statements alone are not real commitments against racism and other systems of oppression. We need practices, policies and structures that demonstrate such commitment. We need actions that guide us toward racial justice—inside and outside mathematics. We, Black women mathematicians, are willing to participate in these efforts. As such, we offer below some possibilities for action without pretending that they will solve all problems but as a warning that we can no longer hide behind the illusion of 'we don't know what to':

- Honest and constant engagement in individual reflections and collective discussions to understand our role in perpetuating racism, patriarchy, elitism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression;
- Eliminate admission processes—at all levels—that ignore the collective reality of the Black population in Brazil
- Implement academic, financial, social, and emotional support services to meet the specific needs of Black students
- Implement professional and student development programs to educate faculty, students, and staff in the vast literature that denounces racism, sexism, and the other "isms" in Brazil
- Create mechanisms that allow Black student to report moral and sexual harassment (in anonymous ways if needed) as well as provided specialized support
- Implement systems of accountability for all those who perpetuate violence be it racial, gendered, and others.
- Use mathematical knowledge as a tool against oppression—economic, physical, social, and others—of Black people such as by developing technologies, teaching mathematics for social justice, and etc
- Use mathematical knowledge as a tool to preserve Black lives in the areas of health, work, education, leisure and etc.

We affirm, without hesitation, that Black Lives Matter! We will continue to fight and join forces with those committed to our cause, so that our children have as rights what today are privileges, and that they can live fully, inside and outside mathematics.

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#### References

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