

# Elevate, don't assimilate, to revolutionize the experience of scientists who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour

As early-career Black women, we argue that encouraging assimilation is not enough to address systemic racism and outline suggestions for how minoritized individuals can not only survive, but thrive, in ecology and evolutionary biology.

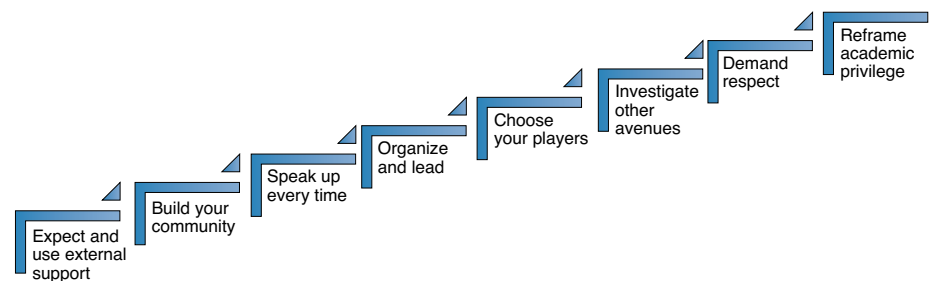
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For scientists in ecology and evolutionary biology (EEB), the conversation is once again focusing on how to fight racism and discriminatory structures<sup>1</sup>, with the aim of increasing representation of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC). Recently, Tseng and colleagues suggested that for the EEB field to advance, the barriers that impede the success of BIPOC need to be dismantled, and they presented strategies for BIPOC colleagues to confront these barriers on the basis of their own experiences<sup>2</sup>. We feel that those strategies are tone deaf and perpetuate a pattern of advising minoritized individuals on how they should move within white spaces — an approach known as respectability politics<sup>3</sup> or assimilation<sup>4</sup>. We argue that reiterating notions of meritocracy and correct academic behaviour does nothing to dismantle the oppressive system of white supremacy. Attempts of BIPOC to follow these 'academic rules' have yet to result in the academic population representing the general populace<sup>5</sup>. The goal of diversity is not one of assimilation and it is problematic for BIPOC to be asked to look different but act and speak the same as our white colleagues.

As five Black women who started as doctoral students at the same university, we support and uplift each other. We have long been told to travel the safest route, be aware of consequences, decrease our perceived threat and then maybe we can survive within academic institutions, and we are offended and disappointed by the continuation of an assimilation mindset. Here, we use our shared experience as Black women in the United States to present a list of strategies for BIPOC in EEB to not just survive, but to thrive (Fig. 1).

## Expect and use external support

White professionalism is not only the dominant narrative in EEB, but in the world



**Fig. 1 | Strategies for BIPOC to thrive, not just survive, in EEB.** For BIPOC to succeed in these fields, we must no longer perpetuate a pattern of looking different but acting and speaking the same as our white colleagues. The unique perspectives of minoritized groups shape their research, teaching and service. To implement sustained change, we need to rely on our community's history of activism, scholarship and leadership.

at large. Although some professions, such as education policy and social work, have certainly made strides toward inclusivity and diversity, the extra stress placed on BIPOC while navigating white spaces can manifest as mental and physical ailments<sup>6</sup>. In addition to carving out time for self-care, BIPOC individuals should pursue paths of physical well-being and identify tangible resources at affiliated institutions such as healthcare facilities and counselling centres. Many healthcare plans now cover professional counselling, either in person or via telehealth. Please do not wait until you are in crisis to seek help.

## Build your community

It is no longer acceptable for BIPOC to press on while coming to terms with disadvantages handed to us by the system. The current reality is that spaces where our colleagues do not understand the realities of life as a minoritized individual are persistent and pervasive. Therefore, it is up to us to build our own academic

communities and insist our colleagues engage in anti-racist behaviour. We can do this by attending minority-serving conferences, such as the National Diversity in STEM Conference, and joining BIPOC groups and organizations, such as the Black Ecologist Section of the Ecological Society of America, the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science, or the Indigenous People's Council on Biocolonialism. Most importantly, we must recognize the contributions and collaborative efforts towards this goal from our colleagues at historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and minority-serving institutions. We encourage BIPOC in other countries to seek out or establish similar communities.

## Speak up every time

Tone policing is a strategy often employed to discredit a message based on the emotion behind it<sup>7</sup>. Black women are taught from the beginning that our voices do not matter.

This manifests subtly, with our ideas attributed to others, our voices talked over and our words ignored. While we recognize that retaliation is possible for speaking up against this discrimination, the reality is that the ramification of not speaking is self-sabotage and devaluing your own voice. If we continue to silence ourselves, we certainly will not be heard. We exist within a system that never intended to have our voices be a part of the conversation. We have to speak up (every time), document everything and insist that we are heard and acknowledged. Our presence must be felt, and it must leave a lasting impression. Only then will we not be relegated as trouble-makers who are divisive and overly sensitive. Combining our BIPOC voices with those of allies will build a collective enterprise to implement systemic change.

### Organize and lead

Do not wait until you are in a leadership position to foster a culture and community of inclusiveness. Seek out like-minded BIPOC and allies that honour your different intersections, within your institutions or online, and use these communities to share advice on teaching, funding opportunities and academic programmes. Assemble resources to make them accessible to everyone, promote your publications to spread your science, and pursue collaborations that build your professional experience. We recommend that you push your instructors or colleagues to decolonize their course syllabi, to not perpetuate the harms of colonial science within the communities and ecosystems that they are working in, and to integrate and champion the role of traditional ecological knowledge in EEB. Push them also to cite publications by BIPOC and to call for seminars from underrepresented and early-career professionals. Demand official policies that address and focus on structural inequalities and equity at every level of academia. Time and effort are necessary investments and will lead to building an inclusive culture that fosters benefits for the entire EEB community.

### Choose your players

BIPOC are not privileged to choose their battles. Simply existing within societies built on racism and working in white-dominated fields puts us in the midst of every battle. It is tragic and unfair, but it is not a choice. However, we can choose our players: pick who to interact with, collaborate with and trust. Choose those who will amplify your voice when you cannot. Do not fear calling in marginalized individuals where appropriate. However, be sure to avoid

speaking over or for others by providing a platform for them to speak for themselves.

### Investigate other avenues

There is a disproportionate ratio of PhD holders to the number of academic positions, and the ratio of BIPOC in tenure-track positions is even lower<sup>8,9</sup>. We therefore encourage you to expand your career options and seek training in areas outside of academia. Attend conference presentations by people working within the industry, the government and non-profit organizations. Ask your institution to invite more speakers from non-academic sectors to allow for more career recruitment opportunities and visibility. Seek senior faculty members with non-academic collaborations as mentors and recruit allies that support these initiatives so that you are not burdened with championing this avenue alone.

### Demand respect






It has long been the notion that BIPOC are disproportionately disadvantaged in EEB and lack the space for productive and high-quality education. It is not our responsibility to endure hardship until we make it to leadership positions and only then change the system; the reality is, we are already the leaders of our communities, laboratories and classes. Yet without systemic change, the assumption will continue that we are not. The bare minimum should be that we can pursue opportunities with respectful scientists and that the teams we join are inclusive. Understand that your unique experiences and voice provide value — whether or not they fit into the preconceived notion of an academic. This includes challenging (micro)aggressions when they occur instead of giving the benefit of the doubt or assuming comments are harmless, such as a presumption that someone is a student when they are actually a professor. These brief indignities communicate hostility toward BIPOC and can lead to detrimental consequences<sup>10</sup>; however, responding to (micro)aggressions when they occur can alleviate long-term harm and can be empowering.

### Reframe academic privilege

Framing academic privilege as membership to the ivory tower for minoritized groups whitewashes the stigma that BIPOC may carry into the public space. This framework casts minoritized ethnic groups through a majority perspective and glosses over BIPOC issues by assuming that educational status alone conveys credibility. Although the framework may seem plausible, it does not account for the minority inclusion tax stigma<sup>11</sup>. Academic privilege comes at a price for BIPOC and is offset by oppression<sup>12</sup>.

This oppression can come in the form of not being able to decline service obligations that do not align with research priorities, not being able to challenge academic practice without tenure risk, or facing safety risks for being seen as a perceived threat, particularly during data collection and fieldwork. For BIPOCs in academia to have privilege, there should be no more pressure to reach out to the community than what is placed on our majority counterparts. At the same time, we agree that BIPOC should be mindful of their voice in the general public and prioritize decolonial and inclusive practices within the communities and ecosystems that we are interacting with. Let us be aware that the unique perspectives of minoritized groups shape their research, teaching and service.

One list is not enough to service the varied identities of the global BIPOC community. We hold room for individuals with different needs and intersections to show up fully as themselves. Our strategies also do not take the place of the work that our white colleagues need to do to educate themselves and implement change. There are plenty of anti-racist resources built on the long history of activism, scholarship and leadership within the BIPOC community; our recommendations include [shutdownstem.com](https://shutdownstem.com) and [sacredland.org](https://sacredland.org). Addressing the systemic issues that specifically affect Black women scholars will work to uplift those of many other marginalized identities. Ultimately, institutions should act to ensure that their underrepresented groups can thrive without the need to assimilate. □

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### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.