

A Challenge From the “Otherside of America”: Perspectives From a Black Clinician

By Oluremi Wanjiru Onifade, PT, DPT

In the words of Meek Mill, an American rapper and activist, I am reporting live from “The Otherside of America.”¹

America—a country where a Founding Father and slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, penned “all men are created equal,” yet enlisted scientists to prove that Black-identified-and-labeled human beings were inferior to whites.² The foundation of America was strongly, powerfully, and undeniably built on the grounds that any person who did not label themselves as white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male, would not have a seat at the table. That is the basis from which I write today.

So, let me introduce myself. My name is Dr. Oluremi Wanjiru Onifade. I am a Doctor of Physical Therapy who works in an orthopedic outpatient clinic as a neurological, resident-trained physical therapist. I am a Clinic Director and minority partner within my company. I am also the co-founder and president of

the National Association of Black Physical Therapists (NABPT). The path to where I am now began with a deep need to better understand my identity—as a Black, Kenyan, Nigerian, queer-identifying woman. I recognize the intersectionality of these identities presents as a barrier to navigating a white normative infrastructure. How does my identity translate into this Darwinist society? How do people who identify as I do, play (and win at) this “survival of the fittest” game called life, that we, Black individuals, are expected to play in the “the Land of the Free?”

“What’s free? Free is when nobody else could tell us what to be, free is when the TV ain’t controllin’ what we see.”

— (Meek Mill, *Otherside of America*)¹

My identity is rooted in my familial heritage. As a toddler, I was brought to the United States by my Kenyan mother to reunite with my Nigerian father and three older siblings. My mother and father are

educators. By pursuing secondary degrees in education, which afforded them upward socioeconomic mobility, they demonstrated to me the values of work ethic and excellence.

Interactions with my family helped me to appreciate why my parents made certain decisions: why they chose their careers, which side of the railroad tracks we lived on, what type of college my siblings would attend, who their circle of friends consisted of, and why they encouraged all of us children to become doctors. As the youngest of four, I was able to study how my siblings made many of their life choices: how they elevated themselves within the ranks of their careers. This had a constructive impact on how I, too, would make life choices, and importantly, my decision to become a Doctor of Physical Therapy.

Growing up in the south, I encountered overt racism and prejudices by white, Black, and other persons of color. As a child, I lived in a neighborhood where all of my friends were either Black American or first-generation African students. Yet my friends at the private school I attended were all white American. One day, I was running through our yard, and I was hit by a piece of fruit in the back of the head. I experienced a unique kind of pain when I saw that the object thrown had come from an area of my yard where three white boys, ones I played with just two days earlier, stood. They called me an “African booty scratcher” and added “nigger” for good measure. At the time I was only nine years old. I could not remember being called a nigger before. I first identified as African, but “nigger” was a new-found identity with which to contend. Aspects of my personhood gained layers, as I encountered further experiences with racism. At one

time in my life, I thought I would only be subjected to individual racism and prejudices; I would come to understand later that this was far from the truth.

“It is in collectives that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism.”

— Angela Davis³

I was privileged to attend the most affirming undergraduate college for my identity: Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. It was here that I was taught the history of the African Diaspora of the World, an area of history that is left out in most Americans’ K-12 education. It was in this environment that I was able to identify with more of my Black community—not as “one of few,” but being one of many, which was transformative for my soul. Living in this community of people with diverse Black backgrounds, I was able to establish my voice as a strong, unwavering, resilient, Black, Kenyan, and Nigerian-raised woman. It was here I began truly reconciling my cultural identity with my professional identity as I explored my Black, Nigerian, and Kenyan heritage, and the associated privileges and disadvantages that accompany that lineage. Being African-born with an African name, compared to a person perceived as “just Black,” is a privilege in itself. I am able to trace my ancestral history. I never had difficulty drawing my familial tree as a child, and I recognized this as a privilege many other Black individuals do not have.

I was aware that my rights to ownership of family land in Kenya and Nigeria was an example of generational wealth, a privilege not afforded to many of my Black

peers. The historical context of this is significant. Members of the Black community, in an effort to gain freedom from their slave owners, fought for the dream of passing on land and assets to the next generation. However, because of their skin color, and lack of recognition as equal citizens in the United States, there were many hurdles to overcome before this dream would be realized. For many, it is still not realized.

The stereotypical Black American was, and continues to be, categorized as unintelligent, lazy, relying on welfare, drug-addicted or dealing, imprisoned (modern-day slavery), being raised in broken homes, and only making meaningful societal contributions in the realm of athletics. Black bodies are magnificently built and, at times, glamorized. However, the minds and souls behind these bodies are often considered unworthy of human dignification. I carried these realities with me as I developed educational and career goals. My aspirations transitioned from being self-serving, toward uplifting, and developing resources for, the Black community. This passion for advocacy stemmed from a desire to deconstruct racial tropes and stereotypes and to promote a culture of Black excellence.

After graduating from Spelman College, I attained my Master’s degree in Education from Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. While in the program I was told by an academic mentor that by being smart I had “transcended Blackness.” It was the most outright racist statement I had heard since that day in my yard when I was 9 years old. I had erroneously assumed I existed in a safe “bubble” of heightened awareness, being in an environment of higher education. The bubble I imagined quickly burst. I had come to Auburn

with pre-existing concerns about living in Alabama as a Black woman and lacking the closeness of my previous affinity groups with whom I identify. I was unsure how I was going to survive, let alone thrive. The moment my mentor made that comment, I recognized two things: (1) I must make her aware of her ignorance, and (2) I must do so with a smile in order to preserve her comfort, in the hope that by doing so, it might help change her mindset.

This experience with my mentor further motivated me to withstand the pressures of being Black, and to continue to learn how to hold white people accountable; to help them realize that they were not superior to me or other members of the Black community. During my year at Auburn, I gained experience asserting my voice into unexpected spaces—lunches with faculty members in the Kinesiology department, board meetings, and admissions meetings—all in an effort to affect the group mindset of the “stereotypical Black student.”

After receiving my M.Ed, I was accepted into Emory University’s DPT Program. I remember the first day of DPT orientation; in a class of 65 students, there were 10 Black students. We would later joke that we were sure the admissions committee did not know all 10 of us would accept the invitation to come to Emory. There also existed an understood pact between us: “We *all* have to make it out of here.”

I succeeded in my clinical experiences, in part by having a Black or other person of color as a clinical instructor. “The Talented Ten” all graduated, thanks in

major part to the Black staff, and one Black faculty member in the DPT program. This recognition helped spark the flame for my future aspirations. People of color needed to see successful individuals in their field who looked like them, as a confirmation and affirmation of their existence in, and contribution to, this field.

*A perspective and awareness of the system and unfairness that afflicts 'em
And the clearest understandin' of what we gotta do to get free.*

— J. Cole- *Snow On Tha Bluff*⁴

A fellow classmate, DeAndrea Bullock, shared my sentiments. Upon completion of our DPT degrees in 2013, we made a pledge to each other that once established in our careers, we would create a resource group for future physical therapists and physical therapist assistants who looked like us. We knew in order to have a resounding voice in the profession, the inner workings of the white-centered system would need to hear us. Thus was the inception of the NABPT in 2016, with DeAndrea in the role of co-founder and vice president. We sought like-minded Black individuals as mentors and developed goals to provide resources to the Black community, increase the number of Black individuals in the field, and address the significant health disparities within the Black community. An important objective of the NABPT is to improve our collective professional quality of life through mentoring Black PTs on strategies for attaining upward mobility in our field.

Fast-forward to February of 2020 at the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) Combined

Sections Meeting, the largest APTA-sponsored conference of the year. The NABPT had 100 attendees at the meet-and-greet session. The organization is growing and thriving—having established five chapters, bringing awareness of our mission and goals to Black students, colleagues, and allies across the nation. Despite this success, it was apparent at this large national conference that our profession displays a glaring lack of diversity. It was also at this event where I challenged my ally in academia, Sarah Caston, to speak up for the unheard. Unbeknownst to her, she did not understand how deeply she would be intertwined with the story of the unheard—with me, the Black, Kenyan, Nigerian, queer-identifying woman, and the rest of the community of which she is now a part. She would be called to do difficult work to increase their freedom, because without freedom and justice, there would be no peace.

“You can’t separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.”

— (Malcolm X)⁵

EPILOGUE:

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

— Audre Lorde⁶

“I have a challenge for you... meet up at the conference?”

— Remi

Facing and Embracing the Challenge: Perspectives From a White Academician

By Sarah Caston, PT, DPT, NCS, GCS

It was pre-pandemic, so the lobby was bustling and crowded with physical therapists attending APTA's 2020 Combined Sections meeting donning lanyards, carrying posters, talking excitedly and meeting up with friends from across the nation. My mind was on a presentation I was giving the next day. Diversity (or the lack thereof) in our profession was not at the forefront of my mind when I sat across from Oluremi Wanjiru Onifade (Remi) in the hotel lobby that day. And that is part of the problem. She challenged me to be a part of the solution. I had made myself available "enough" to be approached with this ask, and I could no longer hide behind my progressive ideals or liberal statements.

"There is a lack of representation of Black and brown people teaching in your program. Are you willing to do something?"

Remi was smiling as she asked this, and I smiled back: "Sure," I replied, I was open to the task. We discussed more about how to connect Black physical therapist educators with our program, but I was naïve to the complexity and weight of the issue. I was not aware of the breadth and scope of how dramatic the underrepresentation of Black and brown individuals is,

not just in physical therapy programs, but in academia as a whole. I had for too long tried to separate politics from the classroom, a commonly subscribed-to directive. At that point, I did not have words for tactics like "racism-evasive rhetoric" or "liberal white supremacy," let alone did I recognize I was complicit in them.

Sadly, it was not until the brutal murders of Ahmuad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd came into the public eye that I truly grasped what Remi was asking of me, what my Black students were asking of me. Although it has been necessary for far longer than it's been trending, I became aware of the hashtag, #whitepeoplesomething. I felt a strong conviction toward #facultydosomething. As faculty, we held town halls this year for our students, giving them space to discuss the recent disturbing events. They expressed fervor and justified anger, not only about the public injustices, but also the lack of faculty voice and advocacy for the minority community. Our students were bravely vulnerable, and to be still or silent in light of these shared experiences was unacceptable.

No longer is there space for "politics doesn't belong in

the classroom.” Politics is now being equated with value and compassion for human rights and dignity; therefore, we must be willing to engage these conversations with our students and colleagues. Social responsibility has long been a core value in our profession, and the time for truly showing up is long overdue.

What does it look like for our profession to stand up against racial injustice? As individuals we must be willing to self-reflect to the point of discomfort on topics such as white fragility and systemic white supremacy. We must expose ourselves to the harrowing truths of the history surrounding government policies that rendered the Black community without access to quality education, long after desegregation laws were enacted. We must be willing to recognize that systematic oppression on the basis of race existed for decades after 1865, after 1965, and still exists today. So, what does it look like for me, a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman to stand up to racism? And again, I ask, what does it look like for the profession of physical therapy to do the same?

*“I always dreamed to being like, on like, CNN and being able to
express myself
And, and speak for like, the voiceless young men of America (do it)
The first step, I would say.”*

— Meek Mill, *Otherside of America*¹

References

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About the Authors



Dr. Oluremi Onifade, PT, DPT was born in Kenya to two immigrant parents from Kenya and Nigeria. The youngest of four moved to the states as a toddler. Being from a family of doctors and high achievers it became important for Dr. Onifade to make her imprint on the world.

At Spelman College, Dr. Onifade developed a track to allow her to become a Physical Therapist. At Spelman, she acquired her four-year degree while also maintaining three on campus jobs and played basketball her senior year. After the initial rejection to physical therapy school, Dr. Onifade pursued a Master’s of Kinesiology at Auburn University. While at Auburn, she earned a graduate assistant position in which she was an educator at a juvenile detention center for a year. Dr. Onifade was a catalyst in building a bridge program with Spelman College and Auburn University to attract students whom desired to pursue careers in allied health. Participating in this program she laid the foundation for future endeavors to educate and recruit people of color into the field of physical therapy. Dr. Onifade was accepted at Emory University to continue her journey into PT school. There she earned her Doctorate of Physical Therapy in 2013. After completing training in Neurological specialty in 2014, she went into Home Health in North Georgia. Dr. Onifade is now a physical therapist and serves as a Clinic Director and minority partner of an outpatient clinic in Ellenwood.

In 2016 Dr. Onifade along with Dr. DeAndrea Bullock decided to co-found National Association of Black Physical Therapists (NABPT). Currently they have over 300 members in which the foundation paves the way to increase the numbers of the African Diaspora in the physical therapy field while creating programs to uplift the black community by proxy of the organization.

Dr. Onifade enjoys spending her free time playing flag football, playing with her two dogs, and spending time with her partner. She has grown very fond of listening to audible books where she is able to relax and forget about everyday life.



Dr. Sarah Caston, PT, DPT, NCS, GCS is an assistant professor in Emory University’s Division of Physical Therapy, and a member of ACAPT’s Consortium for Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism. Dr. Caston incorporates humanities and narrative reflections into her areas of teaching. Dr. Caston demonstrates her passion for DPT student growth and well-being through co-directing Emory DPT’s Learning Community Program, and directing research on methods to improve student well-being. Dr. Caston’s additional scholarly interests include the intersection of the lived experience of individuals with disability with rehabilitation education and practice, ethics in rehabilitation, and DPT student well-being. She is passionate about promoting humanities practices and student self-reflection around the lived experiences of individuals in marginalized populations, social justice, and rehabilitation ethics.