

The Twitter hashtag that put a spotlight on racism in academia

Shardé Davis and Joy Melody Woods started #BlackInTheIvory because they were friends, because they were two Black women in communications research, because a week of protests had left them grieving and because they were ready to expose some of the ways that they had experienced racism. Others were ready, too. As marches spread worldwide to protest against racism and police brutality in the United States, scores of Black scientists candidly described times when colleagues and institutions had been unwelcoming, insulting and hostile. *Nature* spoke to Davis, an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, and Woods, a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin, about how #BlackInTheIvory — a reference to the ‘ivory tower’ metaphor often used to describe academic institutions — started, and why they decided to speak out.

How did you come up with #BlackInTheIvory?

Shardé Davis: I was using it just to string together my own reflections of being Black in the academy. Joy and I were both on Twitter. I texted her and I was like, “I’m actually thinking about sharing some of my own experiences with this hashtag. What do you say?” Joy responds with, “Girl, I’ve already tweeted it out.”

I did not create it thinking other people would pick it up and use it. And we woke up to a brewing firestorm.

What’s your impression so far?

SD: I will say surprised, but at the same time, not. This conversation on Black identity is long overdue. As ‘Black-ademics’, we’re often the only one. So when these racist acts happen, whether it’s covert or overt, it’s very easy to think, “Gosh, I must have done something wrong.” But when you have this, when you share your experience, you’re able to see that other people have gone through the exact same things. So that means it’s not an ‘us’ problem, it’s a system problem. Black folks are fed up, and we just provided the outlet for them to let loose.

Did you worry about repercussions?

Joy Melody Woods: This is a very real question and true, true concern. A lot of times, the people who are doing these



Shardé Davis (left) and Joy Melody Woods founded the hashtag #BlackInTheIvory.

actions are powerful people, they’re big names in a certain discipline or on campus. But how I look at it, if I call someone out for what they’ve done that is abuse — racial abuse — and then I’m not welcome in that space any more, then I don’t want to be in that space.

SD: I’m on the tenure track. You have many junior faculty members, across races, who are told to be quiet. You’re not supposed to be a rabble rouser. You’re not supposed to speak up because people can retaliate and use that against you when it comes time to go up for tenure. And there are many other people on that Twitter thread, who were sharing, who were in a similar position.

What made it the right time?

JMW: We’re in a catalytic moment where universities want to be on the right side of history due to what happened with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and all the countless names that I don’t even have the stomach to say today.

What do you say to people who ask why representation matters in science?

SD: Black intellectuals, scholars, academics, we are way less than 10% of US academics. I’m going to feel comfortable and say around 5%.

That 5% actually has the ability to be 15%, 20% — there is an opportunity for us to be able to truly diversify the professors, diversify the academy. And when we have a more diversified university, that means that we have

more diversified individuals, who then are doing research from their lens. Which then is going to reshape what research looks like, what research gets produced, which then means that we have a greater ability to be able to change our legislation, our policies, how we are informing social relationships and the like.

White colleagues often ask how to help. Has this changed how they reach out?

JMW: There’s thousands of tweets with this hashtag — that’s thousands of different instances or retweets or whatever of people’s experiences, Black students’ experiences, with the white-supremacist system. And the reaching out has now become, “Okay, wow, I might have been complicit in this. I’ve got to change it.” And so I think there’s now a tone of change, because it’s so glaring.

SD: This is not just about police, right? Because the police are the branch. The root is systemic racism. There are many other branches on that tree, where systemic racism rears its ugly head, and I want Americans to see, “Oh, wow, that’s another one. Wow.” So then their mind will start to think critically, to say: “Well, what else is out there? What other institutions need to be completely uprooted?”

Interview by Nidhi Subbaraman

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.