

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:05.03] ANTHONY SIS: Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. On today's show, we continue our series "Blackness at Cornell." In this special series, you will hear the stories of Cornell faculty and staff members, in their authentic voice, about how they define Blackness and Black identity. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:25.52] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:27.20] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to "Blackness at Cornell."

[00:00:30.40] (MUSIC CONTINUING)

[00:00:52.42] This episode features faculty member Dr. Peggy Odom-Reed. Here's her story.

[00:00:58.93] DR. PEGGY ODOM-REED: I am Peggy Odom-Reed, currently a teaching faculty member in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, School of Hotel Administration, and a proud alumna from the Department of Communication at Cornell, earning my doctorate degree.

[00:01:13.90] What does Blackness mean to me? I'm continually challenged to sacrifice my voice and comfort so you can feel comfortable. It is not about playing the Black card, but rather living this reality each day. As a young child, I thought everyone was equal and everyone was treated equally. However, I discovered early in my education, during my elementary school years, this belief is not reality.

[00:01:44.63] One of my elementary school teachers, my fourth grade teacher, I believe, tried to hold me back a grade based on an achievement test that she said I did not pass. When my mom received this information, she went to the school and she advocated for me, because she knew my capabilities. She knew what I could do. After talking to the principal, the school retested me, and not only did I pass the test, but also I did well.

[00:02:17.94] That experience was devastating to me. It changed my perception of people in our world. It changed my belief of fairness. As a child, I could not understand, why would she try to hold me back if I indeed passed the test? That experience shaped me. While it opened my eyes to the challenges that African Americans face in our society, it also inspired me.

[00:02:53.74] It inspired and motivated me to want to excel, to want to achieve more, just because. It inspired me to want to go to college and not question whether I could because I am the first in my family to be a college graduate. It inspired me to be who I am today, an African American educator at an Ivy League University.

[00:03:21.53] Blackness means feeling a sense of discomfort and living as a minority in a majority world. Society has moved from calling us colored people to now people of color, but I do not see a significant difference, and the negative association remains the same. I choose to identify myself as African American.

[00:03:48.02] Blackness means strength, unity, and being connected to an understanding and supportive community who share similar experiences and help each other to survive in a majority white country. Blackness means beauty, appreciation for our beautifully diverse shades of skin color and natural hairstyles that define our uniqueness.

[00:04:13.50] But what does it mean to be African American in this country? We all are created equal, but we are not all treated equally. Being an African American citizen does not mean having equal rights in a fair system. In this country, we are treated as second or even third class citizens who are expected to sit silently.

[00:04:39.33] We are falsely stereotyped as criminals and viewed as threatening because of how we look, regardless of our educational level, job status, and other achievements. We are viewed negatively as Black, where certain people who hold racist views do not want to directly refer to us as Black or African American, or address issues that are specific to our community. We see this in the recent backlash by some from even seeing or hearing the words Black Lives Matter.

[00:05:13.48] At Cornell, having a seat at the table without being able to speak your truth perpetuates the status quo. Imagine sitting in a faculty or staff meeting, or even in a classroom, with nearly all African Americans, and how you would feel if you were the only one or one of only a few white people in the room. This experience is the daily reality for African Americans at Cornell.

[00:05:42.03] As an African American graduate student alumna and now teaching faculty member at Cornell, I bring a unique experience. My Cornell journey began in the mid-1990s, but the sad reality is the systemic bias against African Americans that I witnessed 25 years ago has not significantly improved. I have observed African American faculty and staff come and leave without much care or concern for their early departure and lack of representation, particularly to support African American students at Cornell.

[00:06:20.36] As a first generation college student, I know what it feels like to be the first and to break through structural barriers. Despite the Cornell brand and my corporate and academic experience, I am continually challenged to prove myself as an African American educator. This experience is isolating, as I am one of a few African Americans in my college, and currently the only African American female teaching faculty member at my school.

[00:06:50.63] You might say we are invited to the table, and yes, that is true. We are invited by some, but dismissed, ignored, and unsupported by others, contrary to

Cornell's caring and belonging values. I recall sitting in a faculty meeting and sharing how I am disrespected by certain students in the classroom. Although some of my colleagues acknowledged their white privilege and different experience, none of my colleagues felt compelled to take action to create a more welcoming and respectful classroom environment to eliminate this injustice for their African American colleagues.

[00:07:32.21] Privilege allows some white people to say, I have never had that problem, and dismiss your lived experience without acknowledging the power and privilege that they automatically receive, simply because they are part of the majority and benefit from the similarity bias. How can we feel a genuine sense of belonging when we face institutional racism and are not recognized and valued for who we are?

[00:08:00.11] For example, let's consider the flawed evaluation and promotion systems that favor the overrepresented majority, those who look alike and share similar backgrounds, while discriminating against the underrepresented minorities-- African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, who do not easily fit in a system that is designed by and for white people.

[00:08:25.79] COVID-19 provides another example when we consider the teaching reactivation plan that failed to directly acknowledge or address the health disparities for African Americans and Latinos, who have at least two times the health risks as white people for contracting and dying from the coronavirus. Similar to different states in our country, the University developed its reopening plan without seriously planning for how to protect and mitigate the higher risk for these underrepresented minorities, the most vulnerable individuals, suggesting that their lives do not matter as much as those in the majority.

[00:09:09.74] How can we turn this moment into a movement? We are finally visible. Being at home during the pandemic allow most people to actually see African Americans and not easily look pass or rationalize the blatant racism against African Americans. It's hard to deny the lynching that people across the world witnessed in watching eight minutes, 46 seconds of video of police officers killing a restrained and unarmed African American male, George Floyd, begging to breathe and live. We have many Amy Coopers in our society, including in our institutions of higher education, even though we may not capture their racist actions against African Americans on video.

[00:10:05.59] We can use our collective voices to stand up and make real changes to turn this moment into a movement. We do not need to sit silently any longer. We do not need to engage in more conversations or town halls, which African Americans have endured for more than a century. We need real white allies for action, those who are willing to use their privilege to do the social justice work now to dismantle systemic racism against African Americans that should have been eliminated during the past century. This movement is an opportunity to elevate the voice, comfort, and equality for African Americans as first class citizens in our country and at Cornell, in which we truly feel a sense of belonging.

Episode 25: Blackness at Cornell, Part III
Released on July 24, 2020

[00:11:02.86] ANTHONY SIS: Peggy, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today. If you would like to contribute to this series, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. We welcome multiple forms of expression and the highlight a wide range of experiences, such as joy, resilience, adversity, and more. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:11:27.01] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:11:28.87] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening to "Blackness at Cornell."

[00:11:31.69] [MUSIC PLAYING]