

# EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR

## COUNTER-NARRATIVES

### **DEAREST EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR**

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SHELINA ADATIA (SHE/HER)

Dearest Education Graduate Students of Colour,

Racism in education starts early. In fact, it was in Junior Kindergarten where I, the only Muslim in Mrs. K's class, learnt a lesson I will never forget: **hell hath no cruelty like a group of four-year-old white boys at recess.** *Sans compréhension du racisme ni des microaggressions, ces garçons m'ont présenté leurs effets néfastes sans aucune hésitation.* In other words, what may have sounded like my name mispronounced, was a recurring microaggression LOUDLY pronounced. That was the start of my story of racism in education but THIS is my opportunity to rewrite that story for you and for future Education graduate students of colour. My name is **Shelina**, pronounced **SHEH-lee-nah**, and THAT is what I should have said, loudly and proudly, all those years ago. Instead, I cried in the girl's washroom.

Thankfully, in 2020, authors like Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow (*Your Name Is A Song*), have written beautiful stories meant to empower children as they learn about the beauty and the history behind African, Asian, Black-American, Latinx, and Middle Eastern names. My message to you, my fellow graduate students, is to **NEVER accept anything less than perfect pronunciation of our names - whether that be from a four-year-old or a tenured professor.** *Accepter moins que cela ne ferait que perpétuer le racisme qui privilégie les noms européens par rapport aux noms des personnes noir.e.s, autochtones et de couleur.*

As I write this letter, Hannukah and Christmas have just passed and Kwanzaa is upon us; however, as a Shia Ismaili Muslim, I celebrate *Salgirah*. Taking place on the 13th of December, Salgirah (meaning anniversary) is a celebration of the birth of our present living Imam (our spiritual leader), His Highness the Aga Khan. Today, it would not be uncommon for a non-Ismaili colleague or friend to wish my family and I *Salgirah Mubarak* (Happy Salgirah!), but

growing up, Salgirah was not even acknowledged by my teachers or peers. In fact, during high school, I can recall several instances where my sister and I would be writing exams on December 13th. The one time I did mention Salgirah to a teacher, I was asked to give a ‘special presentation’ following the exam period. To this day, I remain stunned at the AUDACIOUS claim that I spend my winter break preparing a presentation on Salgirah simply because I don’t celebrate Christmas. Moreover, I remember wondering, why is it up to ME to educate my teachers and peers? Are they incapable of doing the research themselves?

Today, as a graduate student, this request is one I would associate with the often unpaid or invisible labour asked of BIPOC students and professors. While this work can be extremely rewarding, it can also lead to extreme fatigue, frustration, burnout, and even missed opportunities for promotion. Moreover, when we do engage in this work, it usually comes with an implicit WARNING: Don’t ruffle any feathers along the way. *Mon conseil? Apprenez à dire NON de temps en temps. If you don’t prioritize your physical health and mental well-being, no one else will.*

Saying NO or disrupting the status-quo is not something that comes easily. As a child of immigrants, it has been ingrained within me to be calm, obedient, respectful of my elders and authority figures, and most importantly, grateful to be living in a country of opportunity. That said, causing any sort of disruption at school would NOT have been tolerated; hence, I chose not to speak up while I was bullied by a white, male peer throughout high school. “Hey stinky”, he would murmur under his breath, as he passed by me in the halls or stood behind me during the daily recitation of O Canada. One day, while I waited at the bus stop after school, I remember spotting him across the street. As always, I ignored him, but unfortunately, he didn’t do the same. As my head was turned away, I became the target of his biggest snowball, thrown at lightning speed. With tears streaming down my face, snow trickling down my back, I could see him out of the corner of my eye, laughing with a friend, as I stepped into the bus.

That moment should have been my wake-up call to SPEAK UP. But alas, out of fear of hurting my parents, or being accused of overreacting or lying by the school administration, I said nothing. At the time, I felt that silence was my only option but this past year, more so than ever, I have learnt that by saying nothing, I too am part of the problem and not the solution. *Donc même si ce sera difficile au début, je vous encourage fortement à dénoncer les injustices. Ce sera frustrant et fatigant et vous ne verrez peut-être pas toujours l'impact de vos paroles et de vos actions, mais soyez assurés qu'elles font une différence.* Indeed, it is only then that our white allies will truly AMPLIFY our voices and share in our vulnerabilities.

As I conclude this letter, we are on the cusp of 2021, and I find myself recalling the wise words of His Highness the Aga Khan: “**The right to hope is the most powerful human motivation I**

**know”** (His Highness the Aga Khan, 1996, para. 30). Yet, 2020 has certainly given us many reasons to lose hope. For instance, a few weeks ago, the uRacism collective engaged in a peaceful sit-in, sleeping on the floors and couches of Tabaret Hall in order to secure a meeting with the University of Ottawa’s top administrators. Their reasoning: to discuss concerns regarding the newly proposed Committee on Anti-Racism and Inclusion. As I followed their posts on social media, I remember feeling completely hopeless as their request was met with push backs, delays, and ultimately, with utter ignorance. It was a sad day, I thought, to be a BIPOC graduate student at uOttawa. It was at that point that I reached out to a fellow BIPOC graduate student, an individual whose words and actions alike have been a continuous beacon of HOPE throughout this academic year. *Alors, chers collègues, ne sous-estimez jamais le pouvoir de vous entourer de ceux et de celles qui vous inspireront lorsque vous vous retrouverez au plus bas.*

Racism in education starts early, but as a collective, we can find the motivation to continue fighting against it by DISRUPTING oppressive discourses, practices, and policies. This, however, is no easy task, so in the spirit of moving forward, I share the following tweet: **“Educators cannot disrupt oppressive practices if they don’t understand how these oppressive practices intentionally came to be”** (Wilson, 2020). As we look towards 2021, let us, the Education Graduate Students of Colour collective, renew our commitment to both learning and unlearning, so that we may, *inshallah* (God willing), REWRITE, and dare I say, ABOLISH, stories of racism in education for present and future generations of graduate students of colour.

Yours in Solidarity,

Shelina Adatia

## References

His Highness the Aga Khan. (1996, May 26). *Speech: Commencement ceremony at the Brown University*. Aga Khan Development Network. <https://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/commencement-ceremony-brown-university>

Wilson, M. [@Drawn2Intellect]. (2020, December 21). *Educators cannot disrupt oppressive practices if they don't understand how these oppressive practices intentionally came to be* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Drawn2Intellect/status/1341069009542909953>