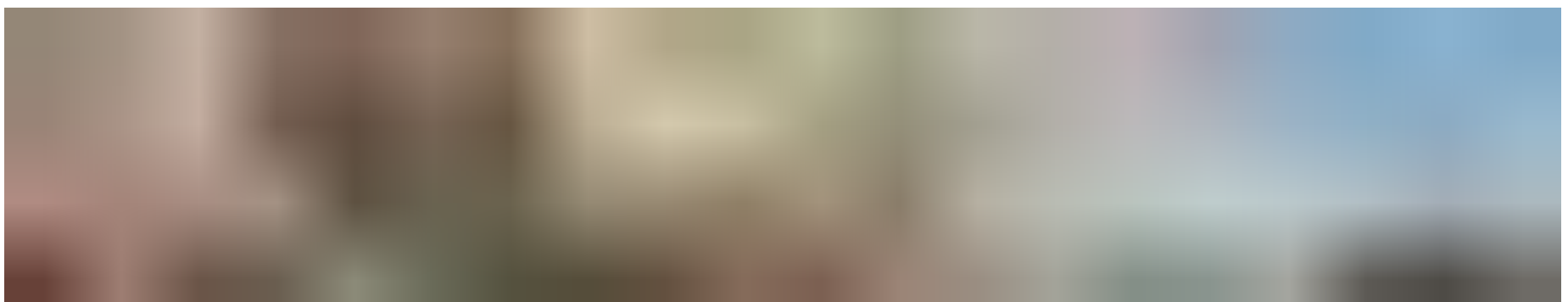


OPINION

The impossible burden of being Black in America

While this may be non-Black America's first time realizing the burden they have placed on Black Americans, it's also the first time Black Americans have realized what life could be like not shouldering that burden.

By **Netia A. McCray** Updated June 22, 2020, 3:00 a.m.





Several thousand people protested a Minneapolis police officer killing George Floyd at Burnside Park in Downtown Providence on May 30. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The first week of March, my team and I at [Mbadika](#), a Boston-based STEM nonprofit I founded while an undergraduate at MIT, were waist-deep in preparations for the kickoff of our spring workshops and creating content for middle and high school students across the country.

As the number of COVID-19 cases began to rise in New York City and Boston, I found myself monitoring developments in both cities and making contingency plans, while some fraction of my mind thought, *impossible*.

Now, I've found great comfort from the uncertainties of these times by reliving my favorite childhood memories, including Disney's version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella." I found myself reenacting my favorite scenes, including hopping onto a chair with a broom while singing along.

Shortly after escaping through song, my new reality came rushing back as I found myself out of breath and feeling a sharp pain in my chest. Now my new routine consists of sitting by an open window, laying on my stomach, and gasping for air.

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The nights are the hardest. I don't believe that COVID-19 is the primary reason I wake up in the middle of the night gripped with fear that I can't breathe.

It's America.

Following the killings of numerous Black Americans, including George Floyd, [Breonna Taylor](#), and [Rayshard Brooks](#), Americans have found themselves in the same predicament as Cinderella when the clock struck midnight. In a matter of seconds, she was thrust from her fairy tale into reality. The glamorous carriage, horsemen, and even the ball gown. Gone.

In America's case, the fantasy many of you find yourself being thrust from is an America in which systemic racism does not exist. Understandably, it's natural to question your newfound reality: Is this America? Have I been complicit in creating this America as the status quo?

My response: It is and you have.

As Black Lives Matter engulfs the nation and the world, my e-mail has been inundated with messages from non-Black colleagues and partners asking for my assistance in navigating their "new normal" as a citizen of a broken nation.

One person wrote, "It's only been a week, and I can't imagine experiencing this burden of being Black in America for a lifetime!"

I had to pause and reflect: "This burden of being Black in America."

While this may be non-Black America's first time realizing the burden they have placed on Black Americans, it is also the first time Black Americans have realized what life could be like not shouldering that burden. The result? We are not going back.

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Many of you would do anything in order to have everything return to the way things were before March. Since March, I've had to shoulder the burden of being a Black woman seeking medical care, being a Black business owner, and a Black educator. I am overburdened at this moment and I can no longer shoulder any more of America's burden.

What you consider normal was slowly killing me and my loved ones.

I can not return to normal. It's time for others in America to shoulder the burden of systemic racism.

So I responded, the way I've wanted to respond to people who asked me how I deal with this burden, a burden I and other Black Americans have had to shoulder since we were children: Because we have to. Just like you are going to have to unless you are willing to help us change this.

The stakes for you shouldering this burden, unlike for me, isn't life or death. If the burden is too heavy for you, then help us fix the system. If the system cannot be fixed, help us dismantle it in order to ensure equal opportunity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That's not us asking for revenge, that is us demanding active recognition of our Constitutional right to equal protection under the law. That is justice.

If you feel justice is impossible, just remember what we considered impossible in March. [A pandemic](#). [Working remotely](#). [Murder hornets](#).

Now imagine what's possible if we stop believing it's impossible.

In one of my favorite scenes from "Cinderella," Cinderella reveals her doubt that the impossible — in her case, going to the ball and dancing with the prince — could ever be possible, to which her fairy godmother gives the following cheeky reply, "[Impossible things are happening every day](#)."

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