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Outlook

I'm a black climate expert. Racism is hurting my work.

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Here is an incomplete list of things I've left unfinished in recent days because America's boiling racism and militarization are deadly for black people: a policy memo to members of Congress on accelerating offshore wind energy development in U.S. waters; the introduction to my book on how we might flourish in our changed climate; a presentation for a powerful corporation on how technology can advance ocean-climate solutions; a grant proposal to fund a network of female climate leaders; a fact check of a big-budget film script about ocean-climate themes; planting vegetables with my mother in our climate victory garden.

Toni Morrison said it best, in a 1975 speech: "The very serious function of racism . . . is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being." As a marine biologist and policy nerd, building community around climate solutions is my life's work. But I'm also a black person in the United States of America. I work on one existential crisis, but these days I can't concentrate because of another.

The sheer magnitude of transforming our energy, transportation, building and food systems within a decade, while striving to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, is already overwhelming. And black Americans are disproportionately more likely than whites to be concerned about - and affected by - the climate crisis. But the many manifestations of structural racism, mass incarceration and state violence mean that environmental issues are only a few lines on a long tally of threats. How can we expect black Americans to focus on climate when we are so at risk on our streets, in our communities and even within our own homes? How can people of color effectively lead their communities on climate solutions when faced with pervasive and life-shortening racism?

Even at its most benign, racism is incredibly time-consuming. Black people don't want to be protesting for our basic rights to live and breathe. We don't want to be constantly justifying our existence. Racism, injustice and police brutality are awful on their own, but they are additionally pernicious because of the brain power and creative hours they steal from us. I think of one black friend of mine who wanted to be an astronomer but gave up that dream because organizing for social justice was more pressing. Consider the discoveries not made, the books not written, the ecosystems not protected, the art not created, the gardens not tended.

It's hearing police sirens and helicopters in my Brooklyn neighborhood and knowing that those who sound them do not always aim to protect and serve. It's walking the back roads near my mom's home in Upstate New York and being more scared of the local white kids in the pickup truck with the Confederate flag on the bumper - in a state that was never part of the Confederacy - than I am of the local black bears. It's spending my weekend writing these words.

Here's the rub: If we want to successfully address climate change, we need people of color. Not just because pursuing diversity is a good thing to do, and not even because diversity leads to better decision-making and more effective strategies, but because black people are significantly more concerned about climate change than white people are (57 percent vs. 49 percent), and Latino people are even more worried (70 percent). That means more than 23 million black Americans already care deeply about the environment and could make a huge contribution to the massive amount of climate work that needs doing.

I have been getting tiny tasks done - emails, (virtual) meetings. Because we are taught that the show must go on, I mustered the composure to conduct an interview about the importance of planting trees. But none of the deeper work got done, none of the work that could have a significant effect on how we think about climate

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solutions and how fast we implement them. Instead of working, I was checking in on my people, staying informed, doom-scrolling.

Now I'm totally spent. Not from the day but from the week, the month, the year, this presidential administration, this country that keeps breaking my heart. We are resilient, but we are not robots.

People of color disproportionately bear climate impacts, from storms to heat waves to pollution. Fossil-fuel power plants and refineries are disproportionately located in black neighborhoods, leading to poor air quality and putting people at higher risk for severe cases of covid-19. Such issues are finally being covered in the news media more fully.

But this other intersection of race and climate isn't talked about nearly enough: Black Americans who are already committed to working on climate solutions still have to live in America, brutalized by institutions of the state, constantly pummeled with images, words and actions showing us just how many of our fellow citizens do not, in fact, believe that black lives matter. Climate work is hard and heartbreaking as it is. Many people don't feel the urgency, or balk at the initial cost of transitioning our energy infrastructure, without considering the cost of inaction. Many fail to grasp how dependent humanity is on intact ecosystems. When you throw racism and bigotry in the mix, the work becomes nearly impossible.

Look, I would love to ignore racism and focus all my attention on climate. But I can't. Because I am human. And I'm black. And ignoring racism won't make it go away.

So, to white people who care about maintaining a habitable planet, I need you to become actively anti-racist. I need you to understand that our racial inequality crisis is intertwined with our climate crisis. If we don't work on both, we will succeed at neither. I need you to step up. Please. Because I am exhausted.

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