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## **Counternarratives as Truth-telling: Survival, Community & Racial Justice in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Utilizing excerpts from the recently published *Confronting Institutionalized Racism in Higher Education: Counternarratives for Racial Justice* (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022), the authors engage Critical Race Theory (CRT) and more specifically, counternarratives as a strategy for centering the voices and experiences of racialized faculty in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Counternarratives also provide space for these faculty to interrogate their everyday lived realities and struggles demonstrating how they resist silencing and erasure through collective action.

NB: The authors capitalize Black, Asian, Brown, and Latinx and not white, when referring to racialized groups to center the collective sense of identity among BIPOC communities.

### **Critical Race Theory and Racialized Faculty**

*Confronting Institutionalized Racism in Higher Education: Counternarratives for Racial Justice* (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022) pays homage to the Critical Race Theory (CRT) practice of composite counternarratives, a strategy which magnifies and re-envision experiences of marginalized racial groups in order to unpack, reinforce, and underscore the impact of structural, systemic racism on their ability to be their fully racialized selves and navigate with confidence spaces like the academy (Bell, 1992; Griffin, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Intertwined dialogues allow the stories told by racialized faculty to engage with one another and for themes to unfold and overlap in ways that center their experiences of pain, perseverance, and resistance. These themes are not only a critical tool for analysis, but also a framework for the

development and implementation of systemic interventions that improve the experiences of racialized faculty.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) highlight five CRT tenets which are of particular relevance to systemic inequities in higher education: counternarratives (narratives centering voices of the oppressed telling their truths), whiteness as property (the legacies of Black lives as white property and the ways in which this manifests), interest convergence (ways in which white people continue to benefit from policies that were supposedly put in place to benefit people of color such as affirmative action), the permanence of racism (because higher education ignores systemic racism upon which the US was built, diversity plans in universities can often reinforce institutional racism), and colorblindness (which allows society to ignore racist policies and laws).

### Counternarratives as Truth-Telling

**Fiona:** *You know, universities were created for rich, white men. And the fact that they've diversified the people coming in doesn't change how it was set up, right? So, we really need to rethink the whole process. There's also the challenge with trying to accommodate multiple stakeholders. I imagine that administrators have boards of trustees, alumni, and politicians if they're state funded. I can imagine they're trying to appease multiple people but at what cost?* (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022)

Stevenson (2014) notes that getting to a better place means engaging in a process of unpacking and reconciling ourselves to our painful and traumatic histories. He frames the conversation in a landscape of forgiveness but speaks repeatedly of the need to nurture truth-telling spaces and projects. From its very inception, *Confronting Institutionalized Racism in Higher Education* was conceived as a truth-telling project. Twelve mid-to-senior level adult education faculty members and administrators: eight Black/African American (seven women; one man); three Asian (two women; one man), and one Latinx woman were interviewed. These faculty were affiliated --,private (two) and public (ten) institutions. The semi-structured virtual interviews (each lasting two to three hours) focused on their experiences at the start of their careers, tenure and promotion as instructors, and strategies they used to navigate life at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). All interviews were transcribed and analyzed and themes focusing on institutional racism; teaching while Brown/Black; stonewalling and gaslighting; tenure and promotion; faculty organizing; self-care; white privilege and white supremacy and “what the university could be” emerged. These connections allowed the authors to place the verbatim interview responses in “conversation” with each other, using short introductory transitions, as needed, for clarity. This was done, in part, to reflect the collective nature of these narratives and the unsettling similarity of people’s experiences (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022).

Speaking one’s truth in a space and place where your very existence as a person of color is a source of contention is an act of resistance. For racialized faculty in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), the systemic barriers that complicate their road to tenure and promotion have reinforced the importance - and risks - of speaking out. Their stories of survival, their counternarratives, push back against institutionalized tales that center whiteness, wealth, and privilege; faulty notions of academic meritocracy, and commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion that check boxes, not structures (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). One example is the number of racialized faculty who serve

as token representatives on racial justice and DEI-related committees while their presence on higher-ranking decision-making committees is absent (or rare). As racialized faculty, they protect universities against charges of racism but by checking the box their presence enables the racism they seek to disrupt.

Counternarratives elucidate the importance of intersectional identities in how people understand, perceive and engage with the world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). They offer not only a more multi-layered (re)interpretation of events, but bring to the forefront distortions that majoritarian, often sanitized stories obscure (Closson, 2010). Issues like microaggressions, gaslighting, power plays and marginalization disproportionately and negatively impact racialized faculty (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). The recent tenure debacle involving the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones at UNC is an example of this, and a testament to the violence of white supremacy and the insidious role of (white) donors' power to reinforce racist, capitalist values in the academy (Stripling & Zahneis, 2021).

Illuminating and centering the stories of racialized faculty as a truth telling project also creates a sense of community (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). Despite their struggles, these scholars and activists remain committed to creating a “beloved community” within the academy. Through their culturally engaged research, critically aware teaching and vigorous advocacy for racialized and oppressed communities both within and outside of the academy, their counternarratives reveal how one can live beside one's traumas - fiercely. Their acts of resistance are not examples of denial, or repression, but sources of revelation. And alongside a commitment to collective action, their stories help to nurture spaces that center and affirm the experiences of racialized faculty. In chronicling these narratives, the authors were not just responding to a particular set of moments (like George Floyd) but to endless years of invisibility with the understanding that the university was a hostile place for racialized faculty. This article (and book) emerges from the need to engage the foundational reality of anti-Blackness and anti-Brownness under which universities operate.

### **The Systemic Nature of Injustice**

**Gladys:** *There's a lot of structural racism built into higher education that just permeates everyday activities, actions, and speech. I'm the only faculty of color in my program and it can get disheartening and hard. And the city where I am in the south is very segregated racially...but it's not overt. A lot of it is covert and there's a long history of much anti-Black racism here. So, for example, I'm the lowest paid in the department. The department chair who had hired me and negotiated my salary told me later I didn't negotiate hard enough. Even though he was the one who had hired me and negotiated my salary. I also have over forty doctoral advisees and four master's advisees so close to fifty in total. Recently, I was told I'm spending too much time on advising, too much time teaching and remapping my courses when I shouldn't really be doing that. In that conversation, there was no recognition of the load I was carrying. It was all about how I was negotiating my load. If you just put it as an overall picture, that's what I mean by racism is structural.*

**Delilah:** *You know, in my mind there's really two kinds of racism. The kind that says you're different from me and the other kind that says, “Oh I feel so bad for you that you're not me. If you were white like me, your life would be better but it's not, so I feel bad for you.” And so they don't*

*identify themselves as racist because they believe that we are in fact inferior to them. And so what I see is this assumption of incompetence on the part of white faculty toward faculty of color, without the questioning, because they've decided they're not racist. What's annoying is they want to have conversations and talk about liberal things without actually being liberal, like just put on your hood and get it over with.*

**Magda:** *I guess I would say my situation is probably not unlike most other institutions. It's racist, discriminatory, prejudiced, and the injustices are systemic. I agree, Delilah, it is a place that wants to see itself as liberal and progressive but it is so backwards and regressive that it's absolutely ridiculous. And when potential candidates come to our on campus meetings, and they ask me is this a safe place, a good place for me? I say no. Don't come in pollyannaish. You have to come in ready to be strategic.*

**Delilah:** *It's felt worse this past couple of years probably because of what's happening in the wider environment. But when I first started, I overlooked a lot on purpose. I decided to see and not see, just so that I could get by and get along. I guess I did it just to be able to survive. But I became aware within those first three years because the Black faculty that were there when I got there were gone all except one. I recognized people didn't really stay, either because they left on their own for a variety of reasons or because they were pushed out. But when I got to the process of tenure and promotion, that's when it became really plain how undervalued I was; that my contributions really weren't seen as important as other faculty contributions.*

**Rafaela:** *This makes me think of something else related to how our research gets perceived. When it comes to reviews for tenure, there's the arm's length piece, right? They require arm's length. So, that to me is racist because in my tiny bubble of the few scholars in my area, we may not be best friends, but we know of each other, right? And so that to me is racist because there are limitations that are special for me. But if you're a plant biologist only focusing on sunflowers and it's your whole career, it's okay to only focus on sunflowers, but I can't focus on Puerto Ricans. So, through reviews like these tenure and promotion, I see that not only with myself but also with so many of us who choose to study and share an affinity with some identity, somehow that's considered biased. It's not scholarly. So fighting for just Latino studies to be a legitimate field is another important piece that nobody gets...that imperial relationship within these disciplines in the academy. So, there are key aspects where the work is seen as biased. And when I was undergoing my fourth-year review, and usually at a fourth-year review level and I'm raising this now because it's critical to understand how women of color have been treated. So, nobody at the fourth-year level gets an external review. Usually, the fourth-year review is internal, so you don't send materials out for review. It's at the department level, college level, and a dean's level review. Sometimes at the provost's level. So, there are at least three or four levels of review. And I had to go through an external review for my fourth year. And they insisted that the externals had to all be full professors, which is another layer that doesn't ever happen for associate level promotions. So, I have always thought it's because I speak out. I think it's my politics, right? I'm a Marxist feminist scholar. I do believe that some of that is part of why I'm treated this way. It's also my politics because I see Latinas who go along with the status quo, getting the promotions but even that's still bad at our university. Anyway, with the review I later found out they were trying to get rid of my department. And why give tenure to someone when they're going to eliminate the department? But of course, that was all behind the scenes. So anyway, devious things like that*

*happened. However, with the full, external review, I passed with flying colors, but it also caused other harm...*

Strategically navigating the indignities of systemic oppression often means that racialized faculty must actively engage with attitudes and barriers that make it difficult for them to be respected as scholars, educators and colleagues. In their examination of Black faculty, Dade et al. (2015) engage CRT and Black feminist theory to explore how institutional racism works to diminish the importance and relevance of their research and teaching. Indeed, influential white faculty decided the interdisciplinary work of Lorgia García-Peña - a visionary Ethic Studies scholar - was activism and not research which resulted in her stunning tenure denial at Harvard despite an impressive background in research, teaching and mentorship (Brown, 2022). For racialized faculty, activism and scholarship are not mutually exclusive and are often essential aspects of their life stories and academic identities. At the same time, the context that informs the work of many white scholars – maintaining the centrality of their culture alongside the gendered hierarchy of the academy - is seldom seen as a reflection of identity politics, but an unbiased reflection on the “real” world. Despite this, faculty of color often persevere, acknowledging that their continued presence plays a small, critical role in initiating institutional change. This is even in the face of actions at the state and local level that have sought to stop the teaching of critical race theory (very broadly defined) and other topics deemed to be divisive because they explicitly engage issues of racism, oppression and white supremacy. And while always conscious of the need to “be twice as good,” service to the college community or mentoring faculty or students allows these faculty to give back and feel emotionally supported. Though vulnerable, many racialized faculty focus on the development of external networks that honor their collective stories of excellence and encourage a new vision of what the university can achieve (Griffin et al., 2011).

### **Death By A Thousand Paper Cuts: Racialized Faculty And Microaggressions**

**Magda:** *I think it was (D.W) Sue who talked about these microaggressive moments as being a 1000 little paper cuts. I like the imagery that it's 1000 little things that eventually cause you to bleed out. That's why we leave the profession because we just don't want to have to deal with this crap any more. It's not worth the benefit of the gains versus the losses. These just aren't enough to make it tenable.*

**Gladys:** *I have to say that the tenure and promotion process, I think it is the one that I have the most nightmares about and cause me sleepless nights. And it's always in my subconscious.*

**Delilah:** *With my white colleagues, it's just a slide through, it's just like check, check, check. Nobody questions. But with me, it's really hard. We have to quantify everything. How much has she really written? And I just feel like there's this extra scrutiny that other people don't get. Like they have permission to be mediocre, but not only can't I be mediocre, but I also can't be mediocre in any area at any time. It has to be perfection across the board or nothing I did matters. I just don't see those rules that apply to everyone.*

**Beatrice:** *I think the tenure and promotion process was a good process for me relative to what I've seen for other Black faculty at my university. I had a mentoring committee which was composed of two people who were the co-chairs of my dissertation committee and the department head for women's studies and the department head from Adult Ed. So, I had four people on that*

*mentioned committee. And even though I was held back for a year, and this is going to sound like it isn't a good story, but relative to others, it is.*

**Rafaela:** *It took me a long time to recover from tenure. It really did. So, to all my sisters out there. I'm just sorry we all had to go through this trauma. I mean, I had a miscarriage through all this. When I got those glowing reviews, I'm going to cry but I thought was this worth it? (crying). Sorry. And so, yes, I made it, but it was not easy. In my personal life I got a divorce, had a miscarriage. You know just the trauma of that was harsh. It was a harsh time. It took me a while to recover.*

**Magda:** *I'm so sorry about the trauma you had to go through. I know without a doubt that I was brought in because I was Black. Our faculty was the opposite of diverse. It helped that I was very strong and a good candidate who just happened to be Black, but I think they really wanted a Black person. My chair strongly supported me from the moment I gave my job talk to the moment they gave me the offer to when I went up for reappointment to when I went for tenure and promotion. When he left the department to become the associate dean, I felt like the bottom fell out. He was really my cheerleader; he was my almost sponsor of sorts. When I went up for full professor, it was completely different, right? By that point I had a different department chair. I should mention we had gone through several department chairs. We had a new dean who had essentially soured on me because I wasn't the good Black as she wanted me to be. I was the agitating Black person who was always in her face, always bringing stuff to her, and I don't think that's really what she wanted. When she tapped me to be the diversity chair, I did a lot of calling out which was part of my job. So, when I went up for full professor I did not receive it. And for me I think it was very much raced.*

**Beatrice:** *So, the year that I wanted to go up, I was held back for a year. And the reason I was held back is because the department head at that time said, you can't go up in the same year that your colleague (a Black man) goes up because you have a stronger case. I was told they didn't want, by comparison, my case to hurt my colleague's. So, they held me back a year. At that time, and I'm not exaggerating, I had twenty-one publications to his five. So, the year I went up, I ended up getting a unanimous vote in my department, but I didn't get a unanimous vote at the college level even though I did at the university level. And what I was told about the college level is that some people find my research anti-male and anti-white. I was always going to get some no votes regardless.*

Racialized women faculty face additional challenges and scrutiny because of their gendered and raced identities (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Téllez, 2013). Their counternarratives speak explicitly to intersectionality and the importance of acknowledging the hierarchies that exist within and outside our understandings of race, ethnicity and gender (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). They can also disrupt claims of solidarity by unveiling how Blackness and Puertorriqueñas and womanhood and class status can work together to differentially impact how working-class women of color must navigate issues like tenure and promotion. For instance, they may be expected to defer their ambitions or be perceived as “difficult” when they push back against unwritten standards that are clearly privileging the career advancement of white women, white men, and/or men of color.

## DEI as Checking the Box

**Magda:** *At my institution, we have only had a diversity committee for a couple of years. I was tapped to be the person to chair the committee. And we decided that we needed to hire an outside consultant to do an equity audit. And so, we got the dean to agree to do that and based on those recommendations we planned our work and so we did things such as having a speaker event. We started out with a renowned national speaker on issues of equity and diversity and brought him in. It was truly a phenomenal success. We had people who drove from four hours away just to hear this speaker. I had the provost give remarks and fully orchestrated this event for the college of education. It put us on the map. So, then we said this is just our starting point because now we want to have monthly meetings or events that follow up on the ideas that the speaker brought to us, right? So now we're engaging in ongoing professional development around diversity and equity issues which was something that has never been done in the college. We started an initiative where faculty candidates were given the opportunity to speak with the diversity committee. My rules were this person would be invited and they would be guaranteed a non-evaluative, confidential space. We were not going to share anything with the hiring committee. We were there to answer questions focusing on people of color, but we offered it to everyone. We brought in three national speakers. We ran a number of, we called them E threes which were Equity, Engagement, and Excellence which came out of our conceptual framework. But we made the college look really good. I would like to say that after I stopped being chair those efforts continued but that's not what the dean really wanted. She wanted to check the box of a diversity committee because she probably saw that every other college had one. She wasn't prepared for us to be engaged in doing meaningful work. And all of a sudden money and funding stopped. We kept hearing "No I don't think you should do it this" I think we should just have book clubs. I don't think we should have discussions around microaggressions.*

**Fiona:** *I've learned how to be successful in the system and have internalized what that means, what quality and rigor look like. Also, bringing bodies of color in isn't enough. I think about deans coming in with initiatives to try to advance racial justice in different ways and the structure makes that really, really hard to do.*

Counternarratives also highlight the intentionality required for change, and challenge limited constructions of DEI that suggest that just bringing people of color into the room is enough, that changes in structures and policies and collective action don't make a difference. The co-opting of the possibilities of DEI work is especially evident in the increasing number of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) positions in the academy. As many of the positions are less than 20 years old their rise might also be interpreted as an enhanced, though belated commitment to DEI in higher education institutions (Leon; 2014; Wilson, 2013). However, the reality is that the organizational structuring of the CDO role often means that the concerns of racialized faculty are rarely recognized, let alone addressed. Limited access to campus decision makers based on the rank and status of the position means that some CDOs lack the political and symbolic power needed to move initiatives forward. In other instances, minimal staff creates an inability to tackle the broad range of diversity issues - from racialized microaggressions to bullying that results in tenure denial - that faculty of color face (Leon, 2014).

*“However, the reality is that the organizational structuring of the CDO role often means that the concerns of racialized faculty are rarely recognized, let alone addressed.”*

Furthermore, when the CDO role is not adequately funded or is situated outside the accountability structures of the institution, diversity concerns become similarly marginalized. This makes it almost impossible for CDOs to nurture the relationships and trust required to authentically assess a situation on a

particular campus (Wilson, 2013). As a result, they are not only unable to enact necessary reforms, but find themselves professionally vulnerable (Leon, 2014). The inability to sustain efforts that have the potential to disrupt structural barriers means that faculty of color often feel demoralized as initiatives lose steam or crucial support. Collective counternarratives provide an opportunity for faculty to take up space - literally and figuratively - through caucusing or making sure that experiences are lifted up, documented and are not stifled or silenced by the powers that be.

### **The Entire System Needs to be Dismantled: Organizing Together and Finding Hope**

**Shabana:** *The reality is that there are tensions and divisions amongst racialized faculty. I mean, everyone is not the same. Not everybody wants to call out racism and go march somewhere. Some people are otherwise focused. But I feel that we should lean into the areas of commonality... like I can imagine, celebrating each other. And for faculty who are motivated, I think we should get together and demand a change in hiring policies.*

**Fiona:** *I also think that universities need to be willing to back up their faculty for taking these risks. I'm not a historian, but as I read and learn about history, this has happened in the past. We saw with any racial advancement there were attempts to stifle that. With reconstruction and now we're at the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa, Oklahoma massacre. That was in direct response like attempts at racial justice and rising up and Black liberation. So, it's history repeating itself, right? I guess it's helpful for me to think that this is typical where there's this attempt to reiterate the order of things. Staying vigilant against that feels important. As educators and faculty, we are critical in helping produce the next generation of people to continue challenging the way we think about things and status quo and revisionist history. We also have power and privilege with tenure to hopefully push against things in ways that maybe other people don't. So, using that to our advantage is critical.*

**Rafaela:** *I guess something that feels kind of hopeful is we have a new Chancellor of color. And he created this Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They're starting with a reading group. That's usually how these groups begin. And hopefully it will go deep into reading something. But the data collection piece is important and the union is also part of that assembly gathering data on hires, retention and exit interviews. We don't even do exit interviews. We did some webinars on Sankofa and the idea of looking at these trauma histories and asking, where are we going? If we can't understand what happened in our past, how are we going to build a better future? People are still mostly white so there's still a long way to go. But I have to try to be hopeful. Otherwise, I can't keep doing this work if I don't believe some changes are going to happen.*



**Shabana:** *I agree. We need to try to find hope where we can. You know, last year I was at another college and people got together and read a book and talked about it. They did this for a semester. I feel like my institution would be helped by having something that wasn't departmentally rooted, but something bigger that could bring people together across divisions because outside of the Writing Across the Curriculum program, which drew from people all over the campus, there is not that much. I also think it would be great to have a place where you could actually see this is the total number of faculty or these are the faculty of color. A sort of racial report card from my institution. Yes, give us information about the students which is probably easier to get. But then also tell us about the faculty, tell us about the administrators who work there at my institution. Some of the higher administration have been from racialized groups so I'm not saying that that is going to transform everything, but I think people want to have a sense or snapshot of what's really going on.*

**Fiona:** *I agree sometimes it's hard to get a sense of the bigger picture. The example of the affinity group, the Black faculty staff alliance is that under one president, it was funded and had a lot more power and under another president there wasn't funding and they didn't have power. So, it just depends on who's leading the institution. There's been some reluctance to become a formal employee resource group because we want to be able to be independent and critique the institution in ways that we think are necessary. There's been some concerns about becoming more formalized that might reduce our voice or make us more susceptible to being canceled.*

**Magda:** *I think the recommendations are great but I just get tired of the university forming a new committee all the time. I want the institution to not just be willing to create a new committee every time something happens, right? I want them to make radical changes. They have the power to do it. I understand that we're a system school and we must get certain things approved. I understand you might need an even higher level than our chancellor. But there are whole bunches of things that are 100 percent within their purview. We need to give them a list of recommendations and tell them we want these types of changes, and we don't need another committee. We've had a zillion committees and we've clearly not had the results that we need. I would say education, awareness, and being proactive are very important in how we do things. There is a need for people to understand that they have to let more people into their circles, right? They need to give people who are outside those circles of power more viable opportunities to be heard and for their voices to be instrumental in the decision making process. That does not happen and that requires a relinquishing of power and privilege which is why it hasn't happened yet, right? So I think that we have to really think about what does radical restructuring mean? And what about matching espoused values with accountable practices? What does it mean to really do that because they're language gurus but practice novices. They're not even at the level of a novice. We need a different type of leadership.*

**Fiona:** *It's like white supremacy is bearing down. It feels like it's holding on for dear life and not giving up the fight. But we have to be vigilant and the risk can't fall on the individual. It's scary to think about the push against Critical Race Theory and the ban against diversity training that the Trump administration tried to implement...and now watching certain states trying to still carry that ban out in classrooms, etc. It's a difficult time to be doing this work and it just feels so important at this time to listen to BIPOC and really center the needs of folks of color. Listen to what they say, what they need, and what they want. You know, I'm in another organization where*

*we're talking about defunding the police and abolition. And there's continual conversation from mostly white people who don't want to use the word defunding. And I have to keep saying this is not the time to be palatable. For decades we did that and look at where we are. People are still getting shot down on the streets. So clearly, it's not the time to take a simple approach.*

**Rafaela:** *Yes, I agree with you about centering the needs of BIPOC. Those of us who have federal grants are afraid we aren't going to be able to continue our work in Ethnic Studies. We know people of color have been experiencing racist oppression. So, unless we create structural solutions, it's all very short term. But we're having town hall meetings about reparations and that gives me hope.*

*“Unless we create structural solutions, it's all very short term.”*

**Magda:** *We need to understand what protest is all about, right? It's about disruption...controlled disruption is not disruption. It really isn't...It's just really important to understand the political landscape and that we have to begin to strategize together about how we have an impact and maybe decide we're going to do bloc voting in order to make sure we're represented on certain committees. We know there's not a lot of us but if four or five candidates get on the ballot, they're splitting the vote. If all of us vote, we can make sure this person is on the diverse research awards committee. That this person is on the faculty senate. We must have representation in those spaces and those can become ways we can really strategize by understanding and really work together. One of the things that has not happened at our university which I would love to see and I think is the next step is for us to do bloc protesting, right? When we know a faculty member was mistreated we don't just sympathize but we write a letter. Maybe it won't change the outcome but they need to know that we see them and we see them as a united front and we're supporting this individual. Eventually we can start changing policy or get people to understand that there's something inequitable about the way this policy is written, presented, and enacted. We can be our own advocates. We don't have to wait for them to do it. So, I think that other piece is political wellness. We have to have a strategy for helping to agitate against those oppressive systems....as I've said before the entire system needs to be dismantled.*

Centering BIPOC interests and social movements is critical if a radical restructuring of the academy is to take place. Caucusing, if it is to be truly liberatory must disrupt neoliberal agendas and inspire radical imaginations, energizing democratic action against the manifestations of structural violence that surround the everyday of faculty of color. Hamer & Lang (2015) remind us that inhabiting the work of racial, economic, and social justice involves challenging and subverting the political economy of academic austerity that shrinks full time faculty while growing administrative bureaucracy. One critique from the conversation is the limited, superficial nature of caucusing in which oppressions are attacked (writing statements as an example of controlled disruption) but devoid of more radical sets of alternatives that undergird social movement organizing historically such as anti-colonial campaigns, anti-racist and feminist organizing, queer movements, and prison abolition movements. In those movements, there were/are explicit demands for equitable distribution of power. Academia embodies and fetishizes relationships rooted in hierarchies, actively discouraging the questioning/shifting of dominant power structures. However, Choudry (2015) points out that resurgent movements create new generations of activist-

intellectuals, both in and out of the academy, with stronger links to movements. Ahmed (2021) reminds us that if we are to stop the system from working, we must be willing to say no; to shatter; to smash; to disrupt. The need to center the voices of BIPOC is underscored to have people outside the circles of power with access to those circles enabling their voices to be heard in order to inform decision-making impacting issues related to institutional policies, practices, and processes in instrumental ways (Choudry & Vally, 2020). This involves individuals relinquishing their power and privilege, which the same group of faculty has often had for decades. Many are unwilling to do this, so engaging policies that will give newer, marginalized voices access to shape the institutional culture is necessary.

*“Ahmed (2021) reminds us that if we are to stop the system from working, we must be willing to say no; to shatter; to smash; to disrupt.”*

### **Making A Way Out of No Way: Moving Forward and Learning From the Past**

**R**adical politics and struggle are needed to uncover obscured truths (Choudry, 2015). Struggle can transform impossible situations into potentially winnable ones but activism is not an end in itself. Ransby (2018) calls for more portals of entry in order for current spectators to move to action and a path into the work of activism. She notes the necessity of more political education that focuses on both history and theory. And while that is definitely true, more theories about transforming the world, about transforming systems of injustice to equitable systems are required. Along with, theories that address people’s material conditions and support communities in creating visions infinitely bigger than anything we have at the moment.

Recommendations:

- Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized the necessity of an institutional mindset for what equity means. Narrow understandings of social justice can be dangerous. There should be an understanding that support for racial justice work comes from the highest levels of the university (“Espoused values translated into accountable practices,” as articulated by a participant).
- Enacting multiple strategies in this struggle is necessary. For example, making sure a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) has an actual staff (and is not just an office of one). In addition, nurturing more grassroots independent bodies outside of institutional structures who might be willing to go to the press (for example, racialized student and faculty caucuses; or human rights-based affinity groups). Institutions care about their branding and usually respond if press releases are involved.
- Hiring more progressive racialized faculty is necessary. While representation is important so is the politics of faculty of color. Both politics and representation matter. As one participant articulated, “it’s no longer enough to say we want Black and Brown faculty. We need to also ask what policies would we want them to enact? What are their commitments and the communities in which they’re rooted and can serve?”

Counternarratives offer a critical point of analysis for naming essential truths about the struggles of racialized faculty in PWIs. Documenting their stories gives hope to emerging racialized scholars and moves the academy toward policies and practices that can spotlight its promise and possibility.

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