

*Research Article*

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## **Decentering Whiteness: Democratizing Adult Education to Transform Academia**

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### **Abstract**

**D**espite rhetoric purporting diverse, inclusive and equitable institutions, academia centers whiteness. As an extension of society, where anti-Blackness/Brownness prevails, universities have often chosen to replicate rather than transform racist cultures and structures. This article explores how universities - through their identities, stories, and culture, and in policies, practices, and structures - embody white supremacy. It also examines the role of diversity, equity, and inclusion work in decentering whiteness.

The co-authors critically reflect through dialogic reconstruction layered accounts of a year-long professional development series at a public, adult higher education teaching institution in the US entitled “Decentering Whiteness.” This article synthesizes salient points from those conversations. The series focused on readings and activities addressing decentering whiteness in academia. Utilizing critical race theory/critical theory frameworks, the authors (the facilitator, a non-racialized male faculty member at a university in the Midwest) of these sessions along with three faculty from the adult education institution (two racialized female and one non-racialized

male faculty) collectively interrogate the purposes, processes, and results of these sessions in relation to the of role diversity, equity, and inclusion in decentering whiteness.

**Keywords:**

**critical race theory, critical theory, adult education, democracy in higher education, white supremacy**

## **T**he Myth of a Racial Reckoning

The 2020 murder of George Floyd generated a so-called racial reckoning as the world watched Derek Chauvin kneel on Mr. Floyd's neck for over nine minutes. This was a moment of dissonance in the white narrative that Black and Brown people died in police custody due to their behavior and that police were acting in the defense of society or themselves. For the Black and Brown community, this simply revealed the lived truth. It challenged the notion of the purported equality in US democratic society by highlighting racial injustice, but beyond performative statements of support to Black and Brown people in 2020, limited actions have been taken since then to affect change. Resistance to examining the cultural hegemony of white supremacy that denies atrocities perpetrated against Black and Brown people makes true reckoning elusive.

As the presidential fellow for DEI, I (Boyce) was focused on using this tragedy as an opportunity to discuss the role of whiteness in higher education. It is my opinion that institutions are trapped in action bias: they want to fix problems before properly identifying the issue. Instead, they must address the root cause and not just a symptom. When higher education was conceived it was designed for wealthy, white men (Neklason, 2019; Cunningham & Francois, 2019). To make it inclusive, Black and Brown people should not simply fit into that paradigm. To address the core issues administrators, faculty, professional employees, and staff have to sit with the discomfort of the discussion to recognize how we consciously and unconsciously view whiteness as the norm and how this results in inequitable outcomes. The changes must be made visible; from the people who lead the institution to the subject matter included in courses.

## **H**igher Education in the US: Bastions of Inequality

A common refrain today continues to be "higher education is in crisis" with several monumental global events (e.g., COVID-19, financial precarity) having altered the landscape of higher education (Porter, C.J. et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2024). Yet, this refrain minimizes that higher education has been in crisis for racialized students, staff, and faculty throughout its history. In addition, these crises in higher education have had a disproportionately greater negative impact on communities experiencing sociocultural/economic stressors (Adler, L. 2021; Arday, J. 2022) For example, racialized communities have experienced higher infection and death rates than white communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). Universities have, throughout their history, educated and empowered a white minority ruling class creating unequal power in a democracy (Brunnsma, D. L., 2013; Libassi, C.J., 2018). A seminal article entitled, "Decentering Whiteness" by Peter McLaren which framed the title of this series argued, "the struggle for ethnic diversity makes progressive political sense only if it can be accompanied by a sustained analysis of the cultural logics of white supremacy" (McLaren, 1997). He also argues that democracy is framed in the context of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, such that these isms, coupled with white supremacy, are the

assumed and unexamined normative grounding for the very purpose of higher education. Therefore, diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education requires an explicit examination of these implicit commitments.

The US population is nearing a racial plurality, sometimes described as “a majority-minority nation” (Devine and Ortman, 2014) predicted for 2043 on a national level, although many US cities have already reached this status. This demographic change is described by US white nationalists as “the great replacement” (Walton, 2020) which posits the oppression of whites by the growing ratio of racialized communities. The cultural hegemony of white supremacy that we address in this article is a normative framework that extends far beyond virulent hate groups carrying tiki torches in Charlottesville, VA. The National Education Association describes White Supremacy Culture as:

“...a form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that whites should politically, economically, and socially dominate non-whites” and a political ideology that “that perpetuates and maintains the social, political, historical and/or industrial white domination” (NEA, 2020).

Organizationally, white supremacy culture is often implicit and sustained through reproduction of institutional identity, stories, and traditions:

Characteristics of white supremacy... manifest in organizational culture and are used as norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the full group. The characteristics are damaging to both people of color and white people in that they elevate the values, preferences, and experiences of one racial group above all others.

Organizations that are led by people of color or have a majority of people of color can also demonstrate characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (NEA, 2020).

White Supremacy Culture is also manifested in higher education through unquestioned or uncritical policies, procedures, and practices. (Ahmed, 2012; Merriweather, 2024; Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022) In 2020 (the year of “racial reckoning” that four years later seems like decades ago) many colleges in the south were pushed to remove confederate statues and other markers signifying institutions’ white supremacist past. For example, removing the name of Bill Tillman, former South Carolina governor and white supremacist from one of the campus buildings or removing Robert E. Lee’s name from the institution’s name at Washington and Lee University (Benson, 2020). These attempts have been aimed at showing how institutions are - and continue to be - complicit and implicated in reproducing the legacies of racial oppression. One of the goals of these gestures was an attempt to collectively unpack how universities can actively support students and faculty of color given the histories upon which they were built. How can we remake the space in ways that honor the racialized bodies that inhabit and walk in them?

White supremacy culture in higher education is also a global phenomenon. In 2015, preceding the moment in the US described above, Black students in Cape Town, South Africa celebrated the removal of a colonial era magnate statue was removed after complained that it made widespread student Africa prompted attacks on other statues around the nation. Such symbolic cultural contestation was intended to force larger conversations about the ways higher education upholds white supremacy in less explicit but even more potent ways.

**White supremacy culture in higher education is also a global phenomenon.**

the statue of Cecil Rhodes, (Guardian, 2015). The numerous Black students them uncomfortable. The protests around South

Most recently, the war between Israel and Palestine (and its escalation after October 7th, 2023) has triggered widespread conflict amongst students and faculty across US campuses and around the world (Alonso, 2024). In December 2023, three university presidents (from Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology) were summoned to a hearing led by Republican led House and Workforce Committee against antisemitism. All three of those presidents resigned after coming under fire for their testimonies during the hearings. Many academics (including the authors of this piece) have felt that anyone who speaks out against the genocide occurring in Palestine has become synonymous with being “antisemitic” and have been targeted. Also, since October 7, there has been a spate of hate crimes directed at Muslim and Jewish communities (Chernikoff, 2024). In spring, 2024, with massive rallies worldwide to support students and faculty at NYU, Columbia University, and City College in NY (as well as other institutions across the United States) students and faculty were arrested for participating in pro-Palestinian protests. Palestinian speakers have been cancelled. In May 2024, an adjunct faculty member at DePaul University (Anne d’Aquino) was fired for giving her student an optional assignment about the war in Gaza. (Lennard, 2024; Ma, 2024)

The western narrative that has emerged is clearly one in which Palestinians have been viewed as lesser than and somehow responsible for (and deserving of) their suffering at the hands of Israel. Rooted in Zionist, western/white settler colonialism (which Israel has embodied from its inception), there has been a bombardment of brutality towards Palestinians. Palestinians have been consistently othered; viewed as barbaric and primitive...a demographic threat to be treated with fear and hatred. Ethnic cleansing is the removal of humans in order that narratives will disappear...it is not only a physical act but one of psychological power (Salaita, 2016). This is the very essence of white supremacy in relation to racialized communities globally.

Such exclusivity and subordination has become a problematic model for education. “The school... reproduces the dominant culture, contributing thereby to the reproduction of the structure of the power relations within a social formation in which the dominant system of education tends to secure a monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Brookfield, 2021;

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Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. C.,1990). As racism and white supremacy goes unchallenged in higher education, it is reproduced in society as legitimate symbolic violence, which justifies and sustains the very real and tangible harms of inequalities, even direct physical violence. How, then, can diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work be utilized to decenter these anti-democratic tendencies in favor of more equitable participation in higher education and

civil society across racial and other identity categories?

## **D** EI+, Growth and Challenge

This article is written in the midst of divergent trends in higher education: the growth of DEI work and concurrent challenges to the appropriateness or even the existence of DEI work. A recent New York Times article was entitled, “With State Bans on D.E.I., Some Universities Find a Workaround: Rebranding. Welcome to the new ‘Office of Access and Engagement.’ Schools are renaming departments and job titles to try to preserve diversity programs” (Saul, 2024). Even when this work is not under threat, the growing field of diversity,

equity, and inclusion in the academe and beyond wrestles to use language and practices that reflect the very purpose of this work. DEI in some institutions has been broadened as DEAI to include *accessibility* (American Alliance of Museums, 2023) and in others DEIB to include *belonging* (Grim et al., 2012) and DEIJ to include *justice* (Fife et al., 2021). “DEI” will be used in this article to reference an appropriately contested concept that is growing to include the diversity of groups who are marginalized or erased based on identity, and to acknowledge the power dynamics at work in DEI initiatives and in the absence of work on these issues.

DEI work can be minimized to address *diversity* alone – a focus on individual categorical difference – without *equity* as a recognition of difference in power and resource distribution, and without *inclusion* as a mechanism for people in all of their complexity to show up as whole people without leaving disadvantaged aspects of their identity at the door. The university will be known either as an institution for its reproduction of social hierarchies, or as a liberating educational force, as much as DEI factors are addressed or ignored. The authors argue that DEI work cannot only be an additive approach, bringing different people into an unreflective and unchanging institution. Rather, DEI work requires an integrative approach with critical reflection on changing institutional identity accompanied by changes in identity, policies, and practices.

It is this substantial change orientation that motivates the greatest challenges to DEI initiatives in higher education. Institutions are identified with their histories and stories inscribed as character and tradition, or branded by internal marketing teams, or defined by third parties (e.g.: Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education). DEI work may be viewed as consonant with institutional mission, or it may be challenged as deconstructing institutional identities, and whiteness or white supremacy culture can be implicitly linked to institutional identities. DEI work requires universities move beyond a superficial sense of unity grounded in conformity or assimilation of the other, to inclusivity that recognizes and promotes diversity to form a community that lives together across its differences. Such differences can press upon and displace the advantaged identity categories that may be normative but unacknowledged in our institutions: white, male, upper-class students from legacy families (generations at the same institution) for whom education is understood as preparation for leadership that continues existing social arrangements. While some universities function with intentionally alternate identities (e.g.: Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the US), these were founded in reaction to – and still exist in the context of – the larger dominating society. Even land grant universities, which were founded to educate predominantly middle-class students in practical fields of study, were historically and are currently funded by lands appropriated from Indigenous communities (2023, TRUTH Project) thereby inclusive of one group at the cost of ongoing marginalization of another group. Universities must critically reflect on identity, stories, and culture, in addition to policies, practices, and structure to engage in authentic DEI work, and this includes decentering whiteness in its cultural and structural manifestations.

### **O**ne Institution’s Story and Inequity

State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State University, a teaching institution, has been considered by many a leader in adult education. Founded in 1971 to address a crisis facing adult students, it recognized the need for high-quality education that could address obstacles of access, recognition of life learning, and flexibility to engage in student-centered learning activities (independent studies, small group studies, distance learning). As a public institution, part of its mission was to provide an education that respected the diversity of New York and engage adult learners across all communities.

Like other universities, it has wrestled with questions such as addressing whiteness in its curriculum, providing opportunities for all students that don't privilege dominant ways of knowing and learning, and creating equitable hiring practices at all levels of the institution (staff, faculty, administration). And while these structural inequalities have been well documented in the history of higher education and Empire State University, the discourse on these inequalities and how they shape a college's sense of community was becoming increasingly visible and open at Empire State University. Providing access to higher education is certainly a social justice accomplishment yet a critical review of who has taken advantage of this privilege can call into question, "who benefits?" Education for and by whom? Parallel to access for students, is who is teaching students? Do the faculty and staff mirror the citizenry of the state? Based upon current published data, Empire State University faculty is not racially or ethnically aligned with New York's citizenry. For example, New York's population of Black or African Americans is approximately 17% while the Black or African American faculty is roughly 6% (Empire State University Data Dashboard).

In 2017, Empire State University created a *Climate Committee* that would examine and identify concerns and dynamics that hinder an inclusive, creative, and collaborative environment while making recommendations to address these factors. One recommendation was to address microaggressions and biases that disrupt the climate. Torino et. al (2019) notes, "When universities and other educational institutions commit to understanding and addressing microaggressions at a systemic level, they are likely to engender real and enduring change on their campuses." (pg. 12). As a result of the survey results, Empire State University embarked on a number of changes to address this recommendation. Engaging with Empire State University system to increase the diversity of historically underrepresented faculty via the DEI Initiative, creating the Presidential Fellow for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and providing college-wide trainings to address biases and microaggressions (which included these sessions on better understanding whiteness) marked the beginning of intensive DEI work at Empire State University. Part of the danger of this work is its inherently performative nature. Higher education masterfully practices performative racial justice daily in its culture, systems, and processes (Gnanadass et al, 2022).

Ahmed (2012) points out, though the word diversity is used more, it means less. And though racialized faculty as diversity workers attempt to develop new processes to stop the reproduction of harm, those can be used to enable the very reproduction of harm it seeks to prevent. Documenting inequities doesn't erase them (or even change them). In many ways, documenting them becomes a form of protection, of allowing them to continue. The documentation, not the injustice, becomes the work.

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## **D**efining Democracy

The authors conceive democracy broadly, beyond the confines of our polarized electoral system. We are addressing a culture of democracy rooted in democratic processes and democratic values; one that is intertwined with individual and collective liberation of racialized people, and through the transformation of political-economic systems that foster and protect racial capitalism (Brookfield, 2022; Gnanadass et al., 2022). We conceptualize democracy as a system that honors the beauty, strength, and power of Black and Brown people (Ramdeholl &

Jones, 2022); one organized around democratic processes of voice, decision-making, and collective action in addition to democratic values of equity, diversity, and inclusivity.

In *Democratizing Leadership*, Klein describes democratic processes as, “finding and using voice and creating structures that facilitate shared decision-making and collective action” and “democratic culture rooted in values, including freedom, justice, and equity” (2016). Our four sessions on Decentering Whiteness in Higher Education attempted to provide opportunities for participants to locate their voice and use it, then use it together, what Paulo Freire termed “political literacy” (1985), an essential element for participants in a critical and informed democracy.

## **O**verview of the Series

The series, “Decentering Whiteness in Higher Education” focused on four parts, entitled: Whiteness and Intersectional Identities; Working Across Differences of Identity and Community; Anti-racist Work in University, Professional, and Community Settings; Personal and Collective Power/Agency. During monthly, two-hour video conferences, 120 administrators, faculty, and staff from Empire State University engaged through storytelling, presentations of concepts and models, and critical reflection.

The first activity in the series involved participant creation of “I am from...” statements, examining intersectional identities through written, intra-personal reflection, and inter-personal sharing of self-selected responses. This poetry activity is, “a tool for analyzing the social construction of intersectional identity and addresses racism and other inequities in the classroom” (Klein, 2018). Participants grounded their racialized identity in the context of broader intersectional identities to locate their work in co-creating their own stories. While some participants were confused by this starting point for institutional work, it remained a touchstone throughout each session, connecting structural or cultural analysis back to participants’ positionality in the institution and individually. Participants who tend to understand and commit to DEI work appreciated the “I am from...” activity, while participants with more performative notions of DEI resisted critical self-reflection as part of that work. For many, fixing the problem was an externalized process without considering internal change. Often, we don’t want to reflect on ourselves as part of the problem.

This powerful piece of spoken word poetry ended the first session and was used again to begin the second:

*Remember: white supremacy is not a shark; it is the water. It is how we talk about racism as white hoods and confederate flags, knowing that you own those things, and we don’t... as if we didn’t own this history too, this system—we tread water... Will we choose to listen? Or will we just continue treading water, watching for that great, white, shark... not realizing that we’re drowning? (Myhre, 2016)*

This metaphor deepened a supremacy through opened participants' supremacy was articulated individual behavior, collective actions that institutional cultures such choose to lift up in syllabi choose to highlight, and we hire to teach courses Such actions are sustained Brown – until identified and challenged in their particularity. The image of the water became representative of the institutional culture we swim in and assume as normative; that we enact daily as we reproduce structures of “legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1990) that sustain white supremacy.

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shared literacy about white imagery that clarified and understanding. White as more than hateful instead focusing on reproduce our normative as which knowledge we and whose work we structures such as whom and to lead our institutions. by all – white, Black or

It’s easy to disavow the obvious, hate-filled violence of the metaphorical shark by responding to racist incidents with well-crafted email messages about tolerance, inclusion, and acceptance. It is more difficult to address legitimated symbolic violence universities uncritically reproduce in their structures and culture. To call white supremacy symbolic violence is not to diminish its actual harm manifested in very real ways. It is to locate white supremacy in the culture of the institution, where it is enacted to very tangible effect through the institutional structures of policies, procedures, and practices. One of the most difficult aspects of addressing white supremacy is the way it is either dismissed as a political extreme or denied as an abstraction. Each session used storytelling to ground participants’ analysis of white supremacy in examples that promoted self-reflection and shared critique rendering white supremacy visible and substantial.

Grounding anti-racist work in individual stories requires vulnerability and is best initiated by a pedagogical strategy Stephen Brookfield (2020) describes as “narrative disclosure.” Each of the four sessions began with a brief introduction and then moved quickly to story-telling by the presenter, using narrative to disclose self-reflection on manifestations of white supremacy in his teaching, research, community-engagement, and family history. By modeling self-disclosure and vulnerability, the presenter invited participants to do the same. While this dynamic was constrained by the online setting and the 2-hour timeframe, and each of these approaches were limited in their utility and in participant response, they did offer participants an opportunity for finding and using their voice in iterative, structured activities.

. A significant outcome of the sessions was how the abstraction of whiteness - and its unseen character as the “water” of institutional life - was made tangible through the specificity of storytelling. Participants developed their voices on this difficult topic by learning new vocabulary and concepts, questioning and critiquing institutional norms, and enacting alternatives based on examples and models provided in the sessions.

Another outcome, only partially realized, was transforming the intra-personal awareness and analysis of the “I am from..” activity to an inter-personal, structural, and cultural “We are from...” analysis of the institution. Just as our intersectional identities require critical reflection to understand how to work across our differences for racial justice, so do our institutional identities require critical reflection on origin, history, purpose, and mission. Who was the institution intended to serve and who did it neglect? Who is now included and excluded? Who is

deemed fit and unfit to enroll or to be employed? Universities were, after all, founded to reproduce the status quo, or sometimes to challenge it in particular ways, and we carry those legacies forward (Jones, Cobb, Asaka, 2020). Without a collective critical reflection on these questions, we are likely to reproduce the harms that DEI work is supposed to address.

### **R**ationale for *Decentering Whiteness*

One motivation for this series was to address underlying issues in student persistence and graduation rates. Higher education is an investment with a return on investment that can lead to improved socioeconomic status: 40% higher earnings for a bachelor's degree than a high school diploma in 2021, BLS May 2022. The graduation rates disparity of roughly 18% between white and Black and Brown students provides only a partial insight into issues of equity. When graduation rates are coupled with 12-year student loan default rates, the disparity between white and Black socioeconomic improvement attainment increases to 28% and Latinx to 20.9%. (Nichols & Anthony, 2020). In 2006, Gloria Ladson-Billings asserted, "We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt." (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). And while she is referencing K-12 educational debt, she utilizes Wolfe and Haverman's (2001) work on the positive correlations between one's own schooling and a number of achievement measures (i.e., health outcomes, health status, consumer choices). In other words, the education debt that occurs in primary school for children of color has an impact on their future in a variety of areas. One means of addressing the debt is an equity scorecard using disaggregated data to change institutional practice by holding the institution accountable for outcomes. It directly challenges the deficit discourse which places the responsibility for outcome disparities on Black and Brown students' ability to perform in college. In essence, it pits the myth of meritocracy against critical race theory.

One method to improve the outcomes of Black and Brown students is to have a faculty-members in whom they see themselves reflected. The plight of racialized faculty is well documented and no different at this institution. In the state institution where the student body is 30% are Black and Brown people, only 14% of the faculty are racialized. To become a faculty member of that minuscule group Black and Brown people have to confront affinity bias in hiring.

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The racialized faculty members successfully navigated the gauntlet of higher education to earn their degrees but are still combating the deficit discourse. It can be argued that the cumulative impact of the deficit discourse, implicit bias and microaggressions leaves them isolated, alienated, and with self-doubt. The "self-worth tax" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) that has been applied to students is also placed upon faculty. In PWIs excellence and diversity are viewed as separate, even oppositional.

Ahmed (2012) states that institutional critiques instead become about individual fit instead of how institutional structures have been built and are upheld. One's fit begins to be questioned. If someone is the wrong shape, size, or color, one must, after all, make more of an effort to fit. It's an uneasy fit. If one cannot fit, they are labeled unfit or misfit. They are seen by the institution as damaged. They are seen as someone needing to be contained. In this environment, Black and Brown bodies are forced to squeeze into spaces not conceived for them (Ahmed, 2012).

Sara Ahmed also writes of “brick walls” in the academy, “to those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear – the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse” (Ahmed, 2012, p174) In a predominantly white institution, how can the wall become visible? How can an institution whose mission, vision, and commitment statements center on diversity and social justice recognize it argues for and maintains racist policies? How does that institution take responsibility for the disparity of student outcomes and faculty experience? A starting place can be examining how whiteness is the norm in education because for some those brick walls are electric fences; when one is shocked enough times, they learn to steer clear of higher education. The price of the passivity is paid by Black and Brown students and faculty. We hoped to unpack how the institution operated as a space of oppression for racialized faculty to exist in permanent states of unbelonging (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022).

### **Critical Race Theory and Decentering Whiteness**

The structure of the piece is Critical Race Theory (CRT). In essence, Critical Race Theory states that racism is endemic to our society. Delgado (1995) highlights five tenets which are of particular relevance: counternarratives (narratives centering voices of those oppressed and marginalized telling their truths and experiences), whiteness as property (the legacies of Black lives as white property and the ways in which this currently manifests), interest convergence (ways in which white people continue to benefit most 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 and support institutional racism, and colorblindness (which allows society to ignore racist policies and laws).

Through the lens of CRT, the 4-session series could be viewed as an example of interest convergence: the university, after all, was able to use this series as a tangible artifact of being responsive to 2020 as a year of “racial reckoning.” For racialized members of the Presidential Diversity Taskforce responsible for planning the series, the need to have a college-wide conversation about white supremacy in higher education (and specifically at this institution) was urgent and long overdue. For them, the series was intended to serve as one way to facilitate that conversation. However, interest convergence posits that unless the interests of racialized people converge with white interests, there will be no significant change (Bell, 1992; Merriweather, 2019). In the case of the series on decentering whiteness, there was convergence; the diversity box was checked, and the series served to protect the very system in which it was intended to subvert. Once the series was over, there was no further institutional follow-up and no interest in how the series would support true transformation. If DEI is additive instead of foundational, true transformation is virtually impossible (Gnanadass et al., 2022).

The series could also be seen as an example of repressive tolerance (Brookfield, 2005; Marcuse, 1965). Repressive tolerance operates as a way of maintaining social control by the dominant class where small numbers of radical ideas are “allowed” to sit alongside the dominant. These radical ideas are forever othered because they are only accessed by small groups of people for limited periods such as this series (or an Africentric film festival). Controlled disruption followed by business as usual.

Squire, Williams & Truitt (2021) add another dimension to this lens, writing about similarities between plantations and universities. In making that comparison, they refer to plantation politics as the psychological and political warfare to which Black people are subjected in traditionally white institutions that render them invisible while exploiting their labor for profit.

Using the plantation as an intellectual lens to frame ways plantation ideologies and strategies are used in the present-day context to control, repress, and surveil Black people and their resistance, they outline similarities in the ways both plantations and higher education operate. For example, universities are able to count Black bodies as present without making any of the necessary changes to ensure Black and Brown people are welcome, safe, and treated equally. Plantation politics support us in identifying the machine of white supremacy in higher education, how it operates, views us as racialized people, which entities act as barriers to equity and justice, what we need to tear down, and how we might build something new in its place that treats Black and Brown people equitably and with dignity (Williams, Squire & Truitt, 2021).

Our work in higher education is therefore a constant choice between reproducing the status quo or addressing inequities inherent in it. Whenever we ignore this choice, we have chosen the status quo.

### **I**mplications: Getting There from Here

The ideals of higher education and democracy are very much aligned yet the praxis of these ideals significantly diverge. The question of how institutions utilize democratic practices to address oppression, internal to the institution and in the community, is complex and fraught, yet needs to be more aggressively explored.

One important implication is that institutions need to critically examine policies and procedures that support DEI and democratic ideals. To what extent are these ideals being enacted at all institutional levels and also pedagogically? Second, while policies and procedures may align, the outcomes must support DEI and democratic goals. This reflexivity should never end. The institution should have a process to examine, implement, gather data, and revise/refocus/redo policies and procedures to support democratic ideas. In a learning environment, there should opportunities to learn from each other. This work should not be siloed. All members of the community should be encouraged to be active participants. This work is ongoing. Additive DEI sessions that fall outside of how the university's processes get operationalized have limited success (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022).

Utilizing tools such as the equity scorecard and conducting equity audits can help to make visible Ahmed's "brick walls." The equity scorecard is nationally recognized and was designed to help close the attainment gap for students from underrepresented groups. It is based in equity mindedness patterns of inequity in asks practitioners take responsibility for student deficit discourse which for the disparity on the has been clearly shown not attainment gap. (Carnavale Center for Urban Education, 2013) which calls attention to student outcomes and that personal and institutional success. It challenges the places the responsibility student preparation which to be the cause of the & Strohl, 2013) The Education has a toolkit that provides guidance to institutions using the scorecard thus offering some standardization to the approach. There are five phases: laying the groundwork, defining the problem, assessing interventions, implementing solutions, and evaluating results. It is a systemic, transformative approach to redesigning higher education.

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Equity audits are closely related to the scorecard and necessitate the institution examine polices, programs, and practices that directly or indirectly impact students or staff based upon

socio-economic factors including race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, disability, age sexual orientation, religion, etc. Traditionally these audits are used for K-12, but have been adopted by some colleges and universities. Since these can be costly, the College Equity Act proposed in 2019 would enable the Department of Education to establish grants for reviewing and addressing equity gaps in student recruitment, admissions, and support in colleges and universities. If done comprehensively, these audits have the potential put into practice the intent of affirmative action.

There is no standard for the audit, but the University of Minnesota “Applying an Equity Lens to Policy Review” offers a protocol for the process. In the following two examples, the approaches used by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill and Rutgers University are quite different. UNC, utilizing tenets from University of MN, focused on policy documents to promote equity and accessibility. To this end the Office of Ethics and Policy hired four research assistants to conduct an audit of all administrative university policy, standards and procedures in the fall of 2021. The resulting changes to language of policy are in line with the tenets of equity by design. (Witham et. al, 2015) However, at Rutgers University took a more comprehensive approach that had three components: a central administration self-study, university leadership perceptions study, and an equity score card. This review of the institution and the results were used in developing the university’s diversity strategic plan. Rutgers chose to carefully examine the equity issues identified before creating the plan to address them thus mitigating action bias.

An equity-minded framework requires the recognition of personal and institutional responsibility for disparities. The normative nature of whiteness in the university system necessitates the overhaul of each aspect of institutions to remove the barriers that make it an unwelcoming space for racialized people. The afore mentioned tools can be starting points in the transformation.

As the demographics of the country shifts, higher education is on a tight timeline to redress that it is designed for wealthy, white men. By 2027 whites will be a minority in the 18-29 age group, by 2033 a minority in 33-39 and by 2041 a minority in 40-49 age groups (Frey, 2018). These changes are viewed by some as the loss of power and control rather than the evolution of the country. The academy is not exempt from that mindset. To meet these challenges, overcome action bias, and deliver the requisite structural redesign, strong support from the highest levels of leadership is essential. It is only if there is top-down enforcement and financial investment to support the fragmented groups working from the bottom up to reach each part of the institution the necessary transformation can occur. DEI transformation necessitates intention, design, and investment.

Additionally, it is essential that anti-democratic voices be confronted and addressed. The tension between freedom of speech and civility should be squarely addressed. Anti-democratic voices utilize part of this equation to sow division rather than allow diverse voices to grow. Higher education institutions should firmly address anti-democratic voices based on a shared understanding of civility.

We believe unequivocally that racial justice is a necessary component in the overall health of any society, organization, or community in a democracy. Unless all of us are free, none of us are free. Higher education is not exempt from this. Though the journey from here to there is long and arduous, it is our only path forward. Performative, piecemeal DEI initiatives that don’t advocate the dismantlement of white supremacy head-on contribute to the ongoing cultural violence of racialized communities. As importantly, racial justice initiatives in higher education must be action based. They must examine how search committees are comprised, who leads

institutions, how many faculty are racialized, who receives tenure and promotion, whose labor is rewarded through artifacts such as awards, etc. They must confront the low morale of racialized faculty. What efforts are made to address alienation and unbelonging among racialized faculty? How is racialized faculty being supported as leaders? And they need to be as vigilant regarding curricula. What is considered valuable knowledge? By whom? How is it studied? What concepts and theorists are included and what/who is excluded? How are racialized scholars situated in the learning content and processes? Are their perspectives and intellectual contributions centered or are they peripherally situated in curricula? And what about racialized students? Is inclusive, culturally relevant pedagogy utilized? All of this needs to be grappled with if one is committed to building democratic, anti-racist institutions. In other words, DEI grounded in confronting and decentering white supremacy must be ingrained in each and every space within universities. It is the work of everyone to collectively struggle towards racially just institutions. This is how we get there from here...

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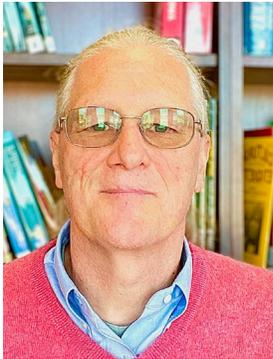
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