

“Trickle-Down” Racial Empathy in American Higher Education: Moving Beyond Performative Wokeness and Academic Panels to Spark Racial Equity

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Abstract

Recent racial justice protests in response to police-related brutality in the U.S. illuminate tensions reflective of persistent power differentials and social and racial traumas of which the U.S. education system has played a pronounced role in both historically producing and, more recently, reproducing by trafficking in an *ethos* of “trickle-down” racial empathy. Asking questions of the reader, this reflection explores how institutions of higher education persistently fail to accurately diagnose and problematize systemic racism and their role in mediating it, thus failing to engender impactful policy toward diversity, equity, and inclusion within and outside of their academic communities.

Keywords

activism, anti-racism, black lives matter, education, policing, policy

The Intersectional Traumas of Social and Educational Inequality

In the context of learned behavior and lived experience, how can you tell a social trauma from an educational one? Academic institutions have perhaps entered into, or are on the cusp of turning a leaf on, the most consequential racial justice reckoning of this generation. Not since the Brown v. Board of Education decision midway through the 20th Century has the country’s education system been, it seems, as pregnant with possibility for becoming the great equalizer that it was envisioned to be. Presently, the U.S. is still very much in the thrall of the racial justice protests that Floyd’s death at the hands of Minneapolis, Minnesota police summoned—and that the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery had, before him, slowly begun to conjure. These protests have been singular in their ability to stir and mobilize a groundswell of traditional activists, namely college students and urban community organizers. The protests have been most striking, though, in their enrollment of a new cohort of non-traditional allies, including suburban Whites and formerly “apolitical” corporations, though to decidedly different degrees of intentionality and efficacy (Roberts et al., 2020; Rugg, 2020).

As the protests have convulsed the country and its political and social conscience, educators, students, and parents around the U.S. have simultaneously contended with the radical

metamorphosis of education owing to COVID-19. This academic evolution, occurring against the backdrop of this similarly transformative racial justice movement, help form an intersecting trauma of social and educational inequality (Ezell et al., 2021; Kulkarni, 2019). The shift to online learning has continued to accelerate and deepen long-standing educational inequities in America’s public schooling system, as underscored in recent provisional assessments of the pandemic’s scope, as historically underserved populations grapple for resources and time from an underfunded and overextended public schooling apparatus (Azevedo et al., 2020; Harper, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

What, if anything, can be said of academia’s role in helping the country understand, navigate, and mediate this intersectional trauma—that is, if these roles indeed can be considered under their purview and within their capacity? Despite telegraphing its role as a vanguard for culturally competent knowledge generation and ethics—or, in the

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parlance of the times, “virtue signaling”—the American education system does not typically proclaim or generally enjoy an especially noble legacy of impactful social activism (Broadhurst, 2014). In fact, its actions (or lack thereof) have, more often than not, been the fuel for such activism, particularly in regards to racial justice. Consider its role in the forced assimilation of Native American children into boarding schools in the 1800s (Smith, 2004) or the purposeful segregation of Black and White students during the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras (Yosso et al., 2004) up through present-day (Rooks, 2020). And although international wars, from those in Vietnam to those four decades later in Iraq, have been cause célèbre for campus activism in America, many university administrations, the centers of gravity in academia, often only passively acknowledge these histories, let alone support their reincarnations. Institutions of higher education have, instead, been content to rest chiefly on their academic or athletic laurels; their production of Nobel laureates, graduates who go on to populate top ranks at law firms and Fortune 500 corporations and in academia, and hanging sports championship banners (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Shulman & Bowen, 2011). As a result, there remains a “would-be” racial justice reckoning in academia, one imbued with institutional complacency and sleights-of-hand, discussed here, that ensure the nation’s educational power structures remain undisturbed.

Scholars have written provocatively of the linkages between educational inequality and structural violence of the nature which led to the brutalization of George Floyd and those of his fateful lineage, and which stymied integration efforts in the 1950 and 1960s, prompting federal intervention (Hammer, 2019; Keisch & Scott, 2015; Osler, 2006). The emergence of Black political consciousness during the immediate post-Reconstruction period, and after that, more forcefully, in the Civil Rights era, gave wind to expressions affirming these individuals’ persistent de-valuation and heightened likelihood of violent victimization. Politically dynamic expressions such as being “social justice warriors,” mapped out in texts from Plato to Zora Neale Hurston, and derivations of being “woke,” from Ralph Waldo Emerson to James Baldwin (Glass, 2017; Jost & Kay, 2010; O’Connor, 2016), have helped color these counter-movements to build resilience against state-sanctioned violence. Both self-identifying ideologies, one of social justice warriorism and one of woke-ism, entered the lexicon—then, expressions primarily derived from and spoken by Black and Brown people—in stridently action-oriented terms. Each expression spoke to the need to be able to systematically and persistently identify acts of racial repression and mount appropriate responses and acts of resistance against them (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; O’Connor, 2016). Nonetheless, in contemporary times, the words have been co-opted and shoehorned into other movements, including left-wing populism and the directives of a largely non-intersectional feminist coterie (Stewart, 2020). In turn, these modalities have increasingly

lost their indigenous roots and multicultural cache, leaving them vulnerable to characterizations of being frivolous and unfounded, evoking a cartoonish avatar associated with extreme sensitivity and an inertia of political correctness (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Phelan, 2019).

Still, institutions of higher education and private corporations in America continue to adopt and perform affirming stances via verbiage and gestures in alignment with social justice warriorism and woke-ism to convey empathy and subculture congruence (Kanai & Gill, 2020). Indeed, these acts become duly expected—as part of “woke washing” (Vredenburg et al., 2020)—for *all* national tragedies including, increasingly, acts of racial injustice and oppression (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Logan, 2019). Performance of wokeness soothes, albeit only at the surface level, concerns over institutional indifference. It grooms entities’ maxims around corporate responsibility, failing to formally challenge institutional power or wrestle with lived realities of that power’s manifestations.

How Performative Wokeness Maintains Power Structures in Academia

Can you measure “woke-isms”? Performative wokeness is especially pernicious in its purposeful ambiguity, its effort to “check boxes” of ethnoracial appeasement, which tacitly includes, and rarely fully codifies, acknowledgment of racially-motivated structural violence, verbal affirmation of minorities’ recurring unease, and measurable, time-specific actions towards sustainable and impactful restitution. The messaging of concern and solidarity, in terms of volume, is bold and prolific, despite the objectively limited value in terms of problematizing power relations and moving towards application. As an example, in an analysis of official responses to Floyd’s murder from over 50 leading medical institutions (Kiang & Tsai, 2020), the authors note that only roughly half of the statements referenced the direct role of the police in Floyd’s death, and only around 10% affirmed active support for paradigms such as “anti-racism” (pedagogy or training) or the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

To this point, meditate on several official responses from several renowned American universities following Floyd’s murder: the University of California - Berkeley’s undirected call for ‘urgent attention’ to do ‘what we can to build a more just society’ (Christ & Dubón, 2020), New York University’s milquetoast ambition to ‘contribute to the goal of creating more just practices and systems’ (Hamilton, 2020), or Harvard’s wistful mandate for its community ‘to act on your beliefs—to repair and perfect this imperfect world’ (Bacow, 2020). Take also, for example, the response from the University of Chicago (this author’s alma mater): This included a series of equally middling statements from President Robert J. Zimmer (Zimmer, 2020), some 2 months after Floyd’s death, and roughly 1 month after protests had roiled the nation

and parts of Hyde Park, the University's oft-forsaken, hyper-segregated South Side Chicago neighborhood which has been subject to its expansive urban renewal efforts since World War II (Webber, 2005).

In late June 2020, President Zimmer submitted to the campus community a list of eight "actions" to address racial equity and inclusion on campus (Zimmer, 2020). Of these, only three—the first focused on examining data on racial diversity on campus, the second, focused on developing anti-racism programming, and the third, acknowledging its persistent and rapid encroachment into its predominantly Black surrounding neighborhood—could be said to meet the bare minimum standard for addressing systemic/structural racism, the foundational dilemma here. The list was, in short, ambitious, whimsical, pointed, and amorphous, the prototypical features of dueling institutional performances of power and acquiescence. There was then, also, the packaging—the "official" email and its "We The People" intonation which that subtly posited the message as its own kind of remedy to the presented issues.

In the biological and social sciences, it is an axiom that measurability is king, making the thinness of such institutional "statements of solidarity" readily evident. *How does one measure, let alone provide oversight, of these fixes to address racial equity? Which, in Zimmer's words, 'new, ongoing programs focused on racism, anti-racism, and numerous forms of bias and exclusion' would they intend to consider, and when? What exactly does it mean to, in Zimmer's words, to 'acknowledge and engage' members of the University of Chicago's outlying community? And again—when?* These are earnest ruminations undertaken in demystifying institutional intentions. More to the point, passively constructed words like "focus," "acknowledge," and "engage," are not "do." And Black and underrepresented students, faculty, and staff at American universities and colleges need *do*. This includes transforming and reclaiming wokeness, and by extension social justice and equity, in policy. As I propose, this is done most forcefully by *doing* diversity in the recruitment and retention of Black and other underrepresented students, faculty, administrators; *doing* community outreach and inclusion across the campus ecosystem; *doing* anti-racism, anti-genderism, and anti-classism through intentional curricula development and pedagogy; and reworking or jettisoning their various polarities, which includes academic panels that incubate pedantic, breathless dialogue on these matters.

Returning to the prior allusion, academic departments around the nation released email communiqués to their respective educational communities in response to the swelling racial justice movement, many it seems with the same uninspired, *post-mortem* ingredients that faculty and students have become accustomed to seeing following a nationally-publicized episode of racialized violence (Hadden, 2020; Kiang & Tsai, 2020; McKenzie, 2020). These emails began with a saccharine nod to the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and/or Ahmaud Arbery, segued to a recognition of the racial justice protests and, then ended with

familiar, half-hearted, and imprecise calls to *be better*. *How many of these emails could be said to cite or endorse a specific, tangible course of action that universities and their partners would undertake (with specific, tangible consequences for failing to do so)?* And this, tacit efforts to preserve power and, above all, continuity, is the quintessential third-rail of performative wokeness in academia.

Student groups and student-focused administrative bodies often also engage in this theater. Many, including Deans of Students and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) offices and their cognates are keen on sharing readymade "resources," the go-to for any tragedy, from incidents of campus violence to student suicide to impending policies poised to impact certain students, such as international and undocumented students (Gulliver et al., 2018). These resources are frequently a cocktail of hyperlinked mental wellness amenities that passively nudge students toward undertaking their own self-care adventure. The core problem with resources, particularly in the aftermath of persistent, ongoing tragedies like structural violence, and the daily social indignities that proceed them, is that they provide support for the outcomes of a societal crisis; they only seek to acknowledge, not invalidate or extricate, the root causes (Kruse & Calderone, 2020).

The Trickle-Down Empathy Economy: The Banality of Academic Panels on Racism

What and who are academic panels on racism for? Modern academic pedagogy and advocacy around race traffics most dubiously in the realm of knowledge and empathy-building around race, modeling formal, intellectual discussion on racism as a bulwark against racism. Institutional resistance to formative efforts to address racial equity is maintained most effectively by positioning such "discussions," particularly by Black and other underrepresented scholars, as evidence of awareness, attention, and inclusivity, acting as a kind of personification of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policy. Advertising of these events—panels and "talks" at campus forums, webinars, conferences, and the like—via email listservs and university websites offers academic entities an opportunity to gallantly stake-out a role in the tenor and direction of conversations on racism and to indeed project active involvement in addressing racism. By employing this derivative of the famous "trickle-down" economic *ethos* of Reaganomics, academics and administrators falsely situate conversations on race, policing, immigration, etc. as precursors to reductions in racial and ethnic animus. The logic of these deductions is, presumably, that eloquent, empirics-guided discourse on the ills of racism will gin-up and radiate empathy from the knowledge-holders who preside over these panels, and then this empathy will then trickle out across stimulated minds on campus, and, perchance, into the broader public square, seeping into and converting the broader masses.

How many more academic panels, and conversations, are needed to discuss how race affects education, or health, or economic opportunity, or housing, or policing? If we have seen or been part of one—and most of us presumably have been exposed to far more than one since the racial justice protests began—have we not essentially seen them all? In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, academic departments, local governments, and corporations arranged myriad panels to discuss race and racism, another performative cudgel that has been acutely diagnosed as the “*Having Conversations Industrial Complex*” (Green, 2020). Green describes these now-ubiquitous race conversations, listening tours, and “dialogues,” more euphemistic but equally banal analogs of conversations, as:

“...a loose assemblage of professional speakers, non-profit organizations, astroturfed activists, diversity consultants, academic advisory boards, panelists, and politicians who are paid to generate a “conversation” that doesn’t need to show tangible results. Rather, the only role of the conversation is to generate more conversations... the Having Conversations Industrial Complex exists to enrich the powerful and defuse radical demands.”

As part of a more contextual critique, it seems unlikely that academic panels would produce community-tailored recommendations or concrete steps for actions, largely because they are often situated on campuses that have implicit and actuated biases towards “outsiders” (i.e., non-academics and the less socioeconomically empowered), as low-income communities on some campuses’ fringes are aware (Ashworth, 1964; Ross et al., 2010; Winling, 2011). Indeed, academic panels frequently lack the parties who are *at the center* of these discussions (Taylor et al., 2018; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010)—they are, in brief, interventions without those needing to be part of, or requiring, the intervention. Indeed, it seems clear that a panel on policing would include current members of law enforcement and everyday community members who have experienced or at heightened vulnerability to police harassment—and perhaps would be especially inclusive of community members who believe police bias to be a figment of the social justice warrior’s imagination—rather than scholars and professionalized activists who may or may not have any proverbial skin in the game. Yet, this is often not the case for panels (Dempsey, 2010; Taylor et al., 2018). This mirrors the tendency for racial and social justice-focused organizations to not be led by individuals from historically disenfranchised groups, for DEI initiatives in academic entities to be spearheaded by non-racial/ethnic/gender minorities, and so forth (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019; LeRoux, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2017; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). However, in addition to earning their organizers’ “clout” in the trickle-down empathy economy, panels otherwise fit squarely under the oft-duplicitous banner of DEI, meeting what increasingly appears to be the sole criterion: just *being about race*.

In consideration of a wider critique on the ongoing suppression of academic freedom (Craciun & Mihut, 2017; Scott, 2017), university-led panels on racial justice—or on justice related to gender, or religion, or immigration, etc.—too often become unconflicted, sanitized venues, and echo chambers, for academics to burnish images of themselves as soothsayers. Rather than undertaking the task of reimagining and reinventing their structures of oppression, racism, classism, misogyny, and xenophobia, universities across the country frequently seek first, and often only, to reimagine and reinvent other institutions. This compulsion forecloses discussion and remediation of universities’ explicit role as architects, shepherds, or silent partners of trickle-down empathy ideology and discriminatory orthodoxy that directly undermines and stalls DEI; and, more to the point, this purposeful tunnel vision belies their capacity to be dismantlers of this intertwining ideology and orthodoxy.

It’s Representation, Stupid: Reanimating Woke Policies That Strike ‘At the Root’

Where do we begin? One of the first prominent White American social justice scribes and “public abolitionists,” Henry David Thoreau, who helped craft the modern concept of civil disobedience that Martin Luther King Jr. and other racial justice stalwarts later adopted, tells us in *Walden*, published in 1854: “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root” (Thoreau, 2006). In the rush to ease their own pain, guilt, and/or annoyance, more thoughtful considerations from racial justice advocates and White “allies” in academia about how to undo structural violence are now being spurned in favor of exotic and low-hanging fruit, like changing the names of academic halls, monuments, professorships, and the like which wear the namesake of known racists.

In some cases, universities, no doubt, wish to take seriously issues of equity. We know this having witnessed their jubilant, remarkably efficient, and effective fusillade in the summer of 2020 to parry an ICE directive to deport international college students, most of whom were Asian and European, if they did not attend classes in-person as COVID-19 (Robinson et al., 2020; Treisman, 2020). When it comes to their domestic Black students though, universities are both remarkably diffident and shameless in their diffidence, being able to present international student cases as a *values* issue and the latter domestic situations involving Black students as a primarily *sociopolitical* one issue (Dancy et al., 2018).

Many academics, students, parents, and individuals in the general population will argue that it is not universities’ place to take a stand on racial issues (Davis, 2020), that racial and social justice interventions, when they move beyond the lecture hall or academic panel, represent pedagogical mission creep, that faculty and researchers should *shut up and teach*. These

individuals will talk about deservedness, meritocracy, and then point out the nominal and token minority hires that university departments make yearly, ignoring the stagnancy in their year-to-year pools of underrepresented groups, which includes not just inequity hiring and engagement of Blacks, but Latinos, women, and Whites from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Carnevale & Rose, 2013; Carr et al., 2017; Kaplan et al., 1982). These are kinetic debates that need to be had—but they need to end with concrete, measurable solutions. To this end, if universities want to begin to advance equity efforts on their campuses in ways that will correspond to addressing all forms of social stratification, three basic actions can be taken:

(1). Actively recruit, hire, and retain people from underrepresented groups for undergraduate/graduate studies, faculty positions, and administration. We should be carefully and thoughtfully looking for ways to increase racial/ethnic diversity across the entire academic ecosystem and work on retention. Indeed, recruitment is for naught without a concomitant focus on the forces, such as discrimination and more subtle forms of implicit bias, which disproportionately drive minorities away from academia (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Kelly et al., 2017). We also need to be more judicious with spousal hires and legacy admissions that disproportionately support White candidates (Kaplan et al., 2018). Importantly, in seeking to augment racial and ethnic diversity, it is important to consider not just the race and ethnicity of candidates, but their history of income, parental education, geography, and nativity, other factors which further stratify and winnow opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities. To create the greatest synergies, such efforts should be spearheaded and led by individuals in these institutions who come from these complex backgrounds, and resources should be devoted to strengthening relationships between recruiters and recruited individuals, early on, and providing culturally competent supports (Bradley et al., 2018; Kaplan et al., 2018).

(2). Create "anti-racism" resources centered around ongoing mandated implicit bias training. The broad movement over the last decade towards mandated and continuous sexual harassment and Title IX trainings across universities was wholly necessary in prompting appropriate views on responsibility and accountability in interpersonal interactions on and off-campus. Moreover, they have proven to be evidence-based, effective in attenuating gendered and sexist views and behaviors (Clancy et al., 2020; Phipps, 2020). Like this vital effort to ensure respect for campus members' humanity and their boundaries and to hence improve the broader academic climate, we also actively need to cultivate ways to enhance our sensitivity towards issues racial and ethnic minorities, instituting mandatory trainings where individuals can learn about the various nuances, customs, and beliefs of different racial/ethnic

groups, to generate *and* sustain greater cultural sensitivity and readiness to support a racially/ethnically diverse campus. Importantly, this programming and training must be reinforced administratively through the actions described in Action #1; to wit, administrations must set a strong, ongoing example for faculty, students, and staff to follow.

(3). Develop physical community engagement spaces on campuses, curate academic courses for community members, and include community members in academic panels on racism. Universities like the University of Chicago, University of Southern California, and Columbia University, which are in the backyards of diverse communities and actively trigger and foment gentrification in them need to break down their visible and invisible barriers and give campus members the opportunity to interact with community members. One substantive way to achieve this is to offer "non-traditional" and underserved community members opportunities to take expedited or "mini" courses at low cost or for free. Offering these individuals access to higher education, even in abbreviated or virtual form, would work to further remediate the race and class cleavages that typify modern higher education in America. And the benefits do not extend to just community members. W. E. B. Du Bois' thoughts on a "color line" are uniquely instructive here: insofar as academics lack practical and meaningful multicultural exposures and work experience—namely outside of academia—they will be fundamentally incapable of relating to, or having empathy towards, individuals outside of academia's "bubble" or of being disposed to genuine advocacy and anti-racism (Kristof, 2014). Finally, to the extent that academic entities continue to see utility in academic panels and "talks" on racism, a diverse array of "every day" community members should be actively recruited as both audience members and expert discussants.

These three policy initiatives will kindle broad and meaningful changes in racial and ethnic minority representation, the needed nucleus of the current would-be reckoning, across each layer of the educational space, and help bridge the fast-fracturing academic-community divide. However, these policies require oversight, accountability, and timelines. And here, the more sobering reality is that White powerbrokers who are in alliance can, or will, only advance the ball of racial justice so far. And, of course, traditional White *non-allies* will not acknowledge, let alone codify, the singularity of this movement and its house of mirrors *pathos*. To wit, the present racial justice movement is, if nothing else, a striking exemplar of many White academics' atrophy for their Black peers in times of crisis. It is, further, a particularly vigorous indictment of those White academics who have built careers off of studying racial inequality, health disparities, and intersectional marginalities in the context of race through prestigious government and foundation grants (Agyeman, 2008).

Universities' intermittently disillusioned and coy responses to the racial justice protests are evidence that even their wokest acolytes—the White professors in the social sciences and humanities who teach courses on systemic racism and structural bias, and maintain active presences on social media to rail against White patriarchy and institutional racism (Hull & Dodd, 2017; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016)—cannot be fully counted on to marshal a new cohort of racially/ethnically underrepresented academics into their ranks. It is now time to build capacity so that these underrepresented groups, and their native communities, are positioned to lead and successfully implement these crucial efforts themselves and thus manifest wokeness in its most historically congruent, practical, and applied sense.

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