Whiteness, Power, and Resisting Change in US Higher Education

A Peculiar Institution

Edited by Kenneth R. Roth · Zachary S. Ritter

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Preface

As we go to press, the United States turns its gaze to yet another peculiar institution: policing. George Floyd, a 46-year-old Minneapolis Black man died in May 2020 after Police Officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, all the while Floyd pleaded to be allowed to breathe. Floyd, whether or not he was aware, allegedly passed a counterfeit $20 bill at a convenience store, and that single potentially accidental act cost him his life.

Chauvin, 44, is seen in social media video resting his knee on Floyd's neck, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets, as he ignores calls from onlookers to let Floyd go. He looks like he's posing for a big game trophy photo, opined a former Los Angeles police detective and Assistant Inspector General who personally investigated police use of force for much of his 25-year law enforcement career.

Floyd's death, then, may be a picture perfect example of murder under color of authority, similar to what we have previously witnessed in the deaths of Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, and Oscar Grant, and many others (Hudson, 2013). But, despite these tragic outcomes, and often administratively ruled bad practices, only one police officer associated with these deaths has been tried and convicted of a crime. US law enforcement either can't seem to learn from its mistakes, or is *allowed* to resist calls for change.

But, this resistance to change is not exclusive to US law enforcement. We argue it has insidiously permeated virtually all American institutions,

and certainly higher education. What these and other US institutions have in common is a resistance to unhook from Whiteness, a doctrine that rewards and ascribes superiority across virtually all domains to phenotype, and the absence of melanin in skin.

The result of this resistance increasingly is the undermining of perceptions of justice, equity, and fair play in transactions with US institutions, particularly law enforcement and criminal justice. As a result, this resistance ultimately imperils our collective belief in and reliance on *all* US institutions, and ultimately the democratic republic for which they stand.

A parallel between law enforcement and the operation of US colleges and universities at first glance may seem opaque. Yet, in both cases, these institutions have been long-established, in fact likely founded around the same time, and have supported racist practices throughout their history.

Further, given its *perceived* intellectual authority, higher education has set the standard for what is valuable to know, who benefits from knowing, and how to access those benefits, often presenting what is valuable by devaluing (geographically and philosophically) alternate ways of knowing. Ironically, the institution encouraging critique of all things and promoting restraint in the absence of broad understanding, has since its inception in the United States delimited what is considered useful knowledge, who can create it, and often to what ends it can be used, and all through a single lens: Whiteness.

While the practice of Whiteness in higher education does not have the same consequences as it can in law enforcement, the wounds it inflicts are not inconsequential. They may be subtler and more nuanced but over time and across generations can become nearly as violent in different ways (Oliver and Shapiro 2013).

As educators, we believe in the promise of education, to enrich self and community, to train for a vibrant politick, and to promote reasoned goodwill and prosperity across the globe. While US higher education has made indisputable contributions to the expansion and wealth of the Americas and beyond, it has not acknowledged its role in the exploitation and oppression of First Nation Peoples and Americans of African descent. Neither has it addressed increasing distress on its campuses due to xenophobia and white nationalism. Neither has it diversified its faculty, or developed tenured pathways for the burgeoning ranks of contingent faculty who tend to work more, earn less, and in many cases possess the same credentials as tenured faculty.

There are many reasons to praise the accomplishments of US higher education; at the same time, there is cause to reflect, to atone, and to reorganize toward a more realistically aligned institution for today's students.

What authors have sought to do here is identify areas where higher education should consider improvements—organizationally, culturally, and philosophically. At the same time, the problems exposed within higher education are problems that extend well beyond higher education, and may not be capable of correction within the academy until they are addressed in the broader society.

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Hallie O. Star holds a Ph.D. in the Higher Education Leadership Program from Idaho State University and is an administrator and adjunct faculty member at the College of Southern Idaho. Her research interests include the critical study of Whiteness in higher education and the intersections of race, gender, class, and family history.

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Introduction

Charles H. F. Davis III

In August 2017, the nation looked on as white nationalists descended on Charlottesville, VA and the campus of the University of Virginia (UVA). Under the banner "Unite the Right," thousands of members of Nazi/neo-Nazi groups, the Ku Klux Klan, and armed white militias mobilized as a show of force to oppose the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. On August 12, a day prior to the formal rally, participants gathered in Charlottesville's recently renamed Emancipation Park with picket signs, merchandise, and regalia featuring swastikas, Confederate flags, and other symbols of white supremacy. Later that night, carrying outdoor torch lights, "alt-right" persona Richard Spencer led dozens of white supremacists through campus chanting anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic slogans. Among them, "white lives matter" and "you will not replace us" were rallying cries that reified the desire of white supremacists to maintain their "property rights," including the right to exclude (Harris, 1993).

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Upon reaching a statue of Thomas Jefferson, the University's founder, Spencer and others were confronted by a contingent of mostly Black UVA students. Having locked arms with other non-Black Students of Color and several white students, the collective of courageous counter-protestors faced down Spencer without so much as campus police presence to ensure their safety. Not surprisingly, the fragility of white supremacy, when met with the immoveable solidarity of anti-racist students, yielded violence. Although no serious injuries were reported, several students were sprayed with chemical irritants, shoved, and even punched before first responders eventually intervened. In the immediate wake of the demonstration, University President Teresa Sullivan released a 4-sentence response:

> As President of the University of Virginia, I am deeply saddened and disturbed by the hateful behavior displayed by torch-bearing protestors that marched on our Grounds this evening. I strongly condemn the unprovoked assault on members of our community, including University personnel who were attempting to maintain order.

> Law enforcement continues to investigate the incident, and it is my hope that any individuals responsible for criminal acts are held accountable. The violence displayed on the Grounds is intolerable and is entirely inconsistent with the University's values.

> Teresa A. Sullivan
> President

The next morning, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency, citing concerns for public safety and the need for additional support to safeguard residents. The Virginia State Police even declared the assembly "unlawful" after observing escalating violence incited by white nationalists before the formal rally, but these responses were too little too late. Just two hours following the declarations, in an area adjacent to the park, James Alex Fields—a self-avowed white supremacist—drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer, and injuring 19 others.

As one of the most visible and collective manifestations of overt white supremacy in recent years, this watershed moment further revealed the extent to which this nation remains seemingly incapable of, as Barbara Jordan (1976) once put it, "being as good as its promise" (https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barbarajo

rdan1976dnc.html). To be sure, neither the sentiment of white nationalism or a public rally of white identity extremists (Davis, 2018) are newly occurring phenomena. The materialization of ideological white supremacy rests at the very foundation of the United States and its many institutions, including higher education. While much about the Charlottesville moment can (and should) be attributed to the deeply racist political rhetoric of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and, later, the Trump Administration, colonial dispossession of Native lands, genocide of Indigenous people, and the holocaust of African enslavement remain antecedent. In Virginia specifically, we are reminded of the arrival of the "White Lion," a Dutch ship with "20 and odd Negroes" (Kingsbury, 1933, p. 244) to Point Comfort from Angola, West Africa in August 1619.

It is precisely because and in *spite* of this history of racial colonial terror that American postsecondary institutions continue to embrace the vestiges of our Nation's violent past. Whether the dispossessed Indigenous land turned plantation grounds on which institutions were built or the names of slave owners and segregationists on classroom buildings, the historical legacies of racism (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) are ever-present on postsecondary campuses. This brings me to my point: American colleges and universities are, in addition to their educational functions, sociopolitical organizations where disenfranchisement and structural disempowerment of racially minoritized people is institutionalized.

Returning to Charlottesville, many of us, myself included, watched the breaking news reports with concern and even intrigue. Having processed the moment with various people, including individual educators and larger audiences at a variety of national conferences since 2017, nearly all of us shared a sense of outrage at what had transpired. Some of us raised questions of dismay and disbelief: "How could this happen?" And, unless one is a direct stakeholder in higher education, the institutional context of the University of Virginia and its administrative response might have easily gotten lost. At minimum, Thomas Jefferson was himself a slave owner who actively participated in racialized sexual violence against the Black women he enslaved. Richard Spencer, once *the* leading voice for the "alt-right" brand of white nationalism, is twice a graduate of the University of Virginia, as are many white alum who likely were never educated about or forced to confront their own ideas regarding race, Whiteness, power, or privilege. Or, they simply chose to ignore it.

According to the current Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System reports, UVA, as a state-public institution, enrolls only 6.5% Black students in a state that is 22.3% Black (Harper & Simmons, 2019). The same data show faculty is 73% white. Taken separately, these details may appear disparate and unrelated. Together, however, the once-obscured *everydayness* of institutionalized white supremacy is revealed and the peculiarity of postsecondary institutions as sites of contemporary racial terror becomes normalized. What is more, this institutional response did nothing precise to address the deeply racist nature of what transpired, failed to identify who was made more vulnerable (i.e., racially minoritized students generally and Black students specifically), and merely attempted to distance the institution's espoused values from the terroristic events. Such responses to campus racism and racial terror have become the status quo for postsecondary institutions, especially in the Trump Era. Rather than communicate an understanding of their respective and proximal relationships to white supremacy and educational violence (Mustaffa, 2017), institutions repeatedly choose to misremember the past and deny the racial realities of the present.

In this volume, Roth and Ritter have brought together an important contribution to the organizational literature on higher education. In particular, this text critically interrogates the relationship between status quo racism, the skyrocketing use of adjunct faculty, the loss of academic freedom, and the increasing reliance on monied interests and their implications for the stated values of America's higher education institutions. In an era in which colleges and universities are increasingly expected to redefine their answerability (Patel, 2016) to a racially and ethnically diverse public, a focus on racialized systems, structures, and institutionalized practices is as timely as it is important. Furthermore, today's expectation for acknowledgment and atonement emerges at a time when student participation in activism and organized resistance, on-campus and beyond, is at an all-time high (Eagan et al., 2015). The current sociopolitical moment in which higher education finds itself has, again, revealed the unapologetic truth about this nation and its institutions: That is, the genocide of Native and Indigenous peoples and the enslavement and exploitation of Black Africans lay at the foundation of school and society's sociocultural symbiosis.

The longstanding question of whether society produces school or school produces society fails to fully recognize the extent to which both school and society remain indelibly guided by systemic white supremacy

and, therefore, remain in service to one another to protect the property of Whiteness (Harris, 1993). This is especially important in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which, over time, may redefine higher education in unprecedented and unpredictable ways. What is evident thus far is the enduring inequities within and across institutions and society. Further, many institutions, due to the growing influence of monied interests, reopened campuses without a legitimate vision to address the disparate impact the 2020 public health crisis had—and will continue to have—on Black, Latinx, and First Nation students, staff, and faculty and their communities. As healthcare and case data have shown, these groups have been most impacted by COVID-19, both in terms of rates of infection, mortality, and community disruption. In addition, as links between the origin of the novel coronavirus and an open market in Wuhan, China escalated in the national discourse, colleges and universities offered little with regard to protecting Asian and Asian American members of campus communities from the xenophobic attacks to which many have already fallen victim. At the time of publication, innumerable racial and class inequities in higher education were glaringly evident (i.e., student indebtedness, retention and attrition, and learning efficacy), and none of them have been addressed during the hurried return to normalcy demanded by the economic imperative to reopen campuses.

Such inattention is yet another peculiar signal of the expendability of *some* for the benefit of the greater white good, a signal that neoliberal ideologies and academic capitalism have once again compelled institutions to place profits, productivity, and prestige over people. This is in large part due to the desire of many postsecondary leaders to return to normal operations, a status quo in which deeply harmful systems of prejudicial exclusion, discrimination, and violence remain unchanged. Higher education stakeholders need not look any further than hiring freezes, furloughs, and layoffs affecting race-based epistemologies and academic units (e.g., African and African American Studies departments), some of which have been either indefinitely suspended or closed entirely, to see higher education institutions are resuming their denial of complicity with a long-festering and broadening white nationalism. Much like the people who have been disregarded, their ways of knowing also have been deemed disposable for the sake of institutional solvency and addressing the financial woes of institutions for which they, neither in part nor alone, are responsible. What, then, can be done? How can higher education

reimagine itself and devalue its operations that have been employed and served certain interests so well for so long?

For starters, perspectives offered in this volume help move educators and postsecondary stakeholders closer to understanding the enduring and endemic nature of racial capitalism and the status quo of white supremacy in contemporary higher education. To be sure, today, the thinly veiled mask of white liberal post-racialism, which has long obscured the ongoing pain and suffering of racially minoritized peoples in the United States, has been all but stripped bare. The seemingly daily threats to the dignity and power of marginalized peoples, in the United States and elsewhere, regardless of race, has forced upon college and university educators the urgent responsibility to reimagine the form and function of the US university in a time of controversy and challenge. Beyond the many calls for investments in social justice, commitments to diversification, and rhetorical (but not structural) value of "inclusive excellence," a meaningful deconstruction of both *where* and *how* Whiteness paradoxically undermines the presumed public mission of higher education is desperately needed. Furthermore, and as demanded by generations of concerned stakeholders, the need for educators and administrators to remediate and improve their literacy regarding structural racism (and their place within it) is critical. Yet, even the consummate postsecondary professional remains without many of the necessary analytical and practical tools to identify racial problems, attribute and accept responsibility for racial inequities, and enact transformative organizational change. For these reasons, and innumerable others, this volume is an important step in closing that gap.

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Historic Scaffolds of Whiteness in Higher Education

Chris Corces-Zimmerman, Devon Thomas,
and Nolan L. Cabrera

> There is no institutional will to enact a shift away from white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism. There is no institutional will to recognize the anti-Blackness that stains the very roots of this University. (WeDemandUNC 2015)

INTRODUCTION

The above words articulated by students at University of North Carolina in a 2015 statement of demands to administrators echo similar sentiments expressed by countless Students and Faculty of Color on college campuses

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across the country. In short, they describe a lack of the egalitarian and democratic principles typically believed to be at the core of US higher education. Beyond a concern for individual racist acts experienced by Students and Faculty of Color, this quote speaks to the very scaffolding of institutions of higher education—a central problem deeply rooted in the past and present. If there is a discrepancy between the lived experiences of Students of Color and the purported values of equity and inclusion so many colleges and universities claim to embrace, the question then becomes "Why isn't higher education better serving its students, particularly Students of Color and other underrepresented groups?" To which critics might reply, "What if it is working just as it is supposed to?" It is this poignant dissonance between inclusion and exclusion, between acceptance and rejection, between belonging and othering, that make colleges and universities such a peculiar institution in both the past and present moment of the United States.

When thinking about the peculiarity of higher education it is important to do so through two similar yet distinct lenses: (1) The institution of higher education as a system and (2) Individual institutions that function within the system. Since its inception in the early seventeenth century, US higher education has been peculiar in both who it served and how it served them. In many ways, one could argue a more apt definition to describe the institution would be "higher acculturation" or "higher stratification" as those have been just as central to the outcomes of these institutions as has their role in preparing leaders and educated citizens. Similarly, at a local level, individual institutions have historically been thought to serve as a means of social and professional advancement where success is based on hard work and acquired intelligence. Yet, a critical look at history tells a very different story of exclusionary admission practices, promotion of eugenicist and racially biased research and scholarship, and a centering of values and policies that reward individuals who look, speak, and act in line with the rules of Whiteness (Wilder 2013). While relatively few texts offer a critique of institutional inequity, those that do almost always emphasize who has been excluded while leaving out who is responsible for the excluding (Karabel 2005; Soares 2007). Though understandable in that these narratives seek to challenge the myriad

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inequitable structures and practices put in place to limit access of students with a range of marginalized identities, focusing on instances of exclusion allows oppressive forces, such as Whiteness and white supremacy among other modalities, to remain invisible and uninterrogated. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for the remainder of this book by revisiting the expansive history of higher education in the United States and training light on Whiteness and how it has served to create inequities at both institutional and individual levels.

The Context of Whiteness

When describing the majority of higher education institutions in the United States, most scholars use one of two terms: Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) or Historically White Colleges (HWC). The term PWI is purely descriptive in nature and primarily focused on demographic or individual-level student characteristics. In contrast, embedded within the term HWC is a critical acknowledgment of the past and present legacy of white supremacy that is central to all "white-serving institutions." Where PWI allows institutions and individuals to conceptualize efforts to address racial inequities as a question of increasing the number of Students of Color who are admitted to the university, the concept of higher education institutions as being "historically white" shifts the focus to the need for reforms and responses to address deeper structural and systemic components of these institutions. Specifically, this focus on the various ways institutions, both past and present, have maintained and invested in Whiteness suggests the need for deep, systemic change to institutional policies, culture, and physical space in order to effectively engage in initiatives to promote racial equity and social justice.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the omnipresent nature of Whiteness in higher education, it is essential to begin by both (1) Outlining what is meant by the term "Whiteness," and (2) Illuminating the myriad ways in which Whiteness and white supremacy permeate institutions of higher education through the presentation of four dimensions of Whiteness.

Defining Whiteness

When discussing the concept of Whiteness it is important to make a clear distinction between white people as individuals, and Whiteness as

an ideological, epistemological, and ontological force that functions to support individuals, actions, and appearances deemed "white." Leonardo (2009) defines the difference this way: "'Whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color. … Whiteness is not a cultural but a social concept" (pp. 169–170). While this may appear to be a matter of semantics, it is actually a fundamental distinction to the understanding of how Whiteness influences institutions of higher education. For example, to consider Whiteness as synonymous with individual white people would lead one to believe the effects of Whiteness in higher education could be addressed by changing the beliefs, actions, and interactions of white students, staff, faculty, and administrators on campus. In contrast, understanding Whiteness as a racial discourse suggests a milieu rooted in both past and present structural, political, and cultural practices and norms that has implications for admissions, faculty advising, and racially hostile campus environments. To understand Whiteness as a racial discourse is to acknowledge the myriad ways in which institutions of higher education actively engage and are complicit in maintaining norms and practices that privilege being identified as white over other individual-level descriptors.

The 4 Dimensions of Whiteness in Higher Education

Whiteness in the US context is an omnipresent, oppressive social force (Bonilla-Silva 1997). That is, when we interrogate Whiteness in higher education, we are critically examining the historically situated ideologies, discourses, policies, and social structures that make institutions of higher education favor white people over People of Color, resulting in reifying systemic white supremacy. Historically, higher education has been a central mechanism for the reproduction of white supremacy, as well as an arena for some of the most visible challenges to the US system of racial oppression (Cabrera 2019). While colleges and universities have demonstrated some egalitarian social functions, they continue to function as mechanisms for the *intergenerational reproduction of white privilege* (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). To understand how this intergenerational reproduction occurs, we explore the ways Whiteness is historically ingrained and scaffolded within these institutions via: (a) Racial composition, (b) Physical structures, (c) Social/cultural norms, and (d) Organizational/curricular norms.