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In the Name of Merit: Racial Violence in the Academy

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In the Name of Merit

Racial Violence in the Academy

ABSTRACT Racial violence in the academy is enacted upon faculty of color, particularly women, in multiple disciplines. This essay attempts to both expose and suggest that everyday systemic racism has become a pervasive and normalizing feature within disciplines that continue to privilege white and Eurocentric forms of knowledge making while devaluing others. Furthermore, attempts to challenge such supremacies are immediately countered by calls and charges of incivility. This is an essay about the costs of unmasking norms of civility as it bears upon constructions of both whiteness and meritocracy. **KEYWORDS** Autoethnography; Racial violence; Whiteness; Meritocracy; Civility

The institutionalization of Black Studies, Feminist Studies, all of these things, led to a sense that the struggle was over for a lot of people and that one did not have to continue the personal consciousness-raising and changing of one's viewpoint.

BELL HOOKS¹

PART 1

In 1948, James Baldwin left America and went to Paris to save himself from being disenfranchised in America. He was afraid that his fate would mirror the tragedy of his friend Eugene Worth, who had jumped off the Washington Bridge and died in 1946. Like Baldwin, in 2019, we the minoritized bodies in academia have been given what Baldwin would call “to bear witness to the truth”² as to how whiteness in academia maintains its power structures and imbalances. Implicit in maintaining these sites of power are simultaneous methods to silence, discredit, and undermine oppositional voices that speak up, speak back, and speak against the sustained logic of white supremacy and status quo within our institutions. This is an urgent intervention about marginalization, epistemic harm, and injustice inflicted on scholars of color that we can no longer avoid or escape. It is a conversation about inclusion, or what Sara Ahmed calls *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*.³

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This is a conversation about reclaiming our space to expose the normalization of everyday systemic racism that has been a pervasive feature within disciplines that continue to privilege white and Eurocentric forms of knowledge-making. Furthermore, attempts to challenge such supremacies are immediately countered by calls and charges of incivility. Here, civility is used as a weapon, or what Tobias Kelly and Sharika Thiranagama have argued is a “mask” to prohibit us from confronting oppressions, injustices, subjugation, and disenfranchisements:

Being civil when facing gross injustice appears simply hypocritical and inauthentic. Advocating civility can place etiquette and manners about equality and justice, and the calls for all of us to “get along” risks glossing over serious and important political divisions. In a world of civility, we must wear a mask, hiding our anger from view.⁴

Joan W. Scott has also posited that “civility” becomes a synonym for “orthodoxy”; “incivility” designates “unorthodox ideas or behavior.”⁵ In this essay, I attempt to provide legitimacy to our anger by unmasking norms of civility that are disguised as “promoting productive dialogues” for the advancement of institutions and the public good. This is an essay that is multi-genre to deliberately defy the orthodoxy of any given scholarly genre.

PART 2

In my 2018 op-ed piece titled “Are You Supporting White Supremacy?” I had noted that one of the features of a mundane and everyday practice of white supremacy within the academy is an (un)conscious instinct to nominate only those students and faculty for awards or leadership positions who are deemed as “stellar” (mostly men) and obviously “white.” Given that meritocracy and racial diversity have always shared a contested, and vexed, relationship, where issues of lack of access and privilege are often undermined or even ignored, I had also said (unapologetically) to those who blindly support meritocracy that “it doesn’t occur to [them] that [they] are implicitly supporting a logic of meritocracy that is built on this racist assumption that everyone has had the same access and opportunities” in their lives.⁶

This statement received much backlash nationally both from self-identified white supremacists and those within academia supporting the logic of meritocracy. The anger was less about the fact that I had said meritocracy was a product of white supremacy, but more because I had called out such practices as “racist.” Some of my own colleagues were angry and filed complaints against me for

being hostile to them—although I had not explicitly named my institution, or accused anybody in particular, but had noted broader symptoms of pervasive and mundane forms of how white supremacy is enacted from the standpoint of critical race theory on minoritized bodies within the academy.

Upon publication of my op-ed piece, my institution's public relations department arbitrarily changed its policy to not publicize any faculty op-eds in its weekly newsletter. While I was surprised, I also read such an arbitrary policy change as a form of policing and strategic censorship to not engage in such "call-out" forms of public intellectual work—if my work was to be recognized within my own institutional apparatus. Being acutely aware of the backlashes that faculty across the country had already received from their own institutions for their extramural speeches (post the election of Donald Trump in 2016), I took precautions by forwarding to key administrators, including the college president, the American Association of University Professors's principles of academic freedom and its statement on "Targeted Online Harassment of Faculty."⁷ While colleagues nationally posted my op-ed piece on their various social media platforms, the majority of my own colleagues were hesitant in posting my piece on their social media outlets. Among the hesitant faculty were also minority and marginalized faculty who feared backlash as a result of their tacit support of my op-ed piece.

All of these actions only bolstered my central thesis about the egregious, exclusionary, and perverse nature of racism in academia in terms of who is appointed to be the gatekeepers guarding the sites of power, knowledge, acknowledgment, and privilege. These gatekeepers reproduce cultures of silence(ing), tone policing, and orthodoxy, while upholding institutional cultures of promoting "open dialogues" as long as they are "mutually respectful" and "civil." Here, the intellectual diversity worker advocating for equity and social/racial justice is seen as an agitator refusing to comply with institutional goals of diversity. Here, the function of diversity is what Ahmed describes "as a form of public relation[s]" campaign where the rhetoric of "*diversity can be a method of protecting whiteness*."⁸ Such methods of protecting whiteness, I want to assert, are precisely forms of epistemic violence that come at the cost of alienating scholars of color from the academy and from the very products of their own intellectual labor, from their lived experience, and from the material conditions within which they generate new intellectual endeavors.

Although my own academic field is not communication studies (but postcolonial studies), I am not an outsider to how white supremacy operates within the academy. The hypervisibility of white scholars as "Distinguished Scholars,"

or those who are overwhelmingly nominated by their peers for awards, leadership positions, and other institutional recognitions, portrays the widespread nature of controlled advocacy and advancements for one kind of scholar/teacher/scholarship, while routinely devaluing works of others representing diversities by deploying non-Eurocentric epistemologies and methodologies.

PART 3

In “Racial/Colonial Genocide and the ‘Neoliberal Academy,’” Dylan Rodríguez states:

*The academy is never home: some of us are subject to eviction and evisceration, alongside the surveillance, discipline, and low-intensity punishment that accrues to those of us who try to build modalities of sustenance and reproduction within liberationist genealogies, particularly when we are working and studying in colleges and universities.*⁹

What are some of these undocumented “eviction and evisceration, alongside the surveillance, discipline, and low intensity punishment[s]” imposed by institutional structures on those who violate upholding status quo? I present three fictionalized accounts of racial and epistemic violence (in the name of merit and threats to displacing whiteness) produced and reproduced within the academy.

Violence #1

Trigger: Patterns of discomfort are threats to whiteness.

Kiara is an African American sociologist who teaches about structural racism and race relations in the United States. She applied for tenure and was denied.

Kiara has published extensively in journals in her field, speaks her mind (when necessary), and is considered a good citizen of her university. Some of her white colleagues do not like the “auto”-ethnography aspect of her research. She also spends two weeks in her “Race Relations” course teaching about the origins of white supremacy grounded in history/herstory. Every year, a few white students have complained about how Kiara’s teachings have made them *uncomfortable*.

There is also plenty of evidence in her teaching evaluations that suggests she is an effective faculty member, including students saying that she changed their lives. Her white department chair and her all white colleagues, however, are not convinced. They focus instead on the “discomforts” felt by her few white students over the last six years, noting that such discomforts have created a clear pattern of “not respecting the viewpoint of her students.” Kiara is subtly asked

to take a “racial sensitivity training” that her university offers in the summer. Kiara refused to undergo any such training.

Kiara appealed her denial of tenure on grounds of racial discrimination and violation of academic freedom. Her appeal was denied.

#PriceOfDiscomfort#

Violence #2

Trigger: A challenge to one’s mediocrity is a threat to whiteness.

Emiliano is a Latinx faculty member who has been working on his book for the past four years. His work is interdisciplinary and intersectional, discussing graffiti and music and their relationship to political philosophy in Cuba. He is overjoyed that he was just offered a contract from a state university press. When he declares this news to his white colleague (who received tenure two years ago by publishing only a few articles, but goes to happy hour with his students every Friday), the colleague says, “Emiliano, that’s great. Did you not manage to get a bite from the more respectable presses?”

In less than two years, this “happy hour” colleague with “only a few articles” will be writing for Emiliano’s tenure review. Emiliano starts having panic attacks. For the first time, he decides to take anxiety medications.

#WhiteSupremacyIsNuanced#

Violence #3

Trigger: Diversity as “institutional mission” is a threat to whiteness.

Padma, a South Asian American female is a visiting professor who is on the job market to secure a tenure-track job in Renaissance literature. During one of her campus visits, a senior colleague tells her that the department needs more faculty of color. “It’s this diversity thing, you know!” Padma is jolted and remembers Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*:

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.¹⁰

By the end of Rankine’s prose poem, Padma has learned a new medical term: *John Henryism*. It is used for people who are “exposed to stresses stemming from

racism.” Rankine says Sherman James coined this term and said that the “psychological costs [of racism] were high.”¹¹

Padma is speechless and wonders if she forgot to mention to the committee that her first book received a major award. For the rest of her visit, she is reminded numerous times that her ethnicity is an asset.

#MicroaggressionIsARealThing

PART 4

This is not fiction.

This is our life.

This life is not invisible.

This knowledge is being used, reused, misused.

The Bridge Called Our Back is broken.

The Bridge Called Our Back is made to collapse.

The Bridge Called Our Back is in need of serious repair.¹²

Our merits are under assault.

Our labor fully utilized with little to no compensation.

Our faces shine on glossy brochures.

To paint a picture of inclusion.

#InDiversityAndEquityWeTrust

#InDiversityAndEquityWeCommit

These are *their* words, not *ours*. ■

RESHMI DUTT-BALLERSTADT is Professor in the Department of English at Linfield College. I want to extend my special thanks and gratitude to the editorial team for their astute comments, and especially to Devika Chawla for spearheading this timely special issue. Correspondence to: Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, Department of English, Linfield College, 900 SE Baker Street, McMinnville, OR 97128, USA. Email: rdutt-b@linfield.edu.

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10. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2014), 10.
11. Rankine, *Citizen*, 11.
12. This is a play on the title of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).