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# The Role of Combahee in Anti-Diversity Work

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*This article is focused on a critical and oppositional approach to diversity work on college campuses—what we call “anti-diversity” work—that builds on and operationalizes various principles of black feminist thought articulated by the Combahee River Collective and other black feminist thinkers. At our small, Midwestern, residential, liberal arts college, we are “doing” anti-diversity work through a new faculty/staff development initiative, a project we developed and are currently implementing, called the Decolonizing Pedagogies Project (DPP). This project draws on concepts like intersectionality and coalition building, along with centering our inquiry on the experiences and theorizing of marginalized bodies and thought, to create decolonial locations that make space for “alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself.” The DPP demands that those who engage with the project do deep self reflection on the ways whiteness shapes and holds them to rigid understandings of diversity and inclusion that, as a result, preclude sustained institutional change. Using an intersectional lens, the foundational assumption of this approach is that “black women are inherently valuable” and that the liberation of black women would mean the liberation of everyone, because all systems of oppression would be toppled in the process.*

*Keywords: anti-racism, black feminism, diversity, higher education, intersectionality, pedagogy*

We are a team of faculty and administrators who are tired. Tired of having to mold ourselves to fit into institutions not made for us.<sup>1</sup> Tired of having to defend our research and scholarship in an academy that is conservative and rigid in thought, unwilling to “read” our work. Tired of having to explain that marginalized students not only belong, but can and should be able to thrive and not just survive at our

college campuses and communities. Tired of sitting at the margins, over-performing while being undervalued. As Fannie Lou Hamer said, we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. When our individual weariness merged collectively we found strength in the fact that we all either defined ourselves as, or critically engaged with, black feminist theory and practice. In this collective we began to ask ourselves questions that pushed back at the ways that academic norms of knowing and being uphold structures of inequity and centered whiteness at the expense of marginalized students, faculty, and staff. We began to strategize around what sustainable institutional change could (and should) look like at our predominantly and historically white institution (PHWI). This led us to facing our tiredness and asking ourselves, what would the Combahee River Collective (CRC) say and do if they were in our shoes? The answer was clear—the CRC would use an intersectional lens that centers marginalized bodies and experiences, grounded in the fact that “black women are inherently valuable”<sup>2</sup> and that the liberation of black women would mean the liberation of everyone, because all systems of oppression would be toppled in the process. They would demand we do the work of “profound and radical politics (that) comes directly out of our own identity” in the locations we occupy.<sup>3</sup> It was our identities and lived experiences working at a PHWI that brought us together—two black women, one white transman, and a white woman—under the explicit goal of not letting the institutional project of whiteness kill us. Instead, we are dedicated to carving out space for ourselves, our students, and others who were never imagined in that creation. When given the opportunity to develop and lead a new institutional initiative around inclusive classrooms, we decided to enact our freedom-making imaginings of what a decolonized institution of higher education might look like.<sup>4</sup> We decided to implement an initiative dedicated to centering voices, bodies, and thought who sit at margins through an intersectional lens, and out of this work to build a broad coalition willing and able to do the work of decolonizing pedagogical practices inside and outside the classroom.

The question that guides our work is, what does it mean to transform the structural operation of a PHWI? Given the historical legacy and present hegemony of whiteness in higher education, is it even possible to “decolonize” such an institution? Particularly in a context where words like “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “inclusion” have been evacuated of critical meaning, how might our work be grounded in a way that produces results as well as resists cooptation? Looking to Combahee for potential answers to these questions, we find that the vision they put forth calls on us to do the work of black feminism in the locations we occupy, in this case higher education, even and perhaps especially if those locations are hostile to the needs of the non majority. Drawing on Native studies scholar Philip Deloria, one could say we wish to see black feminism in “unexpected places,” not solely the domain of critical race and gender studies departments or explicit activist projects, but also as a foundation of pedagogy, curriculum, and policy across every domain of higher learning.<sup>5</sup>

This article is focused on a critical and oppositional approach to diversity work on college campuses—what we call “anti-diversity” work—that builds on and

operationalizes various principles of black feminist thought articulated by the CRC and other black feminist thinkers. At our small, Midwestern, residential, liberal arts college, we are “doing” anti-diversity work through a new faculty/staff development initiative, a project we developed and are currently implementing, called the Decolonizing Pedagogies Project (DPP). This project draws on concepts like intersectionality, coalition building, and centering our inquiry on the thoughts and bodies who tend to sit at the margins in order to create decolonial locations that make space for “alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself.”<sup>6</sup> The DPP demands that those who engage with the project do deep self-reflection on the ways whiteness shapes and holds them to rigid understandings of diversity and inclusion that, as a result, preclude sustained institutional change. Combahee taught us that to “do” the work of liberation means one is “doing” the work of love—“love for ourselves, our sisters and our community.”<sup>7</sup> On this foundation of love and valuation, our work at a PHWI builds on the legacy of Combahee and seeks to realize the radical vision of freedom making and liberation offered by their statement. In practice, our successes and failures thus far highlight the deep need for (and difficulty of) enacting decolonizing work through a black feminist lens within the white spaces of higher education.

This essay starts with an engagement and interrogation of how diversity in higher education functions as a gatekeeper of whiteness in the academy, which allows institutions to market themselves as inclusive without actually having undergone substantive or far-reaching changes. We then turn to an explanation of our project and the ways this project actively pushes back against this capitalist and racial reproduction, focusing on how the work of black feminism is embedded in the “anti-diversity work” of the DPP. From there we address our biggest challenges to enacting this work, which mostly center on whitelash and institutional inertia. Finally we discuss our vision for what a decolonized institution might look like if this work were to flourish.

### **Diversity in Higher Education**

Integrating black feminist practices into the institutional life of a PHWI is not an easy endeavor. Such institutions tend to rely primarily on an overused and uncritical notion of “diversity” to address any and all issues concerning underserved and underrepresented populations. Since the 1960s with the passing of the Higher Education Act and the implementation of programs like TRIO and Gear UP that focus on providing support and access for underserved and underrepresented groups in higher education, there has been a waning push by various institutions to diversify higher education. But, what does this really mean? Given that we are still talking about the need to “diversify” higher education in 2017, are these diversity strategies even working?<sup>8</sup>

Sara Ahmed argues that diversity is a safe, comfortable word within higher education. It sits in university documents and becomes “a way of imagining

organizations as having certain attributes.”<sup>9</sup> These attributes typically focus on increasing the number of racial minorities on a campus alongside producing written documents and policies that signal an institution’s commitment to diversity and/or inclusion. When the term diversity is used in these institutional spaces it allows people, particularly administrators, to relax and feel less threatened, because diversity becomes a substitute for more pointed words like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and transphobia. Responses to diversity typically involve hiring a new person of color, usually a chief diversity officer, to “do” the work that the institution does not want to do itself, or even does not want done at all. In this way, diversity serves as an alibi for deeper structural problem of how institutions of higher education uphold, are shaped by and invested in, the colonial project of whiteness.<sup>10</sup> When diversity is used to maintain whiteness, it becomes the antithesis of anti-racist work rooted in social justice.

To describe the maintenance of whiteness as a colonial project is also to say that it is a capitalist project. Well into the twentieth century, many colleges and universities explicitly rejected “diversity” until mid-century legal mandates and civil rights activism pressured institutions to integrate.<sup>11</sup> Now, these same institutions have found ways to capitalize on diversity even while college campuses remain hostile places that reproduce racial, gendered, and other forms of marginalization. Indeed, this is characteristic of what some refer to as “the neoliberal university,” in which diversity is managed like any other marketable asset, as an aspect of branding and enrollment.<sup>12</sup> In this framework, institutions of higher education tend to treat diversity as a mechanism for adding value to their product. For example, neoliberal administrators often define the value of diversity by reference to the demands of the “global economy,” which requires a class of managerial professionals who exhibit traits like tolerance and cosmopolitanism.<sup>13</sup> In fact, this line of reasoning has been central to the defense of affirmative action programs before U.S. federal courts.<sup>14</sup> This is quite different from valuing diversity for its potential to contribute to projects of social justice, as a means to upend the global economy or as a means of redistributing resources to those who are exploited by it.<sup>15</sup>

Like a board of directors watching their stock prices tick up and down, we have found that the word diversity is brought up over and over again in conversations among senior administrators regarding institutional priorities. These conversations, however, rarely place diversity in its proper context at the intersections of race and racism, gender, class, religion, sexuality, ability and how these systems impact students, faculty and staff from marginalized backgrounds in a predominantly white setting. Ironically, when marginalized students speak out against (or even merely call attention to) unequal relations of power, they are then treated as *threats* to diversity because their critiques and activism draw into question how administrators use the term as a depoliticized product attribute. For example, when an alt-right zine and flyers were plastered all over campus before the November 2016 election,<sup>16</sup> upper administration convened meetings with key campus leaders (deans and directors of offices), on what should be the appropriate formal response. Not just the first but also the second, third, and fourth utterances out of the mouths of those around

the table were to voice concerns that our conservative students felt marginalized and that our response should take care not to reinforce or exacerbate these feelings. We were told that the incident showed our campus needed more *diversity*. In this case diversity meant *including* conservative voices and viewpoints to “balance things out” and to help conservative students “express themselves” through more legitimate means. This misuse of the term diversity reduced it to the status of a product with bad sales; the suggested resolution broadened the marketability of diversity by depoliticizing it and using it to create a false equivalency between racism and anti-racism.

The conversation did not turn to what was, in our minds, the most critical issue: the fact that we were seeing the bold, albeit anonymous, spread of far right-wing rhetoric from people who proudly identified as white supremacists and fascists, and the psychic impact of that rhetoric on the students those flyers were targeting. We were also concerned that the appearance of these posters coincided with incidents on and off campus where marginalized populations were direct targets of verbal harassment and vandalism. Instead of discussing *racism* and the vulnerability of students of color, the conversation settled on the more comfortable word, *diversity*. This redefined hostile and intimidating white supremacist acts as mere political expression and carried the additional implication that those of us committed to anti-racism and marginalized communities were suppressors of free speech.

But what can we really expect? Most efforts around diversity and inclusion in higher education are done in a reactive, rather than proactive, manner. This is not surprising because the foundations of higher education in general, and liberal arts colleges in particular, were created to educate and train a particular body and way of thinking. That body tended to be upper middle class, straight, white, and male and, by the early 20th century, female as well. When incidents arise that showcase the bold and unapologetic ways whiteness and white bodies are centered, the typical pattern of reaction is as follows: an incident happens on campus that sparks student outrage and protests. Administrators convene and decide on some course of action, and the newest buzzwords are used to name a new initiative. The new initiative usually entails some sort of commitment to “diversity,” “inclusion,” “dialogue,” and so on. The president, provost, dean, or other senior administrators commission a taskforce to examine the problems on campus (although, in most cases they have already been told, repeatedly, what those problems are). The taskforce then embarks on a quest to uncover evidence of these problems so that they can produce a report (although, in most cases, these mimic reports that were previously commissioned and subsequently ignored). Through a temporary effort—perhaps a hiring cluster or grant-funded project—a few new black and brown bodies (students, faculty, and staff) may be introduced to campus the following year, or perhaps outside consultants will be brought in to run workshops on topics like implicit bias, stereotype threat, or cultural competency.<sup>17</sup> Once the students who protested have graduated and the overall campus climate resettles into a new sense of complacency, many of these initiatives are forgotten about or siloed into an underfunded campus office of diversity, multiculturalism, or inclusion. These patterns reflect the behavior

of an institution engaged in brand management, rather than being invested in the deeper and more difficult work that diversity could and should entail.

But here is our question: what if these failures of “diversity” as it is operationalized in higher education actually represent the success of educational systems doing what they were always intended to do; that is, functioning as gatekeeper institutions that eliminate and assimilate particular forms of difference? What if “diversity” is, or has become, the primary means to numerate bodies that are not the “norm” and to shift the burden of diversity work to these bodies as an implicit demand that they figure out how to “fit”? If that is the case, then to liberate ourselves from this “technology of diversity”<sup>18</sup> requires us to rethink what diversity is and does. Currently, the use of diversity within higher education leaves little to no room for true structural change. Instead, diversity serves as a “politics of appeasement”<sup>19</sup> that maintains the institution as it stands. Little long-term change is actually enacted, and complex structural inequalities and identities are flattened into single identity issues. This in itself creates reactionary maneuvers instead of proactive strategies.

For us, Combahee and other black feminist thinkers have taught us that structural change is more than bringing black, brown, and native bodies to the table. It is more than saying those bodies can be included at the table (provided they sit up straight and behave). At its core, Combahee, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and many others have shown us that we need to reimagine that table and remake it in a way that centers those who sit at the margins, take care of their needs, and see their lived experiences and ways of knowing and being as the lens in which we can reimagine humanity. Inspired by the words of Anna Julia Cooper, we ask what it would mean for marginalized bodies to enter spaces with “quiet, undisputed dignity” and “without violence [...], suing, or special patronage.”<sup>20</sup> This recentring divests from the colonial project of whiteness and allows for possibilities of locations of liberation within majority spaces. Instead of the usual suspects always “doing” the work of diversity, Combahee has taught us that we must think outside the dominant structures and ways of knowing and being to gain liberation. In spaces of higher education this translates for us into flipping the ways in which institutional approaches to diversity and inclusion are understood, enacted, and embedded—or what we call anti-diversity work.

### **Anti-Diversity Work, or What Black Feminism Taught Us**

We work at a small residential undergraduate liberal arts school in the Midwest with approximately 1,400 students.<sup>21</sup> Our students are majority white (61%) and women (54%)<sup>22</sup> while the demographics of our full-time faculty are 80% white and 58% women.<sup>23</sup> Issues of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are not new for the college. Since 1969, black and other marginalized students have presented the administration with official lists of demands at least five times. These demands have remained relatively consistent: students want more racial/ethnic diversity amongst students, staff, and faculty; they want the curriculum to reflect different



intellectual traditions outside of the Euro-American canon, and they want dedicated locations on campus where marginalized students are granted autonomy to build spaces that meet their needs for safety, community, and fellowship.

Past demands have met moderate, but ultimately insufficient, success. There have been small increases in the number of staff, faculty, and domestic students of color. A new initiative was created, Sustained Dialogue, which organizes students, faculty, and staff into discussion groups that explore social identities and power; a few faculty-led reading groups have served a similar purpose. Yet, the culture and operations of the college remain centered on white and upper-middle-class norms. Despite slight numerical improvements, retention is a persistent problem, and institutional experience metrics indicate that students of color feel less of a sense of belonging than their white counterparts. It has been difficult to garner institutional support for measures that go beyond “dialogue.”

Then 2014 came, with news stories increasingly filled with state sanctioned violence against black people, followed by the non-indictments of police officers for those murders. The institutional and campus community silence became overwhelming leading the first author and a few other black faculty and staff to come together and start Black Lives Matter Beloit as a way to move the conversation forward around racism and oppression on and off campus—preferably, to move past conversation and toward more concrete collective action. Our efforts resulted in a speakers series that brought the town and community together on various occasions to have the hard conversations and start to come up with strategies to tackle racism and other forms of oppression. Response to these efforts was mixed as most students (particularly students of color) welcomed our efforts, but there were those who found our organizing to be a form of trouble-making. Throughout late February and early March of 2015, we awoke numerous times to email notifications regarding hate crimes on campus that ranged from nooses being drawn on flyers with our pictures on them to someone spray painting in large letters “Nigger Die” on a wall on the residential side of campus. By May of this same year students had organized to create a list of demands—again—and presented this list at the final meeting of faculty senate—again—asking for representation, acknowledgment, and autonomous space for non-majority students in this predominantly white location.

It was the most recent iteration of students demands, alongside campus organizing for the Black Lives Matter Movement and in response to the ensuing hate crimes, that led to the creation and submission of a Mellon grant focused on creating inclusive classrooms. Events from 2015 were fresh and the administration finally realized they needed to do more than just react to incidents after the fact. By June of that year members of the President’s cabinet developed an anti-racist statement, which is now included in every job ad as a way to indicate the college’s commitment to equity and inclusion.<sup>24</sup> Yet it will take more than a statement in job ads to see the college’s “aspiration to be an actively anti-racist institution” actualize itself within the campus. Instead, doing the work of equity and justice entails examining the structures in place that are prohibiting non-majority students, faculty, and staff from being legible in these primarily white spaces. When it came time to submit a new



Mellon grant on creating inclusive classrooms, we took that opportunity to use the guilt of the institution to radically re-think the work of diversity and inclusion and reorient it toward a focus on equity and justice, using pedagogy as the location to start this structural (rather than individual) work. This is where our DPP was born.

Drawing on central texts of black feminism, including the CRC's "A Black Feminist Statement," our work with DPP is guided by three principles: (1) centering the bodies, voices, and experiences of those who sit at the margins within higher education; (2) using an intersectional lens to enact our work; and (3) building coalitions across divergent identities and interests.<sup>25</sup> The DPP insists that marginalized bodies, voices, and experiences should be centered in defining the norms and day-to-day life of institutions, if those institutions are invested in social change. Social justice and redistribution of power are our primary goals; we seek to bring historically underrepresented and marginalized voices to the table knowing full well (indeed, hoping and expecting) that they will redefine what the table looks like, or even flip it over and build something new. This approach is in stark contrast to the previously described mode of valuing diversity, either explicitly or implicitly, based on the extent to which it centers and enhances whiteness (i.e., the extent to which it remains "marketable" within exploitative relations of capitalism).<sup>26</sup> Instead, we assert that the goal of our work should be to *decenter* whiteness. Rather than accepting whiteness as an unmarked norm into which others might be included or assimilated, we ask how our institution is complicit in the reproduction of whiteness and how that process might be interrupted. In our work with students this entails shifting away from a deficit-oriented approach (e.g., "what does this student lack and how can they be remediated?"<sup>27</sup>) and moving instead toward an equity and asset based approach.<sup>28</sup> By that we mean that we value and recognize the lived experience, skills, and mindsets students bring with them to college and help students learn how to recognize and use their assets to reach their potential. According to Truesdell, "An equity asset-based approach recognizes that students' lived experiences matter and bring value to our work as educators in higher education. Their experiences, skills, and knowledge can be put to use in creating equitable engagement within the classroom and across campus."<sup>29</sup>

While our anti-diversity work might be read by some as a sort of race-to-the-bottom orientation to doing equity work (where the most oppressed groups are revered or considered to have all the answers simply by way of possessing a certain identity or experience), we have been careful to redirect conversations over and over toward the *structural analysis* foregrounded by black feminist intellectual traditions. While these traditions place due importance on identity, they are not focused solely on identity. Instead, black feminist thought has brought to the forefront the urgency in examining interlocking systems of oppression as a way to move beyond an overly narrow focus on identity, such as tokenization and oppression olympics. We have pointed out, for example, that whiteness is an *institutional orientation*—not just an identity label held by white people. Whiteness describes, among other things, an investment in the myths of individuality and meritocracy, ideologies that non-white

people can be invested in as well. In the same vein, whiteness as an *institutional orientation* is something that white people can train themselves to recognize and resist—personally, intellectually, programmatically, and, yes, institutionally—at the college. In other words, anti-diversity work goes much deeper than just building up the institution’s “numbers” of minority students, staff, and faculty, and then hoping that the problem(s) go away once there has been “enough” inclusion (as defined solely by a demographic body count). Anti-diversity asks for proportional representation, but more importantly it demands a radical paradigm shift such that anyone and everyone at the wheels of power takes responsibility for steering the institution toward justice. This is about challenging people from dominant groups to unlearn their investments in the *status quo*, but it is also about challenging non-majority people to resist the demands of reproducing respectability and assimilation as their only signs of “success.”

As such, decentering whiteness demands that the faculty, staff, and administrators we work with question almost every aspect of “business as usual” in their respective fields, disciplines, and domains of campus life. Helping faculty and administrators become conscious of the ways whiteness is an orienting lens in their work, and how that is detrimental to achieving any long lasting structural or institutional change (if that is the end goal that is actually wanted) involves lifting the veil<sup>30</sup> to encourage consciousness raising in the most fundamental Combahee way. We structured the DPP to give faculty and administrators the space and time to interrogate their work, using a developmental model that integrates theory, reflection, and practice (praxis). In practice this takes the form of an introductory reading series that walks participants through foundational texts of black feminist thought as well as contemporary essays reflecting new directions and issues. Everyone engages in critical self-reflection about their own positionality; they are held accountable, and are asked to hold each other accountable, to take concrete actions against systemic racism and interlocking forms of oppression. We are direct about our approach when we recruit faculty and staff and participants, who voluntarily sign up each semester and are compensated for their time upon completion of the series. Once the foundation is set participants then have the option to apply what they learn in their classrooms or offices, departments, and divisions either through structured peer coaching teams or by involving students in research and action teams that engage problems related to anti-racism and equity.<sup>31</sup>

Many of our meetings, particularly during the initial foundation reading series, involve facilitators asking participants difficult questions, repeatedly and pointedly, that require deep engagement and critical self-reflection. Whose voices are reflected in your curriculum? By what unspoken social and cultural norms do you judge and grade students? How do the systems and bureaucracies you manage (from financial aid to residential life) reinforce marginalization? How are you personally invested or implicated in the reproduction of whiteness and white supremacy? How has your professional and disciplinary training influenced you to normalize and invest in whiteness? What are the barriers and obstacles to change, whether personal or systemic or both? How might you—particularly those who occupy majority or

dominant identities—take on the work of actively acknowledging and disrupting patterns of institutional racism and interlocking oppressions? Some participants have been disappointed to find that our sessions are not the typical model of a diversity workshop, where facilitators go through a powerpoint to deliver assorted “tips and tricks” on “how to be an ally” or “how to work with X type of student.” In fact, we reject the very notion of allyhood and instead ask participants to become our *accomplices*<sup>32</sup> as we work for substantive institutional change. In this sense, when we say that marginalized voices should be centered and whiteness should be decentered, what we are asking is that participants fundamentally challenge their socialization and training as scholars, teachers, and professionals— perhaps even as human beings.<sup>33</sup> We demand (and, when successful, actually foster) a shift in consciousness, such that black and brown bodies—and poor bodies, women’s bodies, queer bodies, trans bodies—become central to the process of learning and knowledge production, rather than merely being “accommodated” by a system that was never intended to serve them. Essentially, we are asking participants to fully enact de-marginalization as a way to focus on structures of power that produce inequity within society.<sup>34</sup>

Building on the principle of centering marginalized bodies and voices, black feminist thinkers have taught us the critical importance of intersectionality. Intersectionality goes beyond simply listing, as add-ons, the various components of one’s identity. Rather, the concept refers to the simultaneity of multiple forms of interlocking oppression. Intersectionality is why the most marginalized must be centered, because it is only in addressing the simultaneity of oppression that we might hope to succeed in liberation for all. Even when we talk specifically about race—asserting the need to decenter whiteness, for example—this reflects our understanding that “race” is always-already also about sex, gender, nation, capitalism, and so on. In the words of the authors of Combahee, “[i]f Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”<sup>35</sup> This sentiment is echoed by the political and intellectual descendants of black feminist thinkers today; as Alicia Garza, a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter Network puts it, “Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum ... *When Black people get free, everybody gets free.*”<sup>36</sup>

Intersectionality takes on additional importance as a component of our “anti-diversity” philosophy, as it is not nearly so safe a word as “diversity” or “inclusion.” Indeed, another damaging function of “diversity” efforts in higher education is that they have tended to silo off different forms of marginalization, leading to the flattening of diverse identities. Part of the shift in consciousness we hope to spark with our colleagues is that they begin to see how multiple forms of oppression become layered onto each other—that intersectionality is not addressed by just adding another identity category to the list of “others” whose inclusion is permitted. To decenter whiteness *is* to decenter homophobia, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism. Furthermore, whiteness must be decentered not just in the institution at large, but also in specific locations within it. White lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

(LGBTQ) people must learn how to decenter whiteness in their academic departments and political and social organizations. White women must learn how to decenter whiteness in their gender studies departments and feminist collectives. It has been thirty years and we are ready to move past the mode of “doing diversity” in which “all the women are white, all the blacks are men,” and “the rest of us are brave.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, in the foundation reading series we call attention to the ways that white women and LGBTQ people have been complicit in racism. This message is not always welcome; predictably we are sometimes told we focus “too much” on race and “not enough” on gender and sexuality, despite the fact that our office is responsible for bringing more women and queer people of color to campus (as guest speakers and scholars not to mention staff and employees) than the rest of the institution combined. This goes back then to our anti-diversity philosophy of demanding accomplices, not allies. Our message to white women and white LGBTQ people who participate in this project is that “when we buy into whiteness, we entertain the delusion that we’re business partners with power, not its minions.”<sup>38</sup>

A final principle of black feminist thought that is vital to our anti-diversity project is coalition building. None of what has occurred would be possible without coalition. Our office functions as a coalition, as does our facilitation team. We represent a mixture of staff and faculty in different departments, on and off the tenure track. We are a multi-racial, multi-gender, and cross-class coalition. Our work together is often challenging—we disagree with and critique one another on issues of substance, style, and strategy. And this is just what happens among our four-person facilitation team! With each new cohort of participants in the Decolonizing Pedagogies Project, the list of differences among those of us engaging in this work grows longer. This mode of doing coalition is indebted to the work of Bernice Johnson Reagon, who once described successful coalitions as places where, “I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die ... if you’re really doing coalition work, most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing.”<sup>39</sup> As Audre Lorde tells us, instead of seeking unity by denying our difference we have had to learn how to use our differences as a well of creative potential, to resist the narratives that would define difference as threatening.<sup>40</sup>

## Challenges

Like all faculty and administrators, we experience mundane challenges to achieving our pedagogical and programmatic goals. The most profound challenge we face, however, is the stubborn unwillingness of white colleagues to “see” the evidence of oppression and marginalization, its ubiquity and its deleterious effects on particular bodies, regardless of how many numbers, statistics, stories, and first-hand examples we present. In the words of Sara Ahmed,

[n]o matter how much evidence you have of racism and sexism, no matter how many documents, communications, encounters, no matter how much research you can refer to, or words you can defer to, words that might carry a history as

an insult, what you have is deemed as insufficient. The more you have to show the more eyes seem to roll. My proposition is simple: that the evidence we have of racism and sexism is deemed insufficient because of racism and sexism.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the supremacist ideologies that enable material inequality, microaggressions, and outright violence against marginalized people also allow those in positions of power to simply deny that marginalized people experience the reality they experience—to deny that we are even capable of assessing and describing our own experience. James Baldwin has described this will-to-power as a form of psychological denial and moral cowardice that is particular to whiteness, based on the “necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history.”<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, the more skilled we become at gathering and presenting evidence of how marginalization operates and its effect on students, the more likely we are to trigger the very mechanisms of oppression we are trying to call attention to in the first place. We strive to push folks past denial; consequently we have seen our fair share of “white fragility” and “white rage.” The concept of fragility, a term coined by Robin DiAngelo, refers to deflective responses white people often mount in response to the stress created by explicit discussions of race, privilege, and identity.<sup>43</sup> Common deflective responses include defensiveness, anger, excessive guilt or shame, over-personalizing, and refusal to bear witness (i.e., denying or minimizing people of color’s experiences). White rage, coined by Carol Anderson, is related to fragility, but describes those more dangerous moments when the wounded white ego asserts itself with some mixture of anger, hostility, projection, defensiveness, paranoia, and episodic violence.<sup>44</sup>

In doing this work at a PHWI, we have observed specific versions of white fragility that emerge from academic norms and culture, both in the day-to-day operations of educational institutions and also in how the whole project of “knowledge production” is conceptualized. By temperament and training, academics tend to engage issues on an intellectual level—pulling apart theories, poking holes in evidence, pointing out the limits of a particular study, and so on. To intellectualize is not necessarily a bad thing; as academics ourselves, we share a commitment to rigorous intellectual analysis. In the context of development on issues of equity, however, faculty, staff, and administrators use intellectualization to distance themselves from the difficult work of anti-racism. For example, participants might express that they cannot “get on board” with anti-racist work because they do not agree with a particular framework used in an assigned reading. Or they notice contradictions from one reading to another, and conclude there are “no real answers” when it comes to enacting anti-racist change. Intellectualization poses a challenge to facilitators, as it’s not always easy to discern when a participant is genuinely engaging with the material versus when they are falling back on a defense mechanism to deflect feelings of anxiety or hostility.

As intellectuals who value knowledge for its power and liberatory potential, we find it valuable to reframe overly academic questions so that they center on action.

Action-oriented questions help the participant make sense of contradictions and disagreements, rather than be stymied by them. How does the participant's question or objection relate to a concrete issue of praxis? Does the question need to be resolved in order for the participant to take action? Could action (paired with reflection) become a method of knowledge production? If the participant's criticism of the material is motivated by a desire to make use of the knowledge being presented, they will be more than willing to think-through-together how various theories or analyses play out on the ground and the messy ways that individual lived experience does not always follow social justice ideals. If there are multiple possible courses of action, the participant can discern which best suits their circumstances and strengths. If participants are coming from a place of genuine commitment to anti-racist action, facilitators can use action-centered questions to channel intellectualization in a generative direction. In contrast, if a participant's questions are driven by intellectualization as defense mechanism, follow-up questions centered on action will be greeted with new forms of deflection. When this occurs, it is important for facilitators to name what is happening. When intellectualization is used as a defense mechanism, it becomes pseudo-intellectualism, a rigid and superficial engagement with knowledge under the guise of academic rigor.

We have also noticed ways in which white fragility and white rage are gendered and sexualized. The white fragility and rage displayed by white women and white LGBTQ faculty, staff, and administrators demand unique strategies for response. When the CRC Statement was first published forty years ago, the authors expressed that "as black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately this dynamic continues to pose a challenge to feminist movements today, and our project is no different. While the DPP relies on an intersectional lens, a notable aspect of toxic white femininity features the appropriation and misuse of intersectional framing. In its original context, intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and put to use by other black feminist thinkers to capture the specific experience of black women who face multiple systems of oppression simultaneously. Preceding Crenshaw's phrasing, black feminists such as those in the CRC utilized similar terms, such as "interlocking oppression" and noted the difficulty of separating "race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."<sup>46</sup> In other words, intersectionality was intended to describe experiences of being "black *and*." But we notice that white women often distort this and use the term instead to mean "white, *but*." Rather than using gender to explore their specific investment in whiteness (i.e., how their investment in whiteness might be gendered, or how white women have historically been complicit in white supremacy), white women too often use gender to deflect and minimize the ways in which they benefit from and participate in racism. When challenged about this, some white women further weaponize racialized gender norms by taking on a victim role—crying, complaining, and accusing women of color of bullying and intimidation.<sup>47</sup>

Finally we have observed a kind of willful ignorance and learned helplessness. Some colleagues express that they still do not know how to respond to bias, micro-aggressions, and problematic policies, even after months of discussion and training. They seem to have epiphanies during workshops, trainings, and discussions, but then circle back to the same pattern of deflection and inaction, or to the repetitive commissioning of taskforces and focus groups. When this occurs we refer back to our colleagues' engagement with the reading series, peer coaching, curriculum workshop, and any other engagements they may have had with our development program. We highlight that the purpose of these engagements is not to check off a box—"I'm trained now!"—but instead to prepare participants to take further action on their own. We might ask of a colleague, "*Now that you have engaged, what will you do?*" We have learned that constant pressure must be applied, with participants being reminded on a regular basis that they are responsible for recognizing inequity and responding to it, rather than waiting for someone to complain and then turning to "the diversity office" to tell them what to do. Unlearning and challenging whiteness, ultimately, is a lifelong process. Our DPP puts into place the necessary supports for this work—a community of engaged peers with a shared commitment—but for long-term change to occur, participants will ultimately need to take ownership without being told exactly what to do.

### **Future Imaginings**

Despite the challenges that we have experienced to this point, the ongoing collaborative rituals we have built into our own process have given us the confidence to believe in our analysis of the institution, our method of demanding that others do the work of deep reflection on the hard questions, and our expectation of accountability on the part of faculty and staff who claim to want meaningful structural change. More than a year into the three years of our project, we are just beginning the work of moving beyond a vague sense of an idealized future to a clear vision of what our efforts to decolonize our institution could look, sound, and feel like. What we are attempting to create, in the words of artist Kerry James Marshall, is "a certain kind of indispensable presence, where your position in the narrative is not contingent on whether somebody likes you ... or somebody is being generous to you. But you want a presence in the narrative that's not negotiable, that's undeniable."<sup>48</sup>

This vision of non-negotiable presence means that the institution is moving from the assumption that black feminism is "unexpected" to the assumption that regardless of who is present, it is always-already in the room. As such, the centering of black feminism—and thereby decentering whiteness—also means that the burden of "diversity work" shifts more and more to normative bodies with an implicit demand that it is their responsibility to account for and address the ways that the business-as-usual structures and practices of the institution perpetuate institutional racism. It means that we have instituted a collaborative process that spreads beyond ourselves and focuses on creating an environment where black women and other



marginalized peoples do not feel like they have to “fight the world” just to survive. This speaks to a movement from institutional isolation to a collaborative politics that understands that structural change is ongoing, ever-changing, and relational across all kinds of differences. That is, the change that we seek requires constant coalition building across various identities and locations of privilege and oppression, including our own.

And while we have begun to see black feminism in some unexpected places,<sup>49</sup> we understand that the outcomes of our decolonizing work must be much more expansive to realize any true freedom-making within institutions of higher education. What we want is an institution where the psychic lives and physical well-being of black and brown bodies, disabled bodies, indigenous bodies, and queer and trans bodies are regarded by administration, faculty, staff, and students are fully seen and understood as inherently valuable, just the way they are. There would be no need to have to quiet our voices or fold in our bodies to assimilate. We do not kid ourselves into believing we can create a full decolonized institution—we still sit on stolen land that was built on the backs of stolen people. But what we can do is shape a community that not only expects—but *would find indispensable*—the presence of black feminism. What we would then have created is an institutional understanding that the freedom of all is inextricably linked to securing the freedom of black women.

### Acknowledgment

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### Notes

1. Yareliz Elena Mendez-Zamora, “Surviving Institutions that Weren’t Created for You,” *The Huffington Post*, August 1, 2016.
2. Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 212.
3. Ibid.
4. We applied for and received an external grant from the Mellon Foundation that gave us the freedom and autonomy to pursue this project.
5. Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).
6. Patricia Hill-Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (Summer, 1989): 746.
7. Ibid.
8. Jeremy Ashkenas et al., “Even With Affirmative Action, Blacks and Hispanics are More Underrepresented at Top Colleges Than They Were 35 Years Ago,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2017.
9. Sara Ahmed, “Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 44.
10. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

11. Charles Teddlie and John Freeman, “Twentieth-Century Desegregation in U.S. Higher Education: A Review of Five Distinct Historical Eras,” in *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education*, edited by William A. Smith, Philip G. Altbach, and Kofi Lomotey (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 77–101.
12. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, “The Neo-Liberal University,” *New Labor Forum* 6 (Spring–Summer, 2000), 73–79. Slaughter and Rhoades define neoliberal universities as institutions that “assign markets central social value,” 73.
13. Michelle Cooper, “The Economic Imperative of Achieving Diversity,” *Forbes*, April 27, 2010, offers an example of this approach to treating diversity primarily as a marketable asset by which “current students” can become the kind of “future workers” desired by global manufacturing and technology companies.
14. See, for example, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). In this landmark affirmative action case involving the University of Michigan law school, the majority ruling in favor of affirmative action invoked business interests as a primary consideration, explaining that, “Major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints,” 308.
15. Henry Giroux, “Public Intellectuals Against the Neoliberal University,” *Truthout*, October 29, 2013.
16. These posters included one titled “race is real” and promoting debunked “scholarship” by racist and eugenicist “scientists”; another decried “anti-white propaganda at college” and directed viewers to an Alt-Right website that explicitly promotes antisemitism, racial violence, and fascism; a third poster admonished viewers to “Love Who You Are: Be White.” Our institution was one of dozens of campuses targeted in what appears to have been an organized campaign by white nationalist networks. Alex Arriaga, “White Supremacists Target College Campuses with Unprecedented Effort,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 6, 2017.
17. S. V. Iverson, “Camouflaging Power and Privilege: A Critical Race Analysis of University Diversity Policies,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 43, no. 5 (2007): 586–611.
18. Ahmed, *On Being Included*.
19. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, “Language of Appeasement,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 30, 2017.
20. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Printing House, 1892).
21. This number includes both degree- and non-degree-seeking students.
22. This is as of the 2016–17 school year as provided through our Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning.
23. This is for the 2015–16 school year.
24. The statement reads: “Because equity and inclusion are central to our students’ liberal education and vital to the thriving of all members of our residential learning community, Beloit College aspires to be an actively anti-racist institution. We recognize our aspiration as ongoing and institution-wide, involving collective commitment and accountability. We welcome employees who are committed to and will actively contribute to our efforts to celebrate our cultural and intellectual richness and be resolute in advancing inclusion and equity. We encourage all interested individuals meeting the criteria of the described position to apply.”
25. We have also found the following texts especially influential, and we often assign excerpts in our foundation reading series: Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984); Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gutierrez y Muhs, *Presumed Incompetent* (Salt Lake City: Utah State University Press, 2012).
26. Iverson. “Camouflaging Power and Privilege.”
27. Estela Mara Bensimon, Alicia C. Dowd, and Keith Witham, “Five Principles for Enacting Equity by Design,” *Diversity and Democracy* 19, no. 1 (2016).

28. Aтира Coleman, Paul Dionne, Marijuana Sawyer, and Nicole Truesdell. "An Equity Asset Based Approach to Student Learning and Faculty Development" (paper presented at American Association of Colleges and Universities Conference on Diversity, Learning, and Student Success, Jacksonville, FL, March 17–19, 2017).
29. Nicole Truesdell. "Black Lives, Black Women, and the Academy: 'Doing' Equity and Inclusion Work at PWIs," in *Difficult Subjects.*, edited by Badia Ahad and OiYan Apoon (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing), forthcoming.
30. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. 100th Anniversary Edition (New York: Signet Press, 1995).
31. As of Summer 2017 we have had 43 faculty, staff who teach, and administrators go through our pedagogies series. The entire President's cabinet, including the President, went through our series as well.
32. Indigenous Media Action, "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex," May 4, 2014.
33. To this point, we sometimes begin by interrogating Enlightenment foundations of all disciplinary assumptions about who is human and whose knowledge matters using Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 2002).
34. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2015.
35. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 214.
36. Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement," #BlackLivesMatter (website), n.d., emphasis in the original.
37. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).
38. Eula Biss, "White Debt," *The New York Times Magazine* December 6, 2015.
39. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 356.
40. Audre Lorde, "Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–23.
41. Sara Ahmed, "Evidence," *Feminist Killjoys* July 12, 2016.
42. James Baldwin, "On Being White ... and Other Lies," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White*, edited by David Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 179.
43. Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.
44. Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
45. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," "218.
46. *Ibid.*, 213.
47. Mamta Motwani Accapadi, "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," *The College Student Affairs Journal*. 26, no. 2 (2007): 208–15.
48. National Public Radio, "Kerry James Marshall: A Black Presence in the Art World is 'Not Negotiable,'" *NPR Morning Edition* March 28, 2017.
49. For example, in the physics and biology departments and in our career services office, some white women have moved beyond superficial understandings of racism and investments in their own innocence to actions in their classrooms and offices that make their disciplines' investments in and reproduction of whiteness part of the conversations they have with students and colleagues. Their attempts to interrogate their own positionality in their respective locations indicates to us that the work of DPP can take root and hopefully keep spreading.

### **About the Authors**

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