

“Affirming Our Values”: African American Scholars, White Virtual Mobs, and the Complicity of White University Administrators

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Abstract

Numerous high-profile cases have brought to light the tenuous position of African American professors, many of whom study race or include race as a significant category in their scholarly work. The cases in question almost inevitably involve critiques of whiteness or white supremacy. The responses to these scholars have been aggressive and violent. Mass-media and social media discussions focus on threats to academic freedom or call into question the merits of the controversy, ignoring very important contexts within which these matters must be understood. We address the oversight through an engagement of the subject using an interpretation of the structural relationship of predominately white institutions (PWIs) and their administrators to whiteness using two methods: Afro-pessimistic description and a philosophical interpretation. We argue that white administrators at PWIs support and encourage white mob behavior through their responses to African American scholars and that they constitute an essential structure of whiteness. The article suggests corrective and constructive measures to address these problems.

As you may know, a podcast interview by one of our professors [Tommy Curry] that took place approximately four and a half years ago resurfaced this week on social media, seen for the first time by many of us. The interview features disturbing comments about race and violence that stand in stark contrast to Aggie core values—most notably those of respect, excellence, leadership and integrity—values that we hold true toward all of humanity.

—Michael K. Young, president, Texas A&M, “Standing for Our Core Values,” May 10, 2017

At the same time, we fully appreciate why many have reacted strongly to her [Saida Grundy’s] statements. Boston University does not condone racism or bigotry in any form, and we are committed to maintaining an educational environment that is free from bias, fully inclusive, and open to wide-ranging discussions. We are disappointed and concerned about statements that reduce individuals to stereotypes on the basis of a broad category such as sex, race, or ethnicity. I believe that Dr. Grundy’s remarks fit this characterization.

—Robert A. Brown, president, Boston University, “Letter from President Brown,” May 15, 2015

White Administrators, White Universities, and the Black Scholar: An Introduction to a Crisis in Academic Leadership

In recent years, numerous high-profile cases have brought to light the tenuous position of African American professors, many of whom study race or include race as a significant category in their scholarly work. This work includes research, teaching, and service in areas of expertise that they are charged to perform as professional scholars at American universities and colleges. Some of this work has been represented, in part or in its entirety, on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Black 2017). Their scholarship also appears in more traditional forms such as in published books and journals and as part of lectures and discussions in classroom settings. The cases in question, which include attacks on scholars such as Saida Grundy, Tommy Curry, Zandria Robinson, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and others, almost inevitably involve critiques of whiteness or white supremacy and explicate the dangerous and violent ways that they articulate themselves in the world. The responses to these scholars has been aggressive and violent—threatening bodily harm, death, or livelihood, as what may be most accurately characterized as *white virtual mobs* (what Grundy [2017, 1864] calls “digitized mob violence”)—often calling, quite literally, for the blood of the scholar and for his or her dismissal by white administrators. *White virtual mobs* is the term we use to refer to *a collection of individuals who are often external to the colleges and universities in question and members of the dominant racial group in America who use various social media platforms not only to inflame the controversies but also to threaten, harass, terrorize, and otherwise bully targeted faculty, especially faculty of color.* Truth be told, white virtual mobs could not exist and be effective without the support, tacit or explicit, of white elites such as college and university administrators.

While a number of publications highlight the backlash facing African American scholars identified in this article, these responses are often limited in important ways. Most articles tend to focus on threats to academic freedom without discussing variations in the exercise of it for professors with membership in different racial and gender groups, or the publications call into question the merits of the specific controversy. Consequently, most treatments of the threats facing African American scholars who use their occupation and platform for cultural critique miss important contexts within which these matters must be understood. We address this gap in the popular press and in trade publications aimed at individuals in higher education by engaging the subject through an interpretation of the structural relationship of PWIs and their administrators to whiteness using a *modified Afro-pessimistic* description of the structures of white supremacy and antiblackness and how they shape discourses, including the ostensible values of PWIs. Upon providing this description, we then provide a philosophical reading of the matter to disclose the invisible and vampiric nature of white supremacist antiblackness as it emerges in PWIs. We call this version “modified” because, although we agree with Afro-pessimists in their diagnostic approach to the world, we nevertheless maintain that, as Saidiya Hartman (1997, 14) argued, there remains the possibility of “[gesturing] toward an unrealized freedom” that continues to avail itself to us as a modality of resistance and therefore (temporary) transformation. Utilizing these methods of engagement, this article (1) describes the problem, (2) provides an analysis and documentation of various responses by white administrators to African American scholars through a brief historical analysis of recent occurrences of African American scholars, who have faced violent retribution for their in-class and public work, (3) offers an interpretation of how administrators at PWIs support and encourage white virtual mob behavior through their punitive or relatively neutral responses to African American scholars, which obfuscates the truthfulness of the scholarship while at the same time marginalizing the scholar, and (4) offers corrective and constructive suggestions for how administrators might better engage these issues and support African American scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

This article argues that white college administrators at PWIs constitute important structural support in the violent functioning of white virtual mobs that threaten bodily harm and the livelihood of African American scholars, who work at those institutions and whose work entails studies of race and critiques of white supremacy. Likewise, instead of rebuking the virtual mobs that enact violent threats and intimidation directed at African American professors, these officials denigrate the scholars who rightly critique whiteness publicly, and often in the classroom. In doing so, administrators become complicit in the structures of whiteness and enable violence against professors, since their public statements often affirm the “values” of academic communities that cast these scholars’ work as the problem. Such a dynamic intensifies the danger for the black scholar’s academic freedom, since both internal and external narratives demand that black

scholars navigate the possible dangers of white backlash. As such, the question of academic freedom and integrity—that is, the question of whether or not one should fully and rigorously interrogate and criticize white supremacy within and beyond the classroom—becomes a critical consideration that black scholars have to make in the course of their regular research.

Along with the white virtual mobs, the white academy functions, by way of administrators and their discourses of presumed academic values, as institutions that police, surveil, and discipline speech and texts that *public forces* render worthy of violent response. Which is to say, these are not reinstatements or reestablishments of white hegemony over African American scholars but rather the normative functioning of whiteness in the academy. This calls into question the nature of academic values at PWIs that are salient and *operate* over and against official policy statements. It is also important to note that the claims that scholars make, which have elicited public vitriol against them, tend to be factual truth claims about the world in which they live and research. By publicly disciplining the scholar, and again, by not forthrightly addressing the violent threats against their employees, administrators contribute to the misreading or intentional misrepresentations that make scholarly work on race and whiteness a dangerous proposition in the current age. This is dangerous to both individual scholars and also to the academy because, without the research and voices of black scholars, conversations about race would be much more sanitized and misinformed than they already are, adding further fuel to the racial tensions smoldering across the country—from Charlottesville to St. Louis and beyond.

The subtext that operates in the discourses and administrative practices is something that many of us already know or strongly suspect: black academic freedom is always already fragile and fleeting. Black professors at PWIs are rendered invisible by the systemic neglect they often experience from within their institutions. At the same time, black professors are hypervisible because they tend to make up a very small percentage of the full-time tenured faculty. Among the consequences of the hypervisibility of faculty with black and brown skin are a heightened sense of scrutiny and the constant gaze from many white colleagues and students that they must endure almost daily.

The responses of these administrators have been almost universally uniform: They swiftly condemn the scholar by affirming the “values” of American universities, which apparently demand an affirmation of racial and ethnic “inclusivity.” Affirming these “values” is a critical move because it produces a false equivalency; it wrongly equates critiques of whiteness with racism against white people.

A week after the statement quoted in our first epigraph, President Michael K. Young released another statement, “Affirming Our Values” (May 17, 2017), in which he acknowledged that he may have contributed to misinformation about Curry, “For those of you who considered my comments disparaging to certain types

of scholarly work or in any way impinging upon the centrality of academic freedom at this university, I regret any contributions that I may have made to misunderstandings in this case, including to those whose work is contextualized by understanding the historical perspectives of events that have often been ignored.” But the damage had already been done. His response fanned the flames of vitriol that were hostile to Curry. And this is just one example: too often, administrators become essential participants in the white virtual mobs by providing—intentionally or otherwise—structural support and legitimacy, which continues to jeopardize the safety of black academics and deny the possibility of black academic freedom.

Curiously, these matters reveal many commonalities; often, administrators affirm professed core “values” in their rebuke of African American scholars, which infantilizes them by scolding them in public. Likewise, it renders (or reveals) *blackness* and the presence of black bodies as perennial problems on American campuses, a process we outline later in this article.

Together, these factors paint a bleak picture that calls into question the nature of supposed institutional values—diversity, inclusivity, and free scholarly expression of ideas—particularly at PWIs, in which schools are largely dependent on the public support of principally white donor communities and political entities. At the same time, they reveal the marginal and precarious situation of the African American scholar in the humanities and social sciences at PWIs; the precariousness of the situation is due to cultural politics that schools rarely lend support and resources—a reality of which African American scholars are acutely aware but which remain publicly unspoken and apparently invisible to administrators (Smith 2004).

Certainly, colleges and university are viewed as laboratories for generating new ideas and technologies. They are considered sites where knowledge is created, disseminated, and transferred; at its best, the knowledge produced at a university serves to change lives, industries, towns, cities, states, nations, and global communities for the better because of this knowledge. However, in higher education, as in many other areas of society (they are not always as separate and distinct as the metaphor “ivory tower” implies), there is a gap between stated missions, values, and what actually occurs. The gap has seemingly grown wider in recent decades, whereby administrators are more consumed with competing for diminishing resources from state coffers and a limited number of private donations. As more and more institutions of higher education adopt what Lori L. Martin (2015) calls the Wal-Martization of education, they not only miss the mark of fulfilling their primary function, but they also leave many of their students, staff, and faculty at risk for internal and external attacks. The attacks may originate from a host of sources ranging from state legislators who use funding as leverage against institutions of higher education to the white virtual mobs mentioned previously. Professors of color, especially black women professors, are particularly vulnerable to “assaults,” even in the course of simply doing their jobs.

On college and university campuses, black professors are among the groups most at risk for unequal treatment, including restrictions placed upon their academic freedom and First Amendment rights. The threats originate from any number of sources and may come from some white male students in their classrooms, acutely at PWIs, and/or from groups outside of the classroom. These external threats against the academic freedom and First Amendment rights of African American professors often come from white men firmly seated at the extreme right end of the political spectrum. The weapons of the alt-right—“a racist, far-right movement based on an ideology of white nationalism and anti-Semitism”—often include the use of social media and social and political capital to force college and university administrators, at the very least, to rebuff black professors publicly or some other disciplinary actions, including termination of employment (Stack 2017).

Black professors—many of whom are black women—who find themselves in these crises and controversies almost never receive the kind of support or benefit of a doubt their white colleagues might receive. While black professors are underrepresented at PWIs across the country, black women are especially underrepresented, and stereotypes about black people, and black women in particular, continue to call into question whether or not they deserve the dignity and respect afforded their white—especially white male—colleagues. The very people who hired the black professors and regularly parade their black and brown bodies at recruitment fairs and in electronic and print material to tout their institution’s commitment to diversity, operate in the opponent’s corner. Black scholars facing internal or external assaults often find themselves in a fight for their academic lives, taking on multiple opponents: the angry, anti-intellectual, antiblack virtual mob as well as administrators from the colleges and universities for which they work (Grundy 2017). The virtual mob threatens to become a physical one but tends to function through intimidation by writing public and inaccurate thought pieces, harassing scholars through direct emails and telephone calls, contacting administrators, placing faculty on “watchlists” aimed at alerting alt-right supporters and sympathizers of professors who promote what they view as a threatening liberal agenda, publishing their personal information, including their addresses and information about their families (Horowitz 2006; Schuman 2016). We will address these issues forthrightly.

Black Scholars and Racial Terror: A Recent History and Analysis

Why are black professors so vulnerable to internal and external attacks? What evidence exists to support our claim about the vulnerability of black professors to attacks based upon comments made during the course of their employment? A number of high-profile cases highlight the vulnerability of black professors, especially black professors at PWIs, and point to the fact that far too many colleges and universities are not places

where academic freedom and First Amendment rights are safeguarded for all. They are not places where knowledge is blind; rather, they are places where justice sees color and walls of whiteness provide protection for white privilege in the everyday operation of higher education (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2012).

For much of America’s history, higher education was only available to a select few (Hine, Harrold, and Hine 2011). White males with the financial means were permitted to attend institutions of higher education dating back to the 1600s. People with relatively few means, women, and people of color were prohibited from attending American colleges and universities for a time. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provided black people with opportunities to receive high school educations and college degrees when access to other colleges and universities was very limited or nonexistent (Wiggins and Miller 2003). Likewise, very few black people were permitted to attend American colleges and universities in the 1800s, for example, but some did, especially toward the end of the century. It would take acts of civil disobedience and litigation in the courts at various levels before some colleges and universities reluctantly admitted people of color. Demands for black professors, black studies programs, and other forms of meaningful special, curricular, and intellectual inclusion would follow (Finley et al. 2016).

Despite legislative changes and even the adoption of diversity plans at PWIs across the country, colleges and universities remain politically contested spaces where far too many black students and black professors experience exclusion, invisibility, and alienation in white academic spaces such as PWIs (Ahmed 2007). A large part of the issue is the relationship between colleges and universities and whiteness. Sociologists David Brunsma, Eric Brown, and Peggy Placier (2012) discuss how colleges and universities are structured to protect white students and by extension are not designed to protect nonwhite students or even nonwhite professors. For example, symbolic walls of whiteness protect white students. These walls include spatial, curricular walls and ideological walls. Not only do such walls fail to protect black professors, but efforts by black professors to penetrate the walls of whiteness also place their employment and very lives at risk, in particular where ideological walls are concerned. Ideological walls include white entitlement, notions about justice and injustice, racial colorblindness, an essentialist view of race as fixed and primarily biological, individualism, the belief that everything is a choice and thus structural barriers do not exist, that race is a “black thing,” and white privilege, especially the belief that white college students are where they should be, while the qualifications of nonwhite students are constantly in question. Brunsma, Brown, and Placier (2012) contend that these invisible walls that protect white students from attacks on white supremacy in a number of ways, including through curricular and extracurricular experiences, residential and disciplinary isolation, institutional symbols, cultural reproduction, and everyday practices such as grading and classroom interactions. In recent years, lawmakers and governance boards have been complicit in fortifying walls of

whiteness by making it easier for students, especially white students, to complain if they feel that the professor has a particular bias (ibid.). Indeed, many universities fail to proactively discourage conservative student surveillance groups, such as Turning Point USA (2017), which monitor the “radical” activity of professors.

The extent to which the student population and the demographic profile of the faculty reflect the kind of diversity institutions of higher education claim they want is questionable. One need only look at the numbers of black professors as a whole and by professional rank for evidence of the gap between what colleges and universities say they value about diversity and what they actually commit to doing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 1.6 million faculty members at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2015. More than half were full-time during that same year. Forty-two percent were white men and 35 percent were white women. Only 3 percent of professors were black men and 3 percent were black women. Eighty-four percent of full professors were white (58% white men and 26% white women). Two percent of full professors were black men and only 1 percent were black women (US Department of Education 2017).

Sadly, attacks on black professors, including black women professors, are far more numerous than they ought to be. The case of Saida Grundy is one example. Grundy experienced serious backlash and an unsupportive administrative response based upon Twitter comments she made related to race (Flaherty 2015a). Grundy had just been hired at Boston University and had not yet started her job as an assistant professor of sociology and African American studies when the attacks began. Individuals at the conservative blog SoCawlege.com decided to collect and publish Grundy’s tweets about race. *Inside Higher Ed* included some of the tweets in an article by Colleen Flaherty. In “Boston U Distances Itself from an Incoming Professor’s Controversial Remarks about White Male College Students,” Flaherty (2015a) includes the following tweet from Grundy’s account, “Why is white America [*sic*] so reluctant to identify white college males as a problem population?” Claimed reverse discrimination was the basis for condemning Grundy’s tweet.

Boston University initially stated that Grundy was within her constitutional rights to say what she said and that she used her personal Twitter account. According to Flaherty, the university’s position (lukewarm as it was) changed after increased pressure from alumni. On May 12, 2015, the university issued a statement “that the university does not condone racism or bigotry in any form” (Flaherty 2015a). President Robert Brown acknowledged Grundy’s right to “pursue her research, formulate her views, and challenge the rest of us to think differently about race relations,” but he also stated that “we must recognize that words have power and the words in her Twitter feed were power in the way they stereotyped and condemned other

people” (Flaherty 2015a). Clearly, President Brown was making an effort to compartmentalize Grundy’s work from her tweets on social media while tenuously espousing the virtue of Grundy’s role and responsibility to challenge us (that is, the broader society) to think differently. Brown, like other college and university administrators, claimed to support the free exchange of ideas and to promote, value, and foster community engagement, but clearly this was not the case when the message was embodied as black, and especially as black and a woman. We extend our analysis of Grundy’s case later in the article since it provides some of the best evidence of the tenuous state experienced by black scholars who study race and find themselves the subject of violent virtual mobs and abandoned by otherwise paternalistic employers.

Black professors all too often become unwilling participants in what Scott Jaschik (2015) calls “a culture war going on about the online comments of black women in academe, and specifically in sociology. To conservative critics, the issue at the heart of this are statements that they consider outlandish and racist (specifically, antiwhite). To many sociologists of a variety of races and ethnicities, black women who challenge white male dominance are having their words and ideas taken out of context, are being flooded with hateful email—and are at risk of having their careers disrupted.” The vulnerable position of scholars of color, including black women scholars, is not new and is in many ways normative given the historical and contemporary challenges nonwhites face in the academy.

Many white institutions of higher education are not welcoming and affirming places for black scholars. Their mere affiliation with public institutions and their areas of study place them at risk for confrontation from any number of sources. Tommy Curry faced similar viciousness from conservative bloggers for comments he made several years ago about race (Dreher 2017). Curry is a full professor of philosophy at Texas A&M University. He is also an affiliate professor of African studies at the university. He became the subject of attacks from white virtual mobs in May 2017 after comments he made in a YouTube video of a podcast five years earlier were circulated online. Curry was responding to an interview question and commenting on the film *Django Unchained* (2012). During the interview, Curry made the following comment: “In order to be equal, in order to be liberated, some white people might have to die” (Flaherty 2017b). His comments were taken out of context, said Curry and more than 1,000 signers of a change.org petition in support of him (Flaherty 2017b). The petition went on to say that the American Conservative, the group behind the “man-made” crisis, “ignored that, in this quote, Dr. Curry was paraphrasing what other Black intellectuals have said over the years in response to slavery and lynchings” (Flaherty 2017b). Curry’s life was threatened and his personal information made public.

Despite the danger that Curry and his family faced, the president of Texas A&M University, Michael Young, issued a statement about the matter, choosing not to name Curry explicitly. Young claimed to have

had no knowledge of the podcast or YouTube video in question. He described the comments attributed to Curry as “disturbing” and contrary to the university’s values. He added, “As we know, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects the rights of others to offer their personal views, no matter how reprehensible those views might be” (Quintana 2017). He was trying to say that there is nothing he or anyone else could really do about Curry based on what he said, but that he disagreed with Curry’s critiques and would characterize the comments attributed to him as “reprehensible” (Flaherty 2017b).

The petition signed by Curry’s supporters aptly characterized the president of the university’s response: “President Young’s statement and his willingness to even merit a response of this magnitude makes us question whether he really extends those Aggie Core Values to all Aggies or if he is only willing to raise a robust response when white Aggies feel their feelings and privilege threatened” (“Statement of Support for Tommy Curry” 2017). Curry’s supporters further noted that the controversy (and the university’s response to it) contributed to a climate in which Curry has been exposed to harassment and threats of violence.

In the cases described here involving black professors, the audiences, which include what we are calling the virtual white mob and others, are often white taxpayers beyond the college and university gates. The focus is on black scholars and not on the systems they seek to dismantle or the walls of whiteness they hope to penetrate. Black professors are blamed for creating a racist culture and are not viewed as under attack by a racist culture on campus or throughout society. The treatment of black professors by elected officials and college and university administrators follows a predictable pattern: First, black scholars are hired based on their qualifications and scholarly records. Next, they are also hired for political expediency, to support false claims of a commitment to diversity and to give the appearance of support for historically disadvantaged groups like black people and women. The next step in this process includes public pressure on a PWI in response to a black scholar’s academic writings or comments. The source of the public pressure may come from anywhere, including from elected officials, to white alumni, white male students, and conservative bloggers. Additionally, elected officials and administrators claim not to have known about the black scholars’ writings or comments in order to escape any culpability. Almost universally, PWIs respond in a way that supports the white virtual mob. When white administrators do offer lukewarm support of the black scholars, they cautiously gauge the temperature of the controversy. Administrators tend to resort to the academic freedom and First Amendment defenses. Eventually, college and university administrators issue statements that scapegoat the black scholar under attack and infer or outright accuse the black scholar of reverse discrimination or antiwhite racism. Finally, administrators implicitly or explicitly join the mob and discipline the black scholar for doing what he or she was trained to do. Disciplinary actions may range from reprimands to mandated diversity training, to dismissal.

A series of corrective and constructive suggestions for administrators at PWIs might help mitigate some of the problems described here. Specifically, PWIs should seek support from public and private sources and avoid relying on funding streams that originate from or are beholden to individuals who have participated in a white virtual mob or are at risk of such participation.

We also suggest PWIs take a leadership role in increasing community cultural literacy and greater awareness about what academic freedom is and is not. Another mediating intervention could take place at and in new faculty orientations, annual college meetings, strategic planning, annual reporting, and so on, which should include statements proclaiming the affirmative actions administrators will take in defense of faculty in protection of their academic freedom and First Amendment rights, and in basic terms, the space to do their work without fear from the public or the university. Moreover, PWIs should review the resources allocated for African and African American studies and other area studies, as these programs are core to the university’s mission regarding academic freedom.

Of course, all of these corrective and constructive suggestions require that PWIs be leaders in thought, culture, and practice. Rather than acquiescing to the politics and norms of the society and being complicit in the structures of whiteness that endanger the lives of African American scholars, PWIs should challenge and disrupt the norms in service of the public good. The rhetorics of inclusion, diversity, free thought, academic freedom, and so on, should be enacted and embodied, not simply statements that end up being used to police African American scholarship. PWIs have to demonstrate that they value African American work in a way that leads them to defend African American professors instead of acting in support of the white virtual (and actual) mobs, which are always anti-intellectual, antiblack, ill-informed but violent and disproportionately affect African American scholars of both genders.

Racism and Black Scholars at PWIs: A Philosophical Interpretation

What do we make of these stories and the exercise of academic freedom, especially by black professors? How do we think about or theorize the connection between the varied yet nevertheless consistent responses to black thought, black pedagogy, and black practices within intellectual spaces? If the term *Afro-pessimism* is understood as an articulation of the social- and political-ontological dimensions of antiblackness, then what we offer here might be understood as an Afro-pessimistic theorizing of these events, highlighting how they speak to what Jared Sexton (2016), quoting Frank Wilderson III, calls the “semantic field” of antiblackness: “The Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Frantz Fanon’s insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world’s semantic field . . . is structured by anti-Black solidarity.” Or, as Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008, 91), antiblackness “is not imposed on

me; it is rather a definitive structuring of myself and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world.” The structure of white supremacist antiblackness is not a system that imposes volitional forms of violence against black people. Instead, antiblack violence is a phenomenological and ontological structuration of an antiblack world. In other words, violence against black bodies is necessary for the construction and maintenance of antiblackness (Finley and Gray 2015).

Fanon and Sexton, for example, highlight that antiblackness—particularly in its white supremacist iteration—is part of “the order of nature” (Sexton 2016). Rendered natural through a series of long historical processes of reproduction and sedimentation, white supremacist antiblackness is as real as gravity itself. As this Afro-pessimistic line of thinking shows, the aforementioned stories are not aberrations or singular events but rather symptomatic manifestations of the ontological structure of an antiblack world.

While we find Afro-pessimistic thinking to be useful in diagnosing the problem, however, we nevertheless highlight that the ontological structuration that is white supremacist antiblackness is not as total or totalizing as Afro-pessimistic lines of thinking appear to suggest at times. There is a force in blackness that counteracts—or, as the historian of religions Charles Long might say, *countersignifies*—the symbolic, ontological, political, and professional hazards facing black scholars in antiblack universities. Black life speaks to possibilities that are simultaneously within and beyond the ontological structures of white supremacist antiblackness, structures that are highlighted as “paraontological” and maybe even “paratheological” realities (Carter 2013). White supremacy did not, cannot, and never will be fully able to entrap the elusive life-in-death that marks black thought, speech, and life.

From black vulnerability to public castigation, these stories highlight the subtlety and violence—as well as the violence of subtlety—that makes possible the perpetuation of the almost ubiquitous presence of white supremacist antiblackness. In other words, these stories render visible how these institutions and the administrators charged to represent them render white supremacist antiblackness both an invisible and cannibalistic reality, digitally feeding on black flesh *through* the very perpetuation of universal (read: white) ideas and ideals. In this regard, professors of color (particularly black professors) are not rendered vulnerable because of what they tweet, teach, write, or say; their—*our*—very vulnerability is *necessary* to the sustained life of these institutions.

Limitations on academic freedom for black professors may be understood as a manifestation of racism. Indeed, to read racism as merely a collection of overtly intentional acts of antiblack hatred is to continue to perpetuate the semantic field of antiblackness. This shallow, perverse, and pervasive reading of racism creates a space wherein Boston University presidents can disavow “racism in any form,” falsely casting as equivalent analytic statements made by African American scholars and the vitriolic animus enacted by white supremacist

nationalists. Evidence of the violence of white supremacy is all around us. We need only look at the institutions charged to protect and maintain its existence. When we do so, two realities emerge: *invisible* white normativity and *vampiric* white consumption.

We will begin with invisible white normativity. Invisible and normative whiteness operates as what Charles Long (1995, 2) called a symbol, as it “radiates and deploys meanings” that *structure* the nature of relations, conditioning certain possibilities over others; what the invisible normativity of whiteness does is operate as a condition of possibility for antiblack racism, occasioning its emergence. In this regard, the symbolic power of normative whiteness stands in its very ability to construct and maintain social ontologies whose vectors are almost infinite in their number and direction.

Lewis Gordon’s admonition that “taking oneself too seriously” presents a host of challenges for the actor is illustrative here. The problem with taking oneself too seriously is that one can very easily hide behind the structures of the world in order to justify or vindicate one’s actions—particularly structures of value; discussing the actor who takes him- or herself too seriously, Gordon (1995, 23) writes, “He [*sic*] regards values—including the value that constitutes himself—as transcendent, independent ‘givens.’” With this in mind, it is not—or should not be—difficult to see how this particular reality plays itself out within the context of university administrators. Let us consider, yet again, the parts of the statement from Michael Young that highlight “values”—but this time, in light of “taking oneself too seriously.” According to Young, the values Texas A&M espouses are essentially universal. For Young, the values of “respect, excellence, leadership, and integrity” are “values that [the university holds] true toward all of humanity”; in other words, these values are universal, which means that Young has taken them, almost verbatim, as what Gordon described them to be—namely, as transcendent, independent givens that are “*known*, not constructed” (*ibid.*).

Already given to the world as knowns, the universal values to which Young appeals are not of his own making, which means that *neither he nor the institution* indict Curry’s comments as incendiary and racist; instead, it is the *values themselves*. Young operates as if he had no choice *but* to publicly denounce Curry’s statements, because, as givens, these values are not up for interpretation. Publicly denouncing Curry in the face of these ontologically given values was compulsory. Young has not only taken *himself* too seriously in this moment, absolving himself of any culpability in contributing to the forms of violence that continued to be directed toward Curry; by representing the university, Young has also highlighted that *the institution* has taken itself too seriously. In one sentence, Young has vindicated himself and the institution of charges of discrimination through appeals to universal values. This discursive and political move can only leave Curry and other African American scholars like him culpable.

This abdication is the utmost expression of a violently duplicitous form of antiblack bad faith. If Texas

A&M upholds the universal values of “respect, excellence, leadership, and integrity,” then why did it give space to Richard Spencer to stoke the flames of explicit white supremacist nationalism? (Young 2017a).¹ Parsing out the difference between Curry’s identity as a university employee and Spencer’s identity as an actor not employed by the university is a fallacious claim in this regard. If the values are ones that the institution holds “true toward all humanity,” then one wonders how the explicit encouragement of white supremacy falls within the scope of these values. What is happening, then, is an implicit and unspoken interpretation of these values *in favor of whiteness*. Through this differential and deferential act of bad faith, Young, other PWI administrators, and their institutions have demonstrated an awareness of the ideal that to be white is tantamount to being a god by absurdly favoring the explicitly discriminatory disposition of Richard Spencer over and against the analytic and historically substantiated comments of *its own professors*, Saida Grundy, Tommy Curry, Zandria Robinson, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Johnny Eric Williams, and so many others. Whiteness has won, and it has done so as an invisible site of power that gains its force through its invisible centrality. To make this clear, we turn to philosopher George Yancy (2018), who has also received death threats in response to his academic work.

In his introduction to a collection of essays titled *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (2004, 1–23), Yancy makes some foundational claims that are pertinent to the matter at hand. Yancy argues that whites speak from a presumed and invisible center, which conceals their ideological commitments that are veiled in the linguistics of universality, as Presidents Young, Brown, and others have done (1).

Yet, whiteness is anything but neutral, objective, and universal. It has a social ontology that is significant for our discussion. One of the primary features of the social appearances and deployments of whiteness, for Yancy, is that it avoids and has an aversion to any honest discussion of the investments and benefits of whiteness to white people. According to Yancy (2004, 4), “A key feature of the social ontology of whiteness is that whites attempt to avoid discussing their own social, political, economic, and cultural investments in whiteness. Many whites fail to see their complicity with the systemic workings of white supremacy.” An important observation, here, is that of complicity, and this is a central claim that we are making about white administrators’ responses to African American scholars—that their scoldings of black researchers are complicit in white supremacy and structural antiblackness. But there is another crucial feature of Yancy’s theorizing of whiteness. That is to say, he sees little to *no distinction* between whiteness, white supremacy, and white people.

For whiteness to survive and to reproduce, it requires the complicity of elite whites, such as in the case of

¹ Texas A&M allowed Spencer to speak at a White Lives Matter rally in September 2017. See Watkins 2017.

administrators at PWIs and everyday whites, including those participating in virtual white mobs, who perform strategic obfuscation through denial, deflection, and distancing from less acceptable and more obvious social forms through which to express displeasure and distaste. In this sense, white elites and non-elite whites on the imagined periphery of race relations absolve themselves, both of responsibility for their inherited benefits and the violence that sustains them. There is no white privilege without what the contemporary age calls “white supremacy.” The constructed bifurcation represents two sides to the same structural coin, in which silence or the absence of structural disruption of white supremacy—appearing, in part, in this denial, deflection, and distancing—is tacit acceptance and approval, while accumulating the benefits of white power.

If silence in the face of the mob, real or virtual, that threatens violence and harm to the livelihood of the black scholar and their families constitutes an essential structure that enables the mob and future mobs, how much more does the explicit policing and disciplining of black scholars mark white PWi administrators as an essential cog in the wheel that benefits some while doing harm others? The invisible normativity that is whiteness operates so surreptitiously and so pervasively as to allow PWi administrators to “throw rocks and hide their hands,” as the saying goes. To provide false equivalencies in the face of rhetorical, digital, and sometimes physical antiblack assault on African American professors stands as not-so-quiet encouragement, stoking the flames of white resentment through fallacious appeals to “universal” values.

Let us also consider Saida Grundy’s case. To “fully appreciate why many have reacted strongly” to Grundy’s statements is to interdict, to effectively cut short, the very validity and analytic force of Grundy’s words. This isn’t merely an act of antiblack bad faith; it is also the assent to a form of white enjoyment that requires—no doubt, demands nothing less than—Grundy’s assent to the “goodness” of white men (or at least the possible goodness of white men). Raising a question based upon historical and sociological data has now, through Brown’s subtly affective and rhetorical sleight of hand, been rendered a source of “strong reactions.” What Brown—and therefore Boston University—demanded of Grundy was a *willing* assent to goodness of white men. When Grundy’s agential refusal failed to assent to this, the president and the university threw Grundy “under the bus,” rendering her physically and professionally vulnerable in the process. She became the problem, just as other African American scholars become the problem. Consuming her work by hiring her, Brown and the university simply wanted to *enjoy* Grundy’s presence as a token of diversity. But when that very enjoyment was disrupted through Grundy’s act of truth-telling, her thought was discarded (again, in bad faith) in favor of purportedly generalizable values like “inclusion” and “wide-ranging discussions.” Grundy was hired to be discredited; she was brought in to be enjoyed—only to be discarded when the possibility of enjoyment appeared to wane. In systems of whiteness, including PWIs, blackness is consumed and expurgated. Rinse. Repeat.

Yet, what is of utmost importance in this example is that *Boston University maintained its reputation through its repudiation*. And whiteness maintained its purity and innocence. In other words, by consuming—that is, hiring—and then discarding—that is, publicly criticizing—Grundy, Brown and the university are able, again, to vindicate themselves through violent acts of bad faith, of taking themselves too seriously, which are concealed in the linguistics of universality. As we noted above: black professors stand in the wake of the development of these universities, as their continued and expanded existence is made possible through the discarding of blackness itself.

Brown's comments not only highlight his willingness to distance himself from a series of critical-yet-informed comments made by one of his faculty members; they also entail an *attempt to protect the university*—that is, to indemnify the (white) university from charges of discrimination against (other) whites. In fact, it was precisely *through* his desire to protect the university that he *distanced* himself—and therefore the institution—from Grundy, leaving her in the wake of Boston University's supposedly inclusive and wide-ranging ideals. In ways that feel similar to—but somehow extend beyond—Young's comments, Brown's statement maintained Boston University's reputation through the public disavowal of one of its own.

In Brown's statements, the invisible norm of whiteness is expressed. The invisible norm of whiteness is largely the result of a form of racialized bad faith that continues to structure the nature of contemporary US racial and social relations; and the vampiric nature of white supremacist antiblackness continues surreptitiously to drain black life of its vitality, leaving the intellectual bodies of black thought in its wake. Standing in the wake of the university's perpetual disavowals, American professors, disproportionately women and African American, too often find themselves rendered vulnerable by the very institutions charged with protecting their intellectual freedom and buttressing the validity of their academic contributions—whether these contributions take the form of tweets or statements on a podcast. Hiring black scholars to be fired and propping them up to be invalidated, PWIs function as intellectual bastions of antiblack racism, stoking the flames of antiblack violence while leaving the “dirty work” to digital and sometimes physical white supremacist mobs. Just like any other institution in an antiblack world, PWIs stand as bastions of white supremacist antiblackness, cannibalizing their black professors to maintain their purportedly intellectually and culturally free existence.

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