

[Back to Volume Ten Contents](#)

A Vision for Scholar-Activists of Color

John Streamas

Abstract

By any definition of “bullying,” many white administrators have bullied many faculty of color in recent years. This began with the “culture wars” of the 1980s and has escalated in the Age of Trump.

Administrators argue that they are merely maintaining neutrality and fairness, or that they are defending the speech rights of campus fascists. But this makes sense only when they willfully ignore white privilege and preexisting power differentials. I relate one of my experiences of administrative bullying, analyze the cultural context in which campus bigots may freely bully people of color, and offer nine modest proposals for change. Without progress toward racial justice, faculty of color may understandably feel compelled to “bully back.”

I am old enough to remember bullies in 1960s family situation comedies. Because mean girls were not allowed to be bullies (their victims were always other girls, after all, and so they were constructed as the weak harassing the slightly weaker), “bully” was a gendered term, and bully boys looked mean and ugly. Often they were heavy, like Lumpy Rutherford on *Leave It to Beaver*; always they dressed “sloppily” and “cheaply”; and sometimes, when they received their comeuppance, their voices soared into frightened “girlish” squeals—rendered so unlikably effeminate that no viewers would want to identify with them. Hero-kids’ goodness could be measured by just how much they tolerated the bully boys. After all, the writers needed plots with recurring bully-villains for succeeding weeks’ episodes.

Such bullies exist in adult life, of course, but—except for those few who evolve into smooth-talking hucksters—they usually wield little power and influence. The truly dangerous bullies are those who, with inexplicable charm and magnetism, win disciples. Fortified with a bit of intelligence and powerful family connections, with whiteness and maleness and everything mainstream, they often take institutional jobs and rise through the ranks. On their way up, they curry the favor of those above them. Near the top, they flex their muscle by terrorizing those below them. At the apex, they bellow and rage, feeling entitled to their power. Donald Trump is such a bully. Alternatively, at the apex, they may pose as proper but jovial, respectful but strong, collegial but independent, lovers of art but focused on the bottom line. Tech industry CEOs are often such pleasant bullies. So are most top-level white university administrators.

Even before the Age of Trump, activist faculty of color were hated by these bullies, carrot-sticked into complacent collegiality. Now, in the Age of Trump, that harassment has entered a new phase: noisier, more openly hostile, quicker to blame victims. As an Asian American who teaches ethnic studies in a predominantly white institution (PWI; people of color comprise only one-tenth of all tenure-track faculty here), I have experienced my share of administrative bullying. I have detailed my most recent experience elsewhere,¹ so here I will condense. In August 2015 Campus Reform, on its website, and Fox News, on its *Fox & Friends* broadcast, charged me with coercion in my multicultural literature class, all because of a policy in my syllabus: “Reflect your grasp of history and social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates, and by deferring to the experiences of people of color.” It is a simple and innocent policy, and Fox would certainly need to strain its bigot-muscles to find offense and threat in it. They claimed that the offending word was “deferring,” but any person of color would know that the real offense was the phrase “people of color.” No bigot would care to show any honor or deference to us. But what Fox—and, later, administrators—missed completely was that I had asked for deference not to people of color but to their *experiences*.

Fox broadcast its accusation on a Saturday, and on Monday morning the dean of the College of Arts and Science ordered me to a meeting with him, the two coprovoists, and one of the university’s legal officers.² I was not told the purpose of the meeting, but I guessed that it had to do with my syllabus and hoped that the university would acknowledge the issue and affirm its support for my academic freedom. Instead the three administrators ordered me to replace the word “deferring,” and the legal rep blackmailed me by saying that, if I defied the order and if someone sued, the university would refuse to defend me. I read to them the definition of “defer” from *Webster’s*—of course the word signifies a yielding, but it is a yielding with honor and respect, as when a driver defers to a bicyclist, or a young person defers to an elder—but they would not budge. One provost said, “Certain readers”—she would never say that these readers might be students—

“could misconstrue the word.” I reminded her that a math teacher would not tailor a syllabus for the “certain reader” who might “misconstrue” $2 + 2$ and come up with 37. Neither of the administrators mentioned Fox until I brought up the name, and neither mentioned race until I accused them of racial harassment. They vehemently denied my accusation, one of them insisting that their action had nothing to do with Fox, that he despised Fox and considered himself a good liberal supporter of diversity. Weeks later I learned from an Arts and Science officer that in fact the Fox broadcast was entirely responsible for the administrators’ action.

Now, when we people of color hear suited white men with institutional power insisting that they are not bigots and that they support diversity, red lights flash all over our consciousness. These administrators may not be willfully lying, but their definition of “diversity” is completely opposite ours. Diversity, to them, reduces to the quantifiable. If it can be counted or measured, if it feeds their austerity schemes, and especially if it brings income, as when enrolling more students of color attracts tuition dollars, then they call it diversity. If it takes unpopular but necessary stands against racist orthodoxy, and especially if it offends wealthy alumni who happen to be bigots, then they ignore or denounce it. They may still speak ignorantly of melting pots, but courage and justice are not ingredients in their diversity stew.

Still, these white people, all with considerably more power than I had, including the power to fire me, crowded me on all sides in a tiny meeting room, and they would not let me go until I consented to their demand. And so, after fifty-five minutes of arguing—the meeting was scheduled for only thirty—I agreed to make a change. I agreed only to a change. I did not tell them that I would make the change they demanded. I knew the word “deferring” was innocent, and so the revised syllabus I gave students a few days later said, “Reflect your grasp of history and social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates, and by deferring to each other’s experiences.” The meaning changed slightly, but I kept the innocent word “deferring.” I eliminated the phrase “people of color,” the term that Fox really hated, and the phrase that administrators hated too, though they refused to say so. No one—not even Fox or the administrators—could find fault with the revised admonition to defer “to each other’s experiences.” I devoted a day’s class to the controversy, but there was no gloating in the lesson, for I knew the administrators would not bother to check my revised syllabus, and I had already begun to receive masses of racist, violent, even threatening voicemails and emails from fans of Fox and supporters of the administration. A year later, I became a charter member of the Professor Watchlist. I forwarded some of the violent emails to the dean, but he ignored them. The Watchlist is a noisy and crude bully, the dean a quiet and reserved one.

There is no consolation in knowing I am not alone, that many faculty of color on many campuses receive no support from administrators when racists attack us, that in fact administrators are likelier to defend the “speech rights” of bigots. If these administrators justified their cowardice by claiming to act in our students’

interests—a claim that would be wrong, for they would refuse to distinguish white students from students of color and would therefore willfully miss the point of bullying racist discourse—this might be understandable, but they dare not say so for fear that, hours later, students of color would be protesting at their office doors, demanding justice and voice. And so they offer only vague, abstract charges of coercion on behalf of an unnamed “someone” or anonymous “certain readers” who are, in reality, racists. The provost who referred continually to “certain readers” refused to name them, and so they could only have been Fox News and the administrators themselves. My students found no fault with the word “deferring.” But then students enrolled in a multicultural literature class are unlikely to be fans of Fox, not when they relish reading Octavia Butler and Claudia Rankine and Sandra Cisneros. My 200-level students understand racism and language far better than middle-aged white administrators.

I am currently teaching a 400-level class called Global Social Justice, and my two dozen students include politically savvy seniors whose identities range across marginalizations of race, gender, nationality, and physical ability. I have devoted the semester to asking for their strategies and visions of a just future, and though at first I was frustrated by their lack of specificities, I have come to believe that the broad set of goals they offer reflect a refusal to box themselves into a vision that too narrowly addresses their own particularities and unwittingly neglects identities they do not inhabit. They refuse to be held against narrow standards and definitions that may be turned against them. They would surely agree that what James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) applies today:

That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. . . . It demands great force and great cunning continually to assault the mighty and indifferent force of white supremacy, as Negroes in this country have done so long. It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and clarity to teach your child not to hate.³

This last sentence is no Michelle Obama–like exhortation to “go high” but is rather an acknowledgement of an urge to fight hatred with hatred. After all, the bigot has his foot on our neck. But fighting his power on his playing field would almost certainly be futile. He has, after all, established standards for power and rules for fighting. How could we possibly prevail?

If, as Baldwin wrote, no schools give people of color our necessary authority, then Robin D. G. Kelley provides an update and consent, arguing that universities can never be “the leading edge in a social revolutionary fight” because “they will never be engines of social transformation,” for such engines power an activism that can operate only off campus.⁴ My Social Justice students agree, as they are among my first students, in my decades of teaching, to understand the limitations of universities particularly and of formal education more generally. Last year, presenting before a conference on race issues, I suggested that schools have failed the cause of social justice and are likely in the future to fail us even more, and to my great surprise the audience largely agreed. The revolution may not be televised, and it will surely not be a part of any curriculum.

When we consider that universities in their “branding” discourse use the very words that Kelley spurns—“transformative,” “innovation,” “leading edge,” “impactful”—we realize that, for bully-administrators, there is no difference between profit and social control. This is why diversity discourse is also profit discourse. My savvy seniors know this, and are therefore not wedded to any notion of a campus’s sacred inviolability. They believe the system will collapse, and that we must work toward its collapse. They are willing to risk being accused of being bullies themselves. Institutional power is now in tension—bully-administrators try desperately to juggle conflicting interests with equalizations that we know are false—and so now our students and allies have an opportunity to demand justice. Our imperative is to bully back. My savviest students insist the time has come to bully back. Before universities can ever be our homes—and, unlike Kelley, I believe they can, and must, be—many preconditions must be met. Here I offer a few, inspired by the general strategies and visions of my students.

1. *Recognize the fact of preexisting power differentials.* When a white man such as Glenn Beck steals Martin Luther King Jr.’s words to advocate for judging by character and not by color, we know he willfully ignores the fact that King spoke of his dream, not of reality. University administrators do the same thing. They do not emulate King when they treat us all as equals. They emulate Beck. I have never heard administrators use the phrase “white privilege.” They ignore their privileges, and all the advantages that go with whiteness. This is why they can claim to detest Fox even as they defend hate speech. This is why they feel no compunction about censoring faculty of color. They actually think they should treat us all equally, white and nonwhite alike. They lie to themselves as much as they lie to us. Racism is a wall built of lies.

2. *Having recognized power differentials, act upon them.* When College Republicans and fascist groups build fences in the middle of campus and spew hateful xenophobic propaganda, and when people of color respond in protest, do not treat these groups as equal, and do not charge the protestors with disturbing the peace. This

is no different from claiming that self-defense is as bad as the crime being defended against. Here administrators betray their true cowardice. When I protested a racist demonstration on campus, an officer of the university's "human rights" bureaucracy told me, "All hate speech is equally free speech." In other words, the university regards antiracist discourse as hate speech, and only thus as equal speech.

3. *Redefine "civil discourse."* Administrators who think that antiracist protest and hate speech are equal in value may as well press their own boots into the necks of people of color. They are complicit. On the side of bullies, they are bullies themselves. Moreover, administrators must realize that social media, as tools for both racist and antiracist discourse, have a flattening effect. While people of color may assert our identifying differences in the name of fairness, white supremacists assert theirs in the name of racism. And universities provide, in the name of academic freedom, a safe space for scientific racism. Writing in the *Guardian* on the resurgence of scientific racism, Angela Saini worries not about "the racist thugs who confront us in plain sight, but the well-educated ones in smart suits, the ones with power. . . . including academics at the world's leading universities, who have sought to shape public debates around race and immigration."⁵ Those of us who had thought that scientific racism had died with the widespread dismissal of the 1990s best seller *The Bell Curve*, warns Saini, are stunned to learn that the book's ideas are enjoying a revival.⁶ This discourse of scientific racism only appears to be civil. But of course racist discourse is never really civil. Scientific racists are then no different from Glenn Beck falsely claiming to emulate Martin Luther King Jr. King worked to make his dream of equality come true, and today antiracist scholars and activists still work, in true civility, for that dream. Both Beck and Twitter ignore white power, and administrators who attend to the messenger but not the message ignore it too, all in the name of a "civility" that promotes racism.

4. *Recognize the legitimacy of the rage of marginalized people, and bear and respect that rage rather than punishing it.* Administrators who have never felt the bullying foot on their necks have no right to condemn those of us who always feel it. They must *defer* to our experiences.

5. *Create safe spaces for marginalized people, and let them define those spaces.* When racism finds a way to build capital out of exclusion, it excludes. Where I work, College Republicans love to signify their xenophobia by building walls in the middle of campus, where they can best provoke and taunt and bully. Before administrators even consider allowing this, they must create spaces for immigrants and people of color where we may be free of bullying. This is a sort of reverse quarantine, protecting us from the bullies.⁷ By "safe spaces" I do not mean the "neutral ground" that Stephen M. Gavazzi and E. Gordon Gee advocate in their new book on land-grant schools, in which they scold administrators who canceled right-wing speakers' appearances after the murder of an antiracist counterprotester near the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville in 2017.⁸ Gavazzi and Gee want such "neutral ground" to serve as a way of guaranteeing free

speech on campus; but their position draws upon the idea in Donald Trump's claim that good people may be found on all sides of the protests, including among white nationalists. By "safe spaces" I mean that administrators must provide people of color with places in which we may be free from bullying. These might be offices, classrooms, or auditoriums marked and publicized as safe spaces free from harassment. If they refuse to allow us such spaces, then they must also refuse to grant public spaces for racists.

6. *Enable bottom-up governance by creating listening spaces in which administrators bear the concerns of marginalized people and are accountable for their responses to those concerns.* Even bad politicians undertake "listening tours," but of course they make only a single stop at each site. Administrators must schedule regular meetings with people from marginalized groups, in which they listen to our concerns, then later report on actions they take in response. Our concerns and their actions must enter into a public record.

7. *Create parallel governance in which various aggrieved communities meet and share concerns.* We faculty of color hate to see, for example, black and Asian American students clashing, or Asian Americans snubbing Asian nationals. Such tensions must be openly addressed, and administrators must bother to learn that they exist. Toward this end, policy affecting, say, Asian Americans must not be automatically assumed to affect Asian nationals in the same way. All marginalized communities must have a share of power in determining policy affecting us. Differences among us must be acknowledged and respected, just as the differences between all of us and privileged groups must be acknowledged and respected.

8. *Redistribute campus power on the model of the wheel.* The spokes of a wheel are all equally important, as answerable to the hub as the hub must be to them. But universities are structured vertically, like corporations, with leaders at the top losing touch with the masses at the bottom even as their salaries reach the distance of a vanishing point. This creates siloes, so that people in underfunded units—units in which people of color are disproportionately located—can be ignored when they complain about the extravagant salaries and expenses of football coaches and presidents. If the ethnic studies silo is separate from the football silo, then its people cannot complain about their underfunding while the coach makes more money than the state's governor. Each silo is a separate entity. But this is like saying that two middle-class siblings receiving allowances from their parents cannot share or borrow or negotiate. Money talks, and it sounds like white power, full of segregating schemes. The vertical power hierarchy is a cone of corruption, and while the wheel is an imperfect alternative model—it may enable false equivalencies like the one Glenn Beck made—still it holds promise for students and faculty of color.

9. *Define the idea of academic freedom as an ideal of academic justice.* Freedom and justice are not the same. One person's freedom can be another's injustice. When you impose a leveling freedom onto an already unequal social context, you merely exacerbate inequalities, further empowering the powerful and further weakening

the disempowered. To the marginalized, freedom means justice. But to the already powerful, freedom means an opportunity to further exploit the marginalized. Academic justice means that a campus's minoritized peoples have a voice, sometimes equal, sometimes proportional, sometimes wildly disproportional, so that none can be exploited or bullied. When we promote academic justice, then administrators must stop censoring and harassing us in the name of "free speech."

The first seven goals should have been in place long before the "culture wars" of the 1980s. That they were not—that administrators are far from adopting them even today—suggests that achievements of the previous two decades might have been less impressive than we have been assuming, teaching, and narrating. The last two goals are unlikely to be realized in the foreseeable future. The racial life of campuses has taken steps backward since the 1980s, and corporatized administrators so smugly expect us to be happy with their white liberal version of "diversity" that they feel no compunction about censoring us—for, after all, are they not merely leveling the playing field? And the soft-liberal people of color they usually hire as "diversity wonks" fool no one with their "let's all get along" discourse.

Being bad jugglers, white administrators may well drop the diversity ball as other priorities take precedence. That the racialized maldistribution of power and wealth is unlikely to change much when at midcentury whites become a minority is bad enough in the corporate and political arenas, but that it also may change little on college campuses is maddening. It is unsustainable not because whites want progress—which, after all, threatens to cut into their profits—but because we will, we *must*, demand it. White liberalism, the creator of institutional "diversity," is no better than a smiley face masking a Klansman's scowl, and if it continues to prevail in our workplaces, then quite possibly a new movement, not just radical but revolutionary, will express our rage in new demands for justice, demands that, if unmet, may result in violence and burning campuses. The time is now to bully back.

John Streamas is an associate professor in the School of Languages, Cultures, and Race at Washington State University.

Notes

¹ See John Streamas, “How We Lost Our Academic Freedom,” in *Teaching with Tension: Race, Resistance, and Reality in the Classroom*, edited by Philathia Bolton, Cassander L. Smith, and Lee Bebout, 143–62 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019); and Streamas, “A Mottled Minority,” in *Narratives of Marginalized Identities in Higher Education: Inside and Outside the Academy*, edited by Santosh Khadka, Jo Davis-McElligatt, and Keith Dorwick, 214–25 (New York: Routledge, 2018).

² My department chair was also ordered to attend, and pressured to keep quiet.

³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 343.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, March–April 2016, 12–13. Kelley delicately distinguishes personal trauma from institutional injustices, insisting that our politics must be guided by that distinction. Universities are, he believes, inherently unable to become sites of justice. In this, he generally agrees with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, who, in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf), urge blacks to remain ostensibly in the university, but only so that they might steal its resources to establish an “undercommons,” a separate, shadow economy of radical learning. I agree with the diagnosis but disagree with the concomitant implication that history is destiny. A commons—even an “undercommons”—has a public function, and if people of color can create it, then why can we not also recreate the entire university in its image? My nine proposals dream that, in the white-minority future, the university will survive only by reinventing itself as a commons, pulverizing its current governing structure, and assuming octopus-like shape-shifting, color-fluid properties.

⁵ Angela Saini, “Why Race Science Is on the Rise Again,” *Guardian*, May 18, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/18/race-science-on-the-rise-angela-saini?utm_term=RWRpdG9yaWFxOJvb2ttWXJrcy0xOTA1MTk%3D&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Bookmarks&CMP=bookmarks_email. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

⁶ Saini, “Why Race Science Is on the Rise Again.”

⁷ Chad Sokol, “College Republicans Want to Build Another Wall at WSU,” *Spokesman-Review*, December 4, 2018. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/dec/03/college-republicans-want-to-build-another-trump-wa/>.

⁸ Stephen M. Gavazzi and E. Gordon Gee, *Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 19.