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Ya'll Don't Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me: How Performative DEI Prevents Anti-Racism and Accountability in Higher Education

Dr. Frederick V. Engram Jr. & Kathleen Mayer

Many institutions of higher learning and more specifically predominately white institutions (PWIs) have created divisions, teams, and administrative roles aimed at transforming problematic and racism-centered institutions. However, the teams and leaders almost never have true autonomy or institutional support in creating an environment not centered in whiteness or white feelings but one centered in disruption of the status quo and truly anti-racist. As scholars and practitioners, we find ourselves being requested to tailor our talks or teaching in a way that is digestible for white people. Meanwhile, students of color are being berated at athletic events, in their classes, and on social media by the same individuals we are asked to spare. In order for higher education to truly meet the moment we have to de-center whiteness, white feelings, and white mediocrity as a starting point. We have to consider the more marginalized and how we must better be of service to them.

Keywords: misogynoir, performative DEI, white manning, higher education, anti-racism

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My name is Kathleen Mayer, I am a sophomore at Michigan State University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in the Arts and Humanities, with a minor in Leadership of Organizations. In the future I hope to work in a profession that allows me to contribute to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in some way.

**Ya'll Don't Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me: How Performative DEI Prevents
Anti-Racism and Accountability in Higher Education
Faux-DEI Initiatives- *Who Asked for This?!***

The Spring of 2020 added an additional chapter in a storied history between African Americans, [*people colonized by racism and white supremacy*] and police brutality. Breonna Taylor was murdered by police officers as she slept in her home in Louisville, Kentucky. Exactly two months and twelve days later, George Floyd was asphyxiated by officer Derek Chauvin, who was assisted by fellow officers Thomas Lane, Tou Thao, and J. Alexander Kueng [*also a Black man*] in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Eighteen days later Rayshard Brooks was murdered by a police officer at a Wendy's in Atlanta, Georgia because he had fallen asleep in his car. Startled awake, Brooks felt a true fear for his life and decided to try to escape. As with all deaths or murders caused by police officers in America, there is an instant rationalization when the deceased person is African American. In America, when African Americans are murdered while sleeping, having a mental health crisis, or for being accused of committing a crime, the typical response of white Americans is, "*why were they resisting?*" or "*why did they not comply?*" it is almost never asked "*why are police officers trained to kill African Americans?*".

This perspective is because anti-Blackness is an accepted norm and foundational to the American story. As a result of the senseless murders of Taylor, Floyd, Brooks, and countless others that year, many Americans took to the streets to protest while companies created faux diversity initiatives and capitalized on Black suffering for profit. We witnessed Hollywood stars and starlets post black boxes on their *Instagram* pages as some performative way to show solidarity. Institutions of higher learning began adding DEI statements to their websites and began requesting DEI statements in faculty applications and as requirements in cover letters. What we know for certain is that each of these initiatives although seemingly well-intentioned, were performative! Within six months of the murders, the election cycle was upon us and over 74 million Americans voted for the twice impeached former President, Donald Trump. How is it that the entire country which seemed to be in mourning after several heinous acts of police brutality occurred, that over 74 million people would still choose misogynoir, misogyny, white supremacy, patriarchy, and xenophobia over stability and experience. The over 74 million who voted to uphold white violence without accountability serve as a staunch reminder of the power and the will of white supremacy and racism. It is also a reminder that African Americans should never become comfortable with the performance of DEI.

Cities like Charlotte, NC; Utica, NY; Washington, D.C. and countless others began painting murals that said *Black Lives Matter*. Other cities began taking down confederate monuments that honored enslavers and universities began changing the names of buildings that did the same thing. Black Lives Matter Plaza became a staple in D.C. all the while D.C. mayor Muriel Bowser increased MPD's approved operating budget from the previous year by \$9 million dollars (Flack, 2020). The streets looked as if change was on the horizon, but legislation, politics, colleges, universities, and

corporations remained steadfast in their anti-Blackness. What was made painstakingly clear is that the DEI initiatives were created as a means of distraction and appeasement for Black folks but there was no real skin in the game. Institutions and corporations began rolling back their DEI initiatives almost as fast as they created them. Netflix in 2022 created *Tudum* as a means of engaging in sociopolitical issues and within four months of the announcing of diverse hires, they were all terminated (Lee & Hernandez, 2022). Netflix would go on to layoff over 150 additional workers leaving people to question if diversity efforts would become collateral damage as they fight to maintain control of the streaming world (Lee & Hernandez, 2022). This Netflix debacle is a great example of the performance of DEI.

Who asked for this?! Is something that many African Americans uttered as the performance of DEI continued. The *it's a start* and *we have to start somewhere* crowds began to form and tried to convince the majority that something was better than nothing. What many failed to realize is that for far too long African Americans have settled for the “something” in compromise of receiving “nothing” if they continued to resist. The patience of years and lifetimes past has run out and the marginalized are wanting and are deserving of so much more. Asking an oppressed people to continue to hold onto their faith as the system of justice and whiteness spits in their face at every turn is inhumane and indecent. As scholars of color continue to contend with the linkages that exist between structural violence and educational inequality drawn in relation to the same system that murdered Floyd, Taylor, and Brooks, we recognize the change that is needed, must occur now (Ezell, 2021). Although many will argue that it is not the role of the university to take part in the disruption of racism (Ezell, 2021), I fundamentally and morally disagree. Education is intended to be the great equalizer as it serves as the foundation for change and futuristic knowledge. In order for us to truly stand by this age-old phrase we must do the following: *create disruptive learning styles that de-centers whiteness and elevates different learning methods (drawing; tapping; or making sounds); provide opportunities for futuristic thinking that elevates the marginalized and acknowledges the past; and be intentional about who we employ and how we measure “fit” and “preparedness”*. Students must see people who they look like and identify with on college campuses, and this should not only exist in the service areas. There is no other institution with positional authority more suited to lead this endeavor than academia. People who reject this idea or feel that academia is not the place to discuss racial violence and interrogate ways to solve the reoccurring issue are racists and upholders of white supremacy. The crux of this issue is that *Ya'll don't hate white supremacy enough for me!*

Ya'll Don't Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me!

This phrase is tweeted from the twitter account of Dr. Frederick V. Engram Jr. [@VanCarlito2003], once a month at minimum. Although the saying is quite hilarious it is also a conversation piece. At a foundational level, the average American although a participant in white

supremacy [*Black folks, white folks, Latinx folks, all folks!*] does not have a real grasp on what it is, nor why they should absolutely hate it. White supremacy has its greatest success because it is so pervasive that it no longer needs white people to uphold it. *You read that right!* White supremacy has touched every aspect of this world from the humans who inhabit it, to A.I. (artificial intelligence) technology created by those same humans. Since the social construction of race post-Bacon's rebellion in 1681, race and subsequently racism have been legally foundational to the American story (Battalora, 2013). Racism which has been historically and legally directed at the enslaved Africans in America and thus their descendants allows for marginal steps to be made in the fight for liberation.

Universities and colleges began creating DEI offices and hiring DEI officers with the intent to make the campus experience more inclusive. Institutions have hired outside DEI trainers to assess the campus climate and then provide a plan of action to move the institution toward being inclusive. The issue is that most of the offices and trainers all seek to appeal and appease whiteness, which is the antithesis of real DEI work. This passive approach to directly addressing white supremacy and the system of whiteness always places the onus of diplomacy on the oppressed. University stakeholders across the United States protest war; the persistence of poverty; anti-Black racism; as well as policies and practices that continue to degrade their experiences within the academic and professional environment (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Understanding that these issues are regular occurrences on majority white campuses it would seem that the role of the DEI office and officer would be empowered and inclined to take an approach that does not seat the majority on the *iron throne*.

Instead, many institutions use these individuals as pawns to wield as they are deemed necessary and as optics allow without providing them true support and institutional buy-in to make systemic change. Institutions tend to cling to acronyms, catch phrases, and cute slogans as performative points of reference without actually defining what these words mean and who they uplift or exclude. Words like "inclusive," "excellence," and "diversity" (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016) are sprinkled about like parsley on institutional DEI websites where students are still asserting that they are being harmed by institutional bad actors. *What is the purpose of a DEI officer if all of their power is tied up in appearances without tangible and direct changes made to enhance the experiences of the marginalized?* If the work that we do in academia does not disrupt the status-quo and continues to center whiteness while being inaccessible to the communities that we represent, are we actually making a difference? I would argue that our efforts are futile and is simply a collective of academic kerfuffle meant to make us feel better about ourselves. In short, *Ya'll don't hate white supremacy enough!* Inequity is the standard and has been the standard for everyone except for elite white people. For poor white people and the oppressed the *divide and conquer* strategy was deployed to keep the non-elite whites and people of color at odds with each other and fighting for scraps. The balancing of the scales must be centered around focusing on what the most marginalized need as a baseline, not whiteness. When institutions refuse to take an active part in the disruption of the status-quo via their DEI offices and officers they continuously show

students that their needs are at the bottom of the institution's priority list (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Predominately white institutions (PWIs) are uniquely positioned to be the place where the disruption must occur for two reasons 1.) PWIs are built on land stolen from those indigenous to America and 2.) the grounds at PWIs were toiled by the hands of enslaved Africans in America.

These two realities are reason enough for PWIs to divest from white supremacy and its tactics. A classic case of *white manning* (Engram, 2020; Engram, 2021; Engram, 2022) occurs when Black stakeholders are engaged in discourse regarding their experiences with racism within an academic space and the experience is minimized by white people. *White manning* can be displayed by dismissive actions regarding the insistence of inequity and anti-Black racism such as the argument of reverse racism as a counterpoint; the oppression Olympics; and the mentioning of Black-on-Black crime as an argument by someone who refuses to do the reading. Each of these instances are commonplace on university campuses whether they be in the classroom, in the residence hall, or in recreational areas. Anti-Black racism is always minimized as something that the oppressed should just simply get over. The insinuating of any of the aforementioned are why true DEI methods and experts are necessary for every college campus. Successful DEI methods must not be passive, and they must directly address the roots of inequity which are directly tied to the enslavement of Africans in America. If that is not your understanding as someone who does DEI work, then your approach is problematic and harmful. Situating any other issue of inequity in America and on a college campus away from white supremacy is *white supremacy!*

As scholar-practitioners, practitioner-scholars, and as general education practitioners we must stop assuming that simply because a person earned a PhD that it automatically qualifies them to be an expert or discussant on issues of DEI or race and racism. Institutions do more harm when they allow purveyors of white supremacy who know cute colloquialisms to lead DEI based conversations or assume DEI centered roles. Institutions often create what comes across as "busy work" for true workers of equity when we are voluntold to take part in DEI plenary activities. Sitting in a DEI retreat at my institution recently was both refreshing [*I had not conferenced since pre-COVID*] and equally frustrating. My excitement to see people and to put names with faces properly was at an all time high. That feeling faded shortly thereafter once the DEI retreat began. The person leading the training used terms like BIPOC, minorities, at-risk, and underrepresented to discuss people of color. Granted a great deal of the language was situated within the recently completed campus climate survey, but it was still a problem.

The session created an opportunity for the presenter to highlight why this language although frequently used, is harmful. The presenter also used the term *ally* as their preferred term to describe white people who fight for liberation and scoffed at "newer" [more appropriate] terms like *accomplice*, and *co-conspirator* as something that she refuses to adjust her language for. What was interesting about her comments as a queer white woman is that she was fully aware that other terms exist, but she refused

to adhere to them. How was their perspective any different than any other person who participates in *white manning*? When addressing issues regarding race and racism regardless of how much you have read your perspective should always default to the critical scholars of color, both past and present. That is true DEI work.

DEI Figure Heads Without Real Authority or *Commitment*

During the retreat each table was comprised of academics, academic advisors, administration, and students. The intention was to allow for different perspectives to be brought together to create a diverse dialogue. During the course of the day a student who defined herself as queer and African American told a story of a microaggression that she experienced during one of the breakout sessions. The student talked about a *race and ethnicity* course that she took as part of university core requirements. The student stated, *during our first day of class our professor required all of us to stand up and say, "I am a racist!"*. The professors, academic advisor, and administrator asked the student to repeat what she just stated to make sure that everyone was clear on what she just shared. Without missing a beat, the student repeated what she had experienced in the classroom. Stunned but not at all surprised by the experience, I asked the student if the professor at least further explained the construction of race and how the previous statement was not possible. The student indicated that the professor did not further explain or provide any clarity and later in the semester stated that colorism and white supremacy were the same thing. *Strap in because this is where it gets good!* The student then indicated that the person who caused the harm was not only in the room, but she was also one of the main speakers and her interim administrative role is as an officer of DEI. The problem? The problem is that as mentioned throughout this piece the workers of DEI in white spaces are often the doers of the racism. The harm that they preach to other white people about is the same harm they are often themselves guilty of. *Hey Pot! Meet Kettle!*

The student then indicated that she wondered what were the requirements to be tapped for the interim role because there was no way that the aforementioned should be in that role. If the universities that are selling themselves as staunch supporters of DEI and anti-racism are truly committed to the work, how might something like the experience of the student occur? It happens because the interrogation of people's commitment is not thorough enough. White people who are well-intentioned liberals are still not adequately situated to sniff out the DEI phonies. Researchers like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Shaun Harper do a good job of explaining these peculiar individuals in both approaches to understanding *Racism without racists*. In their assessment they help critical scholars make sense of how racism is rampant in places where racists do not exist.

Rarely are instances of racism and racist institutional norms named explicitly among plausible reasons for how racialized differences occur (Harper, 2012). During the results shared regarding the campus climate survey the majority of survey completers indicated that they all participate and uphold

DEI initiatives. However, LGBTQ+, African Americans, Latinx folks, and graduate students each mentioned feeling concerned about retaliation if they were vocal about any issues. If everyone is committed to being truly DEI centered, how might all of the marginalized group members be fearful of reprisal if they raised their voices about inequity? Racism and white supremacy are essential to the inception of higher education in the United States (Ash, Hill, Risdon & Jun, 2020). If DEI offices and officers work within understanding and divesting away from this framework then it is obvious how racism and subsequently racists walk among us, break bread with us, make jokes with us, and run our departments. *Wake up!* If university stakeholders of color constantly report experiencing covert and overt acts of racism on campus (Ash et al., 2020), why does everyone seem to be clueless about the location of the racists? *They are right there, dawg!* With the racist foundation that created higher education still firmly in place it is less surprising and more expected to witness how obtuse well-intentioned white people are about problematic DEI initiatives or the location of the missing racists (Ash et al., 2020). PWIs and their historical contexts demand that they engage in interrogative, introspective, and national dialogues regarding race and racism, and in so doing, construct accountability checks and balances, measures to quash retaliation, and create truly equitable institutions (Connors & McCoy, 2022).

This approach is an absolute must. In hiring and creating DEI offices and officers these suggestions must be germane to their foundation without pause. The time for pretending to be diverse and inclusive has long passed, the change must happen now. Institutions must provide adequate support for officers to conduct their investigations and to do their work with full autonomy and institutional support. Hiring Black and Latinx DEI officers and making them figure heads without real support and authority is reminiscent of American cities hiring Black beat officers who were not allowed to drive squad cars, arrest white people, patrol white neighborhoods, or step foot in any police headquarters (Healey, Stepnick, & O'Brien, 2019). It was always about the performance and never about the work much like most DEI initiatives in this country. White people who are truly committed to being anti-racist must understand that the commitment requires of them to give up something. It requires them to give up their commitment to whiteness in ways that are harmful to the marginalized and to use their privilege for good. It also requires for them to give-up being centered in any and all things and even while being de-centered still being actively involved and engaged in the uplifting and liberating of the oppressed. That is the ask, and that must be the commitment.

Conclusion

Something that my student [Kathleen] highlighted in a discussion with me about this topic was *racial battle fatigue*. Racial battle fatigue is a term coined by education scholar William Andrew Smith (2011) to help us assess how Black men experience stress at predominately white institutions. The same can also be used to assess how Black students, faculty, and staff are expected to perform and

persist in spite of racial battle fatigue and racist incidents (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Understand that the work of liberation, and DEI, much like anti-racism is an every day work. It is not a one-time occurrence and it is not something that once earned we stop fighting for. One of the things that I did this year which was pretty unique for me was to use a guided question to build upon the understanding of inequity for my students. The question that I began the year with was “*what are you willing to give up*”. The intention was to allow my students throughout the course of the term to be able to build upon their knowledge and lead themselves to an answer. This real-time approach allows for their to be an understanding of what performance equity is and what real-world and change equity can be. Some students began the semester discussing giving up “things” like a cell phone for example. They ended the semester stating that they would give up their proximity to whiteness, relationship to patriarchy, harmful religious stances, and most importantly relationships with people who refuse to grow.

Providing space for true learning divorced from white supremacy allowed for my students to be able to understand why everyone has a role in the fight for liberation. This was taught through guided dialogue around history and the creation of race and subsequently inequity via white supremacy. We know that history has *ebbs and flows* and for every decade or two that African Americans suffered there was also advancement. The generation behind those who fought for liberation are able to enjoy the fruits of their ancestors and elders’ labor, but some of them do not always understand that the fight must continue. Helping my students to visualize the work of disruption and liberation allowed them to see that the fight must continue.

To this end, there still exists a sense of complacency that makes people believe that the fight is somehow someone else’s responsibility. Being complacent and not keeping the flame of the fight for liberation burning is why many Americans feel that we are post-racial. The idea that the election of President Barack Obama cured all of Americas racism without repentance, reparation, and rehabilitation is dastardly thinking. Although the oppressed know that this assertion is disrespectfully false we are still left to prove that racism and racists exist. This is the power and success of white supremacy which keeps us needing to prove that our causes are important and real. The secret is that white people who uphold white supremacy are fully aware that they are engaging in harm and it is also why when they are caught their responses are so performative. You are not supposed to be able to point out how they engage in the harm otherwise it disarms how they are able to confuse and control you.

Understanding how DEI is supposed to work makes everyone who engages with it responsible for its success, or responsible for its hijacking. As we continue to further navigate critical DEI and its need within institutions of higher learning we will be met with resistance dressed up as a concern for the majority group. We must push past the distraction, roll our sleeves up, and get to work. *Disruption or bust!*

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