Historically White Colleges and Universities: The Unbearable Whiteness of (Most) Colleges and Universities in America

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Abstract
In this paper, we examine the academy as a specific case of the racialization of space, arguing that most colleges and universities in the United States are in fact historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs). To uncover this reality, we first describe the dual relationship between space and race and racism. Using this theoretical framing, we demonstrate how seemingly "race neutral" components of most American universities (i.e., the history, demography, curriculum, climate, and sets of symbols and traditions) embody, signify, and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy. After examining the racial reality of HWCUs, we offer several suggestions for making HWCUs into truly universalistic, multicultural spaces.

Keywords
white space, education, HWCUs, whiteness

Introduction

Racism is alive and well in American colleges and universities.[1] Much of the media attention on race matters in the academy is centered around old-fashioned racist incidents such as when three White students from the University of Mississippi shot a

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historical marker commemorating Emmitt Till, the threatening racist emails sent to faculty at Wake Forest and subsequent stationing of armed guards outside certain classrooms, or nooses being hung on the campuses of Michigan State, the University of Illinois, Stanford, and Duke.[2] Although addressing these incidents is absolutely necessary, it is imperative we also examine the more fundamental ways in which colleges affect the lives of students and faculty of color. Although being called the N-word or having the KKK scrawled on one's dorm door are unquestionably traumatic events, the built-in environment, culture, and structure of colleges are the foundation for these attacks and, therefore, deserve analysis. Accordingly, we argue that most colleges in the United States are HWCUs (historically white colleges and universities) with a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and a set of symbols and traditions that embody and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy. This organizational reality explains why "isolated" racist incidents happen again and again in institutions that claim to be race neutral.

Although the racial component of HBCUs and HSIs is tattooed in their names,[3] the objective, overwhelming whiteness of most colleges is not. This is because whiteness, as the dominant racial identity, is normative (Lewis, 2004), thus invisible. But space is always a social product (Lefebvre, 1991) and embodies the weight of race and other social divisions. Space has a history that shapes it in particular ways reproducing a certain set of social relations. Specifically, space reproduces hegemonic relations, serving as "a means of control, and hence, of domination, of power" (ibid:26). Furthermore, as race, space, and power are interconnected, it creates differential opportunities for Whites and people of color (Lipsitz, 2007). Following the idea that space is racialized, we contend that HWCUs are not just spaces where everyone belongs equally but are instead "white spaces" (Moore, 2008).

In this paper, we analyze the academy both in terms of its built-physical environment as well as the corresponding institutional climate to demonstrate how most colleges in the United States are HWCUs. To explain how whiteness shapes colleges, we discuss how it has affected their history, demography, curriculum, climate, and symbols and traditions. We also illustrate how the spatial and normative whiteness in colleges affects the lives of students and faculty of color. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for crafting practices and policies to deracialize—remove the "W"—HWCUs.

History and Demography

From their inception, colleges in the United States were directly tied to white supremacy via the dispossession of Native Americans' land and the enslavement of Africans. As Wilder pointedly underscores, "the first five colleges in the British American colonies—Harvard (established in 1636), William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Codrington (1745) in Barbados, and New Jersey (1746)—were instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the American slave trade and slavery" (2013, p. 17). These colleges were only open to White students, many of whom brought their personal enslaved

Blacks with them to tend to daily tasks. Slave traders and plantation owners made endowments of stolen land and enslaved Blacks to build these colleges so they could become the colleges' trustees (see Wilder 2013 for an in-depth account of this history).

When HWCUs were "integrated"[4] in the late 1960s and 1970s, most White students, faculty, and administrators vehemently opposed it. For example, in 1961 the University of Georgia (UGA) admitted its first Black students, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Homes, only after the college was forced by a court decision. At the time, Tommy Burnside, fraternity council president at UGA, opined "I am confident that an over-whelming majority of my classmates will…do anything within local reason to maintain segregation of the university" (Sokol, 2006, p. 60). Even as integration sped up because the federal government threatened to remove financial aid from colleges, the sentiment expressed by Tommy remained the norm for Whites. Hence this period engendered a pattern of strained race relations between White and non-White students that remains to this day. Although most colleges have normalized their presumed integration process as part of their glorious history,[5] HWCUs did not change their white essence.

Students of this mostly informal segregation that exists in HWCUs have noted that "racial divisions in space may emerge even in more formal or structured settings such as a classroom or lecture theater, provided that individuals are able to exercise a certain degree of choice in their use and occupation of a given space" (Alexander & Tredoux, 2010, p. 370). This micro-level segregation in lunch tables and lecture halls betrays power differentials between the groups. For some groups, self-segregation reflects survival whereas for others it expresses their dominance (Tatum, 2017). Unsurprisingly, White college students are significantly less likely than Black students to have any cross-racial interactions on campus. Although Black students report having almost twice as many acquaintances of other races than do Whites, they also reporting have a weaker sense of belonging at their school (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Disparities in cross-racial interaction across campus settings is well-documented (e.g., Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Ribera et al., 2017) but, these studies do not address the character of these interactions. Reporting contact with people of other races does not reveal the quality or depth of those interactions. In fact, the racial microaggressions literature has demonstrated that cross-racial contact is often negative for students and faculty of color (see Lewis et al., 2019; Louis et al., 2016). Albeit students and faculty of color exhibit resiliency in HWCUs, illustrated by their development of counter-spaces, such as fraternities, sororities, and other organizations for racial minorities, none of these survival strategies challenges the W-ness of these colleges.

In addition to their historical whiteness, HWCUs remained mostly white until the 1970s. This "white demography" has shaped the racial climate, lack of diversity, and many racial issues we still face in higher education. Black and Latinx students are still underrepresented in these colleges with recent data showing that the gap in college enrollment between students of color and Whites is widening (Baker et al., 2018). Although this gap is in part due to unfair admissions practices (Mickelson, 2003), colleges' overwhelming white demography informs where students of color ultimately

decide to attend school. For instance, a prospective Black student visiting an elite HWCU said the following:

> One reason I didn't go was because it reeked of whiteness. I was only there for two days, and after one day I wanted to leave. And I mean, really, it just reeked, everywhere I went, reeked of old white men, just lily-whiteness, oozing from the corners! I wanted to leave. And I knew that socially I would just be miserable. I talked to other black students; I talked to all of them because there aren't a lot. I said, "Do you like it here?" And they said, "No, we're miserable" (Feagin & Sikes, 1995, p. 91).

As HWCUs are sites of disenfranchisement for people of color, students and faculty of color suffer intense affective experiences—of misery, rejection, and isolation—reflecting these colleges' structures (Strunk et al., 2018; Zambrana et al., 2017). But the overwhelming white demography of the student body is not all they feel, they are also affected by the overrepresentation of White faculty. White faculty tend to believe they are hired through "objective" practices based on their records, but systematic inequality exists in faculty hiring networks (Clauset et al., 2015). Further, no one discusses how racism positively affects the productivity of Whites (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017), giving them advantages in an already biased academic hiring structure. These issues exacerbate the already overwhelming presence of Whites in these spaces.

To be clear, our claim is not purely based on demography. Although numbers matter, the way that racial power and history has shaped these institutions matters more. Accordingly, universities such as Duke (39% students of color), Stanford (43%), and MIT (47%) are regarded as diverse, yet they are still HWCUs. Although a cursory glance of these schools may appear to provide a welcoming environment, people of color still experience racial discrimination and bias (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016).

White Logic, White Curriculum

Another component of HWCUs is a curriculum that reflects the norms, values, history, and position of Whites in the world. Historically, what passed as social science, history, or as philosophy in HWCUs was partial to Whites and the West. Black scholar Carter Woodson addressed this point in his *The Miseducation of the Negro* stating:

> Much of what [universities] have taught as economics, history, literature, religion, and philosophy is propaganda...When a Negro had finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man...The present system under the control of whites trains the Negro to be white and at the same time convinces him of the impropriety or the impossibility of his becoming white (1933, p. 24–5).

Critical scholars acknowledge that culture, history, and social divisions deeply affect the knowledge production process and what becomes "canon" (Harding, 2015). Scholars have acknowledged the sciences' development of eugenics, craniology, and other historical forms of scientific racism (Farber, 2008); however, they are less cognizant that many of these ideas still permeate HWCUs. Emerging fields of personalized medicine, DNA databanks, genetics-informed sociology, anthropological genetics, and genism are new forms of old scientific racism currently being developed at HWCUs across the country (Duster, 2003; Roberts, 2011). By linking race and genetic differences, academia is participating in the re-emergence of white nationalist movements across the globe (Saini, 2019).

Apart from the egregious examples above, the concern about the one-sided nature of the knowledge transmitted in HWCUs remains. From the 1980s onward, numerous student protests have called for the development of racial and ethnic studies departments, courses addressing the histories of people of color, and for the possibility of alternative canons to emerge.[6] For example, students at Seattle University held a sit-in over the lack of diversity in their curricula that resulted in a college dean's retirement. Zeena Rivera, a second-year student at the protest, reported that she had read the works of Plato for four different courses and wanted to know "When am I going to start reading writers from China, from Africa, from South America? The only thing they're teaching us is dead White dudes" (Long, 2016, p. 1). In addition to the importance of teaching knowledge more representative of the population, students experience many positive outcomes when exposed to non-White thinkers and works in college (Denson & Bowman, 2017). Although some faculty have begun to challenge the white logic and methods dictating how science is conducted, analyzed, framed, and taught (see Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), faculty who teach such courses are often met with resistance from White students and faculty. Ultimately, the (white) canons have neither been dropped nor has sufficient space been given to the alternative interpretations of people of color.

White Climate

Integration in the 1960s and 70s did not produce a healthy, multicultural climate in HWCUs.[7] Students of color who attended these institutions in the early period recollect dealing with open hostility from White students and faculty. Even after events that seemingly suggest their assimilation to campus life, hostility remained normative. An example of this transpired at The University of Alabama in 1976. After Cleo Thomas was elected the first Black president of the student council, 15 people came out of the Kappa Sigma fraternity with white sheets over their heads to march along fraternity row, burn crosses, throw bottles, and mockingly sing 'We Shall Overcome'" (Whiting, 1976: para 2). Yet, social peace existed throughout most college campuses in the 1970s because of the limited number of students of color, the great social distance between White and non-White students, and the fact that students of color followed the racial etiquette for the most part.

The 1980s were years of intense racial friction in colleges across America as the number of students of color in HWCUs increased. *Essence* characterized this period as "Black and Blue on Campus" (Louis, 1986). Students and faculty of color experienced physical assaults, extreme isolation, discrimination in dorms, and open ridicule. An example of the latter is an article that appeared in *The Darmouth Review* critical of affirmative action, offensively titled "Dis Sho' Ain't No Jive, Bro" (ibid:132). This friction corresponded with the emergence of "color-blind racism" or what Professor Lowy aptly termed then as "yuppie racism" (1991). As White students came to believe racism was a thing of the past, any effort on the diversity front, particularly affirmative action, was regarded as "reverse discrimination." The outcome of this internal friction, combined with the social conservatism of the 1980s–1990s, was a decline in public commitment to affirmative action. For example, in 1994, 60% of institutions publicly declared that they considered race in undergraduate admissions; by 2014, just 35% did (Hirschman & Berrey, 2017).

This deinstitutionalization of affirmative action has worsened the campus climate at HWCUs. Examples of White people in black-, brown-, and yellowface are still happening today. Whites have used blackface to represent Venus and Serena Williams and Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren from *Orange is the New Black*. There have been "sleazy pimps" in blackface at fraternity parties and a "Mexican-fiesta themed" sorority party which had women in ponchos, sombreros, and mustaches holding racist signage (Basu, 2012). Students have painted their faces like 19th century minstrel shows and put on KKK robes for costume parties and Halloween. Since 2015, hate crimes reported to the FBI are up by 44%, and there has been a 77% increase in the circulation of White supremacist propaganda on campuses (Bauman, 2018). Furthermore, this white climate extends to the surrounding towns as well. Campuses often create their own college town or are "centers of culture" that affect the climate of the population and businesses surrounding the schools as well (Gumprecht, 2003).

Racialized policing at and around HWCUs also deeply affects the lives of people of color, from students and faculty to people not affiliated with the colleges.[8] As we write, there is a growing #DefundThePolice movement occurring all over the United States in response to the recent murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. Strikingly missing from this conversation, however, is the role of racialized campus policing. Campus police were historically brutal during the 1960s and remain so, as the incidents in 2011 at the University of California-Davis, where students were pepper sprayed, and -Riverside, where students were shot with "less than lethal" pellets show (Rodriguez, 2012). This is not surprising as campus police training is the same in most states as that of municipal police officers, which may explain why students of color do not trust them (Wada et al., 2010). Campus police perpetuate both physical and emotional violence on people of color, from Tahj Blow, a Black student at Yale who was held at gunpoint by a campus police officer, to Dr. Ersula Ore, a Black professor at Arizona State who was body-slammed by a campus police officer, to Oumou Kanoute, a Black student at Smith who was interrogated by campus police for simply eating lunch on campus.[9] Although students and faculty of color at HWCUs report that having your campus ID all the time

is helpful, it is also not necessarily protective as seen in the recent example of Alexander McNab, a Black student at Columbia University, who was forcibly pinned down by campus police after entering the library at affiliated school, Barnard College. For some, these incidents evoke parallels between campus IDs and freedom papers, documents certifying Black people's rights to access certain spaces from the 17th century (Jenkins et al., 2020). They state "our *second ID* – the university issued student ID – is another representation of Black surveillance, un/belonging, and a manifestation of the legacy of anitblackness" (ibid 2020:14). Related, work on the "stop and question" tactic by campus police reveals it is used overwhelmingly with people of color. In one study, 91% of those stopped and questioned at the University of Chicago were Black (Allen, 2016). After being stopped and questioned about her faculty status on at least three different occasions, Dr. Brenna Greer, a Black professor at Wellesley College described her fear and anger about racialized campus policing. She said, "campus police have to understand that for faculty, students, staff of color, for many of us, it doesn't matter that they're campus police. They're police…They're not who we trust. And they have to work extra hard to change that dynamic" (Weismann, 2020, p. 1).

Given these realities, it should not be surprising that people of color consistently report having worse perceptions of campus climate than their White peers (Telles & Mitchell, 2018). Thus, students and faculty of color begin to experience a "racial battle fatigue" from being in predominantly white educational environments and their surrounding areas which affects their educational experiences and outcomes (Smith et al., 2007). Without a critical examination of the policies and practices at these colleges, we believe HWCUs will continue to reproduce a hostile environment for the people of color who move in them.

Names, Statues, and Traditions

Historically white colleges and universities are laden with names, statues, and traditions that support and signify whiteness. Institutional icons such as buildings, portraits, and statues are typically of old White men. When non-White people are represented in symbols, it is often through racist representations such as the use of Native American tribes as schools' mascots. Although some HWCUs have officially changed their schools' racist mascots,[10] they are still used informally throughout campus, as they have become a (white) tradition important to many alumni who protested their removal.

Other traditions at HWCUs that often evoke racist stereotypes of minorities include homecoming, where racist parades and other culturally insensitive traditions abound, and campus-wide Thanksgiving parties, where fraternities and sororities have men "dressed up in colonial-era costumes and women scantily clad [in] Native American-themed outfits" (Alcorn, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, students of color were seldom included in yearbooks or in student newspapers until the late 1960s, but even in "progressive" colleges such as Antioch or Oberlin, these publications were markedly racist. Black students were seldom depicted, but racist imagery such as blackface and other racist motifs were quite common (Stewart, 2019). For their 1971 yearbook picture, a dozen

University of Virginia fraternity members, some armed, wore dark cloaks and hoods while peering up at a lynched mannequin in blackface. These symbols and traditions contribute to the normalization of white culture in HWCUs.

Many buildings and statues on HWCUs honor Whites, some with very problematic histories. For example, at Duke, the Carr Building was named after Julian Carr, a confederate in the Civil War known for the controversial speech where he advocated for the Anglo-Saxon race and spoke about beating a "negro wench" (Documenting the American South, n.d. Carr's speech took place at the University of North Carolina as he was dedicating the infamous statue now known as "Silent Sam" that remains controversial today (Pequeño, 2020). As these buildings and statues that memorialize historical figures take on new meanings, HWCUs must develop criteria for naming and erecting landmarks that are "historically informed, civically responsible, and broadly democratic" (Dennis & Reis-Dennis, 2019, p. 179).

What Can We Do?

Knowledge is power. The racial problems people of color face in the academy are not fundamentally the product of "implicit bias" or old-fashioned racism but an extension of the very structure and culture of most colleges. The overall "diversity" goal then ought to be crafting practices and policies to de-Whiten HWCUs and make them truly multicultural spaces. Logically, the first practice to transform HWCUs is for faculty, administrations, students, and the population at large to recognize that universities are saturated with whiteness.[11] Consequently, the enemy to battle is not bad actors (the racists) but "white normativity" (Bhandaru, 2013). To transform these colleges we must deconstruct "the mantra of nonracism—'I am not racist because I don't see race' [which] has enabled White Americans to withdraw into themselves and abandon non-Whites" (ibid:243). The implication here is that colleges are shaped by racial power dynamics as all organizations and institutions are racialized (Ray, 2019).

Second, if the built environment of these colleges reeks of whiteness, policies must be put in place to democratize it and remove the symbols of white supremacy. In this moment, struggles to rename buildings, remove statues, change mascots, and the like are taking place across the nation. Committees have emerged to study the history and complicity of colleges in slavery, Jim Crow, etc., but what is missing is a collective effort to truly transform these places. To make their ecology democratic and inclusive, nothing short of an architectural revolution is necessary (Louden & Harrington, 2017).

Third, although numbers do not equate directly to power, colleges must still strive to represent the demographic diversity of the nation in terms of its students, faculty, and staff. How can this be done? Katherine Newman, Provost at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, believes that by incentivizing departments to hire under-represented minorities, a demographic revolution in faculty hiring will transpire (Newman, 2020). Although the 1-year data at her institution is impressive, this type of bureaucratic effort without a political concern with remedying exclusion and a

collective ethos of racial reform will produce backlash and lawsuits.[12] Similarly, attempting to diversify the student and staff body through policies without doing the necessary political and cultural work is bound to fail.[13] Hence, what is needed is to labor to create and mobilize the political will to democratize HWCUs' demography.

Fourth, leadership matters and a new type of administrator is needed to enact the type of transformation we envision. Brown (1998) outlines many of the things college presidents should do, but his main claim is that they ought to be multicultural through and through and should "communicate unequivocally to the university community that diversity initiatives are to be included in policies and regulations, and that such matters will be reviewed, discussed, and implemented to include all segments of the university" (ibid:89).

Fifth, curricular reform is a must. This expectation was part of the demands of the historical struggle at San Francisco State College in 1968. They asked "to facilitate curricula that better represented the experiences and contributions top U.S. society of populations underrepresented in U.S. higher education" (Thompson, 2004, p. 109). Unfortunately, Diversity Inc. has replaced the political demand for historical reparation and rearticulated it with the inclusion of a few authors "without a reconceptualization of content" which maintains white curricular norms (Swartz, 1992, p. 342). On curricular reform, three core proposals advanced by Esson (2018) are the new holy grail: that the curriculum be (1) antiracist and embrace critical race theory, (2) incorporate social justice concerns, and (3) have a decolonial goal.

Sixth, to transform HWCUs, white *homo academicus* must cease from proclaiming to be a good, color-blind person and become an antiracist activist. Bonilla-Silva (2017) has outlined the arduous path involved, but we must underscore the process is continuous. The moment any White person thinks she is saved, is the moment she gets deeper into what people of color call the "deep whiteness," a term that "forces us to think about how the superiority complex of Whites that Du Bois addressed, reinforced by years of living in a white supremacist world, has produced a *deep whiteness* that may not be seen as such even by 'antiracist' Whites" (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 81).

Seventh, power-holders in organizations and institutions do not cede their advantageous position without demands. Historically, change on race matters has followed social movement demands (Kolb, 2009). Therefore, although we hope that many progressive Whites join the effort to change HWCUs, we know that the main thrust will come from students and faculty of color in these institutions. Predicting when social movements will emerge has proved to be a very tricky business, but we sense that people of color in the a*k*ademy[14] are close to reaching their tipping point. And when the kettle whistles, the changes we urge will become the new norm and we will finally be able to call HWCUs just colleges and universities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. For brevity, we will refer to "colleges and universities" as simply "colleges" when not directly referencing HWCUs.
2. Although racial incidents on college campuses are severely underreported, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* maintains a list of incidents that received news coverage.
3. We do not know much about HBCUs or HSIs. The public assumes that HBCUs and HSIs are institutions geared towards Blacks and Latinx people; however, work on these colleges have shattered these myths (see Laden, 2001; Palmer, Shorette II, and Gasman 2015). First, HBCUs are the product of racial exclusion in this country created to provide education to Blacks who were otherwise denied opportunities. Second, HBCUs are not all-Black. At least 17% of students and 37% of faculty at HBCUs identify as non-Black (Lee, 2015). Third, academic institutions become HSIs if they have a student body that is at least 25% Latinx. Hence the HSI designation is an administrative affair mostly for "public relations and privileged access to funding rather than practices connected to missions and purpose... [such as] expressly fighting racism through their work" (Greene & Oesterreich, 2012:169). Therefore, the racial characteristics of HBCUs and HSIs are quite distinct from HWCUs.
4. Truthfully, integration has never occurred, as what we have can best be described as spatial co-habitation.
5. For example, UGA proudly boasts of having a building named after the first two Black students to attend, the Hunter-Holmes Academic Building, conveniently brushing past the reason they were ultimately allowed to attend.
6. When Bonilla-Silva was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the 1980s, he participated in protests demanding the university hire more faculty of color, expand the curriculum on courses pertinent to the issues affecting people of color, and create requirements so that all students learn about the history and concerns of people of color. Over 30 years later, not much has changed.
7. A few students of color were admitted to some colleges before the 1960s but endured a totally marginal life. For example, Dan Kean, one of the first athletes to integrate The University of Michigan in the 1930s, recollected how tough his life was there. He emphatically said, "Black students were AT the University but not of it" (Steward, 2013, p. 93).
8. The murder of Samuel DuBose, a Black man, by a campus officer from the University of Cincinnati in 2015 is a reminder of how the patrolling of non-whiteness extends to the periphery of HWCUs (Harvard Law Review, 2016).
9. These and other cases are documented at *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*.
10. This change has been largely due to pressure from Native American organizations on the National Collegiate Athletic Association which in 2005 announced they would not allow the display of "hostile and abusive racial/ethnic/national origin mascots, nicknames or imagery" at any of their sports championships (NCAA 2005).

11. Our suggestions here are part of large conversations on HWCUs occurring across the world. For a superb example, see Law (2017).
12. We encourage interested readers to look at the comments on her piece to get a sense of things.
13. For examples on why this is the case in businesses, see Dobbin and Kalev (2016).
14. We choose to spell akademy with a "k" in order to signify that race is central to the construction of colleges. While some in these institutions may believe that we are somehow above the social fray, we argue this is impossible, and so the akademy as a race-central institution is represented in this spelling.

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