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The Racial Politics of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Work

Elvira Julia Abrica and Ruth Oliver Andrew
Department of Educational Administration, University of Nebraska—Lincoln

The stress, labor, and workload of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff and administrators in higher education never seem to end. On the one hand, colleges and universities require new and innovative infrastructures to support growing diversity on campus. On the other hand, the war against DEI wages on. DEI leaders and staff are forced into conversations about unit name changes, removing DEI rhetoric from strategic planning documents, or planning for their unit to be dissolved altogether. DEI and its workers are perpetually between a rock and a hard place. The purpose of this conceptual article is to outline precisely how DEI work is inherently shaped by White neoliberalism forces from outside but also within higher education. The premise of our argument is hegemonic Whiteness and White supremacy are at the heart of anti-DEI movements but also inherent in DEI work itself. We offer a contemporary perspective of the racialized tensions involved in doing DEI work and invite critical discussion around ways DEI practitioners might reify or challenge White logics of higher education.

Keywords: Whiteness, diversity, equity, inclusion, praxis

> The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion were never meant to result in equity and justice.
>
> —D. L. Stewart (2016)

The stress, labor, and workload of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff and administrators in higher education never seem to end (Endo, 2021; Gray et al., 2023; V. Jones, 2020, 2023). Within the current political and economic climate (e.g., Russell-Brown, 2024), DEI workers are forced to have conversations about unit name changes, removing DEI rhetoric from strategic planning documents, or planning for their unit to be dissolved altogether.[1] Perpetual threat is the condition in which DEI work is performed (e.g., James-Gallaway & Dixson, 2023; Morrison et al., 1975), a reminder of the protections afforded to Whiteness and White supremacy as a global superstructure (Mills, 2019). Hegemonic Whiteness and White supremacy are at the heart of current and past anti-DEI movements but also inherent in DEI work itself. We identify at least two conditions associated with DEI work: (a) DEI is under constant threat by those who believe it is too effective at exposing racism, Whiteness, and so forth, as evidenced in current anti-critical race theory and anti-DEI legislation and, at the same time, (b) DEI is made less effective by the White logics and neoliberal forces that characterize higher education organizations (H. A. Giroux, 2014; Patel, 2015; Squire, 2016; Squire et al., 2018). Logics, briefly, refer to socially constructed assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules that guide organizational actions and are characterized by organizational identity, legitimacy, authority structures, mission, focus of attention, strategy, logic of investment, governance, and economic orientation (Durand et al., 2013; Ray & Purifoy, 2019; Thornton et al., 2005, 2012).

In this article, we elaborate on White neoliberal logics as they shape racial politics of DEI work. Our contribution is not novel but contemporary and warranted by exacerbating the need for and rejection of racial and social justice projects. For example, recently, the Association for the Study of Higher Education's (ASHE's) Council on Ethnic Participation called for higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to decenter Whiteness to "deliberately attend to the needs, dreams, and desires of people of color" (ASHE, 2023, p. 39). The context of DEI work makes this an especially difficult task (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Welton et al., 2019). Racially and ethnically minoritized people who work in DEI are uniquely challenged to decenter Whiteness and transform organizations also having to rely on and work within the parameters of White logics within the organization (Gorski, 2019). As others before us have noted in prior critiques of DEI work (Ahmed, 2012, 2018; Casellas Connors, 2021; Gray et al., 2023; L. L. Jones, 2023; Leon, 2014; Long, 2003; Patton et al., 2019; Reed, 2023; Stewart, 2017), it is a perpetual challenge to transform higher education institutions while working within them (Andreotti et al., 2015; Stein, 2018, 2019, 2021; Stewart, 2017; Zembylas, 2021).

This scholarly article is a critical analysis of hegemonic Whiteness and White supremacy as it specifically impacts racially and ethnically minoritized people who work in DEI and more generally impacts any critical scholar, practitioner, or advocate of DEI. The purpose of this inquiry is to outline political and racialized tensions involved in post–2020 DEI work in higher education. The tensions articulated are reflective of foundational ideas from Lorde's discussion of working with the "master's tools" to dismantle the "master's house" (Lorde, 1984), Du Bois (1997) discussion of double consciousness, and Anzaldúa's (2007) foundational borderlands theorizing and other familiar critical, anticolonial, racial theories and texts. Specifically, we invite discussion of this question:

Elvira Julia Abrica https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6140-5325
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elvira Julia Abrica, Department of Educational Administration, University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 141 Teachers Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0360, United States. Email: elvira.abrica@unl.edu

[1] The Chronicle of Higher Education provides up to date tracking on DEI legislation: https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts.

how can organizational actors working in DEI spaces meaningfully disrupt, challenge, or decenter Whiteness when their work is constantly being contoured by organizational logics that advance Whiteness and neoliberalism? Ultimately, DEI work has become an important organizational asset in light of broader societal demands for racial justice that emerged in 2020. Now, post-2020, the pendulum is swinging in the other direction, and DEI is again under attack. DEI work has always been between a rock and a hard place, politically always contested. Amid concerns university investments in DEI will be eliminated or significantly reduced, we find it prudent to clarify that DEI is an enterprise that has, and we believe, always will serve White neoliberal interests. There is an immediate need to understand the nature of DEI, so efforts to rebuild or protect it do not replicate its current logics.

Our article is organized as follows: First, we share our analytic approach and explain how we came to this work. Second, we outline the context of DEI work as once characterized by White neoliberal interest. Third, we describe the tensions involved in simultaneously subverting and advancing White neoliberal interests in DEI work. Our focus is on tensions experienced specifically by staff and administrators of color working in DEI, but some implications of our argument may be relevant to White people who work in DEI and faculty working in DEI spaces on campus. We conclude the article with some ideas that may support practitioners' ongoing reflection and day-to-day actions.

Our Analytic Approach

Our analysis was informed by a theory of praxis. A theory of praxis suggests reflection and action are both needed to transform the social world. According to the theory of praxis, reflection is an active, engaging activity in which one considers the nature of oppression, ultimately leading to action and transformation (Freire, 1970; Gadotti, 1996; Mayo, 2020). We came together through a formal relationship as advisor and advisee in our higher education graduate program and through our respective DEI positions at our institution, a predominately White institution located in the midwestern United States. In reflecting on our own survival, relationship, and access to various forms of power, Whiteness, and how we navigate and negotiate the contours of Whiteness in our respective positions, we formed a new theorizing space by which we become coresearchers and coconspirators invested in a form of social justice and change (Anzaldúa, 2007; Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009; Torres, 2005). We connected on our own knowledge, experiences, and observations to critical theory and scholarship in higher education, resulting in our own theoretical argument concerning the racial politics of DEI work. This mirrors an analytic approach associated with authentic participatory action research, wherein research "collectives create new spaces whereby coresearchers enjoy new parts of themselves, and new forms of relationships with each other, and experiences that often run counter to traditional social hierarchies" (Torre & Ayala, 2009, p. 389). The purpose of explaining the racialized context and nature of DEI work is to invite and initiate change and is also an artifact of our ongoing, shared meaning-making and praxis. Naturally, we occupy individual social locations that position us differently relative to this work that we now describe.

I, Ruth, arrive at this research as a mixed race, biethnic woman with African American and Korean heritage, a lived identity that has provided as much impetus to make meaning of my racialized experiences as it has heightened my awareness of race as an organizational feature. Working as a DEI practitioner in a racially homogenous organization presents numerous questions related to race and institutional efforts aimed at advancing racial justice, including the projects I am involved in or initiate. I began working in this context in 2018 with minimal thought given to the premise of DEI as work that requires strategic attention to survive in the racialized organization. My work has solely focused on DEI education and development among staff and students and, though this work can be foundational, I contend it is evasive action at best and self-congratulatory at worst. It is important to note the mixed feelings I hold in being permitted to transition into DEI work simply, because I expressed an interest in doing so and, perhaps, because I was presumed competent in DEI matters because of my racial otherness in an all-White organization. Since then, I have sought education from—and collaboration with—critically oriented advisors and continue to build the critical DEI consciousness necessary to navigate this work. Yet, this process has made clear organizational decision-makers appoint us into positions despite their lack of awareness of DEI let alone DEI work. This lack of competence formed the conditions of my entry to DEI work in so far as awareness and knowledge were deferred to whomever appeared "to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression—regardless of what they have or have not actually experienced, or what they do or do not actually know about the matter at hand" (Táíwò, 2022). It is with this knowledge that I locate myself directly in the complexity of systematizing DEI work in a White hegemony that dilutes real equity and inclusivity efforts with the bureaucratic tools of delay and specialization.

I, Elvira, am a Mexican American/Chicana female from the poorest areas of Southern California, working as a tenured associate professor of higher education. I occupy both positions of extreme privilege with protections afforded to me as a faculty member at a research university and the experience of marginality that comes with working in a predominately White institution and living in a politically conservative and majority White, midwestern region of the United States. Specifically, I made a decision to abandon my family of origin and have adopted White ways of being in service of material well-being and immediate financial security. At the time of writing this article, I held a temporary appointment in our campus diversity office. It was easy to relate to Ruth's DEI work experiences to my own observations and tensions in advancing a critical research agenda while also having to cater to, or at minimum, respond to, White fragility and emotion (Matias, 2014, 2016, 2020; Morales et al., 2019). My own teaching, research, and service activities all center critical educational and racial theories. I assume students are theorists (Abrica, 2019); they have deep knowledge and analysis about the conditions of their lives, and my role is to support them in leading meaningful research projects like this one, centering their lived experiences (Torre & Ayala, 2009). This work is important to me not only because of the argument we pose but also because of the generative and collaborative experience of doing this work. Ultimately, my purpose of explicating the racialized context and nature of DEI work is to indict Whiteness as actively limiting individual agency (Abrica, 2022) but also serve as an artifact of our ongoing, shared meaning-making and praxis.

Establishing the Context of DEI Work in Higher Education

DEI in higher education is generally understood as a means to support broad social justice aims that loosely reflect the democratic value of higher education for the public good (Ahmed, 2012; H. A. Giroux, 2014; Hurtado, 2007; Stein, 2016). Specifically, DEI is an amalgam of terms reflecting an orientation toward procedural and distributive justice in organizations and institutions, the extent of this orientation is debatable (Arsel et al., 2022). Meanwhile, DEI work is an area of defined staff and administrative roles within higher education. The practical nature of DEI work can involve education around diversity issues, activities, and programming to support the inclusion of diverse perspectives and students. Guiding DEI work could be any number of theoretical, epistemological, and political perspectives, including critical race theoretical perspectives, Marxist, anticolonial, and decolonial critiques of higher education, and could be viewed as reflecting a range of other political, theoretical, and moral philosophies. Amorphous and varied in design and execution, DEI work, however, has supported several of several positive student developmental and retention outcomes across a range of learning contexts, fostering supportive learning environments, particularly for racially minoritized communities at predominately White institutions (PWIs; for a comprehensive review of campus diversity initiatives at PWIs, see Patton et al., 2019). For example, DEI education in the form of racial and cultural awareness workshops and dialogues can foster positive learning and development among students. Bowman et al. (2016) work is an example of evidence that attending diversity workshops can support postcollege behaviors, attitudes/beliefs, and skill/tendencies, regardless of participants' race/ethnicity, gender, and institutional type. Relatedly, DEI efforts are aligned with the premise that a diverse student population benefits all student learning and development, a logic common in affirmative action discourse. DEI work emerged in part because of a need to support diversity through an alternative mechanism to affirmative action (Long, 2003). We do not mean to underscore the importance of the labor of DEI workers or undermine the enduring and positive support for marginalized students and people on campus. Rather, our intention is to name the inherent racial and political tension in doing work that both subverts and reinforces unequal power structures, that requires compliance and acquiescence to Whiteness while also challenging it. As previous critiques of DEI work have noted, DEI can support equity causes to an extent, but DEI as an enterprise of the neoliberal university, like any other functional or revenue-generating unit, largely serves White interests (Ahmed, 2012; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Leon, 2014; Patton et al., 2019; Stewart, 2017).

Whiteness and neoliberalism are interrelated phenomena that fundamentally shape the organization and management of American colleges and universities (H. A. Giroux, 2014; Patel, 2015; Squire, 2016; Squire et al., 2018). At the heart of both are capitalist market logics that are economically generative and protective of White interests and White people. Specifically, Whiteness is a global social superstructure through which cultural, social, political, and organizational norms are defined and organized around the interests of White people and the idea that White people are supreme relative to other racial groups. White supremacist ideology shapes cultures, norms, expectations for behavior, and virtually all facets of the social world (Mills, 2019). Whiteness matters as an ideological context of higher education because it allows for an understanding of how seemingly race-neutral concepts, policies, and structures in fact benefit White people, even without anyone noticing or identifying it as so (Liu et al., 2019). Whiteness and White supremacy, then, become hegemonic, where White dominance over people of color becomes normalized and taken for granted.

There are countless examples of seemingly race-neutral policies deleteriously impacting people of color within our institutional context. For example, we observe differences in available resources for White versus "multicultural" student organizations. Where historically White fraternities and sororities have access to private houses and spaces on campus, multicultural Greek organizations rely on shared, public campus spaces to meet and organize (Garcia, 2019; see Duran et al., 2022, for a discussion on Whiteness and campus spaces). Even policies regarding food and catering can signal who belongs and campus and who does not. For example, we learned of an incident where a multicultural student organization attempted to bring (Mexican) food prepared and catered by a local restaurant, but current policies require events on campus to use dining services vendors on campus. Though there are certainly good reasons to limit outside food vendors on campus, we can also say that denial of entry serves the interests of economic capital for the university and reifies a historical legacy by non-White groups who have had neither the economic resources nor social acceptance to actually belong. Neoliberalism, not inclusivity of different groups and interests, is what guides policy and allows higher education to function like a business within a capitalist marketplace (H. A. Giroux, 2002).

Meanwhile, often through experiences of racial trauma, people of color learn to behave according to White norms and values that are reinforced through seemingly race-neutral policies and practices (i.e., there is no sign saying "Mexican food not allowed"). There are ample examples of racist federal and state policies impacting communities of color (Luedke & Corral, 2021; McCoy-Simmons et al., 2023). With this understanding, we see White supremacy is dynamically produced and reproduced not only as a function of interpersonal interaction (i.e., the person who turned away the "multicultural students" may have been White or a person of color) but also manifests culturally and structurally. Hegemonic Whiteness becomes the "cultural and discursive practices that serve to naturalize unequal social relations along the color line" (Cabrera, 2018, p. 223). Understanding the insidious, naturalized, and often unnamed manifestations of Whiteness and neoliberalism is key in challenging purported racial justice projects like inclusion, diversity, and equity.

A second point to underscore the context of DEI work in higher education is the ways Whiteness is discursively and culturally embedded in the values and assumptions undergirding the American higher education system. Although thought of as a democratic and benevolent institution for the public good, higher education is never removed from larger projects of securing state power, capital accumulation, and their "ordering logics of racialized de/valuation" (Stein, 2018, p. 131). Individuals are not positioned to simply comply or not comply with Whiteness, largely because of the economic imperative created when Whiteness and capital are so intertwined (Memmi, 1965). Yet, there is an ever-present assumption that Whiteness and capitalism can be separate, that somehow well-meaning White people will eventually advance interests other than their own (Bell, 1980), and that there is some horizon of racial justice toward which we are all moving (Baber, 2015; Mustaffa, 2017; Seamster & Ray, 2018;

Squire, 2016; Stein, 2019). For example, our assumption that "students of color" must be provided with more "inclusive" environments effectively reifies a higher education imaginary in which it is assumed higher education is comprised of "good people" who, if provided with enough information about the campus experience of "diverse populations," "would enable that population to 'be included' in our field of research and concern" (Stein, 2019, p. 8). Abrica et al. (2023) leverage an argument against the practice of assessing campus climate, arguing campus climate surveys superficially advance amorphous social justice aims and often do more harm than good by requiring students of color to provide further evidence of racial trauma. The illusion of racial progress (Seamster & Ray, 2018) and assumptions of the benevolence of White people (Matias, 2014, 2016, 2020; Morales et al., 2019) play an active role in perpetuating, not dismantling, Whiteness and neoliberal interests (Stein, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2021). Specifically, colleges and universities must adopt a face of diversity, equity, and inclusion to align themselves with broader social justice projects and remain competitive for resources (e.g., student tuition dollars). As C. M. Smith (2019) points out, from an organizational perspective, DEI becomes part of the adaptive strategy of the higher education organization through which it can activate the salience of race and meanings about race when it is advantageous to do so (Baber, 2015; Berrey, 2011; C. M. Smith, 2019). White people directly benefit from assumptions of ignorance and benevolence that undergird higher education rhetoric (Stein, 2021; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

The DEI Enterprise

We argue that DEI is fundamentally a neoliberal enterprise that extends, rather than disrupts, the logics of Whiteness. Specifically, DEI is a mechanism by which colleges and universities can appear antiracist or social justice-oriented while obfuscating any meaningful engagement with race, racism, or Whiteness. DEI, as an enterprise, caters to "a Eurocentric anxiety" about the "increased size and diversity of the social world" (Martín Alcoff, 1999, p. 15). It offers a way to acknowledge the existence of non-White groups and ways of disruption to core norms and values of Whiteness. Using the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as we previously discussed, allows and invites the assumption White colleges and universities are benevolent and working toward equitable and democratic goals. Yet, as Patel (2015) poignantly notes, these assumptions obfuscate the "deep and purposeful architecture" by which groups have been excluded from higher education and "renders invisible the personal attachment from those who *benefit* from that sustained inequity" (p. 670). Thus, the core benefit of DEI enterprise is to advance neoliberal and White interests of the university. As previously stated, this is not to suggest that historically marginalized student populations do not benefit from DEI efforts at all. Rather, our point is that the DEI enterprise obfuscates White neoliberal interests that are inherently at play, for, as Bell (1980) noted, "racial remedies may be granted in so far as they do not harm societal interests deemed important by middle- and upper-class whites" (p. 80). White interests are preserved, fundamentally, within the DEI enterprise, and this is fostered when those who work within DEI are left to enact meaningful or superficial change (Leon, 2014). Individuals must figure out how to meaningfully advance social justice while working betwixt and between the contours of Whiteness (Desnoyers-Colas, 2019). This positions the DEI enterprise to work both for and against any amorphous social justice aims.

Within the DEI enterprise, individuals enact agency in nuanced, complex (and largely understudied) ways to resist and transform whatever unspecified racial or social justice project they imagine. As Ruth previously noted, people of color are often called upon by our institution to serve as DEI experts, not because of our academic or professional expertise but just because we are not White. The subjective nature of how we (people of color) each understand and approach issues of social justice is never scrutinized. Yet, fundamentally, we occupy complex and heterogeneous social locations that differently inform our interpretations of social justice. So, whether the goal is to advance racial equity and inclusion of racial minorities or any other group identity that has historically been marginalized in some capacity, that social justice project should be defined. Such a definition is inherently shaped by individual's agency, which can be understood dialectically as benefiting from but also contributing to various systems of oppression (Au, 2018). Simply put, individuals hold and occupy multiple social locations. It is from these locations that they conceptualize justice. Those in pursuit of some form of justice should reckon with the dialectic ways in which they too serve injustice. Our argument in this article has been that White neoliberal and capitalist interests circumscribe individual agency; these forces delimit or expand the capacity for social justice at the institutional level.

It is imperative to understand that essentialist or essentializing portrayals of individuals are misaligned with real or meaningful redress of oppression. Capitalist economic structures are always intertwined with multiple forms of oppression, and there is a dynamic relationship between multiple and intersecting forms of oppression such that educational spaces (e.g., schools, colleges, and universities) can serve as sites of both resistance and revolution, of both exploitative and emancipatory projects. Unfortunately, this idea of intersectionality is also appropriated, watered down, and misused in DEI projects, a separate but related argument advanced by Harris and Patton (2019). DEI work, perhaps like other forms of work in a capitalist society, involves individuals "coming together within specific historical and social contexts in order to both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence" (H. Giroux, 1983, p. 259).

One might consider whether institutional context or specific DEI role matters in how we conceptualize the DEI enterprise. It does not. Institutional type, size, and demographic composition of a campus are not variables, from our perspective, that in and of themselves challenge neoliberalism and Whiteness (e.g., Abrica et al., 2020; Vega et al., 2022). There is no prior research to suggest the tensions and experiences of DEI work differ across institutional spaces, although a preponderance of work situates DEI work as particularly challenging and fraught in predominately White institutional contexts (Patton et al., 2019; Reed, 2023). For example, scholars have previously laid out the tensions of Black leadership in higher education and DEI work (Ahmed, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018; Briscoe et al., 2022; Briscoe & Jones, 2022; L. L. Jones, 2023; Stewart, 2017). Gray et al. (2023) chapter, for example, outlines "the DEI industrial complex" and the experiences of Black women DEI leaders. Collins (1994), Gray et al. (2023) articulate, for example, how DEI racial oppression is inherently linked to gendered and other forms of oppression where Black women must "spend an

insurmountable effort challenging White hegemony in academia" (p. 267). Simultaneously, Black women perform "motherwork," defined as a "form of reproductive labor that involves Black women's efforts to promote the survival of Black children, families, and communities despite White supremacist practices" (Gray et al., 2023, p. 267). The DEI enterprise has, as we have noted throughout, been challenged and critiqued by those who have long been attuned to the enduring power of White supremacy and the superficial nature of DEI rhetoric, what Stewart (2017) described as a *language of appeasement*.

DEI Enterprise Absorbs Black and Brown Labor

Within the DEI enterprise, faculty, administrators, and staff are formally and informally appointed to perform DEI labor in the form of trainings, workshops, climate assessments, expert panels, book discussions, and similar activities. DEI workers, particularly those working within historically White institutions, are often propped against racist incidents to respond or advise responses (Ahmed, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018; see Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, and Grosfoguel, 2012, for discussion of politics of inclusion and epistemology). In particular, Brown and Black bodies are called upon only when the circumstances involve an opportunity to make the organization appear genuine and adept at acknowledging racism. As Patel (2015) explains, the university establishes its identity and status as White property by relying on people of color to "not only deliver racist institutions from the appearance of racism but also receive the shockwaves of aggressions from those not fully complicit or conscious of how this desired object threatens their status" (p. 670). The plantation metaphor is particularly useful for understanding how capital accumulation and Whiteness operate in DEI (Dancy et al., 2018; Squire et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021). Specifically, Black and Brown labor exists for institutional yields. The structural elements of knowledge (i.e., White people's attitudes about Blacks), sentiment (i.e., White domination and paternalism of Blacks), goal (i.e., profitability of Black bodies for diversity outcomes), status (i.e., hierarchy of decision-makers on campuses), sanction (i.e., punishments for not owning "Whiteness" and punishment for dissent), and facility (i.e., use of Black production for White gain) are outlined within the plantation politics framework. Squire et al. (2018) assert from a plantation political framework; the Chief Diversity Officer is the house slave who occupies an elevated position relative to other slaves, specifically because they have to some extent bought into Whiteness and its logics. These and other instances in which Black and Brown bodies are elevated offers just enough leeway for Black people "to breathe and have a sense of humanity when the campus creates diversity task forces, invites speakers to campus, and conducts climate surveys … but only just enough room to maintain order" (Squire et al., 2018, p. 13). Thus, it becomes the cultural and discursive practice of the university to appropriate DEI language and rhetoric and acknowledge Black and Brown humanity conditionally. That is, only under the conditions and context consistent with White supremacist ideology and the preservation of White property, space, and capital.

So many Indigenous, queer, third-world, feminist, Black, people of color, and others have brilliantly, poetically, and powerfully articulated the experience of tension, confusion, duality, and dynamism that comes from living as a non-White person living and working in capitalist White society. There is a rich intellectual tradition, from Du Bois' (1997) articulation of a double consciousness to Anzaldúa's (2007) theorizing of third space borderlands, to more contemporary applications in higher education (Abrica et al., 2023; Beatty & Lima, 2022; Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Briscoe & Jones, 2022; Briscoe et al., 2022; DiAngelo, 2006; Franklin, 2016; Gorski, 2019; Jaime & Rios, 2017) that has relevance to the ways DEI workers must navigate tensions of working in the master's house (Lorde, 1984). A more contemporary rendering of Whiteness as it psychologically shapes the acculturation processes of people of color is offered by Liu et al. (2019). For example, they identify specific ways White culture, White supremacist ideology, and White space shape the psychological context for acculturation among people of color. They explain that White cultural values center individualism, competition, hierarchical power structures, objective science, and ownership of goods and property (Liu et al., 2019, p. 146). These values, grounded in a belief White people's supremacy, legitimate existing racial hierarchies and makes it warranted, normalized, and expected that White people can and should surveil and police White space, what Liu et al. (2019) refer to as an ontological purpose for White people. People of color, then, are inherently in a complicated position of having to respond and adapt to White norms and value systems and square White values with their own in terms of "how they regard themselves, White people, and other people of color" (Liu et al., 2019, p. 146). Advancing any interests of people of color or social justice is inherently complicated by White hegemonic Whiteness (Cabrera, 2018).

DEI workers are inherently positioned to be in tension, do they accept their elevated status, knowing, at least to some extent, that its symbolic nature serves a White master? (Squire et al., 2018). How do they answer or respond to Lorde's (1984) classic argument that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house? (p. 27). Abrica's (2022) work is useful in thinking about the additional cognitive expenditures people of color engage in educational spaces. Abrica (2022) explains that White norms and values drive the expectations for behavior in social spaces, such that individuals have to constantly reappraise and reassess their behavior and their experiences. It is an additional cognitive stress to not only have to constantly endure racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, racism, and bias but also constantly reassess, reappraise, and make meaning around how to respond to racist experiences, what to believe about ourselves and our communities, and how to behave in ways that make White people feel safe, signaling that we, as persons of color, pose no threat to their property or space (Abrica, 2022; Liu et al., 2019). Abrica (2022) critiques existing higher education for treating race in essentializing ways that obscure the complexities and nuances of Whiteness as it impacts psychosocial realities for people of color. Abrica (2022) further argues that higher education practitioners too often assume there is a level of racial solidarity, for example, among communities of color. She states that the very nature of White supremacy and racial domination is such that there is no collective, shared, or uniform experience, response, or understanding of race and racism (Abrica, 2019, 2022; Abrica & Dorsten, 2020; Abrica et al., 2023; Abrica & Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2019). By design, systems of oppression insist on de facto assumptions about individual members of colonized or oppressed groups while denying collective mobilization, memory, and identification that would serve attempts to resist such oppression (Memmi, 1965). Indeed, people of color can internalize racist ideas,

beliefs, norms, and values such that they do not share antiracist, critical racial awareness. Importantly, "the application of hegemonic Whiteness and its break with the assumption of racial solidarity allows for people of color to support systemic racism while providing a more heterogeneous view of minority perspectives on the subject" (Cabrera, 2018, p. 226). Internalized dominant norms and values, particularly among those who may phenotypically present as racially White (i.e., White Latina/o/x individuals), are not often described as a dimension of experiences that, within the DEI enterprise, may differentially shape how DEI workers navigate the racial politics and conditions of DEI work. Ultimately, people of color are inherently forced to grapple with White culture, White supremacist ideology, and White space and consequently must engage in added and stressful work to assess and appraise how they should live. Arguably, Whiteness directly supports capital accumulation and protection of White values, norms, and property at the expense of people of color's agency and safety (Abrica, 2022; Liu et al., 2019).

Here, we wish to clarify that our focus is explaining how DEI is fundamentally a White neoliberal enterprise, and because of this condition, those who work within DEI must navigate racial politics and logics, meaning individuals of any background must agentically navigate where there is perhaps narrow hope or possibility of change (Lorde, 1984). For example, there are ways White allyship must also respond to White norms and values (Mathew et al., 2023; Patton & Bondi, 2015). Our argument is meant to elevate the cognitive, emotional, and often invisible labor of Black, Indigenous, people of color, specifically because their compliance with Whiteness is mandated through racial trauma and microaggressions (Liu et al., 2019, p. 147) and because they do not benefit from its logics as White people do.

Generally, DEI workers can range from hourly staff to salaried program directors, to senior administrators and diversity officers. We could discuss the demographics of the profession and how many White versus non-White DEI workers exist across different institutions. But we operate from the premise that Whiteness and White supremacy are the ideological contexts in which any DEI worker or affiliate finds themselves. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage racial equity in the DEI profession itself (i.e., one could question who is occupying the highest level DEI positions), but from our perspective, centering White DEI professionals replicates White logics in focusing on racial demography (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and neoliberal ideals in centering occupational prestige (Pérez Huber et al., 2018).

A second point of clarification is though we emphasize the physical, emotional, and mental harms Black people and people of color endure as consequences of doing DEI work, we must also underscore a dialectic of humanity that exists alongside racial subjection and exploitation within White organizations (or the "plantation" as Squire et al., 2018, describe it). That is, we often fail to "render the historical being of Black peoples into a construct of historical materialism" thereby signifying Black people as only actors in opposition to capitalism (Robinson, 2000). There is much literature documenting Black joy (Johnson, 2015; Tichavakunda, 2022) in higher education spaces. We underscore the dialectic and human experience of being within and of the master's house (Lorde, 1984).

The logics of Whiteness can and are enacted by people of color and White people alike. It can extend to predominantly White institutions and minority-serving institutions (Abrica et al., 2020). The DEI enterprise and other educational spaces often assumed to be predicated on justice and antiracism (see Morales et al., 2019) reveal the same White logics as other social spaces. Within this global structure, people of color are confronted with the psychological stress of having to act in accordance with Whiteness to keep their job, "avoid hostility or tension, or minimize their racial presence" (Liu et al., 2019, p. 147). In everyday life, people of color must play by White people's rules or suffer injury or death. This may be something like stepping out of the way of a White person so they can pass on the sidewalk or avoiding racial discourse to ensure White people feel safe (Liu et al., 2019). For people of color occupying relatively elite positions within the university as DEI administrators or staff, they carry a specialized burden of negotiating Whiteness in unique and university-sanctioned ways. A DEI worker might easily adopt maladaptive coping strategies: become complicit in the DEI enterprise project, protest the labor exploitation, or exit the institution altogether. Each bears individual consequences only for the racially minoritized person pushed to choose, reifying the logics of Whiteness that maintain the DEI enterprise. Squire et al. (2018) identify this condition as one in which DEI provides a "moderated space for Black people to engage in the educational enterprise" (p. 11). Emotional labor is tacitly encouraged through the pretense of grit and resilience, which replicate meritocratic beliefs that applying oneself is equivalent to being successful (Davis et al., 2019; Douglas & Halas, 2013; Kerrison et al., 2018; Lee & Hicken, 2016). Black people and people of color are expected to maintain a steady strength of character even in the face of Whiteness (Ahmed, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018; Lorde, 1984; W. A. Smith et al., 2011).

Discussion and Implications

This section calls for a discussion of practical, real-world solutions implicated by our argument. We observe the precariousness of providing concrete recommendations that require DEI workers to do more work, particularly as our own institution is witnessing severe budget cuts and elimination of DEI work on campus. Individuals' livelihoods, regardless of our critique, depend on the DEI enterprise. As threats become tangible budget cuts at our institution, we do not have the economic power to refuse or mitigate the very real and severe budget cuts to diversity efforts on our campus. We do not have political or organizational power to change what DEI work looks like in the future at our institution. We work in solidarity and alongside individuals and groups who are actively calling for investment in DEI by organizing collective action (e.g., letter writing, protests, and events), although we are not hopeful that demands to reverse budget cuts will be met. Whether or not there will be DEI work in any formal capacity is uncertain. Most likely, slashing of DEI work means greater labor and work for minoritized faculty and staff members who already perform disproportionate work in service of DEI aims. We are bearing witness to threats becoming reality as we close this article. Still, should DEI units survive on other campuses, or take on different names or structures, we feel it is imperative to keep in mind the points we have raised in this article. Namely, no matter the future structure of DEI, we (meaning those invested in racial justice) should always reject superficial action items like conducting more climate surveys or adding items to strategic plans. As new DEI forms necessarily take shape, it is important to not assume a shared level of criticality

among the new DEI workers (e.g., as old DEI workers are laid off, cut off from their jobs amidst current budget reductions). There must be recognition of the fundamental and inherent nature of Whiteness that drives even presumably critical stances. What we mean is rather than assuming higher education practitioners' benevolence and commitment to arriving at some amorphous racial justice horizon, we are saying we must challenge assumptions of racial progress and claims, we are indeed getting closer to racial justice when in fact White norms and values are repurposed and perpetually shapeshifting. The only hope is to build a shared critical consciousness that specifically indicts Whiteness.

We envision and recommend a praxis of critical DEI consciousness that explicitly centers two points of reflection for DEI scholars, practitioners, and advocates to engage in the kind of authentic reflection that scrutinizes the ideological fabric of their work to create possibilities for specific action for transformative change. Again, a theory of praxis suggests reflection and action are both needed to transform the social world. Reflection is an active, engaging activity in which one considers the nature of oppression, which ultimately leads to action and transformation. Practicing critical DEI consciousness means being in dialogue with oneself and others engaged in DEI work in ways that transgress White norms, values, and spaces, and this continual reflection draws critical attention to the process of locating oneself and one's work within the enterprise We offer this praxis as a requisite to the sought-after practical solutions for racial inequity within higher education institutions. Here, "we" refers not only to ourselves as authors but also to those who work in DEI spaces, particularly DEI workers of color.

> *Reflection 1:* The Work of DEI in the White, Neoliberal Organization Does Not Belong to Me; With This Consciousness I Critically Evaluate the Logics of My Initiatives and Unmask Whom They Serve.

Those invested in meaningful organizational, cultural, and structural change must challenge the ways they and others perpetuate White logics. To recognize the racialized nature of DEI work, we must first recognize who and what constitutes our work. Rather than uncritically continue to invest in the idea that through some concerted effort of well-meaning actors (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) redress of racial inequities via DEI would be possible or even expected, it is essential for scholars, practitioners, and advocates to unpack the vestiges of colonialism, racial domination, and White supremacy that shape individual identity, experience, and perception. Resisting the idea of DEI work as something independent from the White hegemony animating the institution allows us to more accurately identify how our roles, as DEI workers, are contingent on the approval of our purpose in the organization. To subvert the insidious nature of hegemonic Whiteness, it is necessary for DEI workers to identify how, not if, their work is Whitened. As anti-DEI legislation targets the work of racial justice inside colleges and universities, those engaged in this work should be mindful of neoliberal responses that sanitize or appropriate racial justice projects. It will be necessary to develop and retain an unrelenting criticality that serves as both lens and instrument to discern maladaptive DEI strategies and devise counterstrategies.

> *Reflection 2:* I Confront the DEI Enterprise and Reveal It to Others; Through This Knowing We Subvert the Hegemonic Whiteness and White Supremacy That Manifests DEI Work.

Ever present in the context of DEI work is the challenge of producing real power to facilitate racial projects that dismantle discursively and culturally embedded Whiteness in the higher education institution. After all, what real power can be leveraged for racial justice and whose version of racial justice is guiding such action? If DEI labor only strengthens the White, neoliberal organization, then how can we recoup power lost to the DEI enterprise? These questions remain implicit in the ethos of DEI work, and they foreground the indispensability of criticality. We urge higher education scholars and DEI practitioners to partner in this criticality to inquire into the successes and failures of DEI work, probing the root concepts that lie below the surface of regulatory policies, practices, and procedures (Squire et al., 2018) to reform the logics of solutions and advocacy desired by organizational leaders. By exposing the hidden assumptions and contradictions of DEI work, critical scholars, practitioners, and advocates can deconstruct the insidiousness of hegemonic Whiteness and make known the White neoliberal and capitalist interests undergirding the value of racial justice projects (Ahmed, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018). Through meaningful alliances of critical DEI consciousness, we can narrowly (Lorde, 1984) but more effectively resist (Ahmed, 2018) White neoliberal forces in ways that authentically reflect our own norms, values, and humanity.

Conclusion

DEI is a perpetually moving target. Though it proports to support an ambiguous goal of racial progress, it very often reflects White supremacist norms, values, and ideas. In this article, we have explained how White supremacy characterizes higher education and how DEI co-opting becomes a function of that schema. This article is an invitation for DEI practitioners and higher education scholars to engage in discussion of how forms of capital, power, resistance, or resilience can be useful or activated in the context of DEI and antiracist work. For example, we might consider what assets can be leveraged in decentering Whiteness and think of the contexts and conditions in which these forms of power are expressed. In what ways do DEI practitioners of color wield power and in what ways does that power reify or challenge White logics? The answers to these questions are obviously complex. However, we underscore the need to center both power and race in discussions focused on "diversity" and "inclusion." The only possibility DEI has for advancing racial justice projects, we argue, is to explicitly engage with race, racism, vis-a-vis challenging the logics of Whiteness. The discussion of meaningfully confronting Whiteness and neoliberal logics of higher education is particularly warranted at our own institution, where increasingly, threats to DEI work are becoming real. The structure of DEI work is changing and the exploitative nature of the future of DEI work is yet to be revealed.

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