THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

"It's embedded in its history and a lay of its culture:"
antiblackness at institutions of higher learning

By

Katelyn Meehan

June 2024

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts

degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences.

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melanie Jeske
Preceptor: Dr. Deirdre Lyons

ABSTRACT

Pervasive antiblackness diminishes the collective communicative power of racialized scholars oriented toward social transformation in higher education and research. In this paper, I examine the incomprehensible social life of pervasive antiblackness at one higher learning research institute. Participant narratives suggest pervasive antiblackness dishonors, devalues, and dehumanizes Black bodies, knowers, knowledge production, and ways of knowing. These barriers are not attacks on individual students or knowledge producers – these barriers are part of the broader everyday violences against Black community and any scholars honoring Black life by examining racialized (and gendered) inequality. They also recognize it as a site for social transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

While speaking at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York City in 1949, W.E.B. Du Bois addressed the two barriers that disrupt intellectual freedom. The first barrier he named was "war: organized murder, maiming, destruction and insanity." The second barrier was "the world-old habit of refusing to think for ourselves, or to listen to those who do think." (Dubois 1949).

Black radical, feminist-womanist, queer study has always communicated the necessary collective building of communicative power for socially transformative action, for everyone regardless of race or gender (Combahee River Collective; Cohen 2001; hooks 2003; Collins 2022, Kelley 2022). "Abolition is a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice and seeks (as it performs) a radical reconfiguration of justice, subjectivity, and social formation that does not depend on relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance" (Rodriguez 2018). Any attack on this mode of thinking (or gathering), is a call to reinforce subjugation and attempts to reestablish democracies boundaries – "the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially fashioned captivity" (James, 2013). What is necessary for social transformation is understanding how antiblackness is the foundational ground for which hegemonic power and heteronormativity operate (Wilderson 2007; Cohen 2001).

Still wading through the racial reckoning of 2020, new racialized crises emerge demanding our intellectual freedoms and communicative power. Multiple imperial wars have drawn up student and faculty protests, challenging universities across the country to reexamine the meaning of "academic freedom" and "freedom of speech" (Quilantan 2023; Kolhatkar 2024). University presidents have been Congressionally challenged to define disciplinary actions towards rigorous thinking (Quilantran and Carballo 2024; Helmore 2023). Students studying rigorously within the boundaries of elite universities are discredited for knowing, thinking, and expressing their call to

(re)define humanity and resist racialized violence (Peters 2024; Gunawardena 2024; Said 2024; Müller 2024).

Entangled in this is the continued attacks on Black Knowers, knowledge production, and ways of knowing led by right-wing state legislators who are banning disciplinary knowledge and critical inquiry (Prose, 2023; Lopez et al 2021; Perry 2023). Since September 2020, a total of 247 local, state, and federal government entities across the United States have introduced 807 anti-Critical Race Theory bills, resolutions, executive orders, and other measures (Taifha et al 2023). Affirmative Action was overturned in 2023 ending race-conscious admissions, while legislative attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion are coming in from all directions (Totenberg 2023; Watson 2024; Gretzinger and Hicks; 2024). This is certainly a moment where knowledge systems addressing social relations of domination and resistance are systematically under attack, leaving knowers and ways of knowing socially and politically vulnerable.

Recent scholarship has addressed the ways higher learning research institutions reproduce and maintain white supremacy and antiblackness, revealing disproportionality and inequality in Black students' admissions and faculty hiring (Allen et al 2018; 2020), continued experiences of racism, microaggressions, and worries about belonging (Brady et al. 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015; Stewart, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012); the barriers knowledge producers face, including resistance to research questions about racism, inequality, and other topics related to race (Pasque et al. 2012).

Interrogating antiblackness in higher education means looking for more than explicit forms of oppression, as the structural and cultural norms mask everyday experiences of dehumanization. Antiblackness is a paradox of agency that emerges as a position of thought shaping our social norms, social processes, social institutions, and social knowledge and it has psychological and political effects on everyone regardless of race or gender (Hartman and

Wilderson 2003; Jung and Vegas 2021). In this paper, I examine perceptions and experiences of (anti)blackness as it emerges in social interactions, organizational, and institutionalized processes. Participant narratives describe the social life of intellectual alienation, epistemic exclusion, and systemic dehumanization. Pervasive antiblackness dishonors, disvalues, and dehumanizes Black bodies, knowers, knowledge production, and ways of knowing.

Institutional Context

This private elite research university is located in the Midwest in a predominately Black community. It serves as the largest private employer in the region and significantly influences the local economy and community. Historically, it played an active role in enforcing racially restrictive covenants and urban renewal policies which have created racial tensions with neighboring Black communities (Patillo 2010).[1]

Black students make up less than 5% of student population and Black faculty up less than 4% of faculty population.[2] In recent years the university has taken steps toward understanding campus climate regarding a range of issues related to diversity and inclusion by administering climate surveys measuring attitudes and experiences of university community members. Findings reveal Black student and faculty have an overwhelmingly negative perception of campus climate (Keels et al, 2016).

In the summer of 2020, faculty and students united with a list of demands aimed at redefining the university's approach to diversity and inclusion. The *Inclusivity Demands* insisted

---

[1] Additionally, it established one of the largest private police forces in the country, with a jurisdiction extending beyond the campus, resulting in a daily presence within the surrounding community. Data collected by government officials, local organization, and journalists have revealed significant racial bias in traffic stops. ()
https://southsideweekly.com/the-fight-over-chicagos-largest-private-police-force-university-of-chicago-ucpd/)

[2] Enrolled student population is 31.9% White, 15.6% Asian, 10.7% Hispanic or Latino, 5.17% Black or African American, 4.31% Two or More Races, 0.0709% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.0218% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. This includes both full-time and part-time students as well as graduate and undergraduates. By comparison, enrollment for all Doctoral Universities is 47.5% White, 15.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 9.58% Black or African American.

on specific and urgent actions for the university to initiate, aiming to address and rectify its longstanding history of "willingly enabling and directly contributing to structural racism." Alongside calling for (1) adequate funding, leadership, and full autonomy for the Center for the Study of Race (CSR); (2) faculty governance for Diversity and Inclusion; (3) the incorporation of "Equity" as a university objective with diversity and inclusion initiatives; (4) Rethinking safety beyond policing; (5) the demands also called for a department for the study of Critical Race Studies; and (6) Reparations for the University's connections to slavery, Jim Crow, and other ongoing forms of racial exploitation, exclusion, and discrimination. These demands put the University as a social institution in relation to the broader social world and local community on check, calling for reflection on how its actions reinforce, rather than reduce and resolve conditions of systemic and institutional racism. It also challenged the university as a racialized organization to reexamine and redress its cultural norms and practices, as enabling or enhancing the agency of its internal campus community.

Literature Review

Studies focusing on experiences of racialized knowledge producers and student learners must recognize predominately White institutions of higher learning and research as racialized organizations inhabited by racialized bodies (re)producing and maintaining (and challenging) racial structure (Ray 2019). As meso-level organizations embedded in macro-level racial structures, they magnify racial projects ordering social life, connecting cultural rules to social and material resources in ways that differently advantage racial groups at any level (33). As Victor Ray has argued, "the ability to act upon the world, to create, to learn, to express emotion – indeed, one's full humanity – is constrained (or enabled) by racialized organizations" (Ray 2019, 36). White institutional actors maintain power by (re)producing racialized practices imposing socially

constructed racialized realities through white racial frames. The routine and systematic mechanisms driving white supremacy and antiblackness are embedded in racist historical and contemporary institutionalized hierarchies of power, institutionalized White logics, discourses, ideologies, and habitus informing everyday racialized practices and function to distribute resources disproportionately to Whites (Moore 2020; Moore and Bell 2011; Mueller 2020; Mueller and Washington 2021).

"Diversity," "Equity," and "Inclusion"

Many colleges and universities that increase efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion are responding to national discourse regarding race relations and internal pressures from students and faculty demanding changes (Conner, 2024). In national discourse, unseen privileges (positionality) and normative presumptions of whiteness (meritocracy) lead to underdeveloped understandings of "equity" (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Napoletano 2024). Although diversity and inclusion are often viewed as instruments for reducing inequality, commitments to diversity are inherently limited as mechanisms for reducing racial inequality, reflecting the primacy of white Americans' interests in governing Black Americans' access to and experience within universities (Starck et al. 2024). Moore and Bell reveal how the diversity construct stalls reform and imposes tacit boundaries around the discourse surrounding progressive racial policies such that the dominant framing of the policy is inherently white centered and antiblack in the sense that it assumes black inferiority (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Institutions of higher learning tend to use diversity language to "identify" those who are to be recruited, retained, integrated, and assimilated (Pasquel et al, 2022). Universalizing these concepts as ideals for building collective morale (mis)understands the social processes driving (in)equality. While institutions focus on "Identity Diversity," racism and discrimination persisted for African American undergraduate students,

graduate students, and faculty (Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McCabe, 2009; Rowe, 1990; Solórzano et al., 2000; Walkington, 2017; Allen et al, 2018; Sue, 2010). Most of these diversity studies suggest focusing on understanding diversity through the uniqueness of positionality (political vulnerability) and access to resources (power).

Other studies reveal how white students maintain racial privilege by avoiding talking about rac(ism), even after they take full semester courses learning about social inequity. When comparing survey data to interview data from college students – White respondents appear to have more prejudice in the interviews than in the survey, utilizing a new racetalk to avoid appearing "racist" (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2020). White students reproduce hegemonic explanations for maintaining racial privilege even after a semester of coursework focused on understanding systemic racism and racial privilege (Mueller and Washington 2021). White students "betrayed their own knowledge, reasoned their way out of compassion and accountability," – creating epistemic maneuvers to *avoid knowing* about systemic racism (Mueller and Washington 2021; 19). Even with new knowledge, students maintain racial privilege and make decisions at the expense of Black colleagues' life chances.

Many Black philosophers and Black studies academics have examined the ways white people in the world and white academics in the academy deny the existence of black experience and epistemologies. As Charles Mills has argued – the denial of black existence is "not that blacks as a group do not exist because individual blacks do not exist, but rather that individual blacks do not exist because blacks as a group do not exist: the nonexistence is racial" (Mills 1998).

Pervasive Antiblackness

This emerges in the academy through the exclusion of Black knowers, knowledge, and ways of knowing, where traditionally Black study is viewed as "deviant" or excluded (Mills 1998;

Kelley 2020, Moten 2017). Black study as an intellectual and political project is continuously presenting knowledge about a struggle for freedom and pursuit to understand the world in order to transform it (Mills 1998; Kelley 2020, Moten 2017, Cohen 2001; 2004). The object of study is Black life; the structures leading to premature death; ideologies rending people less-than-human; the material consequences of those ideologies; and the foundational place of colonialism and slavery in the emergence of modernity (Sharpe 2016; Hartman 2007; 2022; Marriott 2016; Kelley 2024; Jung and Vegas; 2021; Moten 2017; 2008; 2017; Wilderson 2010; 2017; 2020; Sexton 2012; 2016; 2019).

In recent years sociologists have called attention to the social sciences' epistemic exclusion of race, empire, and racial slavery in theorizing modernity, making invisible the long-term effects of psychological and physical violence on the descendants of enslaved peoples (Go 2020; Jung and Vegas 2021; Jung 2019; Patterson 2019). "The original concept 'race' rested on an epistemology of ignorance through which white people 'mythically' saw 'the other' and fantasized essential human differences as rationale for genocide, colonialism, and slavery" (Mueller 2020, 148; Mills 2007; 22). Recognizing racial slavery as a "constitutive element" of our social world, Orlando Patterson named slavery "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (1997, 13).

Scholarship building off of Patterson examine the ways "slavery and its afterlives" continue to emerge and unfold as constitutive of the contemporary conditions shaping the lives of everyone regardless of race or gender (Hartman 2007; 2022; Wilderson 2020; Jung and Vegas 2021). In the afterlives of slavery, "blackness recast in the guise of wage labor, contractual subject, blameworthy individual and (impaired) citizen refigured the relations of mastery and servitude" (Hartman 2007). This antagonistic social relationship (re)emerges as the psychopolitical cognitive

process marking black bodies inhuman, disposable, and inherently problematic (Wilderson 2020). The precariousness of Black life, "still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic," renders Black people socially, politically, and economically vulnerable (Hartman 2007). The insensitivity (or incomprehensibility) of Black suffering and premature death is the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished (Wilderson et al. 2016).

The struggle for educational opportunity "has always been (and continues to be) a struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools" (Dumas 2016). African American college students face severe inequities in enrollment, retention, degree completion, hostile campus climates, unequal resources, and the dismal underrepresentation of African American faculty (Allen et al 2018; 2000). Studies have shown how intraracial discrimination structures college admissions practices – counselors are less likely to respond to Black students committed to anti-racism and racial justice and more likely to respond to Black students who present depoliticized and apolitical (Thornhill 2019).

Research spaces dominated by white perspectives makes it harder for graduate students to study topics related to race and racial justice, to find doctoral advisors and mentors in one's department, and are warned about pursuing diversity and discrimination scholarship (Bell et al 2021; Pasque et al. 2012). Those that do get through have an even harder time with the publication process – research proposals are devalued – perceived to lack "rigor" and treated as "mesearch" (Johnson, 2015; Harris 2021; Bell et al 2021).

Antiblackness embedded in everyday campus culture and social interactions can result in experience(s) of microaggressions, worries about belonging (Brady et al. 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015; Stewart, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012), feelings of isolation and alienation, and an insider-

outsiderness (Collins 1986; Wilderson et al. 2016). These environments can make it difficult for students to recognize career-related opportunities (internships, mentorships, tutoring) and resources (career centers, advising offices, libraries, and wellness centers) are available to them (Thornhill 2019; Feagin et al. 1996; Harper, Smith, and Davis 2016; Johnson-Ahorlu 2012).

Interrogating anti-Blackness in higher education means looking for more than explicit forms of oppression, as the structural and cultural norms mask every day experiences of dehumanization. In this paper, the theoretical concept *pervasive antiblackness* builds off of this scholarship and examines the way knowledge producers and student learners negotiate Blackness in our current historical moment. Examining perceptions and experiences of antiblackness as it emerges in social interactions, organizational, and institutionalized processes participants describe the social life of intellectual unfreedom (alienation), epistemic exclusion, and systemic dehumanization. Pervasive antiblackness dishonors, disvalues, and dehumanizes Black bodies, knowers, knowledge production, and ways of knowing. These barriers are not attacks on individual students or knowledge producers – these barriers are part of the broader everyday violences against Black community – and scholars honoring Black life and examining racialized (and gendered) inequality are systemically socially excluded too. Black culture, citizenship, and humanity serves as the counterpoint to campus safety, scientific rationality, campus belonging, and campus life to reinforce racialized political hierarchy.

Methods

Data collection

Between February and June of 2024, I conducted an interview-based study about perceptions and experiences of antiblackness in higher education. Data collect also included attending faculty-led panels and analyzing university documents.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, word-of-mouth, recruitment flyers, and recruitment emails. Students (n=15) were recruited through a mix of snowball sampling, word-of-mouth, and recruitment flyers. Faculty (n=11) were recruited through email scripts sent to emails found on department faculty pages. Over 400 emails were sent, asking faculty to participate in a generative conversation about perceptions of antiblackness. See Appendix A and B for participation descriptions.

In-Depth Interviews

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview template addressing perceptions and experiences of (anti)blackness in higher education. Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes with an average of 70 minutes. No participants were paid. Most interviews took place in person while others on zoom.

I had separate interview guides for student experience and for faculty. First question for faculty was: "How do you experience racial tensions on campus? "How do you perceive Blackness at this university?" For student interviews I began by asking why they chose to come to the university. Which led to questions about perceptions or experiences of racism.

After interviews I memoed first impressions, participant observations, vibe of conversation, and memorable quotes using a memo template. I used AI-generated verbatim transcripts from recorded audio files. I cleaned all transcriptions by listening again (and again) to include nonverbal expressions and add further memo notes.

Positionality

As a white woman researcher, I understand Blackness is not a monolithic experience and each lived experience cannot be captured in one interview. Oriented through feminist praxis, I honored

deep emotional moments, laughter, and space. Acknowledging participants as collaborators, I asked participants to contribute interview questions at the end of interviews to encourage collective knowledge production. My whiteness privileged me to have vulnerable conversations with nonBlack folks grappling with (anti)blackness themselves, which created awkward but present moments. I challenged peoples' thinking and tried to leave them with reflective understanding.

Observations

I attended and observed faculty-led panels and discussions. Panels included topics on "Race and the Academy," "University Values," "Freedom of Expression," "Reimagining the University," and others discussing "Free Speech" as it relates to campus protest and "safety," I also went to provost town halls where students and faculty engaged in dialogue about campus climate. I took notes, wrote down audience questions, and memoed after. Some panels released video recordings after including transcripts, which I utilized for memoing.

University Documents

I collected university documents and statements which expressed university values and principles. This included statements released by faculty and students in regards to diversity, equity, an inclusion.

Data Analysis

I coded all transcripts and documents in waves using MAXQDA. Using grounded theory procedure, thematic coding captured participants' meanings, context, strategy, and process (Charmaz 2006). Following coding I created analytic memos based on emergent thematic categories to construct situational analysis reflecting participants' embodied knowledge and situated perspective (Clark 2005). This allowed me to grasp variation and multiplicity, recognize difference and complexity, in order to remain reflexive.

Limitations

I experienced several difficulties during the data collection process. I initially planned to interview students, then faculty, and lastly administrators. However, time and participant responses resulting in simultaneous interviews. It was difficult to recruit administrators and provost officials which led to eliminating research questions. Understanding faculty experience is largely shaped by department culture, I recognize I need more data within each department and school to make claims about faculty experience. I struggled to recruit students across race, class, gender, sexuality, and disabilities. This presentation may result in bias in data and strategy.

Findings 1. Knowledge Producers

Participant narratives capture a complex and multifaceted understanding of how pervasive antiblackness and racial inequality is perceived at the institutional, organization, and interpersonal level at this university. Participants describe how conceptions of antiblackness and racial inequality shape institutional values, cultural norms and rules, and social interactions. Participants recognize the university's historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, and economic roots of racial oppression, but also recognize it as a site for social transformation.

"It is sort of seeped into every aspect of the institution – the way rigorous inquiry is."

In the following section, participants describe perceptions of antiblackness as embedded in campus culture and in tension with university's academic values, influencing whose knowledge, expertise, and experiences are perceived and valued. These narratives provide insight that challenge the meaning of diversity and inclusion at this university.

Most participants perceive antiblackness as intrinsic to the university's history and social identity. Participants describe it as "foundational to the university's origin story" and embedded in its "DNA." The university's location and historically antagonistic relationship with the surrounding

Black community are marked by "housing discrimination," "gentrification," and "heavy policing," indicating that discriminatory practices against Black community are not just incidental but central to the institution's development and existence. Participants recognized this historical and ongoing relationship as defining and continuously reinforcing physical, material, and political boundaries and recognize power dynamics that are perceived as maintaining the university's dominance and marginalization on Black community, and in terms of this study, race and racialized knowledge producers and student learners.

Faculty #6, a Hispanic woman adjunct professor described antiblackness as "embedded in its history and a layer of its culture – it is sort of seeped into every aspect of the institution – the way rigorous inquiry is." Describing antiblackness as elemental, she connects it to the university campus climate report in 2016 in which Black faculty and students overwhelmingly reported negative perceptions of racism. It took the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the faculty Inclusivity Demands, four years after the report was released, for the university to begin "to grapple that first diversity climate report." By connecting antiblackness to "rigorous knowledge" she addresses an issue frequently brought up amongst participants around mutual respect for racialized knowledge producers -- when certain situated perspectives and knowledge production (data) is systematically devalued, silenced or ignored.

As stated on the university website, one of the core institutional values of the university is "fostering an inclusive campus where members feel valued, respected, and heard." Faculty #8, a Black woman researcher with decades of experience at the university said, "We are all living with a history, and I think the climate needs to change based on the values and mission of a university. That's really how we have to support faculty. Let them be who they want to be." While she values that the university "has always been about inquiry, freedom of speech, [and] freedom of

expression," she continues to describing the university as "very conservative in terms of its scholarship." He begins to address the devaluation and disrespect her colleagues face regarding research oriented in "solving the problems of inequality. I just think that makes it more different – they don't respect you. I respect my colleagues!" She addresses concern for social, cultural, and political vulnerability experienced by race and racialized scholars examining social inequality, where aspirations for social change add increased scrutiny and are often undervalued – connecting conservativeness with antiblackness.

Faculty #3 a "white-Asian man" and professor of economics, also addressed the experience of Black assistant professors and students who struggle "feeling comfortable speaking out without feeling like there's going to be some retaliation or it's going to negatively impact them professionally." He connects this to the university's stated value of freedom of expression – "a principle that makes this university special." He implies there is an unequal balance between who gets to speak and how that speaking can negatively impact professional career. Recognizing that local environments within the university also shape professional relationships, he stresses the negative impact on Black faculty and students. These narratives challenges the university goals toward diversity and inclusivity.

The Office of the Provost is the highest-ranking administrative office at the university. It oversees the university's educational offerings and research programs; and promotes the university values shaping culture. As part of the Inclusivity Demands of 2020, faculty asked to include "equity" as a university value to embrace alongside diversity and inclusion initiatives. In discussion with the head of the provost, Faculty #11, a Black woman professor was told the reason this demand was not met was because "the boys over there say you can't measure it." The statement implies that if something can't be measured, it doesn't exist. Folded into this statement is a refusal

to validate evidence that justifies claims about inequality-in-the-world. It also suggests a group of male colleagues with relative decision-making power collectively decided academic expertise across disciplines providing evidence of "inequality" in the world was not sufficient for "equity" to be included at as an inclusive objective at the institution and organizational level.

Sapin suggests that "truth" in science is constituted through rule-guided institutional procedures, shaped by the cultural and social norms of the time (Shapin 1994). This means that the legitimacy and acceptance of knowledge claims are not solely based on their correspondence to an objective reality but also on their alignment with established institutional practices and cultural standards. "Our sense of the world's contents and inductive regularities is built up and protected by the constitutively moral processes by which we credit others' relations and take their accounts into our stock of knowledge about the world." The social construction of Scientific "truth" is a form of power emergent that underpins modern scientific epistemologies and methodologies. Recognizing antiblackness as a historically antagonistic relationship that has socially organized epistemic privilege, it fundamentally denies the experiential knowledge of Black people and the knowledge production of race and racialized scholars.

Several faculty members discuss the ways this collective denial of "racial inequality" trickles down and permeates departmental culture. Participants describe how antiblack antagonisms emerges between "traditional scholarship" that describes the world-as-it-is and scholarship aimed at addressing inequality-in-the-world to effect social change. Knowledge producers whose research focuses on race(ism) discussed experiences of devaluation for producing research that "seeks to transform" or "aspires to makes the world better." Faculty #7, a white woman researcher addresses her experience within her context of her school:

> I think the thing I've found that can be difficult applies certainly to work that centers
> race and centers inequality which is that there are people here, especially senior

people, whose perspective on what it means to do intellectually rigorous work and like 'real science' is that we should not be focused on making the world a better place, we should be focused on understanding the world. And so to the extent that you're doing research that centers race and inequality -- that aspires to improve things -- *that aspiration interferes with your ability to do good work*. I, at least have found it sometimes psychologically difficult to operate, knowing that perspective exists because I'm unwilling to not do the work that I wanna do. And I'm unwilling to pretend that I don't care about improving things when I do the work that I wanna do

This participant addresses the ways the aspiration for "improving" conditions in the world-as-it-is becomes a judgement value determining "real science" when evaluating racial inequality research. She also acknowledges the psychological and political effect it has when this evaluation includes a judgement on her capacity to do "good work." She described it as "demoralizing" and "dehumanizing."

Faculty #10, a Black woman researcher also said, "embedded in the evaluation of scholars of race or racialized scholars is the assumption that somehow we do not operate at the same level in the same ways, um, with the same values, standards, or evaluations." Speaking broadly for the collective of researchers anchored in this work she connects, "it is never an attack on anyone one of us individual scholars," but on their attempt to be "transformative, more expansive, maybe even *more inclusive.*"

Part of what race and racialized scholars seek to understand is how social conditions and social systems, the reproduction of identities like race, impact how people experience the world. Asked by her dean to make a presentation to the social science division advisory council – she was told the council members were "*very concerned*" she was "doing advocacy and *not* real research." Although her response was, "the only reason I do research is to advocate," it does reflect an attempt at diminishing the way in which a researcher speaks about their research – its communicative power. The way she heard the "deep concern" was perceived to be an attempt to diminish her performative agency. Implying that it is "not real research" creates a mechanism of

dehumanization, it attempts to alienate the research from her own agency, and constrains the limits of academic freedom of expression.

Several participants discussed the barriers for admission based on what kind of knowledge is collectively accepted as "real science" and what kind of science is "too applied." For instance, Faculty #7 talked about the ways the aspiration for social change can affect potential Black faculty and students' admission to the university. In interviews if someone says, "I really want to improve people's inclusion in the workplace," that ultimate goal of wanting to improve diversity and inclusion has been interpreted as "they're not interested in real science," and the candidate does not get accepted. This attitude reflects a narrow view of what constitutes valid scientific inquiry, particularly for research areas that center racialized experiences.

Student #14, a Black woman master's student faced significant challenges initiating her thesis project. Her research aims to explore community violence as a consequence of racial inequality and oppression. When meeting her thesis advisor to discuss potential research questions – he steered her away from topics related to race or racism. She recalls, "It wasn't so much a no as it was, *it doesn't really matter*, like it was very clear that if I was to focus my paper on that, that it wouldn't be acceptable" enforcing the dominant view that research focused on racial inequality isn't a valuable contribution. In this sense he effectively cut off her inquiry, wonder, and doubt about current research and her intentional contribution to knowledge production.

After undermining her intelligence by attempting to teach her basic research skills (how to use google scholar) and listening to him make explicit antiblack statements about Black community (blaming university debt problems on black people "getting themselves shot" and "not paying their bills)" she decided she had to leave his lab. As a consequence, she lost all the resources that come with having a thesis advisor. She later learned that other students in his labs had the

same experience. Not only does this impact the trajectory of their research projects, but it influences their professional experience. In this case, it left has her doubting applying to PhD programs fearing similar experiences. This ultimately diminishing her agency, resources, and communicative power for herself and Black community.

Faculty #11, a Black woman researcher addressed the many challenges Black women face navigating academic environments steeped in "whiteness, racism, and misogynoir." Misogynoir is a term referring to the combined force of antiblack racism and misogyny directed towards Black women (Bailey 2008). As one of the 1.3% of Black women tenured faculty at this university her "survival and ascent in academia" came at the cost of "isolation, moral injury, and disconnection." While listening to her speak colleagues at a conference about their experience as Black academics at the university, she attributed their severe and chronic health conditions to their "experiences in doctoral education and becoming professors" at the university. Further stating, "our black bodies, too often, are viewed as not our own and as taken-for-granted workhorses belonging to someone else's best interests."

On her journey towards promotion to full professor, despite being among the top 2% most cited scholars globally, she encountered skepticism from her dean. The Dean suggested promotion required being "perceived as a thought leader," an assertion that seemed to undermine her established academic contributions. Ironically, on the same day, the Dean sought her assistance in drafting a position statement, revealing a stark contrast in recognition and respect. Faculty #11 interprets these interactions as instances of "epistemic injustice" — "a professor's very existence and success are based on her knowledge work, and reputation as a credible knower. To discredit someone as a knower, particularly in an academic context, is not only a form of epistemic violence but also an attempt to cause intellectual death."

Epistemic injustice is injustice related to knowledge. It involves discrediting individuals based on social identity prejudices and includes exclusion and silencing; systematic distortion or misrepresentation of one's meanings or contributions; undervaluing one's status as knower, and diminishing their communicative practices (Dotson 2012; Fricker 2007; Samuels 2024). Examining epistemic injustice reveals the unfair and unequal distributions of epistemic authority and unwarranted distrust of marginal knowers. In this case, the participant perceived the dean "felt fully entitled to express her personal judgment of me as epistemically inferior." In this instance the interaction was perceived to involve racial antagonisms, reinforcing race inferiority by discrediting her as a knower and reinforcing "her place" as a "workhorse."

These interactions threaten academic freedom of expression, intellectual freedom more broadly, and attempt to intellectually alienate these researchers from their own research orientations. Some are denied access to the resources and skills that allow for substantial participation in decisions about their research trajectory and actual quality-of-life in the world-as-it-is. Considering the ways antiblackness is embedded in thought, and has a coercive effect on speech – these symbolic transgressions are perceived to place rigidified boundaries around research that seeks to transform sociopolitical relations conditioning Black experience, by folding it into what qualifies as "real research." These assertions of epistemic authority are perceived as attempting to insert a barrier to intellectual freedom more broadly, limiting the ways in which the researcher thinks about the world and talks about their research, and particularly important, the ways in which their thinking might be heard and received – reflecting barriers to intellectual freedom more broadly.

"it's in the way they evaluate the world"

Pervasive antiblackness is deeply embedded in American sociality and emerges in everyday interactions on campus when normative evaluations of Black individuals limit perceptions of status and worth. These experiences are shaped by an ongoing collective social definition of "black people" that transcends individual status and imposes distinct experiences of Black students and faculty – as if they couldn't possibly be a part of the university's knowledge producing community.

As Wilderson has described, subjectivity is only possible because it reinforces alienation and imparts an "ever-growing dispossession" (2010, 67-71). This concept captures the idea that we are both constituted by our social relations and dispossessed by them (Butler 2009, 26-69). In the context of Black identity, Black individuals are subjected to ongoing and escalating forms of exclusion, marginalization, and devaluation. This can be experienced as an ongoing struggle with desire, identity, and the limitations imposed through language and societal structure. It emphasizes that the loss and deprivation are not static but are instead perpetually expanding, affecting various aspects of bodily and social life. The social imposed antagonism has a more insidious route for regulatory power than explicit coercion, allowing is tacit operation within the social (Butler 1997, 21).

The following participant narratives address antiblackness as a normative experience in everyday interactions on campus. Participants describe antiblackness as a psychopolitical process of negotiation, that reinforces black subjectivity as a limit to the horizon of possibilities for whom a Black person could possibly be. For example, when asked how she experiences racial tensions at this university, Faculty #10 responds, "constant, every day" and then laughed. Having been with the university for over 20 years, she paints a picture of this experience navigating campus:

> I can't tell you how many times I am literally in a committee meeting with white colleagues and I will say 10 minutes later, we are walking down the street and

> I'm getting ready to say hello and they walk right by me because to them no one of importance that is black my height and a woman is walking by them – it's in the way they kind of evaluate the world. I'm not that person... maybe I'm someone's secretary and I'm not in any way saying that's not an important role, I'm saying, that's how *they* read who's coming by them, So it is <u>a clear sense</u> of, even if people aren't explicitly saying, you know, I don't believe in you as a human, the way in which you exist in the world tells young people in particular who is valued and who isn't.

The narrative highlights a powerful example of the everyday manifestations of antiblackness and the subtle, yet profound, ways it shapes social interactions and perceptions The consistent observation of the behavior reflects a clear sense of perceived value assigned to individuals based on race and appearance.

Faculty #4 shared an interaction on campus where a distinguished Black economist was mistaken for cafeteria staff, "the fact that that still stuck with him made me think that that was very upsetting to him as a successful black economist." He went on to say: "I don't think it would fit the economist definition of discrimination in the sense that it doesn't come out of, I mean, it comes from some data that people have about the world and they're making a prediction." While Faculty #4 attempts to find words for the economist's definition of explicit discrimination, it is crucial to recognize discrimination as *the* mechanism by which people are sorted and identified primarily through racial categorization and how racial hierarchy is achieved. It is the very mechanism that systemically dehumanized, natally alienated, and commodified Black bodies in racial slavery and fundamentally shaped the global world economy and our social world (Spillers 2009, Morgan 2001, Hartman 1997). The very category "black" is rooted in antiblackness and is as Faculty #10 noted, "it is demeaned as an attempt to destroy, right? The genocide of Black people."

Understanding this is fundamental to recognizing antiblackness embedded in American (and global) consciousness. This fundamentally shapes social relationships, our social knowledge, and our sociality. In the case of the Black economist, the fact that it is still embedded in collective memory is reflective of the ways in which this antagonistic social relationship has transformed

over time and continues to devalue, alienation, and dehumanization Black bodies, and is thus experienced by Black people as a shared experience of incomprehensible suffering. The fact that any one person doesn't experience this as suffering to our social body, is the collective effect of antiblackness functioning exactly as it is meant to.

Faculty #1, a Black woman faculty member talked about her experience during residency at the northern medical campus where she experienced racial tensions between patients, medical staff, and faculty. What would start with patients that might "look at her some kind of way" or "sort of hold their breath" when she entered exam rooms, as if she wasn't a "real doctor" could latter turn into nurses communicating the patients request to not let her enter the exam room. First dehumanized by the patient, and more painfully experienced when the nurses would affirm the patient's racist evaluation. "We're in a partnership. We're working together, you know. So how does that make me feel – It just felt really bad!" She expressed it as a normative occurrence for Black residents. They often "commiserate" with one another. "We've been treated poorly since we started coming here. I don't know why I am surprised. It's just cause you never ask and we're used to just adjusting." The participant expressed the way she and other faculty have had to adjust in social interactions with other faculty and staff who are making assessments based on their perceptions of Blackness, calling them by "the other Black person's name," and in the case with the examination – dismissing their expertise and reinforcing antiblackness.

Many students articulate their heightened awareness of their racial identity within the broader campus environment which challenge perceptions of inclusivity, citing instances of antiblack antagonisms that discredit their status as part of the campus community of knowledge producers. Racial stereotypes play a role in these experiences shaping perceptions of "campus safety."

Student #3, a second-year undergraduate, discussed the various student channels through which non-Black students exchange knowledge and warn each other to be "hypervigilant of Black people and Black spaces," particularly Black students. "Students are coming to the school and are warned to be mindful and fearful of the Black students that go here. It's disheartening." As an example, she mentioned multiple student app communication threads where students were discussing "how scary the Black students on campus were and how they would turn the corner if they saw a Black student at night."

The campus climate was deeply affected by a tragic incident in 2021, when a student was fatally shot during a mugging. This event sparked intense discussions about campus safety and exposed underlying antiblack antagonisms. Student #5 a Black man master's student who also graduated from the college recalled:

> this place had gotten so explicitly antiblack in the air [you could] practically taste it. On all manner of social media feeds, Facebook, where, I mean, people were just barely saying the N-word whenever they were talking about campus safety, which became a dog whistle in and of itself. I couldn't walk around campus, um, wearing all black as I, as I tend to, um, uh, without, I don't know, whistling to myself wearing my cute red beanie, um, to, uh, give people the sense of impression that I'm still the same person they walk by every day.

This student expressed the way "safety" for other students compromised "safety" for Black students. He had to change the way he expressed himself, how he engaged with people on campus, and how he dressed.

Other students discuss how these antagonisms impact the way they "visually present" themselves (Student #7) and move around campus to avoid being stereotyped as dangerous or from outside the community (Student #12). Student #7 used hand gestures to show me the spatial mechanism he employed to avoid walking to close to white woman – measuring the relative distance he puts between them. Student #12 said, "it's not necessarily solely an othering," but -- there is more recognition of me just being a, like a Black woman walking across the street who

probably lives on the outskirts rather than like a student in the school, if that makes sense," both affirming that Black students and faculty are sometimes perceived as outsider threats rather than part of the knowledge-producing community.

During a discussion with Faculty #4, a white man economist, I asked how often he thinks about Blackness on campus and he responded, "In some sense, every day. I am aware of the neighborhood. I lived in the neighborhood for 25 years. I was mugged here at gunpoint. I knew three women as undergraduates who were raped," to which I probed further, "When you think of blackness, you think of criminality?" He immediately felt mortified and took back blackness as having anything to do with the rapes mentioned. Which is really just confusing, particularly because he has lived in the neighborhood and must have regularly seen people perceived to be Black doing normal day-to-day things statistically more times than anything. It acknowledges the habitus of his own racial calculus set to a particular meaning of "Black." This mechanism creates boundaries defining how he imagines the campus in relationship to these racial stereotypes.

Although these interactions mostly emerge at an interpersonal level, students and faculty express frustration that the university doesn't take initiative to change the narrative to assure safety for all students. Safety includes providing resources when Black students are systemically under attack and need resources for support and survival, especially in moments when racialized activities heighted a sense of threat. From a racialized organizational perspective – their ability to freely express their full humanity – their ability to act upon campus community, to express emotion, to create and to learn is constrained by perceptions of blackness and ultimately diminishes agency and limits their freedom of expression (Ray 2019:36).

These interactions highlight a complex socio-politico-cognitive process shaped by antiblack antagonisms, which systematically dishonor and devalue knowers status, which

ultimately reinforce societal norms associated with Blackness. At its core is the structural incomprehensibility of (anti)Blackness (Wilderson 2010: 58). Not only the incomprehensibility of the experiences described as dehumanization, but also the incomprehensibility of "constant, everyday" suffering from that constant, everyday dehumanization. As student #5 emphasis, "what in the world is going on, and not with me per se, but *with the world* around me, that *I, I am without value and or devalued.*

Findings 2. Learning Environments

Many students who participated in this study were drawn to this university for its location in a diverse area and the university values promoting diversity and inclusion, freedom of expression, and rigorous debate. Others appreciated the classroom sizes and structure that foster engagement with ideas. The university is marketed as a haven for "quirky, smart people," a sentiment that resonates with Student #8, a white woman undergraduate student. Student #5, a Black man graduate student who also graduated from the college, was drawn to its palpable "intellectual excitement"– "you can get anybody talking about whatever it is that makes them passionate, it's very enlivening, that electricity – you feel it!" Students also value the abundance of opportunities to attend speaking events, workshops, panels, and symposia, which enrich their academic experience. Despite challenges posed by Covid-19, undergraduate students, especially Black and other marginalized students, found solace and community in student organizations upon returning to campus. These organizations provide a supportive environment where students can be themselves and connect with others who share similar experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Many participants in this study voiced disappointment over the lack of diversity in their classrooms, graduate cohorts, and faculty representation. For many students, diversity and

inclusion are directly linked to safety and freedom of expression. Despite feelings of belonging and solidarity in student groups, they didn't feel like the student groups belonged to the broader community – one student described them as "safe havens" for marginalized students.

Safety, in this context, means being able to express one's full humanity and be seen in that expression – very similar to freedom of expression. It also meant seeing one's community as integral to the broader academic community. When Black experiences and histories are not fully integrated and honored in curriculum and classroom discussions, students' express feelings of dehumanization and marginalization. This reflects broader issues around whose knowledge is valued and whose contributions are deemed legitimate.

Feelings of safety among Black students often coexist with pressures to conform to white norms leading to internal conflicts and constant adjustments to predominantly white spaces. Student #12, a Black woman undergraduate said, "instinctively sometimes you feel unsafe by being in groups that are not diverse" which is not that every white space is necessarily unsafe, but "it's definitely a challenge and it definitely requires adjustments." The examples of her adjustments were similar to other students — "changing how you act" and "codeswitching" — "it's usually suffocating." Although she has no problem "being outspoken," she said, "I'm very on guard." Student #3 recognized how her peers also codeswitch but recognized that it has to do with perceptions of "blackness" and "it not being accepted."

Student #4 a graduate student expresses the deep emotional and psychological toll of having to contort oneself in classroom environments. She physically tightened her whole body and through tears struggled to say, "in order to be taken seriously, you have to, *I have no choice*." This statement underscores the struggle for performative agency and (intellectual) freedom relative to broader Black struggles for freedom. She feels as though she has to contain and regulate her

cultural expression which can feel like an eradication of being on one end and conforming to white norms in order to have better life chances on the other. With few words she struggles between wondering and doubting, refusing and consenting, negotiating life, sociality, and blackness. I asked, "what would it require? "Maybe to feel validated as a person.. as an academic.. normally just a person in general." These words came through as whispers, as if saying them makes the meaning (im)possible. Not only is she negotiating how she is perceived as an academic at the university, she is negotiating how she is seen as a person in relation to perceptions of (anti)blackness in society.

Students negotiate their identities in relation to how their ways of knowing are perceived and received in academic setting, revealing barriers to freedom of expression and intellectual freedom. This process can be challenging in environments that marginalize certain perspectives, especially when their perspectives are seen as radical or deviant. Most students describe the external perceptions people project on them in regards to their own knowledge systems they describe negotiating coming off as "too loud" (student #14) "extremely on the left" (student #1) or "too radical" (student #12). Student #3 a second-year undergraduate said, "in a racialized context maybe you also don't wanna come off as being to quote unquote extreme."

Student #8, a Black woman PhD candidate made a conscious choice to adjust her own academic writing:

> in terms of like the thoughts that I think and then what I could put down, as long as I like contort it in such a way, uh, where I can keep the central message, but like I have to write it in a style that, you know, isn't personally mine, then I, I will be fine enough just to get the PhD. in terms of like doing something more radical, I know that this isn't the space and part of me feels like there that should be the call to action on my behalf to make it such – I just feel sometimes different or isolated just because I'm the only Black student who's really like going to courses.

An undergraduate students described it as exhausting, student #2 said:

"I think its very exhausting, because [with whites students] there's not the constant guilt of wanting to help improve your own standing and the view people have of your race – there's so many different things to navigate as a person, so its like guilt of like am I feeding this stereotype, am I disproving them like constantly. And then if I'm not doing something, should I be doing something. And I think this is not something that white students have to grapple with."

This challenges our understanding of academic and intellectual freedom, when perspectives of marginalized voices are seen as radical or deviant, even though Black (and other marginalized) students, in reality, may be working toward understanding and transforming social problems directly impacting their survival.

Several students told me about experiences where they were penalized for contributing knowledge in classroom discussions relative to Black and marginalized experiences. In a global studies course where the majority of the students were Black, Student #10, an Asian woman undergraduate student lost participation points for challenging an American, white male colleague after he marginalized himself during a discussion about intersectionality and privilege. The student had identified with his mother's native country and said he was "ethnically Canadian" to distance himself from what he perceived to be the dominant group. When the student challenged his misunderstanding of privilege (power) she was called a "bully" and lost participation points for the day. As she told the story, what lingered was her frustration with the production of ignorance in the classroom – the absent bits of information in communicating intersectionality ineffectively, reproducing powerblindness.

During a study abroad course in Senegal, Student #1 and 5 other Black students experienced "feelings of antagonisms" from the other students and white woman professor. Although complimented and praised for bringing critical perspective based on their previous course experiences, antagonisms built up and there were multiple instances that made the students

feel "unsafe" and "disoriented" – "every single day somebody had a panic attack, somebody was crying, somebody was upset."

They were taken to an exhibition where traumatic Black experiences were on display – "there was no trigger warning" or prior explanation for what would be exhibited. When speaking up about their experiences, the professor told them they were "aggressive, rude, and disrespectful." The students called out the ways those words reflect ingrained prejudice against Black women, or forms of misogynoir (the intersectional bigotry of sexism and anti-blackness). Upon returning to class, the professor had written "the URL of the Title IX report form on the board," and began the class by saying, "I'm the professor, you are the student, if you want to report me it is within your right, but just know that if you report me, this program is going down," (re)assering dominant power toward Black undergraduate students resisting oppressive language and experiences – the professor gave them all a B. Their attempts at applying critical knowledge and standing up for themselves (and community) were seen as deviant and they were punished creating unnecessary internal suffering, feelings of dehumanization, and academic repercussions.

Student #1 described adopting a strategy she called "policing" which leads her to negotiate when and where to speak on campus: "So it's like not being able to express yourself, policing yourself and then being policed and then going to the classroom and that not being a safe space. It's all disorienting and it's really difficult." She navigates a fully racialized social and epistemological architecture based on these experiences (Kelley 2018).

These instances constitute forms of epistemic injustice. They not only impact students' grades and GPAs, potentially affecting their financial aid, but also suppress their epistemic agency while privileging others' even in classroom dialogue about what privilege is. It is also a form of epistemicide, which silences, annihilates, and devalues knowledge systems and ways of knowing

within the classroom environment. In both cases, knowledge used to communicate Black experience for better understanding of their positionality was cast aside. In the first instance the participant talked it out with the male colleague outside of the classroom.

Firstly, I commend the students for their courage in confronting these challenges. It takes guts! Secondly, these situations could have fostered critical understanding and improved communication skills for everyone, but instead reinforce a perception that certain forms of speech are deviant or unworthy. Instead, students experience it as perpetuating and strengthening antiblackness and intellectual alienation, reinforcing dominant norms and rules, limiting freedom of expression and epistemically excluding their diverse perspective.

Where do we meet each other and where do we actually produce something?

Every one of these students is eager to participate in constructive dialogue. However, at this university, both students and faculty, recognize a generalized misperception that addressing these issues implies a reluctance to engage in "uncomfortable conversations." What students are expressing in these discussions is a fundamental need for mutual respect and a sense of moral consideration, rooted in their feelings of safety.

Student #1 actually sees these tensions *as an opportunity for learning* and for creating something new, *possibly more inclusive and transformative*:

> I have lived this experience whereas like another person may have to learn about my experience, and learning about it and and living it are two different things. But it's like, where do we meet each other and where do we actually produce something?

In essence, Student #1 acknowledges the deep complexity communicating across difference, but acknowledging vulnerably and wounded agency, creates the conditions of possibility. Student #2 recognizes the value of her perspective, stating, "I think we provide critical perspectives, which to us seems so obvious... I wish there was more guidance for white students... let's think about this in *a more productive way*." Student #3 emphasizes how the lack of guidance

can lead to feelings of dehumanization, saying "I hate feeling like I'm debating basic human rights principles or like I'm debating the right to exist or feel safe." As student #5 further describes:

> I take it as an obligation…I'll have uncomfortable conversations with all sorts of people, but I need your help <laugh>. 'cause you cannot just be, I'm, I've, I've come more and more to the conclusion that there are no non-racist. That they are just racist and anti-racist. ..because everyone is struggling, including black people themselves who are dealing with internalized, um, antiblackness. I know I have! ..but, gimme something! Gimme literally anything! A non-recognition?! – *It it is a recognition for the purposes of devaluation.* Emotional intelligence gone. If you're gonna deal with race and racism, you have to be emotionally intelligent. You have to engage with a part of yourself that you've severed yourself from. I'm asking people to put their ego aside. I want people to always already know that your faith's bound up in mine. ..I'm not asking you to, uh, uh, now imagine a relationship. *I want you to recognize one that is already there.*

This student acknowledges the antagonistic relationship that dehumanizes and devalues Black knowers is a relationship that already exists. There is no doubt these conversations produce tensions, but it comes down to understanding Black life as precarious based on an antagonistic relationship (re)assigning that identity as part of a social and political hierarchy. Participants intuit a lack of regard for understanding from other students and it interpreted as lacking "moral sense" (Student #5, Student #2, Student #3, Student #13, Student #12). Although students experience it as dehumanizing, they also recognize that experience of dehumanization as an opportunity for generative dialogue, mainly because their life chances and opportunity depend on it.

These students strive to be recognized in their full humanity, which includes recognition of their social and political vulnerability in broader social contexts where they face devaluation, dehumanization, and sometimes violence. Despite being equipped with tools to understand racial antagonisms, the avoidance of their existence and epistemes, transforms perceptions of racism into subtler forms. Students attend to it in language, the words people use, the tone in which a person says "Blacks" as if "Black is a noun, and not an adjective" - Student #12. Other students are offended when "property" is not translated to "slave" when talking about the past – Student #3.

Other students like trigger warnings, because walking into a class and not be prepared for seeing Black women in vulnerable and violent positions isn't an easy thing to bear (student #2), but it doesn't mean avoid any of it – it means acknowledging what is there (student #7).

When we continue to avoid the existence of racial antagonisms, even after being handed the tools to understand it – "racism takes on another form" as a third student described (Student #12). One student described it as "a different racism we've kind of upgraded." Student #10 described it as a racial sensitivity where "racism becomes invisible, the question is lingering around outside of the conversation bubble that makes it so much hard to identify the things we hear that sound not ok." The (in)visibility of implicitness structures classroom dynamics when faculty and students negate, avoid or deny Black and other marginalized agency. What they name as a sense of new racism, is also their heightened sense of agency.

These conversations raise a sense of awareness of racial antagonisms and a sense of being-in-relation to Blackness-in-the-world *as a form of agency*. Enhancing agency gives them collective communicative power to inquire, wonder, and doubt the status quo. They recognize the collective communicative power of speech as a form of intellectual freedom and are calling for social transformation. In response, these students seek environments where faculty employ caring pedagogies that foster community and safety within the classroom. Feeling safe allows them the confidence to freely express themselves and develop a clear sense of their agency, empowering them to engage confidently beyond the classroom.

Safety establishes the ethical foundation necessary to foster freedom of expression and the exchange of ideas within environments comprised of diverse historical beings. It facilitates the courage to engage in uncomfortable and challenging conversations by recognizing the pervasive influence of cultural hegemony throughout history. By doing so, it reaffirms consent as a

fundamental *respect for <u>each</u> person,* as a knowledge producer navigating a deeply complex historical present – isn't that fundamental to scientific research methodology?

In 2020, the Office of the Dean of Students issued a welcome letter to all students emphasizing the value of academic freedom while condemning the use of 'trigger warnings' and intellectual "safe spaces." It essentially mobilizes opposition against discourse, authority, creativity, and politics. The timing of this directive, following a summer marked by widespread national social activism and moral reckoning, after student and faculty Inclusivity Demands, suggests an attempt to reinforce dominance over students and faculty in solidarity with movements and epistemes that honor Black lives. This stance aims to curtail social power and impede progress toward social change. What I am saying isn't necessarily political, I am analyzing how this impacts how students understand and perceive social knowledge.

Organizationally it fosters a climate of surveillance toward individuals who incorporate these practices in their classrooms. This contradicts the university's core principle of promoting freedom of expression, diversity in that expression, and epistemological inclusivity. It functions as a posture against dissenting voices methodologies and those perceived as deviant. In contrast, Black agency advocate liberation from oppressive structures, advocating for non-oppressive methodologies to foster legitimacy, freedom, dignity, authority, and recognition (Gordan, 2022). Any genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, would prioritize empowering Black and other marginalized individuals and communities within academic settings.

Blackness is not about Black people's humanity. It's about Black people as political subject

In 2023, The Center for the Study of Race was ordered to remove a post that welcomed collective grieving with the family of Tyre Nichols, a Black man who was brutally beaten to death by police during a traffic stop in Memphis, Tennessee. The letter communicated a sense of

responsibility to the broader campus community by offering a space to share "difficult feelings, plan mutual aid, or get information about additional resources." It included links to the student wellness center, the Center for Identity and Inclusion, and a phone number for a therapist-on-call. These are critical resources to attend to pain, loss, and suffering.

After meeting with a professor at the center, I learned the center fought with the provost office *for over a year* over removing the post after one white economics professor reported the post to the provost office claiming it was "too political." This is a case where White grievance were considered over human grief and suffering, which sends a message from the university provost that White grievances are more worthy — evenly *empirically* – one white male professor's grievance is more worthy than the entire collective community of grievers (Hooker 2023). In the context of institutional neutrality, which restricts "the university" from making public-facing statements about political issues of the day, it doesn't hold up as a political statement unless: (1) the reader views the grievers as political subjects; and (2) the message is interpreted as directed toward a particular kind of political subject in contest with other political subjects (who perhaps refuses to grieve).

Throughout my interviews participants bring this up as an articulation of university values in relation to prior statements made by other departments acknowledging solidarity and grief with Ukraine when Russia invaded and with women regarding the overturning of Roe. No one said take those statements down (Faculty #12, Faculty #5, Student #5). Faculty #10 asks, "Whose grief was thought to be political and whose grief was not? Anything associated with Blackness is not about Black people's humanity. It's about Black people as political subject." These perceptions attend to how the university situates Black life in its own collective memory – antiblackness, which both resists and pushes back upon Black freedoms, life, and suffering, is the constitutive force of

African American subject(s) (Chandler 2000). By requesting to remove the post, the administrative body institutionally and organizationally reinforces Black subjectivity and pushes against Black agency and communicative power.

Most students expressed profound frustration and anguish regarding the university's action. One student said, "[it] just feels like a slap in the face to the Black students that are here. it's so hard to be here and exist here," which reflects how it trickle down and has psychopolitical effects on the social environment. Student #2 said, "[it's] just like angering because we do come here, we are students, and it also feels like maybe in this regard, *our struggles are being treated as not as relevant, not as important and we're just second-class students.*" This student ties Black suffering and grief to the status of *less-than-student* addressing the fundamental dehumanization process. Student #5, a Black male graduate student who went to undergrad at the university described it as "malicious ignorance":

> It's always already political before grief has even come. Um, we're, we're already being surveilled. We feel as though we're under attack, uh, and the natural response is, is is grief, deep grief..., if anything, we're grieving 'cause we're, we're, we're having arrows slung at us and no one's there to help us because there's a lot of plausible deniability on the part of university. Um, a sort of malicious ignorance.

The insensitivity to human suffering and death becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. As one faculty member put it during a faculty-panel addressing university values, "What does it mean or say, if the world watched and reacted to the murder of George Floyd, and no entity, even those whose intellectual projects are rooted in and align with the discussion of topics of race said nothing?" In this case, the fact that the death is unremarkable says something about human intelligibility, and the boundaries on speech which protect the entities enforcing Black subjugation. No speech, speaks.

More broadly, this puts limitations on the kinds of speech and activities the center is allowed to post in the future. Which means it puts a level of surveillance on them in regards to

kinds of speech in relationship to Black life as "always political." At the current moment, the center is dealing with another claim that their mission statement is "racist" and a violation of free speech. As a "hub of research and an incubator of anti-racist practice" -- the broader political tensions out-in-the-world-as-it-is seemed to be influencing administrative decision-making at the university. After the 2020 student and faculty Inclusivity Demands, which gave the center more autonomy, or independents, these instances seem to suggests recent limitations to autonomy.

Conclusion

Participant narratives capture a complex and multifaceted understanding of how pervasive antiblackness and racial inequality is perceived at the institutional, organization, and interpersonal level at this university. Participants describe how conceptions of (anti)blackness and racial (in)equality shape institutional values, cultural norms and rules, and interpersonal relationships on campus. The interactions described reveal a complex socio-politico-cognitive process shaped by historical antiblack antagonisms which systematically dishonors Black bodies, discredits knowers, devalues knowledge production, and dehumanize ways of knowing.

These institutional, organization, and interpersonal dynamics underscore a systemic challenge for racialized student learners and knowledge producers facing persistent marginalization and devaluation within this university, reflecting broader societal attitudes that undermine their contributions and expertise.

Pervasive antiblackness emerges in the ways race and racialized scholars research standards and evaluations are measured against rigid conceptions of what counts as science. Pervasive antiblackness emerges in the way students experience less-than-student status and are penalized for speaking to issues pertaining to their life chances in world-as-it-is. It also emerges

in the way Black epistemes and methodologies are scrutinized and used to diminish or enhance the performative agency and collective communicative power of racialized scholars.

To address these profound inequities, it is essential to acknowledge and dismantle the normative evaluations and social definitions that perpetuate epistemic exclusion, intellectual alienation, and epistemological violence. This requires a commitment to fostering intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and academic inclusion that genuinely values Black epistemes and methodologies. As student #7, a 7th year PhD candidate said:

> I think people have the impression that like you know, caring about bias and like antiblackness and stuff is just like 'oh, whatever' or 'just to be nice! But like no! It actually matters! You are actually misled about the world you live in if you're not thinking about these sorts of things. If there is bias in research, where else could it be.

By challenging the rigid boundaries imposed on research and thought, and by recognizing the vital contributions of Black scholarship, we can begin to transform the sociopolitical relations that condition not only Black experience, but everyone's experience. We are ultimately misled about our world when we (mis)comprehend the constant, everyday suffering Black and other marginalized people experience.

Participants also recognize the university's historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, and economic roots of racial oppression as a site for social transformation, to begin to think creatively about liberatory future. The students are actively thinking up strategies to foster productive dialogue. They recognize meaningful outcomes hinges on understanding identity, positionality, ideologies, and our relationships with dominant power structures. These students recognize privilege as a social and political architectural innovation shaping existing systems of repression, suppression, and oppression; and take it as an obligation to engage in difficult conversations -- because their life chances depend on it.

Ultimately, the fight against antiblackness in academia and beyond is not just about individual recognition but about creating a more inclusive and equitable society. It is about ensuring that Black voices are heard, respected, and integrated into the broader discourse, thus honoring the profound intellectual and cultural contributions of Black communities. Only through such systemic changes can we hope to achieve true academic freedom and social justice.

Future research should look into the mechanisms which enhanced marginalized student participation and solidarity between marginalized students and professors. This includes how students define "care" and what practices they think enhance their agency. This includes what resources graduate students and junior faculty need available to enhance their scholarship, especially in locations where there is no representation of their shared experience. Another study could focus on ways students learn what resources are available and how best to utilize them.

Appendix 1. Knowledge Producers

Date:	Identity	Race	Gender	Department	Interview Length	Type of Interview
2/9/24	Faculty #1	Black	Woman	Biological Sciences	78	Zoom
2/12/24	Faculty #2	White	Man	Biological Sciences	61	Zoom
2/15/24	Faculty #3	White/ Asian	Man	Business School	86	In-person
2/21/24	Faculty #4	White	Man	Business School	67	In-person
2/23/24	Faculty #5	White	Woman	Biological Sciences	72	Zoom
3/1/24	Faculty #6	Hispanic	Woman	Business School	60	Zoom
3/7/24	Faculty #7	White	Woman	Business School	60	Zoom
3/26/24	Faculty #8	Black	Woman	Biological Sciences	60	In-person

3/26/24	Faculty #9	White	Woman	Sociology	55	In-person
3/27/24	Faculty #10	Black	Woman	Political Science	60	Zoom
6/16/24	Faculty #11	Black	Woman	Social Work	Not recorded	In-person, Events, manuscript

Appendix 2. Student Learners

Date:	Study ID	Race	Gender	Student Status	Major / Minor	Interviev Length:	Type of Interview
2/5/24	Student #1	Black	Woman	College, 4th year	English, Black Studies	106	In-person
2/18/24	Student #2	Black	Woman	College 4th year	Global Studies	86	In-person
3/1/24	Student #3	Black	Woman	College 2nd year	Law, Letters, Society	60	In-person
3/29/24	Student #4	Black	Woman	Masters	International Relations	58	In-person
3/22/24	Student #5	Black	Man	Masters & College	Sociology	64	In-person
3/22/24	Student#6	White	Woman	PhD, 3rd year, & Masters	Anthropology	101	In-person
3/29/24	Student #7	White	Woman	College 4th year	Fundamentals	65	In-person
3/28/24	Student #8	Black	Woman	PhD, 2nd year	Anonymous*	45	Zoom

4/4/24	Student #9	Black	Man	PhD 7th year	Social* Sciences	75	In-person
4/5/24	Student #10	Asian	Woman	College 4th year	Global Studies & Linguistics	82	In-person
4/2/24	Student #11	Latina	Woman	Graduate	History	91	In-person
4/13/24	Student #12	Black	Woman	College 3rd year	Political Science	81	In-person
4/15/24	Student #13	White	Woman	College Affiliate **	Political Science	90	In-person
5/6/24	Student #14	Black	Woman	Masters	Psychology	72	In-person
5/9/24	Student #15	White	Woman	Masters	Sociology	60	In-person

* Some participants may be the only Black person in their department and requested for more anonymity

** Participant was an international affiliate who attended college at this university for one year.

Work Cited

Allen, Walter R., Channel McLewis, Chantal Jones, and Daniel Harris. "From Bakke to Fisher: African American students in US higher education over forty years." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 6 (2018): 41-72.

Allen, Walter R., Edgar G. Epps, Elizabeth A. Guillory, Susan A. Suh, and Marguerite Bonous-Hammarth. "The Black Academic: Faculty Status among African Americans in U.S. Higher Education." *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1/2 (2000): 112–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2696268.

Beatty, Cameron C., Tenisha Tevis, Lorraine Acker, Reginald Blockett, and Eugene Parker. "Addressing Anti-Black Racism in Higher Education: Love Letters to Blackness and Recommendations to Those Who Say They Love Us." *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)* 6, no. 1 (2020): 7–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48644508.

Bell, J. M., & Hartmann, D. (2007). Diversity in everyday discourse: The cultural ambiguities and consequences of "happy talk". *American Sociological Review*, *72*(6), 895-914.

Bell, M. P., Berry, D., Leopold, J., & Nkomo, S. (2021). Making Black Lives Matter in academia: A Black feminist call for collective action against anti-blackness in the academy. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*, 39-57.

Bonilla-Silva, E., & Peoples, C. E. (2022). Historically white colleges and universities: The unbearable whiteness of (most) colleges and universities in America. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *66*(11), 1490-1504.

Bonilla-Silva, E., & Forman, T. A. (2000). "I Am Not a Racist But...": Mapping White College Students' Racial Ideology in the USA. *Discourse & society*, *11*(1), 50-85.

Brady, Shannon T., Geoffrey L. Cohen, Shoshana N. Jarvis, and Gregory M. Walton. "A brief social-belonging intervention in college improves adult outcomes for black Americans." *Science advances* 6, no. 18 (2020): eaay3689.

Clarke, A. E. (2005). Pushing and being pulled around the postmodern turn. *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn*, 1-36.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Deviance as resistance: A new research agenda for the study of black politics." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27-45.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens." *Sexual identities, queer politics* (2001): 200-227.

Conner, Tyler."Black Faculty and Radical Retention." Footnotes ASA Magazine 50, no. 2 (2024).https://www.asanet.org/footnotes-article/black-faculty-and-radical-retention/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20National%20Center,percent%20of%20the%20national%20population.

Dancy, T. Elon, Kirsten T. Edwards, and James Earl Davis. "Historically white universities and plantation politics: Anti-Blackness and higher education in the Black Lives Matter era." *Urban Education* 53, no. 2 (2018): 176-195.

Dumas, Michael J. "Against the dark: Antiblackness in education policy and discourse." *Theory into practice* 55, no. 1 (2016): 11-19.

Dubois, W.E.B. "'The Nature of Intellectual Freedom." *The Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace*, New York, March 25-27, 1949. http://www.webdubois.org/dhp/retext-ifre.html

Dumas, M. J., & Ross, K. M. (2016). "Be real black for me" imagining BlackCrit in education. *Urban Education*, *51*(4), 415-442.

Feagin, Joe R., Hernan Vera, and Nikitah Imani. *The agony of education: Black students at a White university*. Routledge, 2014.

Gretzinger, Erin and Maggie Hicks. "Tracking Higher Ed's Dismantling of DEI." The Chronicle of Higher Education, July 15, 2024. https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-higher-eds-dismantling-of-dei

Gunawardena, Devaka. "Resisting Genocide in Gaza: Is a New Political Imaginary Possible?." https://polity.lk/devaka-gunawardena-resisting-genocide-in-gaza-is-a-new-political-imaginary-possible/

Hamilton, P. (2020). 'Now that I know what you're about': black feminist reflections on power in the research relationship. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(5), 519-533.

Harper, Shaun R., Edward J. Smith, and Charles HF Davis III. "A critical race case analysis of Black undergraduate student success at an urban university." *Urban Education* 53, no. 1 (2018): 3-25.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. WW Norton & Company, 2022.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Macmillan, 2008.

Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank B. Wilderson. "The position of the unthought." *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183-201.

Helmore, Edward. "US university presidents to testify before Congress over claims of antisemitic protests on campuses." *The Guardian*, November 28, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/nov/28/university-presidents-testify-congress-antisemitism-harvard-mit

Hicks, Maggie. "New Anti-DEI Legislation Goes Into Effect in 4 States." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2024. https://www.chronicle.com/article/new-anti-dei-legislation-goes-into-effect-in-4-states

Hill-Collins, Patricia. "Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminism thought." *Gender: a sociological reader* 93, no. 6 (2002): 69.

Hurtado, Sylvia. "The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict." *The Journal of Higher Education* 63, no. 5 (1992): 539-569.

James, Joy. "Afrarealism and the Black Matrix." *The Black Scholar*, 43, no. 4 (2013): 124-131.

Johnson-Ahorlu, Robin Nicole. "The academic opportunity gap: How racism and stereotypes disrupt the education of African American undergraduates." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15, no. 5 (2012): 633-652.

Jung, Moon-Kie, and João H. Costa Vargas. "More than and beyond racism: theoretical and political meditations on antiblackness." *Souls* 23, no. 3-4 (2022): 235-253.

Jung, Moon-Kie, and João H. Costa Vargas, eds. *Antiblackness*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Kolhatkar, Sonali. "Student Demands for Divestment Are Not New." *CounterPunch* (2024).

Keels, M., Gilliam, M., Greenland, W., & Thisted, R. "Spring 2016 Campus Climate Survey: Diversity and Inclusion." (this university), (2016).

Kelley, R. D. (2018). Black study, Black struggle. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, *40*(2).

López, Francesca, Alex Molnar, Royel Johnson, Ashley Patterson, LaWanda Ward, and Kevin Kumashiro. "Understanding the attacks on critical race theory." *National Education Policy Center* (2021).

Miller, Richard, Katrina Liu, and Arnetha F. Ball. "Critical counter-narrative as transformative methodology for educational equity." *Review of Research in Education* 44, no. 1 (2020): 269-300.

Mills, Charles W. *The Racial Contract.* Cornell University Press, 1997.

Mills, Charles W. *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Moore, W. L., & Bell, J. M. (2011). Maneuvers of whiteness:'Diversity'as a mechanism of retrenchment in the affirmative action discourse. *Critical Sociology*, *37*(5), 597-613.

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Reckoning with slavery: Gender, kinship, and capitalism in the early Black Atlantic*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Müller, Jan-Werner. "Student encampments have the potential to strengthen US democracy." *The Guardian* May 4, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/04/university-encampment-democracy

Mueller, Jennifer C., and DyAnna K. Washington. "Anticipating White Futures: The Ends-Based Orientation of White Thinking." *Symbolic Interaction* 45, no. 1 (2022): 3-26.

Mueller, Jennifer C. "Racial ideology or racial ignorance? An alternative theory of racial cognition." *Sociological Theory* 38, no. 2 (2020): 142-169.

Napoletano, Toby. "Meritocracy, meritocratic education, and equality of opportunity." *Theory and Research in Education* 22, no. 1 (2024): 3-18.

Pasque, Penny, Rozana Carducci, Aaron Kuntz, and Ryan Gildersleeve. Qualitative inquiry for equity in higher education: Methodological innovations, implications, and interventions: AEHE, Volume 37, Number 6. Vol. 164. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Pattillo, Mary. *Black on the block: The politics of race and class in the city*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Perry, Imani. "We Read the Banned Books." *The Atlantic*, February 23, 2023. https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2023/02/we-read-the-banned-books/676710/

Pirtle, Whitney N., Breanna Brock, Nonzenzele Aldonza, Kaline Leke, and Dallas Edge. "I Didn't Know What Anti-Blackness Was Until I Got Here": The Unmet Needs of Black Students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions." *Urban Education* 59, no. 1 (2024): 330-357.

Prose, Francine. "Ron DeSantis' academic restrictions show he hopes to change history by censoring it." *The Guardian*, February 9, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/09/ron-desantis-florida-education-censorship

Quilantran, Bianca. "The Free Speech Fallout from the Israel-Hamas War Could Be Dire: A First Amendment scholar is very worried about the future of speech on college campuses." *Politico*, December 5, 2023. https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/12/05/free-speech-campus-00130076

Quilantran, Bianca and Carballo, Rebecca. "College presidents defend their student protest deals." *Politico*, May 23, 2024. https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/23/college-presidents-student-protest-deals-00159656

Ray, Victor. "A theory of racialized organizations." *American sociological review* 84, no. 1 (2019): 26-53.

Rodríguez, Dylan. "Abolition as praxis of human being: A foreword." *Harvard Law Review,* 132 (2018): 1575.

Said, Atef. "Why the Student Encampment Worked." *The Progressive Magazine*, May 29, 2024. https://progressive.org/op-eds/why-the-student-encampments-worked-said-20240529/

Shapin, Steven. *A social history of truth: Civility and science in seventeenth-century England.* University of Chicago press, 1995.

Sharpe, C. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press (2016).

Sexton, Jared. "Affirmation in the Dark." *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 90-111.

Sexton, J. The social life of social death: On Afro-pessimism and Black optimism. In *Time, temporality and violence in international relations,* Routledge*,* (pp. 61-75).

Sexton, Jared. "Ante-anti-blackness." *Lateral,* 1 (2012).

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." *An American Grammar Book* (2009).

Stewart, Brenton, Boryung Ju, and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick. "Racial climate and inclusiveness in academic libraries: Perceptions of welcomeness among Black college students." *The Library Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2019): 16-33.

Taifha Alexander, LaToya Baldwin Clark, Kyle Reinhard, and Noah Zatz. "Tracking the attack on critical race theory." *CTR Forward: UCLA School of Law Report*, April, 6, 2023. https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/new-crt-forward-report-highlights-trends-in-2021-2022-anti-crt-measures/

Thornhill, Ted. "We want black students, just not you: How white admissions counselors screen black prospective students." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5, no. 4 (2019): 456-470.

Totenberg, Nina. "Supreme Court guts affirmative action, effectively ending race-conscious admissions." *NPR*, June 29, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/06/29/1181138066/affirmative-action-supreme-court-decision

Wilderson, Frank B., III. *Afropessimism.* First edition. New York, *N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020.*
Wilderson, Frank B. III, Samira Spatzek, and Paula von Gleich. "'The Inside-Outside of Civil Society': An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III." Black Studies Papers 2.1 (2016): 4–22. Web.

Wilderson, F. B. (2010). *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*. Duke University Press.

Watson, Leah. "Anti-DEI Efforts Are the Latest Attack on Racial Equity and Free Speech." *ACLU Racial Justice Program*, February 14, 2024. https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/anti-dei-efforts-are-the-latest-attack-on-racial-equity-and-free-speech