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Whiteness in Academia, Time to Listen, and Moving Beyond White Fragility

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GUEST EDITORIAL
Whiteness in academia, time to listen, and moving beyond White fragility

The months since society observed the horrific, real time murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis have the potential to be transformational in so many areas, including the academy. Many White academics renewed their wokeness, born out of tragedy and pledged to do better. Yet, Dar *et al.* (2020), in a provoking essay, aptly points to how the academy in general, and business schools in particular, reproduce ideologies that reinforce White supremacy and subordinate people of colour. Although the academy is considered to be an arena where progressive views are fostered (Haynes, 2017), we tend to overlook the performance, networks and power structures of White academics and their White hegemony on a profession that is often held up as steward for racial justice and social change (Hikido and Murray, 2016; Melaku and Beeman, 2020).

In the first editorial of a Special Issue on Black Lives Matter (BLM) (see Volume 39, Issue 7), we (Eddy Ng and Andrew Lam) wrote about how Asians are complicit in anti-Black racism. In this second editorial, we (Kim Bates and Eddy Ng), long-time colleagues and friends, reflect on and write about our many conversations on issues of racial justice and fairness in the academy. Our conversations revolve around academics as gatekeepers, our complicity in reproducing Whiteness and what makes us comfortable but reinforces our privilege. We engage in coalition building and engage in micropolitics to influence each other and resist change, to the injury of Blacks, racialized minorities and low status groups. Social science has helped us become cognizant of our biases and flaws, and humanities can guide us to become better humans. The future of the academy as a catalyst for progress and change lies squarely in our own hands.

Academics as gatekeepers
The academy is built on judgements large and small. Every day, we act as gatekeepers as we generate and assess research, design and deliver curriculum, educate students, and contribute service to universities and other stakeholders. Our encounters with people have profound impacts on their lives and their futures, from the moment we begin training as doctoral students, to our final contributions as retired academics. The majority of academics in North America are White, and the great discretion we have also suggests that eradicating the impact of systemic racism means moving beyond White fragility. We know the research, much of it conducted by us academics, about the impact of biases – cognitive and social – on individuals, organizations and societies. And yet, it can be difficult to keep the knowledge that we inhabit and reproduce institutions in our conscious and unconscious acts. Many have observed the absurdities of academic formalisms even while struggling to be fair and hold to meaningful standards. It can all seem so arbitrary. Many point to academia as a positive institution that has welcomed a diverse group of scholars, based on merit, over the past five or six decades, while ignoring the differential outcomes. Success is much more difficult for

academics who are racialized, sexual or religious minorities, women and those who claim multiple differences. We both feel a great fondness for the academy, even as we recognize its flaws.

As a White woman, I, Kim Bates have had a moderate level of success, early on as a researcher and more recently as an administrator and educator. I have enjoyed the privilege of being able to observe many wonderful and alarming things, and to work with so many wonderful people. I have also seen how bias reproduces itself to the detriment of the institution. I have come to recognize many ways that my Whiteness has opened doors that are not always opened to racialized and minority colleagues. There have been uncomfortable moments, mistakes, misunderstandings and a learning process that I hope will continue for the foreseeable future. I always meant to be kind and contribute to making academia a more just place, but I had to learn so many things, beginning with what my Whiteness means to others.

A better and more just and inclusive academy can only emerge through dialogue, followed by real change to both our mindsets and procedures. We have had many of these dialogues over the years and learnt much from one another. By procedures we mean the rules and policies that govern universities, journals, granting agencies and classrooms. Our impact on students is enormous and important. We reproduce this institution both from positions of power and positions of disadvantage. At a time when science, professionalism and intellect are under assault from an aggrieved and unhappy society, how well we respond to this moment may determine the future of the academy. If we can listen to peers and other stakeholders who have not previously shared their perspectives, perhaps a more just academy can emerge. For those of us who are older and Whiter, this may be an uncomfortable time.

Now is a time to listen
First, now is not the time to share, it is the time to listen and reflect. Older, Whiter academics may be having an unexpected voyage of discovery and reexamining past experiences. It does not follow that this is important to discuss just now. For the academy to capitalize on this moment, Black and racialized colleagues must be able to freely explain how experiences with systemic racism have shaped their lives and careers. It is unacceptable to wait for the pause and then begin sharing how enlightening this is. It is also a good time to recognize that younger, racialized peers of diverse genders and sexual orientation already know the impact of the past actions of their older, Whiter, cisgendered male peers. White "professional liberals" (see Ng and Lam, 2020) and "academic Karens [1]" need to stand back and stand down (see Cole and Grace, 2021). Now is a good time to listen and reflect, to examine past decisions and interactions. As researchers and teachers, we are also writers, and keeping a journal may be very helpful. There may be a time when Black and racialized peers seek to understand how members of the majority experienced this moment, but it is not now. Now is the time for active listening and reflection. It is also important to remember that while peers who claim other types of non-majority status, as female, non-cisgendered, as something other than strictly heterosexual people, this moment emerged from the unavoidable realization of the negative impact of institutionalized (anti-Black) racism when the world watched a man die slowly over eight minutes at the hands of police.

The meaning of Whiteness
One topic for reflection should be Whiteness, and what it means to people who do not claim that identity. Many White academics have a good understanding of what their ethnicity means to them. They may be invested in their specific ethnicity within that overall concept of Whiteness that was invented in North America and exported to colonial Europe (Babb, 1998; Nye, 2019). Some have undoubtedly been learning that part of this identity is being a Settler

and may even know which boats brought their distant ancestors to formerly colonial shores. That is a wonderful personal narrative, but largely irrelevant to our public personas as academics. Do you know what your whiteness means to others? Perhaps you feel you have been kind towards everyone, but until you understand how others see your Whiteness, understanding how to act effectively as an academic of goodwill may be difficult. Colleagues of other identifications already know how the White world sees them and have been given many occasions to think about how they are seen. The stress of daily disconfirming experiences, those acts of microaggressions towards Blacks and racialized groups is thought to contribute negatively to well-being, creating greater inflammatory responses that lead to poor health outcomes (Pitcan *et al.*, 2018). At the very least, bringing one's Whiteness into awareness will enable better communication with peers and students.

The converse of understanding Whiteness is understanding whether we communicate differently with colleagues and students who are racialized. There is a certain casual mode of conversation, the use of slang, colloquialisms that can seem demeaning to colleagues if they observe that White colleagues are treated in a more formal, less familiar fashion (see Ng and Lam, 2020; on "atta boy" and competence downshift). Both students and peers may be affected. Should White academics fear being themselves? Absolutely not. Likewise, it is the best way to avoid cultural appropriation (think Jessica Krug, a White professor who passes as Black, see Jackson, 2020), which is another obvious way to offend. But taking care to interact respectfully with others in academic settings by speaking the same way with all may avoid creating doubts in colleagues and students about whether you see their talents and abilities in a clear, just and unbiased way.

Claiming "hard work" is racist

Many White academics, particularly those of humble origin in North America, have grown up hearing about the importance of hard work. Many have worked hard to achieve their graduate degrees and do not feel privileged. But this narrative comes with an unspoken, or even overt set of attitudes that suggests those who have not achieved success did not work as hard. It is very important to recognize how the doors to success have opened for Whites. No academic achieved success without the assistance of others, or without being admitted into academia by institutions, whether or not they have a privileged background. Now is a good time to recognize that and be grateful for it. It is also the time to stop talking about hard work and recognize that many talented people also worked very hard, but the doors did not open for them, because those inhabiting the institutions did not see them as worthy of admittance. This inability to see talent across the breadth of the population is a failing, and one that can have very real impacts on the livelihoods and prosperity of students and colleagues, as well as their health and well-being. Few successful academics have failed to work hard, but the narrative of White hard work sends a message to colleagues that the speaker is oblivious to the systematic ways that many people are prevented from succeeding, despite their hard work.

Moving beyond White fragility

Resentment over the admission of more diverse students and colleagues "taking" positions that would previously have gone to White men, and more recently White women, has grown in recent decades, but it ignores the changing nature and size of the academy. It also raises the question of whether the rules of science are real, and whether the humanities are indeed human. It is based on the narrative that White people cannot compete unless others are excluded or disadvantaged. Assumptions of White privilege can only exist with an unexamined life untainted by reflection. The many unfortunate interactions produced by outbursts of entitlement or discomfort, known as White fragility (Ng *et al.*, 2020), can be learning experiences that lead to better outcomes for all. No one likes to feel foolish, but

experiences that make uncomfortable beliefs and assumptions obvious can be valuable, if they are an occasion for more empathetic awareness, and perhaps asking for forgiveness from those harmed by White obliviousness. The academy is a diverse institution and has welcomed people from all parts of the globe, despite not being without its problems. White academics are well positioned to move beyond the narrative of White fragility. We can examine unconscious bias as it is revealed and seek it within ourselves in an effort to improve academia. This will take conscious effort, along with a large dose of humility. The studies showing how biases affect us all have been conducted by peers, while others have developed methods for addressing them. Our institutions are governed by rules that seek to be fair. Does the academy have the ability to transform itself into something better by applying those rules to our current challenges? We believe it does.

We must use the analytical rules of the sciences and humanities to examine where our institutions succeed, and where they fail. Research is built upon individual judgements and the development of arguments. Individuals have great discretion in how studies are designed, funded and reviewed for publication. Graduate students, often future colleagues, will benefit from a better academy and will likely be pivotal in creating change to institutions. Admissions systems have been shown to be flawed by biased metrics. Some indicators of quality (e.g. standardize test scores producing adverse impact), are an impenetrable barrier to talented applicants. Those diverse students admitted under quota systems must have the courage to deal with the cruelty of peers and faculty members who assume they must not be as talented as those who would have been admitted without quotas. There are so many ways that admissions can be improved. We can do better by recognizing that while admissions are flawed, once admitted, everyone deserves to be there and to succeed. Senior faculty members can seek to understand why younger colleagues of colour do not find existing paradigms compelling, rather than requiring loyalty and mastery to the paradigms that contributed to their success.

In a post-George Floyd era, institutions need to be deliberate and intentional if they mean what they say. Implement targeted hiring (not just broadly advertising to check the box). It is not reverse discrimination or a violation of meritocracy to right historical wrongs. Reverse discrimination occurs only if everyone has equal opportunity to be meritorious. Academia is overwhelmingly White, relative to the diversity of students and availability of faculty of colour (Davis and Fry, 2019). Be intentional in seeking out and developing Black and racialized faculty members. They are experiencing disproportionate burden of service (see Melaku, 2019, on invisible labour and inclusion tax), but their contributions are just that, limited to voicing injustices and discrimination in their institutions (see Boykin *et al.*, 2020, on how Blacks are vilified for voicing their experiences). Their lived experiences also uniquely qualify them to be more thoughtful and inclusive leaders. To dismantle systemic discrimination and White supremacy, White academics need to give up power – political, social, economic – because we/they have a lot of it. We must be willing to share power and resources if we mean to do better.

There are many ways we can do better, and we can do better. We should. For all its flaws the sciences and the humanities have contributed many positive things to the world and will both be needed to address the urgent issues facing civilization in the coming decades.

Essays in this second special issue on Black Lives Matter
This second issue extends the conversation from the first issue on BLM (see Volume 39, Issue 7 on Black community voices). In this issue, you will read about how public statements and disassociating with past wrongs are insufficient to address present day anti-Blackness racism. Issues of racism and race equality are also well and alive in sports. Organizations and individuals need to do better in mobilizing meaningful resources and overcoming bystander

effects to step in to interrupt racial violence and discrimination. Anti-Black police violence also traumatizes the community and requires a public health response and calls for police reform have failed. What is needed is a transfer of power from police to the community.

Nelarine Cornelius opens this second collection of BLM essays by reminding us of how European colonialism and the slave trade have continued to oppress Black Africans in White dominant societies present day. While organizations are distancing themselves from past European imperialism and historic racism, it remains shameful for them to not acknowledge their profiting from Black chattel slavery. She adds that it is important to address the origins of anti-Black racism before we can create more effective policies and practices in support of race equality and anti-racism.

Discussions around police brutality is inherently tied to calls to abolish or defund the police. Joseph-Salisbury *et al.* (2021) first lay out the landscape on racist policing in the UK, and then make the case for the abolition of the police. The authors argue that past efforts in reforming the police have failed and it is time to remove the power and influence from the police and handing them to communities instead.

Ingrid Waldron draws our attention to the traumatizing effects of anti-Black police violence. Police implicit association of deviance, aggression and criminality with Blacks result in disproportionate use of police force against Blacks. Negative police encounters inevitably create a heightened sense of stress, anxiety and trauma. The intersection between race and mental wellness have often been overlooked. The breakdown of trust between police and mentally ill people can thus be fatal. She further points to the after-effects of police racial violence can inflict those who are not direct victims such as families and communities. Thus, she declares police violence as a public health concern requiring appropriate policy response from law enforcement, healthcare, business, education and the media.

Next, Kevin Hylton shows us how race and racism is reproduced in the sports arena. He points out that sports is not a utopian, race-neutral and meritocratic space, where people view it as a level playing field with an equal opportunity to succeed. Sports organizations such as the English Premier League in antiracism stance, yet their ahistorical politics render them unable to combat their own institutional racism. The author adds that race and racism is central to our understanding of sports.

Courtney McCluney, Danielle King, Courtney Bryant and Abdifatah Ali document how organizations responded to anti-Black racism and prescribe how organizations ought to mobilize resources to address systemic racism. Building on their earlier work on "calling in Black" (McCluney *et al.*, 2017), McCluney and colleagues note that the multi-layered nature of crises inflicting Blacks and people of colour requires organizations to go beyond making public statements. Organizations need to develop antiracism resources that embrace a long-term view, embrace discomfort in acknowledging past mistakes and systematically assess (and dismantle) White supremacy across organizations. They also prescribe how management researchers ought to conduct antiracism research in organizations.

Audrey Murrell furthers our understanding of why seemingly well-intentioned people fail to act, which in turn facilitates racial bias, discrimination and racial violence. Drawing from aversive racism theory, she advances that unconscious bias can render individuals who consider themselves to be fair and egalitarian to rationalize discriminatory acts and racial aggressions. She calls for greater attention to locating behavioural interventions to assist bystanders to intercept when they witness future acts of racism.

Amelia Gibson, Renate Chancellor, Nicole Cooke, Sarah Park Dahlen, Beth Patin and Yasmeen Shorish revisit their earlier writing (Gibson *et al.*, 2017) on the role of libraries as public-face institutions. The authors were critical of the informational institutions' focus on optics (e.g. in issuing statements of support) rather than creating institutional antiracist cultures or dismantling White supremacy cultures. They further point out to the complicity of libraries as "creating surveillance, education, and health care systems that harm" BIPOC [2]

communities while claiming neutrality. The authors call for greater pan-ethnic solidarity with Black lives, particularly from Asians and Asian-Americans (see Ng and Lam, 2020, for a discussion on the complicity of Asian-Americans in anti-Black racism).

Courtney Cole and Audrey Grace draw attention to the persistent White supremacy in American institutions, including Catholic and women's colleges. Drawing from Cole's experience as a White faculty, she reflected on her Whiteness and the need to get out of the way so that Black voices can be heard. She recounted being counselled to "leave the race stuff" until after tenure. As a tenured associate professor, she now recognizes the urgency to attend to anti-Blackness and antiracism work. Cole, along with Grace, a Black-identifying administrator, discuss the ways – with illustrative examples – in which they are working to combat White supremacy, anti-Blackness racism and all forms of oppression.

Sandra Cha, Stephanie Creary and Laura Morgan Roberts suggest that identity references, i.e. face-to-face interactions in which race is referenced, often by Whites, can be interpreted negatively or positively. When the racial reference is perceived as negative (e.g. microaggression), the recipient may react by disaffirming, going along or mindfully correcting the speaker. The authors propose a framework which includes a number of factors such as structural closeness, past hurt, dominant identity foundation (based on recipient's dominant identity) that can impact how identity references can affect the recipient's relationships with White colleagues. This final essay offers some helpful recommendations in racial interactions (see Avery and Ruggs, 2020, on conversing with Black people on highly charged or emotional topics) and makes a valuable contribution to microaggressions and interactions.

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Notes

1. Karen is a pejorative term for someone perceived as entitled or demanding beyond the scope of what is appropriate or necessary. A common stereotype is that of a White woman who uses her privilege to demand her own way at the expense of others (Wikipedia, n.d.). "Academic Karens," generally found in liberal arts colleges, are White saviours who speak up and put on a show of allyship at every opportunity to gain moral credentials.

2. Black, Indigenous and people of colour.

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