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“Stop Complaining, You Just Need More Resilience:” Racial Gaslighting as “Othering”

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This work defamiliarizes commonsense notions of resilience by exploring the process of racial gaslighting. Through a theorizing of racial gaslighting, which operates through White demands for “more” resilience from BIPOC faculty in teacher education programs, this paper shows how everyday discourses of resilience uphold Whiteness. By centering White feelings and interests under the guise of helping BIPOC faculty “survive,” racial gaslighting operates as a form of racial violence. Ultimately, this paper calls for an approach that reimagines resilience within an anti-racist context of confronting oppression by encouraging BIPOC faculty to say no to demands to “roll with the punches.” This new approach, one that refuses the pathologization and “othering” of BIPOC faculty, could provide a catalyst for transforming teacher education into a more just and humane place. This work uses retrospective autoethnography as a methodology to examine racial gaslighting of BIPOC faculty in a teacher education program at a historically White university.

Keywords: resilience | racialized gaslighting | teacher education

Introduction

In this paper, I provide a critique of a particular type of *resilience* discourse. I use the term resilience here in a specific sense, distinct from definitions that derive from psychology or human development (Patrón & Garcia, 2016). While a definition of resilience from these fields denotes positive personal traits or adaptations that aid in overcoming adversity, I use the term here to pinpoint specific ways White faculty decontextualize, commodify, and weaponize resilience against Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) faculty (Olzman, 2021).

By demanding that BIPOC faculty “go with the flow” or “roll with the punches,” instead of talking about racism, White faculty use resilience, defined by them as not complaining, as a form of racial gaslighting (Ahmed, 2021; Berenstain, 2020). Theorizing racial gaslighting, the process by which White faculty attempt to make BIPOC faculty doubt the persistence and lethality of systemic racism, exposes how the practice of demanding resilience functions as a tool of White supremacy (Bonds, 2020). One question guides this study: how do White faculty misuse and weaponize resilience to gaslight BIPOC faculty?

Across diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) projects, the “need” for resilience among BIPOC faculty, has received more attention than demands to abolish the structures that undergird and protect White supremacy (Moon & Holling, 2020). As Hoerl (2021) writes, “emerging appeals to resilience amplify the emphasis on individualism as higher education administrators encourage faculty and students to “roll with the punches” and “bounce back from adversity” (p. 142). The idea that BIPOC faculty must develop individual resilience, instead of condemning systemic racism, has a long history in White spaces, especially in sites where appeals for stability provide an alibi for White racism (Denis & Schick, 2003; Vasquez, 2019). For example, in discussing the civil rights movement, Cruikshank (1999) notes that many White people claimed that “a special responsibility fell on the shoulders of Blacks to restrain themselves in order to

protect democratic stability” (p. 63). The privileging of stability operates in teacher education programs (TEPs) through calls for individual resilience rather than anything that might upset White notions of stability (Ahmed, 2021; Cabrera, 2018).

Theorizing the way racial gaslighting by White faculty distorts the meaning of resilience, simultaneously illuminates the limits of DEI work, while also pointing toward the need for a different type of anti-racist action (Patrón & Garcia, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In this autoethnographic study of an anti-racist faculty discussion group gaslighting refers to attempts by White “allies” to gaslight BIPOC faculty by causing them to doubt their perceptions of racism in the department (Ruíz, 2020). This paper discusses the experiences of one BIPOC faculty member in an anti-racist discussion group created in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd at a historically White university (HWU) in the northeast.

Need for this Study

Although the terms resilience and anti-racism often appear in TEPs, a connection between the two concepts remains undertheorized (Hill et al., 2020). Given that resilience and antiracism regularly emerge as topics that faculty engage with in DEI work, these concepts require further examination and elaboration, especially as they intersect with racial gaslighting (Johnson et al., 2021). Addressing how racial gaslighting operates provides a pathway toward a more nuanced understanding of the pervasiveness of racism in TEPs (Vasquez, 2019). This new understanding complicates simplistic calls for banal DEI initiatives that leave existing structures and hierarchies unchanged, especially those that prioritize the needs, interests, and desires of White faculty (Vasquez, 2021). In short, by situating individualism as the only place with an answer to racism, as in, “*you* just need to develop more resilience,” TEPs continue protecting racist structures while retraumatizing BIPOC faculty who seek to confront White supremacy.

Why Theorize Racial Gaslighting?

Recognizing demands for resilience as harmful to BIPOC faculty raises a multitude of paradoxes and dilemmas. As a possible way out of some of these dilemmas, this paper argues for a questioning of superficial DEI approaches that leave the structures of racism intact while promoting resilience as the optimal response to racism. For instance, according to Daniels (2021), demands for resilience can “promote a narrative in which resilience is reduced to a muscle that simply needs to be exercised” (p.1). This conceptualization, when taken up by White faculty, positions resilience as a competency lacking in BIPOC faculty. To paraphrase White faculty at this HWU, it would be helpful if BIPOC faculty could only develop these “powerful skills.” Ironically, by shifting the meaning of resilience toward BIPOC assimilation to institutional norms, or “settling in before you start criticizing,” White faculty force BIPOC faculty to find other ways to be resilient in White spaces.

Positionality Statement

This project was inspired by my desire to understand the incongruity between the appearance of White liberal caring, articulated on more than one occasion as “we love our new BIPOC faculty,” with the reality of the conditions and structures that sustain White supremacy in the department. As far as my positionality, I am a triple anomaly in teacher education, a Chicano

man, a former elementary teacher, and first-generation high school and college graduate. At this HWU these dimensions of my identity, as well as my Brownness, simultaneously marked me as hypervisible or invisible, depending on the context. In attempting to maneuver the possibilities and limitations of my status, I agreed to participate in the anti-racist discussion group during my first semester. The group consisted of approximately fourteen White faculty members, mostly women, and three BIPOC faculty new to the school. The group disbanded before November after the three BIPOC faculty members refused to participate any longer. Data for this paper comes from the experiences of one of these BIPOC faculty.

Theoretical Approach and Definitions

The term *gaslighting* has emerged recently across a range of sites as a way of defining the process of manipulating a person into questioning their own sanity (Berenstain, 2020). In abusive intimate relationships, for example, gaslighting describes attempts by one partner to control the other by causing them to doubt their perceptions (Podosky, 2021; Sweet, 2019). According to Davis and Ernst (2019), “manipulation of perception is powerful because our reality – how we perceive the world and our place in it – is socially constructed” (p. 762). For example, racial gaslighting deflects attention away from White supremacy by causing BIPOC faculty to question their perceptions and knowledge of systemic racism (Graves & Spencer, 2021).

The concept of resilience was developed by psychologists in the 1970s (Patrón & Garcia, 2016). While conceptualizations of resilience vary, the term generally describes personality traits associated with positive adaptations and sustained functioning in challenging environments as well as recovery from trauma or adversity (Patrón & Garcia, 2016). In education research, resilience typically refers to the “process through which individuals experience positive outcomes despite exposure to significant adversity” (Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010, p. 156). These positive experiences could result from factors such as support groups (Sanders & Lopez, 2021). For this paper, I draw on a different definition of resilience. For this study, resilience refers to the everyday use of the term by White faculty to refer to individual accommodation to existing structures: “try to fit in,” instead of complaining about racism (Ahmed, 2021). “Have some patience” constitutes another example of this practice.

Recognizing that conceptualizations vary by discipline, for this paper, structural racism refers to the policies and practices, both formal and informal, that advantage White faculty while harming BIPOC faculty (Nenonene et al., 2021). For example, unequal access to promotion and tenure opportunities, as well as disproportionate exposure to everyday indignities by White faculty without an effective mechanism for holding White faculty accountable, constitute two dimensions of systemic racism in higher education (Nenonene et al., 2021). A comprehensive review of all dimensions of structural racism in higher education, such as those involving BIPOC faculty interactions with administrators, falls outside the scope of this paper.

Racial Gaslighting

An example of the type of harm produced by racial gaslighting, which also produces a diversion away from analyses of systemic racism, involves the use of tone policing (Berenstain, 2020). White faculty use tone policing, restricting what can be said, to discipline and suppress the communication style of BIPOC faculty when they articulate a challenge to oppression (Ahmed, 2021). This policing focuses on the emotion behind a message, for instance describing

communication as “too angry,” rather than the message itself (Phoenix, 2019). By focusing on the delivery of the message, no matter the legitimacy of the content of the critique, tone policing prioritizes the comfort of the White faculty and minimizes BIPOC experiences by establishing boundaries around taboo topics (Phoenix, 2019). For example, at this research site, tone policing emerged as a White response to any critique of shallowness, superficiality, or willful ignorance, among liberal White faculty in addressing systemic racism. “That’s not who we are” was a regular comment.

Unlike other methods of racial subjugation, racial gaslighting does not have substance or ideology in and of itself (Sweet, 2019). Instead, it produces a dynamic network of social control mechanisms and feedback loops causing BIPOC faculty to start questioning their own perspectives and wisdom. For instance, when White faculty label comments by BIPOC faculty as “reckless” it causes uncertainty and self-doubt. “You have to be more optimistic” also exemplifies gaslighting when used against BIPOC faculty who raise questions about systemic racism. Understanding racial gaslighting as a form of social control offers a way of recognizing how White faculty sustain White supremacy over time.

For this paper, racial gaslighting describes a process that perpetuates and normalizes a White supremacist reality through pathologizing those BIPOC faculty who resist racism (Grundy, 2017). Just as racial domination rests on the creation of racial projects, racial gaslighting, as a process, relies on the reproduction of established deficit narratives about BIPOC faculty as too angry or overly emotional (Vasquez, 2021). These deficit narratives obscure the existence of White supremacist structures. They also reduce negative BIPOC faculty experiences to merely a lack of resilience on their part or another deficiency, such as a lack of interpersonal skills (Reveley, 2016). “You lack collegiality” also operates in this manner.

For BIPOC faculty who recognize racial gaslighting, it can be almost impossible to combat their pathologization by White narratives due to the ubiquitous normalcy of White supremacy (Moon & Holling, 2020). For example, the White narrative, or master narrative, concerning emotionality among BIPOC faculty has been used as a tactic to convince scholars of color into believing that they should assume responsibility for the failures of the university (Ahmed, 2021). This normalized master narrative, which upholds this pernicious myth of personal responsibility, fails to address structural barriers and how the presence of BIPOC faculty threatens White hegemony (Vasquez, 2021). It also fails to address how these “little skirmishes” with White faculty, their words not mine, keep BIPOC faculty preoccupied and distracted. Dealing with these conflicts and the emotions they elicit also requires additional hidden labor, which prevents BIPOC faculty from pursuing other endeavors such as mentoring students (Grundy, 2017). Of course, White faculty deploy these comments condescendingly as helpful advice only for “your success.”

Methodology: Retrospective Autoethnography

For this paper, I use a *retrospective autoethnography* research approach as a methodology for inquiry into the process of racial gaslighting in these meetings (Forbes, 2017). Autoethnography involves making the self the subject of critical inquiry (Chang, 2016). In retrospective autoethnography, the researcher seeks to create a fragmentary narrative rather than a complete life story. This narrative disentangles personal experiences and reconfigures them to arrive at a historical, social, and political explanation for an event (Chavez, 2012). Retrospective autoethnography attempts to unravel and upend the hegemonic logics of objective knowledge, as

well as the Euro-centered privileging of disembodied research practice (Bernal & Villapando, 2002; Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017).

In this case, retrospective autoethnography provides a space where the personal intersects with the political and cultural to critique the everyday power structures of White supremacy in a TEPs (Huber, 2009). What distinguishes this type of ethnographic writing from more conventional forms involves the work of inserting the autobiographical past, in this case my personal narrative, into the present as a form of counter-storytelling resistance to dominant narratives (Solorzana & Yosso, 2001). This approach follows along the same lines as the critical race theory (CRT) principle of storytelling as a way of disturbing the present. In CRT, storytelling confronts hegemonic narratives that essentialize and stereotypes of people of color (Vasquez, 2018). However, retrospective autoethnography cannot provide closure as stories take on a life of their own and remain open to new interpretations (Huber, 2009).

Data for this paper consists of emails and notes taken during the meetings as well as memories. At the time, I took notes only to map the process and to find places where different perspectives might temporarily coalesce into spaces for solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. During the writing process for this paper, I examined my notes and emails for recurring themes. These became the launching point for this paper.

In this study, I use vignettes and examples from anti-racist faculty meetings as well my emails to faculty to understand gaslighting as a process that upholds and masks interpersonal and institutional modes of racial violence against BIPOC faculty. This covert violence, a way of conceptualizing racial gaslighting in this context, does not constitute a generalized manifestation of overt White discrimination or bias. Rather, it is a precise technique of violence that produces specific harms for BIPOC faculty by undermining their perspectives and diminishing their confidence in their personal knowledge and professional training (Vasquez, 2019). This undermining of BIPOC faculty complicates the already risky labor of determining who can be consider an ally in a site with deeply rooted attachments to White supremacy.

I was one of six tenure-track BIPOC hires for the university in fall 2020, a significant moment in terms of a racial reckoning. Two Black women were also hired in the school of education and attended these meetings. Although 40% of undergraduate students at the university self-identify as BIPOC, in the school of education the number drops to 8%. The university is approximately 80 miles from one of the largest national and global urban centers. Although situated in a rural area, many pre-service teachers seek field placements and eventually professional teaching careers in the city. I was hired in part because of my urban teaching experience. This narrative will highlight fragments from my experiences to outline the opportunities, delineations, and contradictions of the space created by the anti-racist faculty working group.

Narrative of my Experiences

In response to the execution of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, some White faculty in the school of education organized weekly anti-racist meetings to examine curricula and policies. At the time, the school had two BIPOC faculty members out of approximately sixty total faculty. I was encouraged by two White faculty members to attend the meetings. As the only Chicano faculty member in the school of education, and probably the university, it made sense from a superficial DEI perspective to invite me. I entered this space with hope even though I was aware

of the institution’s reputation of having a revolving door policy when it comes to retaining BIPOC faculty.

While the number varied, at least a dozen White faculty members regularly attended these meetings. After only one session, I was told by more than one White faculty member that my comments reflected too much negativity, hopelessness, and anguish. When I cited specific Black authors to support my claims, such as by referring to the work of Derek Bell (1980), I was told I was “wallowing in despair” instead of providing “real or practical” answers for *our* school. I was told continually that racism was not really a problem in the school of education. I was told in a friendly manner that racism was “minimal.” I was told this even though I had already experienced overt racism in the form of harassment from the chair of one department in the school of education, which I had reported this to the university six weeks into the semester. Again, I was told, it was a problem for only a few members of the “old guard” who had to be taught how to be more “woke.” At the start of the next semester, only my second semester, I was transferred to another department within the school of education.

Despite what would seem obvious, the White faculty continued to assert that racism does not exist on campus. Instead, I was encouraged to “give the place a chance.” When during one meeting I mentioned Berlant’s (2011) concept of “cruel optimism,” I was questioned and harassed again for being too negative. My explanation of the concept, when something you desire, such as the label “anti-racist school,” can be an obstacle to your flourishing, I was assured that the school had in fact earned that label. Even the use of the rather benign word “division” was singled out as too negative a descriptor. This was in the context of saying that perhaps the division in the department was too great to overcome merely with anti-racist readings.

White faculty also informed me that I did not know the school that well since it was only my first year. This pattern of gaslighting continued until late November when I, as well as the other BIPOC faculty, stopped attending the meetings out concern for our wellbeing. Although the group was supposed to meet only for the summer, it continued into the fall. During these meetings, few White faculty members engaged with the content of my comments, instead, most focused on the “feeling we’re getting.” This was repeated in different ways over the course of the weekly meetings. Not all White faculty members engaged in gaslighting. It was mostly a group from one specific unit within the school of education, who dominated the discussions.

Making me the Problem

Much of the tension in the group involved the idea that CRT attempts to indoctrinate the undergraduate students. Again, isolating CRT as the main issue, instead of systemic racism, devalued me and dismissed my work. When I informed the group that I thought I was hired in part because of my CRT expertise, I was told again that my perspective was too negative and not collegial and that I needed to “go with the flow a bit.” At the time, I started to wonder if I really was too negative. I even questioned whether I should have moved forward with my complaint about the current chair of the department. This self-doubt was compounded by the fact that everyone in the meetings reassured me that I would “fit in nicely once things settle down.” Again, I was told, “you just need to give us a chance.” The implication being that I was the problem and that my perceptions were inaccurate. Everyone was cheerful during the meetings, even when discussing police violence and the murder of George Floyd. In retrospect, this cheeriness might have affected the tone of my responses in ways that made me stand apart from the other participants (Andreotti, 2016).

After I left the group, the gaslighting continued in the form of emails urging unity among faculty, insinuating that I had been the cause of disunity for mentioning CRT. The content of the emails was always positive and cheery. In response to one email, sent by a White faculty member after I had left the group, I responded with an email to the entire school of education. In my email, I reiterated some of the points I had made previously in the meetings and identified specific disparaging comments made by White faculty members. I mentioned that “as the only person in the SOE with extensive doctoral training in critical race theory (CRT), under the direction of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, I hope I can provide some clarity.” In retrospect, I recognize this email I sent as my attempt at having my credentials recognized by White faculty. The gaslighting had caused me to think that White faculty would take my comments more seriously if I verified my qualifications. In a way, this email highlights my efforts to ground my claims in something other than my perspectives, something that would be comprehensible to faculty who dismissed my concerns. Since my perceptions and subjective knowledge were dismissed outright, without any regard, I was worried about moving forward with my work at the university and I had started having doubts about my abilities. These both constitute examples of the effects of racial gaslighting.

In another email, I identified exactly what was said about racism “not being a problem” at the school. My email addressed a clear example of tone policing. I stated that “the insinuation that someone (perhaps me?) is seeking to indoctrinate students or faculty constitutes a type of ideological policing that comes dangerously close to censorship.” Moreover, I stated that “it also constitutes a type of testimonial injustice that curtails rigorous intellectual discourse in the name of collegiality or positivity for the sake of preserving the status quo.” No one responded to this email. Again, this constitutes a type of gaslighting. By not responding, even with an aggressive email, I was left engaging with only myself. That silence left me wondering if I contributed anything of value. This feeling exemplifies gaslighting. Even though my transfer was approved, which I was told rarely happens, I asked myself if I had been wrong about the school. The silence was compounded by the fact that group emails about mundane issues concerning accreditation received multiple cheery responses and invitations for drinks. In another email I sent to the entire school of education, I also wrote:

Our students are not fragile, and they deserve the best quality education possible. State University may not be Harvard, but that doesn’t mean we can’t provide them with access to the same knowledge. To do otherwise would not only be elitist and condescending, but it would also be a grave injustice. We owe it to our students to treat them as intellectually and ethically capable of understanding CRT.

I never received a response to my email, which did not surprise me, but it did make wonder why. Obviously, I had spent much time composing the email and considered the greater issues involved, and yet received no reply. Much of the focus of the school had been on the dispositions and maturity of students, and those emails received multiple replies. For example, clear manifestations of White supremacy by students were positioned as merely a lack of maturity on their part. In short, “not really a big deal.” Again, all this despite repeated evidence about students lashing out in response to antiracism in several classes. Again, I sent a new email to the entire school of education:

In my recent work, a critique of universalism and Eurocentrism, I’ve been arguing that the epistemic perspectives of people from historically oppressed groups must be centered in any discussion of conceptions of the self, including notions of “maturity” and life-changes.

This email also elicited no responses. I was told informally that Eurocentrism is “not a thing at our school.” Once more, this was yet another attempt to compel me to question my perspectives and knowledge. It also served as a message to me, and to others attending those meetings, that my concerns were not valid. The effect of all this was to cause me to disengage from school of education discussions on diversity and inclusion, including on antiracist training for faculty. Since these events, I have not sent another email to the school of education community concerning these issues or any other concerns related to racism. If the purpose of racial gaslighting involves protecting White supremacy, then clearly it was effective in this case as it silenced any substantive critique of White supremacy in the school. It also had chilling effect on my work by making me question whether engaging with the school of education, and especially the White liberal woke faculty, was even worthwhile. All this contributed to a new iteration of social amnesia that eliminated any awareness or memory concerning racism in the department and the school of education. It also induced in me a type of disequilibrium and questioning of my skills.

Discussion

Racial Gaslighting as Othering

Understanding the effects of racial gaslighting requires naming how systems of domination continue to operate in liberal spaces. Those unwilling to recognize racial gaslighting, particularly White liberals who promote themselves as allies, avoid confronting their own complicity in harming of BIPOC faculty. For example, comments directed toward me during meetings involved an iteration of “aren’t you being too negative or too sensitive?” This was typically followed by related comments such as “we have made a lot of progress you know.” These comments sought to gaslight me by making me doubt the continuity of racism. While activists and scholars have challenged the oppressive White supremacist power structure in TEPs, much more work is needed to theorize the way racial gaslighting upholds the systems of domination that anti-racism seeks to address. In short, antiracist groups themselves can become sites of racism when White members gaslight BIPOC faculty into believing that racism has diminished or is “not as bad as it used to be.”

Even though I accepted the position in good faith, with the understanding that I would have space to do antiracist work, once there, I was told racism is “not that big of a problem here.” As a critical race scholar engaged in decolonizing work, I believed that my work in abolitionist and anti-capitalist teaching had value and made me an asset to the university during this time of racial reckoning. My interactions with my peers “corrected” my ideas. For example, while discussing my intellectual trajectory, someone described me as “unwilling to bend.” This person followed this with several comments indicating that she could not understand how I could even make requests for structural change “so early.” Despite my explanations about my training and expertise, this person proceeded to state that perhaps the reason she couldn’t understand my stance was because of my despair and negativity. In other words, that I needed to exercise “self-

care,” or practice mindfulness to find peace and joy in life. Despite my willingness to clarify my research interest in radical pedagogies, she failed to engage with my concerns. During our conversations and later email communications, it became clear to me that many of my peers did not wish to understand my commitments to anti-racist pedagogies or disruptions to the dominance of Euro-centered epistemologies of individualism. Given the current moment for racial justice, as well as the university’s publicly stated goal of becoming an anti-racist institution, this was unfortunate and forced me to find a different type of resilience. This resilience took the form of disengagement from anti-racist work.

Describing me as too negative constitutes a type of violence that uses racial gaslighting to force me to understand myself as an “Other.” In short, an “Other” who does not conform to the traditional norms and values of the school of education of not asking difficult questions. This “Othering” also placed an immensely exhausting burden on me to establish and defend my legitimacy in the department. In many ways, this gaslighting constitutes a form of punishment for my “diversity,” which they were supposed to celebrate according to their public diversity statements. The only celebrating that occurred was manifested in hollow comments such as “we’re so glad you’re here.”

While my research and teaching expertise could have supported the university’s long-term goal of becoming an anti-racist institution, I too needed support. For example, my work in decolonial approaches that examines the violence inflicted on epistemologies that fall outside of the European Enlightenment did not seem to have a place in the school. A main goal of my research involves addressing the harms caused to children of color through oppressive schooling processes and ideologies that mark them as inferior. My expertise would enable me to develop new courses in educational foundations that address these and other concepts, including courses that examine systems of anti-blackness. Even the term anti-blackness, however, provoked a strong negative reaction from my peers during meetings. These reactions took the form of tone policing related to the “angry sound” of the term anti-blackness.

By the second semester, my concern was that the wound caused by the negative interactions would not heal enough for me to feel comfortable and safe in the department unless we reconceptualized the term resilience. I was especially concerned about peer evaluations related to my promotion and tenure that would mark me as a problem (Vasquez, 2021). As I sought to receive credit for my prior service, which means the window for achieving tenure was reduced, any harm to my professional trajectory by negative evaluations would be amplified, which also had an insidious silencing effect on me. As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is interesting that 40% of undergraduates at the school identify as students of color, yet they remain disproportionately underrepresented in the school of education. This along with other examples I mentioned, constitute an element of the systemic racism I sought to address in the group. As a scholar from a historically oppressed and marginalized group, I must reiterate that feeling “safe and supported” must never be conflated with dismantling White supremacy.

The Emptiness of Antiracism as Performance

The discourse that dominated this antiracist faculty project was that racial progress “may be slow, but it is working.” Rather than focusing on structures, resilience was positioned as something “needed by people of color.” Emails and statements that restate this “truth,” which functions as a diversion from White supremacy, actually cause more harm by pathologizing BIPOC faculty like me as “too angry” while also closing off possibilities for nuanced

discussions. In the vignettes shared above, the attempts at gaslighting by White faculty can be seen as strategies to avoid changing the school of education in any substantive way, which shifts attention away from White liberal complicity in racism. The self-serving performativity of liberal anti-racism, which seek to protect the status quo, requires the racial gaslighting of BIPOC faculty.

While anti-racist and abolitionist writing have emerged from a range of different sources and have brought renewed attention to the systems of domination that sustain and defend current social arrangements, during meetings White faculty dismissed that knowledge as “something that happened somewhere else” or as “we don’t have that here.” In effect these comments upheld White supremacy by discounting my comments and experiences as not relevant. This left the systems and structures of racialized violence and domination that continue to subjugate Black and Brown people and communities across all levels and dimensions of teacher education unexamined. Instead, I was told to focus on concepts such as community building. As a new faculty member, I even began to wonder if I needed to conduct a survey to collect data on racism on campus. I also began to feel depleted and even considered resigning, rather than continuing to endure the onslaught of negative and noxious comments from my peers aimed at discrediting me by dismissing my knowledge.

Racial gaslighting positions genuine critique as being “too much” or “too harsh.” In other words, racial gaslighting domesticates or pacifies BIPOC faculty into submission by forcing them to start questioning their own senses and sanity. “Am I too harsh” was something I asked myself. Accepting racial gaslighting, by BIPOC faculty, unintentionally leads to working for White supremacy. For that reason, concepts such as resilience that pathologize BIPOC faculty must also be confronted. Resilience, in this case resistance to racial gaslighting, must aim toward a process of decolonization as the only solution to White dominance, especially dominance over which narratives count as valid (Bernal & Villapando, 2002).

In higher education, problematically, confronting racial injustice has still centered mostly on practical or technical solutions, such as identifying new practices such as mindfulness, for fostering resilience in BIPOC students and faculty (Fritzsche, 2021). These forms of resilience, such as the promotion of mindfulness techniques to “calm” us down, paradoxically reproduce harmful deficit-narratives by marking BIPOC people as needing to change for our individual well-being (Forbes, 2017). These types of therapeutic solutions, positioned as necessary self-care, also demand that BIPOC people police themselves and their feelings, rather than focusing on the structures of domination that make life in American unsafe for BIPOC people. This shallow and self-serving support of BIPOC people, which leaves the status quo of White supremacy unchanged, has been especially focused on vulnerable untenured faculty at HWUs such as the one discussed in this paper.

An example of this performative support, a term that captures an important dimension of this “support,” can be exemplified by the proliferation of feeble statements. In these statements, Whiteness continues to operate as a dominant process through the centering of White feelings and interests (Ahmed, 2006; Bailey, 2021). While privately reproaching BIPOC faculty for their own suffering, public statements serve as public confessionals for White liberals who desire absolution for naming their past sins of “unintended” racism (Leong, 2021). In short, despite the White liberal rhetoric of progress articulated by trendy anti-racist statements, little substantive movement has been made to construct alternatives to current social arrangements for faculty in programs that prepare future teachers (2015, Grande). In the age of neoliberal multiculturalism, where diversity is still only superficially celebrated, I attempted to explain that representation by

itself is not the solution, only to be pathologized by my peers as having “fallen victim to despair.”

Conclusion

While the stated purpose of the group was to respond to the murder of George Floyd with anti-racist awareness, the actual purpose, as this paper shows, was to provide liberal White faculty a space to further extend their privileges and power by hiding behind a veil of professionalism and stability (Marom, 2019; Pennington & Prater, 2016). By silencing substantive critiques of racism in the school in the name of stability, White faculty reproduced the very systems of domination and privilege they claimed to want to address (Shaw et al., 2016). Ultimately, this work shows how DEI approaches that simplistically call for more BIPOC resilience, rather than for holding White faculty accountable for racist actions, suffer from a disastrous limitation.

The Problem with Teacher Education

While much has been written about radically altering higher education, what this entails within the context of the new type of “woke” teacher education antiracist discussion groups has received much less attention from researchers. As this paper shows, racial gaslighting obscures the enduring legacy of subtle or covert White racism that continues to name and define the boundaries of what counts as oppression long after the end of accepted forms of overt racism (Davis & Ernst, 2019). Addressing covert racism in White liberal spaces, such as teacher education, requires a different type of resilience on the part of BIPOC faculty.

While resilience may be simply regarded by some as simply a psychological experience or state of mind, these previous characterizations of resilience may be too narrow, reductionist, to capture all the dimensions of resilience as lived by BIPOC people subjected to racial gaslighting daily (Berenstain et al., 2021). Moreover, these conceptualizations of resilience along the lines of a psychological state may tacitly contribute to unreflective deficit-narratives that further stigmatize and punish BIPOC people and communities whose notions of resilience, by necessity, may fall outside the logics, binaries, values, and limitations of western epistemologies that value and privilege individualism over collectivism (Medina, 2013).

Rethinking Resilience

A different anti-racist approach, one that situates resilience within a non-euro centered context of collective resistance to oppression, including through disengagement, could provide a new catalyst for transforming teacher education spaces as just and humane places for all. Asked from a place of radical dreaming (Wynter, 2015), the question of a different approach to resilience, invites TEP faculty to go beyond merely imagining the possibilities of resistance to oppression and the nurturing of resilience in the face of everyday indignities in higher education. By providing a starting point for fracturing the monopoly held by White faculty on conceptualizations of terms such as resilience, linked to “positivity and collegiality,” this paper seeks to create a space for reconsidering how we might envision resilience differently for BIPOC faculty. This involves increasing awareness of different possibilities for new ways to see resilience through disengagement as a way of obliquely confronting White supremacy and racial

gaslighting rather than “getting along.” Developing approaches to understanding racial gaslighting remains a significant challenge. By forcing BIPOC faculty to see themselves as “others,” for “not giving the place a chance,” and positioning resilience, in the form of accommodation, as the solution to that problem, White faculty strategically absolve themselves of any responsibility for racism while reaping the benefits of being antiracist advocates (Delfino, 2021). Solidarity across difference cannot thrive in such a state.

Last Words

What I wished to call attention to in this paper, was the possibility of rethinking or defamiliarizing BIPOC resilience as a way of countering a different and much more insidious form of White racism in teacher education. Since the murder of George Floyd, a range of anti-racist writing has sought to convince remaining doubters, including White liberals, that racism represents a continuing threat to BIPOC people (Radebe, 2021). Rather than understanding racism as an aberration or leftover from the past, for instance, Radebe (2021) defines White racism as “directed at de-humanizing its victims, which, in turn, works to justify the use of force in the cause of preserving White supremacy” (p. 236). While the continued racialized violence against Black and Brown people has drawn renewed attention to naming and confronting racism, much remains undertheorized about anti-racist approaches in teacher education (Vasquez, 2019).

Racism is no virus, and no experimental vaccine or resilience can prevent its infecting White spaces. Rather, it is a learned behavior directed at de-humanizing its victims, which, in turn, works to justify the use of force by police in the cause of preserving White supremacy. Universities, like other sites of racial domination and violence, have been slow to come to grips with their legacies of White supremacy and the many conspicuous and subtle ways that the college campus has been marred historically and still today by racism and institutionalized exclusion. The wounds caused by racialized violence cannot be healed by resilience that seeks to domesticate and defang. The unhealed wounds from racialized violence and domination require delinking from ideas such as learning mindfulness to cope. As I stated during a meeting, to the irritation of my peers, George Floyd did not die because of a lack of resilience on his part.

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