Antiracism is Not an Action Item: Boutique Activism and Academic (Anti)Racism

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Abstract

As organizations and institutions responded to calls for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many did so in performative ways that maintained the racial status quo. In this article, the author argues that such performativity has been both pervasive and intentional. Drawing parallels between her experiences advocating for racial justice in a nonprofit organization and in an English department, the author explores the type of liberal boutique activism that, already common in nonprofit spaces, directs much of the discourse on (anti)racism in academic settings and squashes more substantive efforts to challenge white supremacy. The author also explores how her positionality as a white Jewish woman impacted her experiences as an antiracist activist in an academic department, illuminating how linkages between racism and antisemitism are covertly weaponized in white spaces by those who profess interest in social justice but really seek to uphold white supremacy.

Key words

academia, activism, antiracism, antisemitism, Jewish, nonprofits, performativity, white supremacy

In June 2020, I resigned from the executive board of a small nonprofit on which I had served for three years. The fund, as members referred to it, supported educational and extracurricular opportunities for Black and African American boys and young men under eighteen. It had become clear during the time I served on its board that the fund's practices were steeped in ideologies of exceptionalism and white saviorism and that perpetuated rather than challenged systemic anti-Black racism and that there was little interest in interrogating how white supremacy sustains itself structurally and rhetorically, even within spaces that profess to work toward racial justice.

As a white Jewish scholar-activist whose work focuses on antiracism, I was familiar with this dynamic. In fact, at the time I was extracting myself from the fund, I witnessed the same dynamic play out in the English department where I work. I know how important it is to build coalition and call others in, particularly white folx, to do the work. Some coalitions, however, lead to more dead ends than open doors.

In this essay, I tell you two stories. One is about the nonprofit. The other takes place in an English department. It will become clear as these stories unfold that they have run on parallel tracks, neither of which leads to social justice. Ultimately, this essay seeks to expose the liberal boutique activism that, already common in nonprofit spaces, directs much of the discourse on (anti)racism in academic settings.

STORY #1: WHITE-SAVIOR PHILANTHROPY

By the time I'd joined the fund, the president and founder, an older white woman I'll call Amy,[1] was having trouble recruiting new scholars and soliciting donations. Despite telling me she hoped new membership would be revitalizing, she categorically dismissed my suggestions. I learned quickly that we functioned as a board in name only: There were no votes and few conversations.

"She can't handle anyone who disagrees with her," a board member named Phyllis explained. A white social worker in her midseventies (and, to my knowledge, the only other Jewish woman on the board), Phyllis had been with the fund since its founding.

It was only with Phyllis that I discussed my concerns: I was troubled that eligibility for scholarships was determined by grades and standardized test scores, which have been shown to be biased against Black and Brown students (Strauss, 2014). Public schooling was designed with the express purpose of assimilation, an aim it continues to serve (Keisch & Scott, 2015). Because the emphasis is on performing whiteness, it seemed the fund was perpetuating racial exceptionalism rather than challenging racist injustice.

Fundraisers, which previously had been held in a racially and economically diverse neighborhood, had been moved 20 miles away to the predominantly white gated community where Amy now lived. The change was for the benefit of Amy's neighbors, some of whom were donors or sat on the board (though, according to Phyllis, they were more interested in the Sunday brunches Amy hosted than in racial justice). Of 15 members, all but two were white. A wealthy West Indian neighbor served on the board, as did an Asian retiree who rarely attended meetings or replied to emails. Though there had been attempts to recruit more BIPOC some years earlier, the Black teacher educator who joined the board had resigned after six months.

Still, as an old friend of Amy's, Phyllis remained an active member, as did I, thinking I could contribute to a more equitable organization. Maybe that was my own white-savior complex talking.

In 2019, Amy threatened to dissolve the fund: "We've had a long and productive run. It saddens me that it will end with me." One board member suggested we "rethink our mission and target group." We didn't hear from Amy for six months.

In June 2020, less than a month after George Floyd was killed on camera by Minneapolis police officers, and while uprisings were occurring in cities across the country, Amy introduced our newest board member: Olivia, the daughter of Amy's West Indian neighbor who also served on the board. That same day, Amy requested "immediate" feedback on a letter she had drafted to "the

boys" (scholarship recipients) directing them to write about their experiences with racism for their update to the board, a biannual scholarship requirement. The letter read:

> When my husband and I first conceived of this program it was because we were both horrified over the fact that so many black youth were being incarcerated. We felt that if they were offered enrichment programs, they would be able to envision a life separate from street culture . . . You boys are all bright and have experienced different kinds of enrichment which will help you pursue a career and a productive life. I wonder do you feel you are somewhat handicapped by the color of your skin?

I got a phone call from Phyllis: "*Street culture*? Asking them if they're *handicapped*? How can she say this?"

Amy expresses horror at incarceration rates of Black men but does not acknowledge the racism of the criminal-justice system that leads to such outcomes. She elides systemic racism when she refers to "street culture," a racist trope even more transparently euphemistic than "urban" or "inner city." She suggests the support of the fund will help the scholars "pursue a career and a productive life," a statement that both reductively implies educational enrichment will open doors for the scholars who receive it, overlooking the various ways racism manifests structurally outside of education, and presents Amy as the white heroine who can help these "boys" access a better (and whiter) life.

"What's the point of this requirement anyway?" I asked Phyllis. I was more familiar with the fundraising side of the organization. "What do they usually write about?"

"They just say what they've used the money for and thank Amy for the support. That kind of thing. I'm going to say something."

"I will too."

Phyllis emailed the board that the letter was "patronizing" and presented the fund as the "great white savior." I added I was troubled by the voyeuristic nature of the writing task and its potential to trigger or retraumatize those assigned to complete it. I suggested we discuss our aims: Why were we asking young Black men to talk to us (a board comprised largely of white women) about racism? Why was any writing assignment mandatory? In a conciliatory move designed specifically for the fragile white audience I recognized I was dealing with, I said I appreciated the apparent intention to "listen" but added we may want to think ahead: "What will we do with the information we may obtain or the stories we may hear?"

Olivia quickly shared a revision: Terms like "street culture" and "handicapped" had been deleted, but the letter still opened and

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1 All names of fund and faculty members are pseudonyms.

concluded with the mandate to write about racial injustice, and there was no mention of why those stories were solicited or how they might be used. The next day, which happened to be Juneteenth, Amy emailed a third draft with only minor changes and informed us she had already sent the letter to the scholars that morning, without board approval.

Because philanthropy can easily end up "reinforcing the very social ills it says it is trying to overcome" (Dorsey, Kim, Daniels, Sakaue, & Savage, 2020), an organization must acknowledge how whiteness functions in its operation "before it can earnestly and holistically support racial justice" (Cordery, 2020). I wondered if this kairotic moment could lead to such a conversation. If the organization was a system, this, I thought, might be a point of leverage at which "the least amount of effort can enact the most amount of change" (Melzer, 2013, p. 86).

I emailed the board, expressing my hope that we too might be able to consider what this moment meant for our organization and reflect upon the work we could do, as an institution, to combat our complicity in white supremacy. Where the annual letter was concerned, I suggested we reconsider our approach in the future because the requirement itself could be seen as racist.

Phyllis called me: "You used the word 'racist.'"

"I called the requirement racist."

"I know. That's not how Amy's going to read it."

To many white people, it is worse to be called racist than it is to actually *be* racist. Given my audience, I could have employed a more strategic approach, but dancing around white fragility is exhausting and responding to white racism with whitely politeness does little to challenge the overt or covert ways white people enact whiteness and racism on a daily basis.

As Phyllis had predicted, Amy became defensive, immediately reframing herself as the harmed party: "We have wonderful relationships with our scholars and their parents for more than 25 years," she said, "so I find your comments offensive." By emphasizing her individual relationships, Amy attempted to distance herself from systemic racism. In apparent efforts to further assert her own moral goodness, she then forwarded an email from a donor praising her for teaching him "what it means to help people." Tactics like this serve to protect a person's "moral character against what they perceive as accusation and attack while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 64).

Olivia defended Amy: "I'm mixed race," she said, "and I don't think it's racist."

I've thought about this a lot since. My impressions of Amy were pretty fully formed by then, but I didn't know Olivia and I wanted to honor her experiential knowledge as a mixed-race person, knowledge I do not and cannot possess. We exchanged emails. In Olivia's view, we were "just asking the boys to share their thoughts on this historic time in the way that we might ask any young person—regardless of race—to share their thoughts." In my view, questions remained: Would we have been asking any young person to share their thoughts on this historic moment? Or were we asking because the protests were about Black lives and the young people in question were Black?

Unfortunately, we couldn't even have that conversation: Perhaps predictably given that white supremacy in the nonprofit world often manifests "in the silencing and/or removal of foundation staff that speak out against" that same white supremacy (Cordery, 2020), Amy sent two emails in quick succession requesting my resignation, one noting that my opinions did not align with her work, the other declaring me "not a good fit" for the board.

Even after I (and Phyllis) resigned, Amy didn't let it go. She claimed my "rhetoric" had ruined her friendship with Phyllis, a move that minimized the significance of our concerns by reducing them to a term that, though it denotes my field of research, often carries a pejorative connotation in popular discourse. With this, Amy confirmed what I'd always sensed: This fund had little to do with social justice and much to do with her personal relationships and her whitely sense of self. In fact, Amy continued to harass me via email, alternating between direct insults and passive-aggressive heart emojis—I wish I could say I was joking—until my second request to be removed from the email list.

How naïve was I? I had seen Olivia's appointment to the board and Amy's letter, problematic though it was, as signs she and the board would be willing to engage in a more in-depth and nuanced discussion of the organization's role in combatting anti-Black racism. That did not turn out to be the case.

And I wonder now about my own motives. The letter was, in my view as a race rhetorician, blatantly racist, but, looking back, I think my resignation was not only about the letter; it was also about my general dissatisfaction with the fund and not feeling heard for three years while serving on the board. I just wasn't interested in the "boutique activism" (Szetela, 2016) of women for whom social justice was a weekend activity akin to shoe shopping. Maybe the change I needed to make in that kairotic moment was not institutional but individual.

I, like Amy, had made it personal. Maybe I was one of the problematic white women for not letting it go. And maybe Olivia, as the newest member and the daughter of another member, felt she had no choice but to defend Amy. But I can't shake the feeling that Olivia's appointment was not only about nepotism but also about tokenism.

This is one story of one small nonprofit that, I imagine, will fold sooner rather than later. But situations like this are microcosmic and illustrative of a problem increasingly apparent in academia, especially as programs, departments, and universities rush to respond to public outcry for racial justice in the most whitely and neoliberal box-checking ways possible. The next story illustrates this dynamic.

STORY #2: WHITE-SAVIOR SOLIDARITY

By the time I'd joined the English department at South Lake State University as the only Jewish faculty member, the major was having trouble recruiting new students and retaining current students, and many of my colleagues seemed, for lack of a better description, generally unhappy. Some of the first meetings I attended devolved into passive-aggressive arguments rife with racism and sexism among tenured faculty members. Despite telling me they hoped my presence as a new faculty member would be revitalizing, often I felt ignored and dismissed. I also noticed I was having trouble communicating with most of my new colleagues, who never seemed to speak directly. Like many Ashkenazi Jewish people from New York, I've been accused of having a more "aggressive" communication style than non-Jews (Schiffrin, 1984; Tannen, 1981). I speak directly and animatedly, and I lapse occasionally into *Yinglish*, "English-language phrases with syntax influenced by Yiddish" (Benor & Cohen, 2011, p. 71). For Ashkenazi Jewish people, animated speech and argumentation are part of "sociability," not, in fact, argument (Schiffrin, 1984), but whenever I spoke passionately, I felt my coworkers' eyes on me like I'd grown horns since opening my mouth.[2] I began prefacing my comments with "I'm from New York, so . . ." to prevent misunderstandings, even though I really wanted to say, "I'm a Brooklyn Jew and this is how I talk so please just listen to the content of my statement and don't make me keep giving you this disclaimer."

Suzanne, a recently tenured woman of color, gave me a warning one afternoon after closing the door to my office: "When I got here, I was advised to be careful. People here hold grudges." I became close with Rita, a tenured woman of color who dealt with the department by avoiding it and the people in it as much as possible, and Daphne, a white woman who repeatedly tried in vain to get all the women together for a meeting to discuss strategies for combatting the sexism and racism in the department. Rita and Daphne shared stories about their experiences in the department and repeatedly told me we had to do something.

I learned quickly that the practices I had by then come to associate with academic departments were nowhere to be found at South Lake: There were no bylaws, no elections, and few conversations. In the year before a middle-aged white woman I'll call Diane was elected chair—she ran unopposed after the dean threatened to appoint an outside chair if no one stepped up—I worked with Suzanne and Daphne to develop bylaws and create an elections committee and with Daphne and Rita to introduce conversations about racism and misogyny in small corners of the department. The bylaws and committee stuck, despite Diane's complaint that she couldn't see why everything needed to be "codified," but the conversations didn't.

In June 2020, less than a month after George Floyd was killed on camera by Minneapolis police officers, and while uprisings were occurring in cities across the country, two Black women in prominent staff roles on campus (outside the English department) called out the relative silence on the university employee listserv. As interim director of the writing center, I had already shared our philosophy, which explained across five pages how the writing center enacts antiracism through its approach to writing tutoring, and I had presented at academic senate on antiracist approaches to writing instruction. I'm also one of the few white faculty on my campus whose work explicitly examines racism. So, I sent a call to white faculty and staff, cosigned by Daphne and five other white-identified colleagues, calling white members of the campus community into this work. Over the next month, 60 white members of the faculty, staff, and administration attended workshops we hosted to discuss the roles of white people in dismantling racist systems.

In the English department, around the same time, I asked my full-time colleagues what we were doing to support Black students and part-time lecturers. (There were no Black faculty members on the tenure track.) Another colleague suggested we write a solidarity statement. No one wrote anything, so I drafted three sentences, emailed them to my colleagues, and asked them to expand upon the statement. A colleague suggested we include links to organizations doing substantive antiracist work and to resources for people seeking support. For two weeks, those three sentences were circulated among the members of the department for little more than wordsmithing. Commas were changed, "antiracism" was taken out, and "Black liberation" was replaced with "equality," which was then replaced with "Black liberation." No additions were made and no resources were provided, but the statement was posted.

In response, a coalition of graduate and undergraduate students and part-time lecturers emailed the department decrying the brevity and insincerity of the statement. Over the next month, they called us to collective action via emails and letters pointing out the racism, sexism, and linguicism they experienced in the department. I led a workshop for my colleagues on how we could begin to challenge inequity in our department. Rita and Suzanne shared stories of the racism and misogyny they had been subjected to at the hands of their colleagues; Diane, the new chair, turned off her camera.

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2 One trope in anti-Jewish propaganda is the depiction of Jewish people as having horns.

Following this workshop, Rita and I shared additional resources about antiracist pedagogy via email with the department. Daphne said she was excited to keep this work going. Diane replied to say we couldn't continue because we weren't on contract during the summer, and, despite my requests, did not put any discussion of antiracism or the structural inequities of the department on the agenda for the first two department meetings of the semester. At the first meeting, I asked why we weren't continuing the conversation we began over the summer. Others seemed interested, so we discussed ways of building a more diverse curriculum and more inclusive pedagogies. Diane's agenda went quickly out the window.

At the second meeting, Diane showed us PowerPoint slides about how to use the degree audit system for student advising. When someone mentioned we should consider culturally relevant approaches to advising, Diane told us a story about one of her former students: He was "African American *but* he had potential," she said, and explained that, through her persistent mentorship efforts, she was able to "get him across the finish line" (emphasis added). Diane's use of "but" to describe the relationship between the student's racial identity and his academic aptitude as she perceives it marks his "potential" as extraordinary. This construction demonstrated her view of this student as exceptional, distinct from other Black and African American students, who, it is implied, lack such potential. Further, by emphasizing her individual efforts, Diane attempted to distance herself from systemic racism and further assert her own moral goodness as someone who "helped" a Black student. Like Amy's emails, this tactic served to protect Diane's "moral character" from attack "while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 64).

When I tried to interject, Diane told me we had no time and had to move on, then switched to another slide. No one said anything in the meeting about Diane's comments, but I received text messages from Rita and Daphne, who were equally horrified. No further meetings were scheduled, and we barely heard from Diane for six months. I heard through the grapevine that Diane was distraught about the prospect of having to run another meeting because she didn't want to be called racist, specifically by me. (That I had never called her or anyone else in the department racist was apparently irrelevant.) She had told people she couldn't understand why I was suddenly so "angry." I must be "unwell," she said. Of note, these labels draw upon racist and ableist anti-Jewish stereotypes (Gilman & Thomas, 2016; Schiffrin, 1984; Tannen, 1981) that have positioned the Jewish body and its expression as essentially distinct from and inferior to Christian bodies and their expression (Gilman, 1991).

In early March 2021, Diane finally called a meeting for April; the dean, we were informed, would be facilitating the meeting. Then, on March 16, a white man killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women, in a series of shootings at three spas and massage parlors in Atlanta, sparking a national conversation about violence against Asian and Asian American people in the United States.

After two weeks, and after numerous other departments had released statements claiming solidarity with AAPI colleagues and students, Diane reached out to the department to suggest we craft a similar statement. "I think we need to say something," she wrote.

Daphne wrote that she had reservations but would be willing to contribute if we were honest in the statement: "I'd rather admit where we have fallen short and explain how we plan to do better if the other options are empty gestures or, worse, silence." Ilana, a white woman who had joined the department that year, and therefore wasn't present for the previous solidarity statement debacle, attached a draft of a solidarity statement to which she asked others to contribute and suggested we have a meeting to discuss this further. We were now a week into April, and I was having a distinct and overwhelming experience of déjà vu. I wrote,

> The rise in anti-AAPI hate crimes has reintroduced what I see as a familiar dynamic in our department: We talk a lot about the work we need to do—with some of us talking a lot more than others—and little material happens to improve working conditions for us or learning conditions for our students. . . . This [antiracist] work involves, among other things, critical self-reflection, open and honest discussion, reconsideration of internal structures that serve as barriers to equity, and intense collaboration. . . . I completely agree with Ilana that a meeting to discuss this is in order.

A white man replied all: "Let's talk about this at the department meeting." No one else replied, and, when Diane sent the agenda for the meeting a week later, there was no mention of the solidarity statement on it.

Over the next six months, conversations about antiracism were replaced with empty talking points about "collegiality" and "civility," perpetuating a discourse that disproportionately burdens people of color (see Newkirk, 2016) and marginalizes anyone not acculturated into the discourse of what I have called, admittedly somewhat facetiously, "being American" (Grayson, 2020, p. 71). In a professor culture that centers whiteness and suppresses conflict (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Yoon, 2012), the violence of the institution emerges even through "warm (even cherished) ideals such as solidarity, loyalty, and collegiality" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 180). While I worked with programs and initiatives outside the department, my experience inside the department worsened. For over a year, Diane had refused to meet with me about my progress toward tenure, my course schedule, or the work I was doing in either composition and rhetoric or antiracist education. In my annual review, in which she begrudgingly recommended my reappointment, she undercut my accomplishments and injected enough little barbs that I had to write a three-page rebuttal. Making matters worse, the new emphasis on "collegiality" made it even easier to hold my New York Jewish speech patterns against me. Whenever I spoke directly, I was told I was "inappropriate"

or "rude," and I was constantly advised to "be nice," even when I thought I *was* being nice.

Over the next year, in my attempts to advocate for my colleagues, my students, and myself, I learned what Sara Ahmed (2021) meant when she declared, "To be heard as complaining is not to be heard" (p. 1). Through the complaints I made, those voicings of negativity I, like Ahmed, saw as "political action" (p. 68), I experienced the powerlessness institutional complaint creates in the complainant, the sense that "making a complaint about harassment can often feel like being harassed all over again, becoming subjected, again, to another's will" (p. 45). And most people I encountered in the institution had little interest or incentive to address the problem. A few months earlier, I had conveyed my concerns to the interim dean, who admitted Diane was not fulfilling her duties but said I was stuck with her because no one else was willing to serve as chair and because he wasn't "willing to fail" as dean. A literary scholar, he had retreat rights to the English department, he told me, but, for obvious reasons, he didn't want to work in the English department either. I had also spoken to the provost, who attributed the backlash to my antiracist work as "a vehement last gasp of white supremacy" and hired two restorative-justice mediators to address the "problems" in the department. The mediators, however, one of whom advertised herself as a Christian-faith-based counselor, were less interested in sexism or racism than they were in resolving "the growing tensions" between Diane and me. Like many other administrators when faced with bullying of a woman faculty member by a woman bully, the administrators at South Lake and even the mediators they hired dismissed my complaints as "stereotypical infighting rather than recognizing the intensity and impact of bullying" (Sepler, 2017, p. 301).

When I told the mediator I'd expected the mediation to be about the department as a whole and that I didn't want to be "in circle" with Diane (a term I still don't understand and which they told me I wouldn't understand unless I was in said circle) without knowing how I would be protected as a probationary faculty member, the mediator told the university I was "not a suitable candidate" and should be excluded from mediation. From what I understand, Suzanne refused to participate. Daphne and Rita chose to be "in circle," however, and seemed to grow increasingly sympathetic toward Diane and increasingly resistant to any overt discussion of racism or sexism. To my knowledge, no one else in the department was asked to participate.

I did not feel heard when I complained to the administration, but when I finally filed official complaints with the university, I learned just how little I would be heard from that point forward. If we understand all "universities are part of the society in which they are created" (Shenhav-Goldberg & Kopstein, 2020, p. 256), and that the United States is built upon a racial contract (Mills, 1997) designed and continually reshaped to maintain white supremacy, we can deduce that, in the microcosm of the university, legislative bodies and administrative procedures are likewise intended to

uphold the racial contract. The same is true of even those administrative entities tasked with enforcing university policies and relevant laws ostensibly intended to increase equity, officially if not in practice, like Title IX officers, who often are among the first in a series of administrators one encounters in the "messy and circular" process of filing a complaint (Ahmed, 2021, p. 35). In this way, university agents like the interim dean and procedures like those we are required to follow to file a complaint can be seen as "coercive arms of the state . . . working both to keep the peace and prevent crime among the white citizens, and to maintain the racial order and detect and destroy challenges to it" (Mills, 1997, p. 84).

The department had been a toxic place long before I arrived, but faculty members had become resigned to racial and gendered imbalances in workload distribution, frequent microaggressions, and instruction motivated by deficit ideologies about language, writing, and learning (Grayson, forthcoming). When I pushed my colleagues and supervisors to face the violence of these dynamics, I was blamed for having revealed them. When a person complains about racism, "it is racism that leads her to use the word racism" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 156), yet in naming racism, I challenged the racial contract I was expected to accept in exchange for the privileges of whiteness (Mills, 1997).

Ahmed (2021) notes that "a complaint can be how you learn about institutional violence, the violence of how institutions reproduce themselves, the violence of how institutions respond to violence; yes, we can be hit by it" (p. 180). And I was hit with it: I stopped receiving emails about committees I was on; the interim dean ignored me at campus events. When we finally had another department meeting and Daphne suggested we talk about how our department interactions could improve, I shared that I felt I had been ostracized in recent months. No one responded. Diane, however, began reading from a prepared list of grievances, some of which were directed at me. When I interjected to tell Diane that the concerns I'd shared had not yet been addressed, the meeting devolved into a yelling match, and I logged off the Zoom call.

After my complaints became official, my experience shifted from "covert" or "quiet bullying," a type of strategic "relational aggression" (Sepler, 2017), to "academic mobbing," a type of workplace bullying that frequently targets teachers or researchers "who speak out against unethical behaviour" (Khoo, 2010, p. 63). Privately, Suzanne, Rita, and Daphne all told me they knew how unfairly I was being treated and they didn't think the situation would improve any time soon. Perhaps relatedly, they each said, in separate phone or text message conversations, that they wouldn't feel comfortable defending me publicly in group settings like department meetings. "People are scared of you," Suzanne told me over the phone one afternoon. "You're just so… New York! We aren't like that here."

A colleague who experienced similar mistreatment in another department referred to it as a form of hazing, a term I think applies if

we understand hazing is really about socialization and indoctrination. In the context of an institution designed within the parameters of the racial contract, it might be more accurate to think of such hazing as a "metaphysical operation" (Mills, 1997, p. 82) intended to compel acceptance of the racial contract through "ideological conditioning" (p. 81). The academic mobbing I experienced was designed to teach me, someone deemed "too new to abide by, or respect, an institutional legacy" because I was unwilling to reproduce it, that, in this institution, "the right kind of people were the white kind of people, the kind of people who would not complain about racism" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 153).

How naïve was I? I had seen my appointment to the faculty and the attendance of my colleagues at the workshop I ran as signs that members of the department would be willing to engage in a more in-depth and nuanced discussion of the department's role in combatting racism. I thought that, on some level, even if they weren't shouting it from the rooftops, the department wanted real equity work. I mean, they hired me, right?

But that's the trap. The truth is that most institutions just want to *look like* they're doing equity work. After all, as Ahmed (2007) explains in "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," in white institutional spaces, "recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness" (p. 157). To the extent that "spaces extend bodies and bodies extend spaces" (p. 158), I was expected to understand that my presence in the space of the department was a condition of my own white privilege and conditioned upon my willingness to extend, not challenge, whiteness. Intellectually, I knew this, but I had convinced myself that this time it was different; I convinced myself *I* was different—how very whitely of me indeed.

Part of my work as a white-privileged person is self-reflection: challenging the willful ignorance and misunderstandings of racism the racial contract requires of white people. And part of my work as a white-privileged antiracist educator is helping other white people separate themselves from the agreement they have entered into "to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority" (Mills, 1997, p. 18). Self-reflecting in this way since filing those complaints, I've realized my confidence in filing them, my sense that I was entitled to complain, likely stemmed in part from my own white sense of entitlement. And perhaps it was my whiteness, my entitlement, that led administrators to doubt the validity of my complaints. As Ahmed (2021) points out, "[T]hose with a strong sense of entitlement tend to dismiss complaints *as* expressions of entitlement" (p. 147). Maybe I was another one of the problematic white women because I, like Diane, like Amy, couldn't let go of the harms I'd suffered.

But I was also the complainant whose complaint made her a target, and once you complain, "you can end up being made to feel that you are the problem, that the problem is you" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 16). I've wondered about my own motives, particularly where

the solidarity statement was concerned. Diane's sudden urge to release a solidarity statement was hypocritical and whitely, but, looking back, I think my refusal to contribute was not only about the statement; it was also about my general dissatisfaction with the department and not feeling heard for three years while working so far beyond my contractual obligations that the only day off I'd taken in all that time was to nurse a concussion I'd suffered during a midsemester move. I'd spent the past year working to exhaustion during a pandemic that killed multiple family members and friends, trying to figure out how I, as an academic, could stay active as an activist. The truth is, I was exhausted. And I was pissed off.

The process of complaint forces the complainant to pay closer attention to their surroundings and take note of things that previously "might have been part of the background" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 41). I began to remember other things: I remembered that, when I arrived, a colleague mentioned the department was suspicious of "outsiders." I remembered an incident a few months later when, seated around a conference table during a meeting, a colleague told a joke that made my stomach drop. The punchline was one word: *kike*. The colleague later apologized, and I brushed the incident into the background—or, more accurately, *back into the ground*. That is to say, I buried it. I buried it because, at the time, acknowledging even the possibility of antisemitism challenged my white self-conception and the racial contract I too, despite my work, despite my Jewish positionality, had tacitly accepted. Now, here I was, the only Jewish faculty member, being made the scapegoat for the department's toxicity.

In white, Western, Christian societies, Jewish people have historically been constructed as outsiders (Bronner, 2019; Gilman, 1991), and scapegoating has been one of the primary rhetorical strategies and manifestations of antisemitism (Kiewe, 2020). Scapegoating is "the projection of guilt in an otherwise unguilty entity; it is the result of guilt experienced by the one who practices scapegoating" (p. 17). In other words, it is about displacement: Scapegoating the outsider allows the community to deny the problems the community faces by framing them as problems introduced by the outsider, whether the outsider pointed them out, attempted to rectify them, or did nothing at all. Consider, for example, the chants of "Jews will not replace us!" from the neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville in 2017. This white-supremacist expression of replacement theory relies upon the belief that Jewish people are the "hidden hand" directing challenges to the white Christian way of life (Bronner, 2019). Given that Jewish people make up 2 percent of the U.S. population, the logic at play here isn't that Jewish people are "trying to replace whites with Jews. They are trying to replace whites with Browns and Blacks, and pulling the strings to do so" (Baddiel, 2021, p. 50). In the eyes of white supremacy, the problem in the community isn't racism but instead the attempt to challenge it. These same logics made me, a Jewish person who does antiracist work, an easy scapegoat in a department seeking to maintain its white racial order and unwilling to admit as much.

Since filing formal complaints, most of which went nowhere, were addressed "in ways that reproduce[d] the problems" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 22), and required an abundance of "communicative labor" (p. 35), I've also thought a lot about that initial offer of mediation. Should I have participated? Should I have shared the harms I'd shared so many times before—and have shared so many times since—with a person who insisted I was to blame for them and only talked behind my back? Meeting with Diane "in circle," on the off chance we'd be able to work things out, might have made my daily activities at work easier for me, but that restorative mediation had nothing to do with activism, and I don't think I owe it to anyone to spill my traumas for an audience that just wants to watch me bleed.

Despite the whiteness of my skin, I still can't shake the feeling that my own hire was also a form of tokenism.

BOUTIQUE ACTIVISM AND PERFORMATIVE (ANTI) RACISM

I resigned from the fund less than two weeks after Democrats in the House of Representatives knelt down in Kente cloth to demonstrate they cared about Black lives and police reform while protestors marched in the streets for police abolition and racial justice. To many progressives like myself, this congressional piece of performative (anti)racism was typical of "the Democratic Party, the party of optics and gesture" (St. Felix, 2020). In that first workshop I gave for my department the following month, I defined *performative (anti)racism* as declaring oneself antiracist without actually doing anything (Condon, 2020). Performative (anti)racism is oppositional to antiracism—but where, I've been wondering, does activism fit in?

I have been teaching college classes since 2010, when most of my students were barely younger than I was, when I still wore pencil skirts and buttoned-up button-downs to approximate an image of the college professor based more on fiction than reality. But the longer I spend in academia, the more I realize it's all performative. Like the elbow-patched tweed my father wore when he taught theatre classes at the local community college and the uptight necklines I wore to teach college seniors as a grad student, most supposedly antiracist programming (or what academic institutions label "DEI work") is mere costume. It makes us look the part without embodying it.

Most "DEI work" stems from inadequate and incomplete frameworks that conflate or overlook the structural, interpersonal, and psychological dimensions of racial literacy (Guinier, 2004) and do not challenge the deeply rooted ways of knowing and doing that result from and perpetuate white supremacy. Even when individual and interpersonal dimensions are addressed, the structural dimension is rarely addressed directly or substantively. After all, institutions exist in order to, well, exist. That's the only way they have power. Thus, initiatives that focus on individuals rather than systems generally are implemented in lieu of broader structural changes. As Shirley Anne Tate and Damien Page (2018) note, "[T]he institutionalisation of unconscious bias as an alibi for white supremacy is part of white fragility and, thereby, unconscious bias reinstates white racial equilibrium" (p. 146). In this way, these initiatives do not challenge but instead perpetuate whiteness and white supremacy.

In April 2021, I spoke to teachers and scholars at the Watson Conference about the approach I use when I work with campuses, my own included, on antiracism and critical whiteness. I approach organizational change using a structure designed to address the ingrained ideological, rhetorical, and institutional nature of white supremacy and how these structures perpetuate racism and inequity. I explained that this integrative approach examines how white supremacy functions at multiple levels and in multiple spaces within an organization or conference. I described some of the successes I'd had on my campus: Inequitable policies, including those around student conduct, plagiarism, and academic integrity, were revised; I was invited to join the university's strategic planning committee to contribute to a reconceptualization of the university's mission and vision, which now include direct statements and multistep plans for antiracist reform. I also described the challenges, some of which stemmed from the fact that the systems we work within weren't built to be equitable. We tried to get a resolution submitted in Senate to better compensate contingent and BIPOC faculty for invisible labor like mentoring; as soon as we completed the necessary documents, we were notified that Senate procedures had changed, requiring us to repeat the entire process, which it was too late to do in that semester.

Once I'd been labeled the campus's "equity warrior" (Dugan, 2021), I was asked to do a lot of things for free that were, despite being my areas of research and activism, far outside my actual job duties. I know the same is true for many of my colleagues, particularly women of color. What troubles me, though, is that, while some of us began to turn down "invitations" and "opportunities" for extra work that wasn't supported, some of the same colleagues who complained to me about the extra work women were doing continued to take on that labor because, to paraphrase one coworker, they love the department, dysfunctional as it is. I recognize not everyone shares my progressive politics or my activist orientation, but I wonder if they realize that the institution will never love them back and that things won't change if the same people keep picking up the slack.

Professional organizations are institutions too, with long histories of racism and, generally, little incentive to change. Committees are formed to do the labor the organizations long should have been doing; then, the work of scholars of color is ignored or rejected for being too radical (Inoue, 2021). Committee members try in vain to make changes via unwieldy bureaucratic procedures designed to make the process of changemaking difficult. Statements

released by organizations represent years of work and considerable compromise (Smitherman, 1995). Organizations try so hard to appease all of their members, including those who adhere to or actively promote racist ideologies, that they achieve, at best, incremental change; more commonly, they achieve nothing but the maintenance of the status quo.

The theme of the 2021 Watson Conference was antiracist conference planning, but this year, like in previous years, instances of racism made clear the conference remained a "space saturated with whiteness" (Olinger, 2020). Part of the problem is that large-scale change is hard and takes work and necessitates that we "imagine worlds not yet seen" (Condon, 2012, p. 121). Too often, "educators treat equity as a series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing" (Dugan, 2021). This sort of reductive conceptualization imagines equity as an endpoint rather than ongoing, "on-the-ground activism" (Condon, 2012, p. 137). Real change requires we move beyond "DEI" and "implicit bias" to explore interpersonal relationships, encourage leaders to examine how policies and practices may (inadvertently) perpetuate inequity, and develop integrative and transformational practices.

But the other part of the problem is something that, for many, is very difficult to admit, though it is readily apparent in the stories I've shared about my experiences in nonprofit and the academy: The performativity isn't accidental. The institution doesn't want to dismantle itself. Institutions steel themselves from the impacts of real, transformative antiracist work in much the same ways they protect themselves from complaints against the institution: through strategic inefficiency, policies that do not achieve the ends they state, and institutional procedures that incentivize silence and the acceptance of the status quo (Ahmed, 2021). Thus, our institutions and many of the people in them, if they aren't wholly reactionary, commit only to liberal performative gestures like implicit-bias trainings for the same reasons Democrats wore Kente cloth instead of passing legislation. They want symbols like solidarity statements for the very reasons many of us want to move beyond those symbols: Symbols don't fix structural ills. But in educational spaces that have substituted diversity for inclusion, it makes sense that the only sort of activism tolerated is the boutique activism that "substitutes multiculturalism . . . for a real progressive political position" (Szetela, 2016). Thus, the antiracist activist must, as Frankie Condon (2012) explains, "learn to name and critique the disparities and contradictions between what institutions say they stand for and what and how they actually do what they do" (p. 138).

Not long ago, I talked with antiracist writing studies scholar Alexandria Lockett about how we each define *activism*. I said activism requires we actually *do* something. I couldn't find the words to explain what I meant, but, of course, she could: She said activism is defined by risk—we put something on the line to do something.

She's right. And that definition helped me make sense of things I've been trying to work through myself for over a year now:

I'm not sure there's any space for activism in institutional "DEI work" because the institution doesn't want to put anything on the line.

The institution will take your activism and turn you into a martyr.

The only activism, then, is what we do that challenges the institution.

For these reasons, I'll conclude this essay much as I concluded that [presentation](#) at Watson 2021: Is antiracist activism possible within your organization? Racism is contextual. Racial literacy is contextual. And antiracism is contextual. In short, you can't have an antiracist conference if you don't have an antiracist organization. And, frankly, you won't have an antiracist conference or an antiracist organization simply because you attend a few presentations on antiracism and conference planning. This is deep, long, ongoing work. No single event, handout, consultation, or conference is going to fix the intentional design and unintentional complicity of our field in racism and white supremacy.

So, I ask you: What are you doing on a daily basis, *in praxis*, to decenter, destabilize, delegitimize, and dismantle white supremacy in your organization?

Acknowledgments

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