

Selling Diversity, Promoting Racism: How Universities Pushing a Consumerist form of Diversity Empowers Oppression

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Abstract

How does racism persist and even worsen on college campuses amidst pro-diversity university efforts? From interviewing college students and interrogating university materials, this article argues that public universities' heightened revenue-generating functions inspire them to sell diversity as an attractive quality, divorced from its association with race and social justice. Because diversity has become a strong discourse, its uncritical university marketing turns it into a commodity at the cutting-edge of cultural capitalism: a consumerist diversity. White students eagerly embrace this university-sponsored version, seeing it everywhere and in everyone. This is a highly individualistic, disposable, and inherently positive diversity that enables students an easy authentic experience of celebrating humanity. Issues of inequality clash against this feel-good understanding, enabling diversity loving white students to regard calls for racial justice as unjust anti-humanist racial attacks. Diversity efforts by the profit-minded university therein empower white students' colorblind and even color conscious racism.

Keywords: *racism, diversity, consumerist diversity, neoliberalism, higher education*

Introduction

What happens racially when predominantly white universities in the United States use diversity as an advertising tool? US universities regularly express commitments to diversity, at least as a partial proxy for concerns about racial inequality (Berrey 2011; 2015). At the same time, these universities have new neoliberal responsibilities to raise revenue from a multitude of sources, including convincing students to pay ever higher tuition (Newfield 2008; Clawson and Page 2011). One major strategy involves marketing campaigns that rebrand regular campus facets as attractive features, such as location, food services, activities, the surrounding area, sports, and other amenities (Osei-Kofi *et al.* 2013; Selingo 2012). This article focuses on the profitability of diversity: what happens when universities promote diversity as part of their new revenue generating function? More specifically, what happens to race when universities use diversity as a tool to attract students and therein increase their tuition base?

From open-ended qualitative interviews and a review of university documents, I found that by marketing diversity, the university actually promotes racism in white students. Without investing in a concerted effort to redress racial inequality and racism, the push to spin rather than critically evaluate university characteristics makes universities sell a *consumerist diversity*. This parallels cutting-edge marketing campaigns that tell us that buying their products makes us better people by enabling us to contribute to something bigger than ourselves. Herein diversity gets sold as a disposable consumer good that white students can simply pick and choose so they can feel good about themselves and then readily dispose of when they are done. As a consumerist product, they see it everywhere and in everyone, multiplying the variety of diversity into a meaningless multitude.

Race becomes just one of infinite individual ephemeral choices, like what to

wear or eat. Social justice concerns based on *group* membership and inequality, however, run counter to this model. To diversity-loving white students, race claims become illegitimate forms of anti-humanist hostility, unjustly prioritizing one form of diversity above another. White students therefore see redressing racial inequality as unfair racial politics. The university's institutionalization of diversity as a positive marketing tool that lacks a substantive, coherent policy normalizes this racist diversity. And some students even move beyond colorblind racism towards embracing a color-conscious racism that sees whites as under unjust attack from people of color.

To argue this point, I first give a brief overview of research that brings together higher education, neoliberalism, and race. After describing the methodological approach, I illustrate the pressing problem of racism in higher education. I then turn to the current university strategy for dealing with racial issues: diversity. I show that the directive to raise money makes the university transform its commitment to diversity away from critical assessment and towards vapid spectacle. Diversity becomes a glossy promotion of an already achieved cultural capitalist product that promises students uncontroversial, meaningful experiences. This makes white students see diversity everywhere and in everyone. Thus, they see it as highly individualistic and encompassing all trivial differences. This de-racializes diversity through making race just one of many potential individual consumerist decisions. Moreover, consumerism makes them see diversity as inherently good, eliminating any controversy from the term. This produces white students who readily accept inequality because it is just a form of diversity. Further, these students prove hostile to social justice concerns because they inject conflict back into diversity. Looking at university policies shows that the formal institutionalization of diversity is so shallow that it ends up empowering the consumerist model. As such, I show that rather than improving race relations, this construction of diversity actually ends up

supporting white students' racism.

Neoliberalism, Race, and the Hidden Curriculum

How can we understand the intersection of race and neoliberalism in higher education? Social reproduction theories of education, sometimes termed the hidden curriculum, investigate education as an autonomous sphere. They look beyond the surface formalities of education to uncover the deeper ways this institution employs its considerable power to influence the prevailing culture and social structure, and students' place in them (Margolis *et al.* 2001). Looking at both the formal curriculum and the unintended transmission of norms, values, and beliefs, most scholars have found educational institutions hegemonically inculcating and therein reproducing the dominant ideology and structure of society (see Giroux 1983 as a core text). Influentially, Bowles and Gintis (1976) coined the "correspondence principle" concept, describing how schools train students to accept the inequality and hierarchical bureaucratic work structure of the corporatist capitalism of that time. This raises broad questions about how schooling changes as the political economy shifts from corporatism to neoliberalism (Apple 2011). I employ this approach to explore how the university's neoliberal shift to raising funds gets translated to students, and how this affects the prevailing campus race relations.

Neoliberalism has altered much of the world over the past forty years (Harvey 2005). It holds the utopian idea of reshaping society such that the profit motive can drive all social outcomes. Instead of adhering to politically determined priorities, such as providing food security or investing strategically, market competition governs resource allocation. Advocates argue that providing more resources to the wealthy enables them to be job creators and the engines of the economy so that wealth trickles down to the general populace. The actual outcomes of neoliberal reforms, however, have been highly regressive,

concentrating wealth at the top while dramatically undercutting the middle class and poor (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Looking at these results leads David Harvey (2011:10) to conclude that neoliberalism amounts to “draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power.”

Applied to higher education, neoliberalism prescribes making universities run like businesses, specifically placing revenue generation at the center of university activities (Clawson and Page 2011). This contrasts humanistic models that see a broadly educated population as furthering human development (Newfield 2008), or even liberal and corporatist models that see government needing to make long-term investments in education so that industry better realizes short-term returns (Rose 1996). Similar to other institutions, neoliberalism in higher education cuts costs— such as through raising class caps and relying on the contingent labor of adjunct faculty – while increasing revenues through commercialist practices like corporate partnerships and slick marketing campaigns (Clawson and Page 2011). Several works have shown that the stress on raising funds through advertising puts style before the traditional university substance of critical engagement, which when applied to diversity issues misrepresents the actual incorporation of people of color (Berrey 2011; 2015; Osei-Kofi *et al.* 2013; Pippert 2013). This, however, begs the question beyond appearances of what such misleading depictions actually train white students about race.

Critical race theory helps us understand the reproduction of racial inequality and the relation of diversity to race. While there is much lively debate about specifics (Omi and Winant 2009; Feagin and Elias 2013; Glenn 2015; Fenelon 2016; Cole 2011; 2017), the core insight of critical race theory holds that, much more than bigoted individuals, the normal operations of society work to perpetuate racial inequality: this includes the shape of institutions, standard

cultural mores, seemingly non-racial policies, and normalized human interactions (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2015). As such, the processes of racial differentiation remain largely obscured. Dominant group members do not see how they reproduce racism through their everyday actions, thereby creating “Racism without Racists” (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Critical race theory reveals that the “diversity ideologies” emerging around multicultural efforts have the potential to both worsen and remedy inequalities (Embrick 2011). While some positive change has occurred through deliberately addressing inequality (Warikoo 2016; Berrey 2015), most researchers have long found diversity efforts worsening inequality, including giving cover for regressive neoliberal reforms (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solorzano and Yosso 2000; Feagin 2010; Jay 2010; Moore and Bell 2011; Glazer 1997; Michaels 2006; Berrey 2015; Mueller 2017). As an overall rule, Embrick (2011:544) says, “if race and gender issues do not get addressed as a central part of diversity, they do not get resolved.”

The variances in these outcomes call for nuanced research into the conditions, nature, and processes surrounding diversity efforts in order to understand their often lurching and contradictory impacts on racism. Peter McLaren (1995:47-55) provides a useful tripartite analytical framework in which conservative multiculturalism “uses the term ‘diversity’ to cover up the ideology of assimilation.” Liberal multiculturalism achieves modest, measurable impacts on formal forms of inclusion, such as the numbers of participants of color, but largely ignore issues of power and therein preserve the structure of the overall system. Finally, critical multiculturalism involves a continual process of reflexive power redistribution: efforts grounded in acknowledging power but also heterogeneity and change within groups (Hikido and Murray 2016; Giroux 1995; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997). Through these bodies of work, this article

brings university advertising practices into the research on the reproduction of race and neoliberalism in higher education. Specifically, I ask: how does the hidden curriculum's incorporation of diversity into neoliberal advertising strategies affect multiculturalism and thus the racialization of higher education?

Methods

This article comes out of a larger research project investigating how students' training in the university variously reproduces and challenges the neoliberalization of higher education. Our test school of over 20,000 students is in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and is predominantly white, with Hispanics making up the largest minoritized group at around 11%. African Americans are 2% of the student body, Native Americans make up 0.4%, and Asian-Americans 2.3%. We have conducted five waves of interviews on a wide array of student beliefs about and experiences in higher education. Our topics include most of the key aspects of the neoliberalization of higher education, such as the increased private burden to pay for higher education, including high student tuition and debt, corporations on campus, increased credentialization and assessment, and the tension between STEM and the liberal arts (Canaan and Shumar 2008; Clawson and Leiblum 2008; Saunders 2010; Stevenson 2014; Cohen 2016). To understand the nature of these changes, we also ask about more traditional sociological concerns, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality.

We make sure to ask students about both their perspectives and experiences as the contradictions between these prove highly insightful—how much are they guided by beliefs and ideology over their own experiences? Our interviews therein speak to the pervading ideologies, the elements of the university experience resistant to neoliberalization, and how neoliberalizing efforts coopt or struggle against these elements. Over several years, I have worked with groups of undergraduate research assistants to develop and deploy various

research instruments. The trained undergraduates conduct almost all of the interviews with their peers. I myself am a cisgender rich white male, a tenured full professor, and current department chair. I strive to use my privileges to challenge the racism and neoliberalization of the university as much as possible. For instance, I made a presentation of some initial findings about racism on campus, attended by the now retired university president. Nevertheless, I cannot help but reproduce both neoliberalism and racism, such as relying on highly contingent adjunct faculty when scheduling as chair, or catering my race classes to whites. But a major motivation of this research and involving undergraduates directly in it is not just to interpret the world: “the point is to change it.”

Our interviewees have come largely through opportunity sampling, with volunteers rising from random lists – provided by the office of institutional research – of upper division undergraduates we contact over email. To date we have conducted over 150 interviews, each lasting about one hour. Seventy-five percent have been white, ten percent Hispanic, four percent Asian-American, two percent African-American, and the remainder undisclosed. Declared gender splits evenly between male and female, with no additional category stated. The average age was twenty-six, the median twenty-three, the lowest age eighteen, and the highest fifty-five. Given our focus on studying up and the opportunistic nature of sampling, we did not scope for race, gender, or age. People of color generously told us about the trials they face. And well over sixty percent of whites spoke in openly colorblind ways, even to our interviewers of color, sometimes starting with such phrases as “this is going to sound bad, but...”

With the generational divide in political outlooks in the United States, considering age would prove useful. We could not oversample on older students, however, given the limits of the research design. But we are launching a quantitative survey which will be able to capture a larger population and make more robust generalizations.

From the rich data on students' thoughts and experiences, we ground salient trends in the larger literature on neoliberal higher education. Considerable work analyzes the wider parameters of the massive shift towards privatizing public higher education. But much more research needs to document the lived experience of students, particularly acknowledging the major training function of universities and how this impacts broad understandings of the social role of higher education (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2013). Our work addresses this gap, focusing on the highly imperfect internalization of neoliberal ideology, and the assertion of narratives and experiences that run counter to the idea of public universities run like businesses.

Race has played a powerful and yet not fully understood role in bringing about neoliberal transformations (Inwood 2015), including those within higher education (Giroux 2003; Taylor 2017). And qualitative methods have proven one of the best at grasping the workings of race (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015). While we therefore had research guiding us to investigate race, nothing prepared us for the stark contradiction between students' passion for diversity and their hostility towards racial justice. Only once we started unpeeling what students meant by diversity and its relation to how the university institutionalizes the concept did we begin to understand the connection to racism.

Racism on Campus

How much does racism pervade campus life? While there are indications of racial progress over the past fifty years, racism has proven an enduring problem. Research shows racism pervading the ideology, institutional structure, and daily interactions of the university. Higher education suffers from institutional racism—inequality emerging from the standard structures of organizations. For instance, whites are becoming concentrated in the most selective universities with high

levels of per-student spending, while people of color mainly gain access through open public universities with flat levels of instructional spending despite rising tuition (Carnevale and Strohl 2013; Newfield 2016; Semules 2016).

Within schools, one study of graduation rates at 1,309 non-profit universities shows that black students lost ground to whites everywhere. Any closing of the racial gap largely occurs through Latinx students, though not at a pace sufficient to close the gap this century. At the subject institution, an almost five percent drop in graduation rates of students of color paralleled a similar growth for whites, making an almost ten percent leap in the racial gap (Eberle-Sudré 2015). All groups' graduation rates fell below the national average, with Native Americans and African Americans two percent below, Hispanics almost twelve percent, and Asian Americans twenty-two percent (Ginder *et al.* 2017). Generally, whites have disproportionate access to scholarship funds (Kantrowitz 2011) and much more in family funds (Oliver and Shapiro 2006). And the precipitous racial gap in student debt undermines people of color's access to prosperity (Houle and Addo 2018).

Ideologically, studies have powerfully demonstrated the many ways that colorblind racism predominates amongst white students (eg Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2003; Feagin 2006; Kreiter and Scarritt 2018). These show how racial inequality persists despite whites not adhering to traditionally racist views about the inherent inferiority of people of color. Researchers have also found more overt forms of racism at universities and hostile climates for people of color (Feagin 2000; Zamudio and Rios 2006; Hughey 2007; Esposito 2011). In our own study, students of color were kind enough to share some of their experiences with us:

It's like it's become so normalized of being this stressed out about going to the classroom, or being on edge when you walk across the quad, it becomes so normalized. Like those feelings become part of your norm. The feeling of unsafety becomes normal to you.

And though white students we talked to decried racism, they also sometimes implicated themselves, illustrated here by parallel quotes from a white student and then a black student.

A lot of the diversity students on campus, especially black students, a lot of them are football players, so I don't think that helps with [the school] as a university, because all their black diversity students are football players or athletes.

You always have the microaggressions, people staring at you, or people that assume you're an athlete. I cannot tell you how many times I have got [that]. And it's not do you play sports? It is what sport do you play. They automatically assume. I play studying, that is the sport that I play. I'm on an academic scholarship not an athletic scholarship. The notion that black people can't go to school outside of sports is ridiculous because all my friends [and I], none of us are on sports teams.

Herein the white student feels she is merely making an innocent observation. But the black student reveals this for the racism that it is. As DuBois (1903) pointed out long ago, the white student not only assumes something about black people simply because of the color of their skin but delegitimizes their participation in the core of the university, equating learning with whiteness. These quotes therein also show how the whites' normal everyday behaviors create a hostile environment for people of color. The white student sees no wrong, the black student endures. Many universities launch diversity initiatives to challenge this situation, though such efforts can become entwined in both the cultural appeal of multiculturalism and the university's own need to raise money through tuition.

Marketing Diversity

With universities' new role of raising money, administrators try to tap directly into the best marketing techniques to attract more students (Clawson and Page 2011). They particularly target advertising to what they consider the right kind of high-income, low-maintenance student-consumers (Harrison-Walker 2010). Administration moves from enabling quality teaching and research to focusing on the bottom line. This includes becoming cheerleaders for anything that can be spun in a positive light. Every aspect of the university becomes a potential attraction, if packaged correctly. This image-conscious stance moves away from higher education's humanistic notion of improvement through critical reflection (Newfield 2008). Instead, it actively seeks to promote anything deemed positive and obscure anything negative.

Our subject university, for instance, characterizes itself for its ready access to the outdoors (A+ For Adventure!) rather than rural isolation, high profile male sports teams rather than limited cultural venues (or sexual assault), slick new dorms instead of commuter challenges, and a growing STEM emphasis rather than a flat per student investment in instruction. Further, policy tends to follow this style-over-substance approach, of heavily investing in PR over instruction and basic research. For instance, after a very neoliberal cross-university comparison of program costs per credit hour to identify and invest in the most efficient entities, the university ended up establishing a boutique and high-cost innovation center run by former business CEOs. This was high neoliberal propaganda: follow supposedly rigorous assessment metrics and, as a main outcome of the study, establish a totally unproven but slick and expensive pro-business entity that runs directly against those assessment outcomes.

This push to raise private dollars has also ensnared diversity as marketing fodder. The university reconceives diversity as a positive and a product, and

policy follows suit. As Ellen Berrey (2011) points out, public universities wanting to valorize racial difference while at the same time having to raise a large part of their own incomes means that university efforts to preserve diversity programs must gain the support of the white students who pay most of the tuition. Universities have to sell diversity to whites. But the university promotion of diversity has moved from preserving the Civil Rights legacy to become an advertising tool in its own right. Universities found that diversity sells (Osei-Kofi *et al.* 2013). In their scramble for enrolment, universities display themselves in their recruiting material as more diverse than they actually are, particularly over representing the black population. As a review of such material finds: “It is clear that racial diversity is being used as a commodity in the marketing of higher education and presenting an image of diversity is more important than accurately portraying the student body” (Pippert 2013).

Indeed, our subject university’s promotional material heavily over represents people of color, such as the 2017-2018 Undergraduate Catalog featuring students of color in half of the cover’s pictures (4 of 8) when they are only one quarter of the population. On more of a policy level, the university states that it “is actively committed to diversity and inclusivity, a stance in alignment with our Statement of Shared Values.” Administrators will regularly say this is an aspirational statement, one showing what the campus is working towards rather than an indication that it has successfully “overthrow[n] every species of hierarchy, “as the nineteenth century education reformer Lester Frank put it (quoted in Bowles and Gintis 1976:6). In the uncritical context of advertising diversity and not situating this statement as part of a clear assessment of the challenges faced by the university – a task more attuned to the university’s traditional mission – students see such pronouncements as factual rather than aspirational. Students of color told us they felt deceived by university materials.

And, as we shall see, whites saw diversity as an existing attractive part of college, not something the college is trying to achieve.

Meaningful Cultural Commodities

What does this peculiar selling of diversity do? At the heart of my argument is the insight that white students eagerly embrace diversity because their understanding embodies the cutting edge of today's "new spirit of capitalism":

At the level of consumption, this new spirit is that of so-called "cultural capitalism": we primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful... showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a collective project. (Zizek 2009:51-6 summarizing Boltanski and Chiapello 2005)

In this new capitalism, purchasing supposedly enables the height of authentic humanistic self-actualization and creativity. Examples include Starbucks' campaign of: "It's not what you're buying. It's what you're buying into," enabling social justice through coffee. Meanwhile, Hilton Hotels tries to sell on the idea that: "Travel doesn't only get us from place A to B. It should also make us a better person" (Zizek 2009:51). Because we are told we can better develop our humanity simply through product selection, or more accurately, selecting all the right kinds of products, we can skip the messy intermediating processes and go right to the end of possessing a fulfilling experience available right at the food court.

The hollowed-out nature of this form of cultural knowledge stands out.

Humanistic cultural knowledge focuses on unpredictable processes – exploration – with knowledge acquisition happening through the experience rather than the end product. Cultural capitalism, in contrast, skips the process and allows people to hop from one pseudo-meaningful product to the next. This

is an ideological cultural knowledge acquisition about what products supposedly represent greater meaning and thus are worthwhile, granting people the idea that they participated in something larger than themselves without actually giving them the experience and the substantive knowledge that comes through it. It is an anti-humanistic cultural knowledge, one that prevents us from understanding our humanity through the mask of celebrating humanity.

As with other cultural capitalist commodities that are readily available and provide authenticity to everyone who consumes them, we found that white students embraced diversity, seeing it as inherently good and seeing it everywhere. “Cultural diversity is wonderful,” said one. It is “The entire world! All planet earth,” explained another. Rather than an effort to center historically marginalized groups, these students believed that everyone makes valuable contributions to diversity. When we asked them how diverse they thought campus was, they claim it is “about 65% diverse.” Our campus is 75% white. And these white students were hard pressed to recall interactions with people of color.

Of the one hundred plus white students we spoke to about diversity, they all variously agreed it was an inherently positive thing. Not a single student had anything negative to say about it. Any form of critical discourse was very limited. For instance, one white student leveled the critique that student services were teaching students:

to celebrate people just being different. And I just think that’s kind of a shallow– it’s not very deep, you know, like it’s really nice that you – I feel like everybody can learn to be polite. Yeah. Like I think challenging yourself to be a better thinker is more beneficial than just like learning to be cordial and polite with people.

This student sees that there are issues beyond difference but struggles for the language to speak about inequality. This student challenges politeness as the core of diversity and by implication race, intuiting but not being able to articulate that politeness readily means conforming to the standards of the dominant culture and its racial etiquette, and that inequality must accompany discussions of difference or they simply reproduce oppression (Omi and Winant 1996; Gallagher 2003). As the boundary of whites' capacity to critique the prevailing diversity ideology, this quote shows just how limited whites' resources are. While higher education is known to provide the humanistic and critical thinking tools to meaningfully engage such an issue, without diligence these discussions could easily fold back into colorblind racism wherein people are merely different, not unequal (Guinier and Torres 2002).

The first thing to notice, then, is that race plays little to no role in their conceptions of diversity, confirming previous work on diversity ideologies (Embrick 2011; Berrey 2011). Instead, they saw diversity everywhere, as pervading every aspect of their lives. And rather than assessing it critically, white students saw diversity as inherently good. Exploring the consequences of this ubiquitous, feel-good diversity helps explain its impact on the campus racial climate.

Everywhere: Individual Expressions of Every Person

How is diversity everywhere, especially on a predominantly white campus? These students saw diversity in everyone. And they saw it as highly individualistic, as the expression of trivial personal choices. As a result, they distinguished it from race, believing race was just one of many choices individuals could make. They therefore saw claims that race was more important as invalid. Indeed, many saw such race claims as threatening to

diversity as it unjustly prioritized one kind of diversity over another. As one white male student explained:

I understand that it's not a cultural diversity that exists, but there is also a human individual element of diversity. So you can have a whole culture of, say, punk rock kids, that you know, we can all say that they are diverse, different from a religious group, or something like that. But, within those two groups you are going to find that every individual is slightly different.

First, note that he is not directly attacking the concept of diversity itself, showing its strength as a strong discourse. Instead, he redefines it. He stresses the non-culture aspect of diversity. This is at least partially coded language dismissing the centrality of race in diversity. His assertion of a classic counter culture – punk rock kids – as an example that diversity is not about culture reveals his anti-race stance. Any culture is as valid as another, punk rockers or Hispanics. And rather than deeply rooted traditions guiding our large and small actions, such an understanding of culture is just about the things you decide to engage in at any given moment.

Thus, even with culture, similarities are not significant enough to merit valuable shared perspectives. Instead, the heart of diversity sits in the endless quirks of every single individual. For him, diversity not only exists in every single person, but everyone contributes equally to diversity. Extending his logic, given this inherent ubiquity, diversity has no substantive meaning as it is equally in every person. No person has any privileged claim on or arising from diversity. No group membership of any stripe grants enhanced status. And cultural group membership – read race – has no privileged place in diversity at all. Thus, while diversity exists, it is largely meaningless, and neither race nor social justice are parts of it.

Another student deliberately expressed the diversity inherent in white people to emphasize the non-racial aspect of diversity. And in doing so, she too stresses whimsical individual choice as the true basis of diversity:

You take, Caucasian people in the US. You're going to have the ones who are farmers, you're going to have the ones that are lawyers, you're going to have the ones that are doctors, you're going to have the ones that choose to live off the grid, who choose to live luxurious lifestyles.

Not only does this student deliberately assert the diversity contribution of whites, she finds that diversity hangs on deliberate lifestyle choices, including the absurdist notion of choosing to live luxuriously. Herein, she completely divorces diversity from inequality. Individuals simply choose to be poor or rich, off the grid or opulent. Her focusing on whites deliberately de-races diversity. People of color are not the ones who bring diversity, she asserts, white people contribute just as much and in the same way. More, difference merely comes from alternative choices people make based on their particular tastes – all people have the same opportunities, they just exercise different options. As with the previous quote, diversity comes across as free of conflict, as mere choice, and certainly not as something aspirational to work towards. Inequality has no place as we all enjoy the same opportunities. And social justice concerns make no sense as outcomes simply reflect individual preferences.

Some students went further, seeing the association of race with diversity as potentially problematic.

I think that diversity is primarily interrupted as racial or cultural diversity. But I see diversity as diversity of thoughts and ideas.... The more diversity of thoughts we have on campus the richer environment is. And the richer the fabric of campus. Yeah, obviously different cultural and racial and ethnic backgrounds would contribute to

that, and I fully support that. *But I don't think we should undervalue someone with a different perspective just because they aren't of a minority status.* (emphasis added)

In her assertion of thoughts and ideas as the core of diversity, especially at a university, she sees that the power of a racially associated diversity as inherently conferring prestige, and thereby undermining the valuable diverse contributions of whites simply because they are not minoritized. This is a slightly subtler take on classic charges of reverse racism. But these charges say that race-based diversity undermines the educational mission of the university. Various studies of implicit and explicit bias demonstrate that the opposite is in fact the case: women and people of color are treated as less authoritative than white males (Kronsell 2005; Acker 2006; Alfrey and Twine 2017).

All told, students saw diversity as grounded in frequently trivial individual choices. Everyone contributes to diversity all the time through the choices they happen to make throughout the day. Difference is merely about different banal choices. No decision – no contribution to diversity – is better than any other. Diversity is the inherent state we find ourselves in at any given time. It is merely the way we are, it is not something to try and achieve. Race comprises only one potential choice. And giving it more weight unjustly undermined the other choices individuals may make.

A Commercial Celebration of Humanity

In addition to being everywhere, diversity proved a cutting-edge commodity as students saw it as inherently good, providing authentic experiences. Herein the move of transposing the differences of collegiate life onto understandings of diversity proved determinant. For instance, when asked about her experiences with diversity on campus, one white woman said:

I know a lot of people, more so with girls, flock to the education building a little bit, some of them even more to [a different building] because it has food and we're girls, most of us are hungry.... I know the library is very diverse in that way, you can tell who the rowdier groups are because they stay on the first or second floor and more of us study oriented or shy, lonely people, or if you just study alone they go up to the third or fourth floor. But, you see just who cares more about academics or if you are a group you stay on the first floor.

There are several key points to note about this statement. Gallagher (2003) pointed out the colorblind racist association of race with consumption patterns, that race was merely about the products chosen by people in different groups. This student goes further, leaping from Gallagher's patterns within groups, to individual choices unassociated with any cultural bent. The triviality of these decisions again stands out: going to buildings or different floors of buildings. While research on race shows that inequalities between groups frequently maps to geography – residential segregation, for instance – the differences this student highlights are much more temporary. They deal with certain behaviors at certain times and change quickly, largely not reflecting structural inequalities.

This student's food example is specifically about purchasing a commodity. Another student echoed this product association when asked what diversity meant:

different everything, there is a lot of different types of candies, my backpack is diverse, there is a lot of different materials and things in it. It also, it's not, I don't think I have ever seen someone with the same backpack as me.

In this conceptualization, diversity is specifically about the different experience acquired through buying things. The experience of diversity changes according to the building a person goes to at a given time, a person's candy, accessories,

and food they purchase. But the deeper buying of this ideology is in the understanding of diversity itself as a consumerist commodity. Diversity is practiced as deeply as buying and disposing of something, of doing one activity and then moving on to another, to have one kind of diversity at the food court and another in the library. With the backpack, diversity is both the different elements that make up a product, the thing embodies diversity in and of itself, and also how these differences add up to distinction even though almost everyone has a backpack. Diversity becomes an unavoidable, constantly changing aspect of everyday life. Everyone experiences it because everyone does different things at different times.

What this also means is that there is no bad diversity, or nothing that can be wrong about diversity. Instead, it is about universal human existence. It is a natural facet of life. But it is also one that inherently enhances the quality of life. This is akin to an uncritical cultural relativism stance, that no diversity is better or worse than another, just different. But it is divorced from culture.

These are individuals making random choices apart from any cultural apparatus giving them direction in life: they are hungry, they eat; they want to be rowdy, they stay on the first floor; or you happen to go to one building over another at some time.

Diversity therein becomes a celebration of all the differences of humankind, with none any better than the other, offering endless possibilities for experiences that make trivial actions – going to some building – meaningful. As the student with the diverse backpack explained:

I believe that every experience, no matter what it is, is something that changes you even if you don't notice it or realize it. There is something you can learn from everything you do.

While this echoes classic understandings of cultural knowledge gained through experiences, his earlier words show that this extends uncritically to every candy he eats or backpack he lugs. More broadly, what this demonstrates is the tendency amongst students towards an undifferentiated transfiguration of the new and different realities that make up the college experience into their understandings of diversity. They rightfully feel proud for thriving in such an environment rather than retreating or fighting it. Thus, under this kind of diversity, they really feel they are gaining meaningful, authentic experiences.

College is new and newly challenging, and they applaud themselves for dealing with it. But this is very different from social justice understandings of diversity. The challenges of social justice involve confronting the systemic and cultural racism, sexism, and heterosexism that has made up much of their formative lives. It means implicating themselves in the relative privileges and oppressions that shape their society. The challenges of the college experience deal instead with newfound freedoms and responsibilities, recreating oneself amidst a sea of new people, and managing an adult life while making room for youthful fun.

Since the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, the college experience has also involved confronting new ideas and the long history of oppression. But the open question under investigation here is the manner of the integration of social justice and the traditional college experience. In what ways are the two brought together and with what results? To use McLaren's (1995) terms, is this a conservative tokenistic inclusion, a liberal pluralistic form, or a critical multiculturalism that alters institutional structures and practices?

The conservative form emerges hegemonic and revitalized. Rather than just a tokenistic inclusion of people of color to enable the status quo, consumerist diversity sees race as merely one of the myriad forms of ephemeral variations. Conservative multiculturalism finds new strength through empowering

individual trivial differences under the condition that they are disconnected from issues of power and inequality. It is a process of transforming the profane into the sacred, to use Durkheimian terms. The mundane everyday becomes unquestionably sacrosanct. The sundry banal experiences of a dynamic college life become celebrated as a holy and inviolable diversity. As we shall see, this means that social justice challenges to this divine diversity become blasphemous anathema.

All told, in meshing with cultural capitalism, consumerist diversity brings the culture wars full turn. In general, this is how cultural capitalism, “at the level of consumption, integrated the legacy of ’68, the critique of alienated consumption: *authentic* experience matters” (Zizek 2009:53). Selling diversity in such a way means that a university’s empty rhetoric of diversity provides satisfied – and self-satisfied – student customers who believe they are receiving the authentic college experience and contributing to the greater good of society. These authentic diversity experiences therein help deliver conflict-averse students reconciled to a highly unequal university and society. Students readily rely on the tautology that the ubiquity of diversity proves that inequality is not a problem, and thus there is nothing to protest. The irreducible humanistic core of higher education gets employed against itself: lack of self-actualization can be addressed through more and better consumption of diversity, more individual choices in the diversity marketplace.

Diversity Policy

For these students, diversity no longer means struggling to transform the university so it justly serves the multiple needs of people with various cultural backgrounds, income levels, and ways of knowing. Indeed, diversity no longer means transforming the university at all. Rather, to them, we live in the halcyon days of diversity. It is everywhere and in everyone. Students celebrate the

multitude of differences, that are all positive, unrelated to economic inequality, have nothing to do with politics, and are mostly seen as a consumerist individual choice. This includes such crucial issues as deciding where to eat, what backpack to use, or to simply deciding to live luxurious lifestyles.

More importantly, the way the university institutionalizes diversity on campus supports and benefits from this consumerist view. Generally, the university has specific policies, vetted through the proper channels, regarding such related issues as conduct on campus. Diversity, though, is treated as an initiative that is not part of actual policy. The university forwards a program it calls “inclusive excellence.” As an indication of the power behind this initiative, the policy document itself is merely one page of generic guiding principles lifted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) that is still on AAC&U letterhead.

The awkward name of the policy risks insinuating that including people of color undermines excellence, that specific actions must be taken to make sure people of color do not erode standards. More specifically, the administration did not adapt the policy to local realities, or otherwise specify how it would get implemented. Instead of a systemic integration of support for some of the most vulnerable populations, the scheme stitches together a variety of sources from across the campus, such as Multicultural Student Services and the Gender Equity Center. All of these are at-will organizations, with none enjoying the protections of academic freedom.

For such a historically fraught issue, and as designed to serve the most excluded groups, the initiative is largely symbolic. And this symbolism communicates that inclusion remains peripheral to the core of the university: that what exists is diversity, and the only adjustments that need to occur happen with isolated, non-

systemic issues, easily addressed by these poorly empowered at will groups. In other words, it reproduces the colorblind racist thinking that racism only occurs in one-off incidences that quickly get punished (Gallagher 2003). A new university Commission on Diversity and Inclusiveness is beginning to take more action. As an indication, it states that “Diversity is the variety of intersecting identities that make individuals unique.” Here at least, it follows the same conceptualization of diversity, emphasizing its individuality and ubiquity. And it has yet to do anything to actually integrate the issue into the core of university operations.

Teaching Racism

Combined with the myriad university propaganda misrepresenting people of color, the university herein paints a picture of diversity as not something to strive for, but as something already existing in plenitude. These policies, in that they embody university diversity efforts, tell students that what exists already meets the university’s standards. The institution, culture, and politics of the university strips race specifically, and social justice more broadly, from diversity. And since such a positive diversity helps bring in white students, the university benefits from helping maintain such an impression.

Rationally then, since white students do not see diversity missing, they do not regard its lack as a problem. It makes no sense to spend extra university efforts on increasing diversity since diversity already proliferates across campus. So the issue of racial inequality raises white students’ ire. Says one among many students about hypothetical scholarships for people of color:

I don’t think that that’s fair. I think that’s almost reverse what we’re trying to do. You know, we’re trying to create equality and equal diversity, but you’re getting the minority more than me.

Since race is subsumed as just one kind of consumerist diversity, just another inconsequential difference, the centering of race in calls for social justice gets translated to white students as fundamentally unfair. To these white students, people of color focus on one difference among many, and unjustly demand resources because of it.

Rather than presenting an immediate solution, teaching about inequality becomes even more fraught. These classes must cater to the privileged, translating the experiences of the oppressed to those benefiting from oppression (Haltinner 2016). Students teaching other students about inequality therein smacks of participating in one's own subordination. In other classes, challenging inequality can sometimes create a toxic environment, with those challenging inequality removed from the class so as to minimize the toxicity. The gulf in understanding and discourse between well-meaning sheltered students and those considering themselves politicized creates inherent conflict.

Student codes of conduct clearly police against such obvious things as hate speech and aim to help maintain a respectful environment. But our subject university holds that disturbing the peace includes "Conduct that a reasonable person would find offensive...". With the institution structured in inequality, and with bigoted understandings common throughout the student body, challenging people's blindness to their own privileges runs against normality, and thus can easily offend a reasonable person. Especially with issues of race, I have painfully witnessed such processes. While such definitions hopefully help minimize abuses against oppressed groups, these codes ultimately aim to safeguard the university, maintaining the peace through preserving the status quo, and thus remain the master's tools.

Indeed, many of the white students we spoke to saw calls for redressing racial inequalities as an unwarranted racial politics that threatened their wellbeing. When specifically talking to them about the general concept of affirmative action, these students expressed disdain. Said one: “I think affirmative action is horrible.” White students had profound misunderstandings of the concept. They believed it only applied to race, provided a full ride, and was “giving them scholarships purely because they’re black”: an automatic, comprehensive benefit based only on skin color. No students associated it with gender, even female student athletes who clearly directly benefited from it. No students saw it as a partial remedy to inequality. And certainly no students associated it with systemic privileges provided to whites, even though most university services disproportionately serve whites.

With such hostility and misunderstandings, we found not only self-segregating actions, but indications of a move from a colorblind to a color conscious racism. As one white male parsed his position:

if black CEOs want to provide scholarships to impoverished youth that can prove, who have proven in grade school that they can make something of themselves, great, that’s the best way.

This student believes that rich black folks have the sole responsibility for providing education to talented black youth, and in a very paternalistic fashion. He assumes some parity between white and black wealth even though median white wealth is more than ten times that of blacks, a disparity that only grows at the upper registers (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Rakesh 2011).

More importantly, though, this student adheres to a race-conscious belief, stating that white people have responsibility for whites while blacks have

responsibility for blacks. In this, he echoes the infamous 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court ruling that denied blacks citizen rights: "Neither Dred Scott nor any other person of African descent had any citizenship rights which were binding on white American society." For this student, blacks have no claim to funding beyond those of the black community – no claims to what this student was unwittingly or otherwise regarding as white money.

This is a retrenching towards a full racial politics, a form of white supremacism in which the white nation is beset by people of color and thus must structure itself to safeguard its resources. While this student may be extreme in his statement, his logic resonates with most other white students. Affirmative action to them is an unfair rigging of an otherwise equal contest. And since people of color engage in racial politics in order to game the system, whites have full license to do so too.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the profit-minded promotion of diversity in higher education ends up exacerbating white students' racism. In order to attract students, new standard university practices sell different campus facets as unproblematic positive attractions. Diversity, meanwhile, has become an increasingly strong discourse, though one that is largely divorced from concerns of race and social justice. Bringing these together, US universities create a consumerist diversity in which students transpose the newness of the college experience onto diversity, believing that with paying for their education they are buying an authentic experience that contributes to the greater overall good. Selling diversity as whimsical individual choices that are inherently good makes white students celebrate it as in everyone and everywhere. Diversity becomes de-racialized: the group quality of race gets eliminated, replaced by personal fleeting choice. White students therein accept inequality as just another form of

diversity. This diversity also enables white students to decry social justice efforts whose critical and group-based nature they see as unjustly and threateningly prioritizing certain kinds of diversity over others.

Profiting from this understanding, the university fully supports it through the way it institutionalizes diversity. Herein, university diversity initiatives clash with its marketing efforts. Aspirational university statements about commitments to working towards greater diversity and inclusion – and even anti-racism and social justice – get reframed through the advertising lens as actual accomplishments. This makes white students see diversity as accomplished, blinding them to the school’s white normativity. In contrast, social justice and racial inequality concerns challenge this feel-good diversity, coming off as unjust anti-humanist threats. And students of color report shock at arriving on campus and finding themselves isolated and even harassed. All told, the successful university diversity efforts help train white students in racism.

While most of my data come from student interviews, we must see the power of the university as an institution and its key training role in society as sitting astride students’ perceptions. Students deliberately come to the university to be influenced by it, and society wholeheartedly endorses this role. The findings of this article, then, illustrate a major conflict between the teaching and money-making responsibilities of the university. Advocates of the business model of higher education openly tell universities to attract “homogeneous customers”: younger, wealthier, mostly white students who do not have costly “heterogeneous” needs (Harrison-Walker 2010:204). Advertising diversity to attract such students means sucking the conflict out of the concept and repackaging it as something great everyone can participate in equally. Aspirations towards greater equality – of opportunity to say nothing of outcomes – make little sense. Thus, the extent to which universities employ a

business logic for institutionalizing diversity determines the degree to which they teach students that inequality is not a problem but that people who push for equality are.

White racism therein reflects an invigorated conservative multiculturalism, moving on from tokenistic inclusion of people of color to a de-racialized inclusion of myriad trivial differences that make every individual unique. Before, mere presentations of some people of color could help maintain the status quo. Now, the ideological strength of the diversity, defined to the meaningless universality of “intersecting identities that make individuals unique” – thus including neo-Nazis – much more readily provides cover for continuing all forms of inequality as well as the deeper implementation of regressive neoliberal policies. That is, this kind of ubiquitous and inherently positive multiculturalism not only constructs inequality as simply difference, its triumphalism ends up celebrating all forms of inequality and the processes that exacerbate it. This diversity thereby not only derides those who challenge inequality, it makes white students advocates for inequality.

Rather than a true asset, then, whiteness becomes a barrier to the humanistic development of all students. The deepening racism clearly undercuts students of color. But white students, in hueing to this uplifting but empty commercialist diversity, end up advocating for and participating in the stunting of their own humanity. Rather than the substantive humanistic elements of explorational learning, transformative knowledge, empathy, and growth, the neoliberal university gets white students to emphasize credentialization, vocational knowledge, egotism, and zero-sum mentalities.

The university therein inculcates late capitalist consumerism and acceptance of even greater inequalities – in contrast to Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) findings

about training for the corporatist hierarchical workplace. In so doing, the university helps shape the resource of whiteness as a narrow and limiting tool centered around hoarding from the Other and stunting growth of the self. In such, the university employs whiteness to conscript students to press for neoliberalism: the more they limit their own education away from broadly trained humanism, the more they demand limiting the education of the Other. And this, of course, limits the quality and extent of education across society.

Ironically, as several scholars have pointed out, this even helps undermine neoliberalism's own promises about the ability of neoliberal universities to deliver the neoliberal goal of employment (Canaan and Shumar 2008). Instead of creating dynamic workers nimbly managing high exposure to the job market in the knowledge economy, neoliberal education produces narrowly and superficially trained fearful students who, in their zero-sum frame, believe it is in their best interests to limit education, both to themselves in terms of learning, and to others in terms of limiting competition. To put it another way, rather than acknowledging that everyone is better off the more everyone is educated, these students advocate for limiting their learning to a job training that actually will not help them get a career, and preventing others from getting an education so there are fewer qualified people.

These findings bring up important issues about the overall transformation of higher education that are beyond the scope of this paper. One of the biggest overarching question asks: how does neoliberalism get working class students to embrace an elitist model of education that works against their own interests? This paper addresses the centrality of race as a means of acquiring consent. Important questions also surround gender, especially given its high levels of segregation across majors (Ferree and Zippel 2015). The impact of sexuality remains dramatically understudied (Hogart 2005). And the complexity of

intersectional impacts need desperate attention (Choo and Ferree 2010). Questions about STEM promotion and attacks on the liberal arts enter here, especially given the importance of cultural knowledge in these issues (Teitelbaum 2014; Newfield 2008). The rapid commercialization of public universities demands much more interrogation, to say nothing of exponential student debt (Clawson and Page 2011). And the bifurcation of US higher education into an increasingly white upper tier linked to good jobs and a darker hued lower tier tied to bad jobs remains a preeminent issue of our time (Newfield 2016; Carnevale and Strohl 2013). In short, the dramatic neoliberal remaking of higher education is a complex, multifaceted process with far ranging and cumulative impacts which desperately need more illumination. Hopefully this research can also reveal resistance and substantive alternatives.

The greatest irony is that things do not have to be this way at all. The current economics of higher education make little sense from either a conservative or liberal angle. Our fiscally irresponsible system only provides universities with one out of every three dollars that students pay in tuition (Newfield 2016). This is morally reprehensible as well. Most of these funds get siphoned off by the financial agencies maintaining the system. Tuition skyrockets as outlays for instruction stay flat. The old system of financing education through taxes would be vastly less costly, potentially representing a net gain for state governments as billions of dollars exit their economies to finance government subsidized student loans. Indeed, the federal government already pays out the full cost of higher education (\$67 billion) with what conservatives would call inefficiencies in allocations accounting for the needless debts students and their families accrue (Weissmann 2015).

Much of the problem stems from administrators treating tuition as boundless ATMs, a lead that state governments have happily followed. Jeff Selingo (2012)

called the first decade of the millennium the “lost decade” in higher education for exactly this reason. Post-recession, however, conditions have only worsened. Rethinking tuition, indeed even working towards eliminating it, presents administrators and state officials with great competitive possibilities. Especially since administrative bloat accounts for much of the growth in college budgets (Clawson and Page 2011), universities can potentially enter into compacts with their states to compete on both quality and price. Freeing the money now used to hold up the system of student loans would provide huge windfalls for government and higher education – to say nothing of citizens. If the left-leaning state of California decides for the sanity of free tuition, many surrounding states will suffer unless they too join the fiscally responsible tax payer route. Of course, free and widely available higher education will not automatically overcome centuries of racial oppression. But it would be one of the most powerful tools.

In the meantime, many disparate studies show ways to make concerns about social justice and racism more central to higher education, to make it more of a vehicle for generating widespread opportunity rather than reproducing injustice. For instance, a recent broad comparison of campuses found that only concerted, deliberate actions increase the graduation rates of people of color at close to the level of whites (Eberle-Sudré2015). Most recent efforts, however, tend to occur on the margins rather than at the core of universities as extra add on projects with dubious long-term impact. Race conscious outreach and the building of infrastructure targeting people of color have some regularly proven successes (Feagin 1996; Smith, Altbach, and Lomotey 2002). Non-explicitly race conscious efforts that deliberately target issues in which people of color are over-represented is a recent innovative strategy showing some impact (Nelson 2017).

But the broad changes of forty years ago clearly demonstrate that the core of higher education needs to change, and that creative popular mobilizations need to play a large part in bringing it about (Clawson and Page 2011). Higher education needs to shift away from servicing corporate profit and towards democratic humanism. Ironically, as already pointed out, this better serves our knowledge economy. University missions, strategic plans, curricula, instruction, research, assessments, initiatives, culture, and budgeting all could variously change to become more inclusive. For instance, funding could hang more directly on overcoming inequality, such as through rewarding departments for serving first generation and students of color, or pegging a real percentage of revenue to needs-based resources. And the curriculum could broaden, both into new fields and to making explicit the connections between traditional fields and inequalities, such as with great and small feats in engineering (Bullard 1994; Rich 1994). Students, faculty, and citizens can pressure their universities to re-institutionalize diversity, to make the lack of substantive diversity a problem needing addressing rather than an attraction that needs advertising. Social movements and protest have enjoyed a renaissance in the past decade, providing great opportunity and innovation for altering the system (Zizek 2012). More people, white people in particular, need to get angry that racism undermines their wellbeing.

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