

Explorations in Adult Higher Education

An Occasional Paper Series

Women in Academia:
Roles, Barriers, and Leadership



FALL 2022 • NUMBER 7

Co-editors: Shantih E. Clemans and Alan Mandell
Associate editor: Karen LaBarge

Printer operator 3: Steven Linton
Office assistant 2 (keyboarding): Janet Jones
SUNY Empire State College Print Shop

Cover and Inside Art by Lisa D'Adamo-Weinstein

Lisa D'Adamo-Weinstein, Ph.D., is a visiting associate professor in the department of arts and media at SUNY Empire State College's School of Arts and Humanities. Her love of art and photography started when she was very young hanging out in her father's art studio. While she does not share his talent for pen and ink, she developed skills in the areas of digital layout, digital storytelling, and photography. Her photographic eye leans toward all things outdoors and employs macro and bokeh effects. Most recently, five of her photos were included in the 2022 New York State Summer Art Show at the Paul Nigra Creative Arts Center in Gloversville, New York.

D'Adamo-Weinstein earned a B.A. in English and general literature at Binghamton University (SUNY) and her M.S. and Ph.D. in education at Indiana University. She co-authored the book *Piecing It Together: A Guide to Academic Success* (1999). She is a past president of the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA), serving on the executive board from 2003-2006. In 2005, she received the Department of Defense, Commander's Award for Civilian Service while at the United States Military Academy, and she is a 2013 recipient of the State University of New York's Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Professional Service. In 2021, she and three other colleagues earned the James William and Mary Elizabeth Hall Award for Innovation for their work on three virtual performances related to the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the weekly Creative Expressions sessions she ran for 30 weeks from April to November 2020.

Cover photo: *Center Field*

All images: 2018-2021

All photo credits: *Lisa D'Adamo-Weinstein*

Explorations in Adult Higher Education

An Occasional Paper Series

Women in Academia:
Roles, Barriers, and Leadership

FALL 2022

NUMBER 7

SUNY Empire State College’s occasional paper series brings together the ideas, voices, and multiple perspectives of those engaged in thinking about adult higher education today. Our goal is to critically examine our theories and practices, to provoke dialogue, and to imagine new possibilities of teaching and learning.

Special thanks to our SUNY Empire and external colleagues whose ideas, work and ongoing commitment to this project have made this publication possible: Kyle Adams, Dana Brown, Elliot Dawes, Michele Doyle, Jon Easton, Michael Fortune, the IT Service Desk, Janay Jackson, Janet Jones, Dana Gliserman Kopans, Sarah Leibrandt, Steve Linton, Sam Litfin, Susan McFadden, Jim Merola, Ed Peck, Eric Strattman, Jamie Tario, Lynne Wiley, the Print Shop, and the Office of Academic Affairs. With much appreciation.

The recordings of the webinars in this series, upon which this publication is based, are available upon request by emailing Karen.LaBarge@esc.edu.

The ideas expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of SUNY Empire.

Table of Contents

***What We Know, What We Need to Learn, What We Must Try* 1**
Shantih E. Clemans and Alan Mandell

***Education Is A Project: Minds Matter* 5**
Elizabeth Minnich

***Thinking and “Non-Thinking”* 24**
 Lynne M. Wiley

***Vulnerable to Collusion* 30**
 Lucinda Garthwaite

***Intersectional Imaginaries of Academic Labor* 35**
Heather Steffen

***“My Heart is in the Work”: Presuming Competence
 and the Value of Academic Labor(s)* 48**
 Dana Gliserman Kopans

***Making Peer Review More Equitable and Inclusive* . . . 53**
 Chris Price

***Happy Kamala Harris Day: The Impact of the First
Female Vice President on Adult and Higher Education* 59**
Edith Gnanadass

***Social Equity and Adult Education* 70**
 Xenia Coulter

***Ontological Blackness in Adult and
Higher Education* 76**
 Lisa R. Merriweather

**Coming to See Systems of Advantage:
A Surprising and Rewarding Journey 83**

Peggy McIntosh

The Reinforced Steel Ceiling: A View From Within . . . 94

Sheila Aird

What We Know, What We Need to Learn, What We Must Try

Shantih E. Clemans

Director, Center for Mentoring, Learning and Academic Innovation

Alan Mandell

College Professor of Adult Learning and Mentoring

SUNY Empire State College, Co-editors

"... [T]he effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler — for the liar — than it really is, or ought to be."

"In lying to others we end up lying to ourselves. We deny the importance of an event, or a person, and thus deprive ourselves of a part of our lives. Or we use one piece of the past or present to screen out another. Thus we lose faith even with our own lives."

—Adrienne Rich, *"Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying"* (1977, p. 414)

Our thoughts are often strongly felt and full these days, but all of us wonder what we can truly grasp. We often feel our efforts to make sense of things are scattered, especially as we try to report on individual experiences and analyze the social contexts in which they are so persistently embedded. (Indeed, there are so many layers.) And all of these challenges of understanding are exacerbated by the incredible depth of pain and array of problems, conflicts, disappointments, and lost opportunities to shine that are right here in front of us today.

As adult educators, we are especially drawn to new ideas, angles, and insights because, in so many ways, our tradition invites questions about big issues: access and fairness, the persistence of discrimination, the forces of standardization and depersonalization, and the ways in which our work as educators, as much as we try, might just reproduce the complexities we want to solve. The history of theories and practices of

adult education is also quick to remind us that the tough issues at hand are not mere technical troubles: quick fixes can't do it. We must respond to deep-seated systems; we have to be thinking about our long-term commitments to social change while recognizing that impediments to change will not just magically disappear because we want them to.

In our 2021 "Revisioning Adult Higher Education" webinar series that served as a building block for this issue of our occasional paper series, we focused on "Women in Adult and Higher Education: Roles, Barriers and Leadership" — a topic critical to our efforts to understand our collective work, our experiences, our responsibilities, and how gender shapes (and too regularly limits) choices and possibilities inside and outside of the academy. How incredibly lucky we were to have been able to welcome Elizabeth Minnich, Heather Steffen, Edith Gnanadass, and Peggy McIntosh to this series and this publication: how important it was to learn from their experiences, feelings, observations, and to hear their critical voices. We thank them for their thinking and insights, for their contributions, and their patience with a publication long in coming. We thank them for pushing us to see how "minds matter," the "importance of thinking," and the tenacious shadow of evil (Minnich); how "ideologies of academic labor" shape and often distort how we imagine and judge our work and those of others (Steffen); how "anti-Asian racism" and "violence against Black, brown, and nonwhite people" are a relentless backdrop in our "historic moment" (Gnanadass); and how, over a lifetime of writing and actions, we can learn from and find hope in the example of one colleague who has indefatigably pursued the effects of "white skin privilege" (McIntosh).

We also want to thank those colleagues from within and outside of SUNY Empire State College who responded to the main essays of this volume with valuable comments and key questions that added immeasurably to this exploration: Lynne M. Wiley, Lucinda Garthwaite, Dana Gliserman Kopans, Chris Price, Xenia Coulter, Lisa R. Merriweather, and Sheila Aird. And, too, we thank our colleague Lisa D'Adamo-Weinstein for offering us her wonderful photographs that we have included throughout this volume.

We thank you, our readers, for your thinking, curiosity, insights, and even rage. Hopefully, the reflections in this volume can serve as inspiration to carry us forward. Together we can work for social justice for all.

And without a doubt, our webinar presentations and this Occasional Paper project would not have been possible without the incredible care, ongoing attention, and singular contribution of our colleague, Karen LaBarge, associate editor of this *Explorations in Adult Higher Education* series.



Before

Education Is A Project: Minds Matter

Elizabeth Minnich

I want to talk to you about the life-and-death importance of thinking. I'm delighted to be part of the Revisioning Adult Higher Education series, I must say, because it is literally a matter of life and death. I'll connect these things shortly.

I thought what I would do in this time of chaos, and loss, and hope against hope that we've been living through, and still in many ways are, is to share some thoughts sort of in story form — a story about minds.

My title has “minds matter” in it. We're in education. Of course we focus on minds; that's really our business (in the opposite sense of *none of your business*), our practice. So, when I speak about almost anything, what I find myself doing is emphasizing the importance of mind, the importance of thinking, and the importance of connecting those to issues of justice, to issues of morality — the political concerns that we have that pertain to our living together on this earth.

I don't think we often enough connect mind, thinking, and justice work. So, the story I want to tell — it's my story, but I hope, as with many stories, that it speaks and offers some illumination to other people — is a story of an inquiry because I'm a philosopher (or maybe I'm a philosopher because it's an inquiry: I'm not sure which). It took off when I was very young, as probably many of your stories did too. Looking back, it turns out to have a kind of narrative arc, although only after the fact.

Beginnings: Puzzling “Non-sense” and Philosophizing

Every time I think back to beginnings, which we need for a story, what I come up with for myself is enormous puzzlement. So this is a story of puzzlement, not just in general (I have always been puzzled by a whole lot

of things) but of the kind that launched my lifelong work. My story, my work — but not mine alone.

I am thinking of the stories of when we encountered being treated as a *what*, rather than a *who*, where we discover that there are supposedly *kinds* of human beings and people who think they know, when they decide what *kind* we are, what we can and can't do, what we ought and ought not do.

When they then say something about us, they pretend it's descriptive but it's actually prescriptive. They are reading from their "pre-judgments" of our kind — their "pre/judices" — what we ought to be, how we ought to be, by those prejudgments. For example: "You're a girl, you're not good at that; you're a girl, you don't like that." This is puzzling at first, because it has nothing to do with me, with you. They do not know us. They are telling us about ourselves as *if* they did know us — because they have already decided what and therefore who we are.

They make no sense. "You claim you know everything about that kind of person and about me as a kind of person." That makes no sense. You can't possibly know all of us, all about me, "them." And anyhow, look around: I'm nothing at all like most of the other girls I know even if I wish I were.

Behind those prejudgments — prejudices — are the conceptual errors of the whole dominant tradition. We'll come back to that. With a story in mind, what we need to say now is that early childhood experiences of being profoundly puzzled by such pronouncements are common, and consequential.

We start off as children befuddled, hurt, and variously informed and deformed by the profound errors that underlie and sustain prejudicial injustice but cannot yet know that, and are rarely openly taught that we are right to be puzzled. Something is indeed wrong. We are encountering the close-in workings of a specific kind of injustice. I've taken to calling it "prejudicial injustice" because that's what it is, specifically. It's a kind based on and sustaining "non-thinking," which is what a prejudice is; you prejudge, you don't think about something you think you already know. Errors, some of them extremely harmful to what, or whom, people actually are, cannot help but happen when reality cannot reach or correct what we have prejudged.

It is also a problem that prejudicial prescriptions do not always remain puzzling to us through adulthood, even when we still need to say, “That makes no sense.” Even before getting to “That’s wrong morally” and/or “That is factually incorrect,” “That makes no sense” is primal. Our minds stop before nonsense. We can then be startled into thinking, or, on the contrary, stop thinking and accept the thoughtless prejudgment as is.

So the story of my work and so many peoples’ experiences starts, as I said, with enormous puzzlement of a particular sort — a sort that can, when not dealt with, disable minds whose life activity, after all, is thinking. It can also, like the puzzlement that can awaken questioning, especially if it finds support, be a beginning of philosophizing, of calling out what simply does not make sense so as to invite people to stop and think. Children are natural-born philosophers, given a chance: They ask so many questions.

Noticing the Obvious: Prejudices and Prefixes

Leaping years ahead: When I was at Sarah Lawrence College, running the Continuing Education Center while its founder, Melissa Richter, was on sabbatical, the historian Gerda Lerner came to talk to me one day and said that she and Joan Kelly Gadol were starting the first-ever women’s history program, a master’s program. She asked if I would like to collaborate in some way or be part of it. I responded that it sounded very interesting and I’d be delighted to work with them, although — maybe particularly because — I knew nothing about women’s history. Then, as I was walking home later that day, I had one of those moments of realizing something as never before: I’d gone all the way through the Ph.D., I had been teaching for a while, and I simply *had not noticed* that the majority of humankind was not being covered in what I studied, nor was it represented in the authors, in the major actors, in the stories that were told.

I had not noticed. That’s what stunned me. Not that women in all our differences were missing — but that I had not noticed something so very obvious. I was hooked and never got over being hooked by the fact that it was possible for so many people in a gender-race-class, sexuality-obsessed culture not to notice when over half of humankind is missing. What started me thinking about the meanings of women was this: We would certainly have noticed if there were no men in what we were taught. We would certainly have noticed if all the people about whom we were

taught, and who were teaching, were Black. But it was not noticed that those men who indeed were present were white as well as male. Not then, it wasn't.

A great deal unfolds about humankind, about what it means to be human — about constructions of meanings of humankind — when you start noticing what is obvious and in a sense known by everyone. After all, it did need to be carefully taken into account daily who was and was not male, who was and was not white (and other markers) but was still not supposed to be *noticed* that those we studied were mostly white men (and other markers). All that's fascinating and people have done wonderful work paying attention, listening, learning, studying all that and those so long missing — excluded — from the public story that is central to education's culture-conserving role. Western Civ was presented as the "civ" of and for us all — however invisible most of us were; we now have superb scholarship "re-telling" this story.

But structurally, within the meanings, the dominant meaning system, in my story that good work had not really started yet. Perhaps you remember or have encountered in the past (that is always also still present) how, in line with the dominant culture, we said *lawyer/woman lawyer/Black woman lawyer/young Black woman lawyer/young Black disabled lesbian lawyer*. *White* was very rarely used, nor was *male*, nor for the most part, *Christian*, as Jewish and Muslim were. The more prefixes you had, the further you were from the defining center of what it was then taken to mean — basically, crucially, *representatively* — to be human. We did not come home and say, "We have a new white male Christian banker"; that was just a *banker*. We were not to notice such things about the normative few — like that the philosophers I studied were Western white males.

There were all these elaborate constructions that kept us from not seeing who, what, was occupying the supposedly most general meanings by which we live and understand our lives.

In my story, I recall very well the first time I said something about the *white, male philosopher Immanuel Kant*. People walked out. It's hard to remember that. I wouldn't put my particular blindnesses on other people — I remember that I had not noticed — except where they correspond with

cultural constructs and have power systems that correspond with them as well. We share responsibility for what we do and do not see about those.

Not seeing, not processing, the obvious even when your mind is otherwise awakened, working in all kinds of different ways — that went from puzzling to fascinating to awakening me to its relation to the deepest of injustices and untruths, which revealed themselves as enabling each other. Because if you don't see it, if you don't mark it, if it doesn't catch your attention, you collude.

I then realized that to keep prejudicial injustices going, deadly as they can be, you don't have to have motives. You don't have to hate the people in that group. You don't have to look down on them. You don't have to think people are inferior. You don't have to think you're inferior. It's in the systems of meaning within which our minds move. (This insight came together with others and led, later, to another inquiry that I published as *The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking* [2016]. That's jumping ahead of the story, except that insights have their own ways of unfolding in minds, in time.)

Transforming Knowledge: *Women Can't be Added Onto Human Being*

After puzzlement and thinking including the sample above about who is just a philosopher and who can only be a woman philosopher (if white: otherwise, with more prefixes), I was fascinated anew. I started talking to all kinds of faculty members, colleagues, in all fields, here and abroad. And the next thing that emerged was also obvious but still then not grasped: If you exclude women in all our differences from the stories and studies of humankind (then, still called Man/Mankind), you've excluded an enormous amount of human life. Not just people with bodies called *female*, but all that *females* were assigned and limited to doing, as well as qualities designated *feminine*.

Take the meaning of *woman* seriously as fully human, and it just unfolds in all kinds of ways, including, for example, meanings of *work* and *peace* and *war*. What if war had not been so masculinized? What if histories had been oriented around *peaces* (for which we do not even have a word) rather than wars? What would we think of wars if we had studied what

they have always also meant for women? Once people had realized — and many people were perfectly interested, they didn't mean to be excluding anybody — that thinking about women equally illuminated many things, including the most serious systems of exclusion, minds, scholarship, teaching truly began to change. We weren't studying only white men because we actively meant to do so. Most didn't even realize they were doing so (some did; some always do).

The next thing we realized, also by then obvious but not commonly seen, was that we couldn't just add women on. As colleagues said, "I'd love to add some women to my art history course, my physics course, but there aren't any. Not their fault; not allowed — but still, what can I do?" As retrieval scholarship was done, that shifted: I could say, "Here — there were indeed women." So you could add on women's history, women artists, women in physics, as a bit at the end, or a whole course — but there was still over there the unprefix history, which remained the real history. Meanings of war in books about women and war, gender and war, feminist analyses of war ... offered major revisions; they did not easily lead to revisions of military history (unprefix), or even "Europe between the wars."

We entered an era — still here to some extent, though a lot has certainly changed and is doing so even more now — in which what people did was add things on: offices for minorities, for diversity; women's centers; gender and race and ethnic studies, disability studies, postcolonial studies — new programs, new courses, still more new centers, etc.

I'm going to say only "add on" now, but obviously one of the things we've added that, like and with once-excluded subjects (in several senses), is whole sets of new concepts that help us think across many lines. Of course we did. We were thinking about what used to be unprefix and unseen, and what it took to make that happen and keep it happening and unnoticed in the centers of learning had to be surfaced, thought about, questioned, dissolved. That is conceptual work; better and new tools have been developing. Early on: from sex and sex roles; to sex and gender; to gender as an analytic category, as race also shifted to a critical rather than supposedly descriptive concept (including toward variants of the critical race theory that was developing largely in law schools).

The story continues, and continues dramatically. It is one thing to say, “Oops; left you out — well, come on in” without changing anything that, unnoticed, did the excluding. It is another to say, “well, sure; you can have your own room over there on the margins.” It is entirely another to notice just how much it took to lock so many minds into prejudicial injustices — into reality-ignoring thoughtlessness, into unjust action.

One difficulty of being attentive to all the consequent conceptual errors is that they had nothing *necessarily* to do with heart, passions, fears of the other, hatred — the usual affiliates assigned to “prejudices.” The errors about which I am telling a story of how minds matter, so education is an ongoing project, are built into meaning systems, built into buildings, built into what and whom organizations serve and don’t serve. Before you can make buildings accessible, whether you fear or admire those with disabilities, you have to notice that and how buildings are not accessible, and then think that through. You have to notice the obvious: there are steps everywhere, and skinny doorways, and no microphones, and PowerPoint slides that must be read from a distance. Notice, and this way, too, we can “re-conceive” what is possible, just, beautiful. Reconceive, not just tinker around the edges. Also, reconceive rather than only “re-label” according to a theory that itself then tells us ahead of time what to see. (I confess that it makes me anxious when people who are about liberatory change begin to all sound alike.)

We build our assumptions about what it means to be human, what’s important, what matters into the structures, the systems, including meaning systems and systems of knowledge, into which people are born, socialized, and educated. There is no way *not* to do that: You cannot devise anything, from a poem to a bathroom, without making choices. And so also mistakes. Nothing nefarious here: this is what creatures with minds do. So, learning to notice nonsense, stop and think about it, watch then for the errors that lock it in, is an ongoing project, fascinating, liberating, and, at the very least, may help us avoid colluding with prejudicial injustices from past mistakes. It also opens space for whole new fields, radically revised scholarship, illuminating concepts that help us continue to see differently. That’s what I learned traveling, talking with hundreds, probably thousands, of people, all over the place that led me to write *Transforming Knowledge* (first published in 1990, now headed for its third edition).

On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking: Thoughtlessness Enabling Evils

The next big moment in this journey: Continuing to be fascinated by how we cannot see the obvious, I finally realized that interest had been seeded when I studied with Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher, during my graduate work (I told you insights have their own nonlinear chronology). I was her teaching assistant when she was going around talking about *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Arendt, 1963), her very controversial book, in which she introduced the concept of the *banality of evil*.

The basic point for the moment is that, unlike much younger me when I was taking in the great tradition and not noticing who was there and who wasn't, Arendt was a noticer, she was a thinker. Preeminently, she was a thinker, very attentive, always very present and with a very well-populated mind.

She had a lot of thinking friends, from the latest cab driver that she found interesting to the European classics, poets, journalists. She spoke five languages: a lot of company to help her think well and flexibly. She was used to moving among differing meanings, paying attention. She was also Jewish and had fled Germany and had reason to be paying attention.

Arendt went to Jerusalem to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who has been called the "Engineer of the Final Solution," key to the Holocaust, the Nazi genocidal murders of over 6 million Jews and some others they deemed biologically inferior, including gay and Roma and old and ill people. And what struck her, because she was paying attention, was something that was not prepared for in the dominant traditions: that the monstrous acts that led to Eichmann's trial for crimes against humanity had been done by a man who did not appear particularly monstrous.

There's a discrepancy there, a lack of proper moral balance between deed and doer that is troubling, but that's what she saw. And so, Arendt sat down to think about it, and she posed a question. As I said, my own first question, later, was: How can we not see the obvious? Her question with Eichmann was about what struck her as obvious about him — his "extraordinary" thoughtlessness rather than monstrous, murderous

hatreds that we would obviously expect. This led to her key question: *Can the inability to think and a radical failure of what we commonly call conscience, coincide?* The book she published, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was greeted with a lot of discomfort, shall we say, although it was also widely read and taken very seriously, as is the “banality of evil” as a concept. It haunted; it made people think.

You can barely avoid the phrase anymore, but at the time of Arendt’s writing, the notion that evil can be banal was highly, highly controversial. The banality of evil or that evil can be not just ordinary, but desiccatedly ordinary, boring ordinary, clichéd — banal is the ordinary with the life sucked out of it — was so strange. How can that have anything to do with evil when evil is precisely grand, huge, dramatic? Many questions came to my mind as I listened to my teacher and so many others, but one that stuck is related in some ways to: How can we not see the obvious, so that we don’t collude with it if we would rather *not* collude with it? Or here is another way to ask it as it tried to ask itself in my mind then: Are there situations in which the inability to think is not the fault or failure of an individual, but is actually a characteristic of a time and place, a whole culture, a whole people, so that effectively the culture is not thinking, runs on and rewards thoughtlessness? Not the usual conventionality, but radical thoughtlessness such as Eichmann’s?

Can thinking, *can minds*, matter so much?

I mean, think of dictators: The first thing that they do is get rid of poets and students and teachers and journalists and the people who think for a living and love to think and help invite others to think. “The elites.” That’s what they do first, and they break up groups — civic groups, but also just clubs, like book clubs and Boy Scouts: no associations, so people won’t think together.

It’s hard to think if you’re radically isolated, unless you’ve got a mind like Arendt’s so very well equipped with thinking friends. Solitude can then even be less lonely than “social life.” One reason for education is to store as much good company in your mind as you can so you can go on thinking no matter what: This, it should not be missed, is key to a case for liberal education as politically important. In any case, I was interested in how far Arendt’s *banality of evil*, the radical harm that

persistent thoughtlessness enables, could extend, so I spent a long time studying horrible things. I studied genocides, I studied sexualized violence against the most vulnerable (usually girls and women, but not only), enslavement, exploitation of labor. I studied all kinds of evildoing, its many manifestations.

This was difficult, but the question seemed to me very important. I wanted to know *what was going on in people's minds* when they participated in doing horrific things. All the talk I was encountering was about failures of imagination, empathy, fears, hatreds — all kinds of emotional things — as well as the view that there is a bit of monstrousness, of power lust, in all of us. You've heard such efforts at explanation.

But I was really interested in what was going on in people's minds because I was becoming more aware, as I studied perfectly "normal" people who did the daily work of extensive evils, that our minds can participate more and less in what we're doing. We can be functional mentally, but not be thinking about what we're doing just now or have done in ways that matter. What I encountered is the next large moment in this story, and then I can move toward what I want to do with it in our context.

Two Kinds of Evil. *One Requires Thoughtlessness*

While doing my research, it suddenly dawned on me — a phrase that makes me pause, because we are interested in thinking, and in reconceiving, "re-visioning." Such sudden dawning happens when you're being fully attentive to a subject matter. Things come to you, it's like you *find yourself with a concept*, as Arendt said of her *banality of evil*, that you neither had nor knowingly made. It came to me that there is a radical distinction between two kinds of historic evils. I'm not speaking theologially; I'm speaking about distinctions among historic evils that needed to be made if we would ever be able to understand times when, for example, whole cultures of "respectable," "normal" people could be built on slavery, the financial and sexual domination of women, child labor. ...

Any distinction into two kinds is bound to be a bit gross. Of course, there are nuances and blurrings. Nonetheless, it is very important to draw a distinction here, I believe.

First, and most often meant when people call the acts *evil*, there are those horrific acts that are done (and I'm perfectly comfortable saying this) by monstrous people (there are: I am not saying that thoughtlessness accounts for all evils). Those are the acts about which we say, "Oh, my God, this is abnormal; this is exceptional, this *never happens*, how could it happen here?" The ordinary is shattered; these are extraordinary things. Most people are shocked, horrified, have difficulty thinking about it. Some go straight to pop psychology, as in "They're sick, insane, clinical," or religion, as in "The devil made them do it," not so much to explain as to encapsulate the shocking action. I call those "intensive evils."

They do enormous harm, but they're usually done by one or a few people. They don't last all that long and they shatter rather than are consistent with normalcy. They are taken to be an eruption of the monstrous into our world. We have trouble thinking about them, although we surround them with a whole lot of theorizing because we need to try and understand.

The other kind is what I realized I was trying to understand when I studied international sex trading of young girls, genocides, slavery, and other long-term historical evils. This kind connects to the apprehension I had of the degree to which we can be surrounded by meanings that, while we remain thoughtless, allow us to collude when we don't wish to. This kind I call "extensive evil" because it extends through time, across many groupings of people, involves a great range of organizations and actions.

Genocide, an extensive evil, takes time; you can't do it in a week, in a fit of passion, with just a few people. You have to have an elaborate apparatus. In fact, you need the kinds of systems that Eichmann, the Engineer of the Final Solution, worked out to make it possible at all.

In fact, you need — and it's a phrase I got from somebody who trains torturers in the United States — "reliable workers." The Nazis didn't want people who loved killing working for them; they were unreliable. People who train torturers don't want psychotics, they said; psychotics tend to be unreliable and have other bizarre problems (as do perpetrators of intensive evils).

You want people who will do their jobs, who are reliable, who will go to work every day and do it. You want people who will participate in the society and enable it if you're going to do massive harm. Enslavement

as a basis for a whole culture and an economy cannot happen and then last unless it is *normalized* — worked into religions, knowledge, conventions, law, governmental policy, an economy benefitting even more than the enslavers and owners. Same with reducing females only to dangerous dependency, domestic and reproductive and/or sex work, only nonpowerful work positions. Attitudes toward the poor get normalized, scientized, when many are needed for cheap labor.

We are indeed then dealing with knowledge, with minds that may and may not be thinking about what they know, what they believe. You go back very far in science and your jaw drops. All sorts of prejudices are “proven true: inferiority of women of all kinds; of Black and dark ethnic men (Italians, Jews, Mexicans ...); of “idiots.”

These are extensive evils that, in order to continue, become normalized. You all know about the postcards that were made of photographs of lynchings in the U.S. People took photographs, white people took them, and they were turned into postcards to sell, and they were sent widely. Postcards, like you’re going to the circus and want to send pictures home, going through the U.S. mail — postcards of *lynchings*. OK, that’s normalizing, right? That’s not seeing, that’s not being attentive. That’s the phenomenon to remain interested in.

Thinking, Acting: Disrupting

The story then has to come to how do we live with these apprehensions and what might we do with them and about them. And I want to say in the context of this series of talks that adult education and constant revisioning and thinking about meanings of women in all our differences are ways of *doing something* because they disrupt the thoughtlessness that accepts nonsense, prejudices that normalized extensive evils must have.

The thing about thinking — specifically thinking, not knowledge unless it makes us think — is that it is in and of itself disruptive, or as we might say, free. It’s thinking that comes along and says, “I know this — but maybe I don’t know this accurately. There’s also this to be considered and that to be considered.” You cannot just recite anything if you are actively thinking about it. You will keep interrupting yourself.

There's a whole lot to talk about. We haven't really begun to consider what I have come to mean by *thinking*. Fundamentally, thinking is most evident as the ability we have to reflect even about our own thinking. We can be one-track. We can also always notice that, and so no longer be what we are noticing: You are not a one-track mind if you are aware that you are a one-track mind. Even when we are within prejudicially unjust systems, when we collude, don't even see them — we actually could. We can if we will *stop, and think*. Sometimes entrapping meaning systems support the doing of extensive evil, evil that's normalized, surrounded not only by then-legitimated knowledge but by conventions, cliches, banalities of everyday life and, as we have discovered, we don't even see them. We do not then *act*; we *behave*. Or we see them, and we feel trapped by them, like the puzzled child with whom we started who may renounce puzzlement if it gets her in trouble, subsiding into the banality that disguises nonsense, the behavior that disguises collusion. But we can, in fact, think about them if we're startled back into thought and can abide, hopefully welcome, the freedom of being unsettled, once again having to choose how to act.

If something catches our attention, something odd comes along and we stop and think, we remember that we are capable of stepping outside, seeing, as Toni Morrison (1992) put it, the normally invisible bowls within which we, like captured fish, swim. There is freedom built into mind in that way. Mind is formed, it is also potentially always its own liberator; we can do that. Even if we haven't been taught to do critical thinking, or to philosophize, we can ask, "What's that?" and say, "that makes no sense." Or, "I can't do that." We can do that about "critical thinking," too (and certainly philosophy, which without philosophizing becomes a history of ideas).

When we don't do that, we're at great moral risk; we're at great intellectual risk. Our knowledge, our morality, our politics are *liable to fall into mutually constructed agreements that make it harder to think as and for ourselves, as and for others*.

If we're not thinking, I will say from my work on *the evil of banality*, then we're capable of anything. If we are not thinking, I will say from my work on *transforming knowledge*, then we are at risk of colluding with prejudicial injustices built into meaning systems in the past — which prepare us for

the recurrence of such injustices (“backlash” to change is evidence that meaning systems cannot be changed all at once or once and for all; minds don’t work that way). It’s both deadening not to think and it’s deadly not to think.

So, I arrive at wanting to say, most of all, that what you all are doing in this series is very much a part of the project of enhancing, keeping up, extending, practicing, thinking that, like democracy, is a project. It’s not a product, an outcome, an achievement. It takes place when we practice thinking, not when thinking ends in knowledge, the (temporary) answers to its questions. Like dancing and music, minds in play realize human “be-ing.” This is why education is not a means, it’s an end in itself. It’s heightened life, as John Dewey (1916) knew.

Educating Thinkers: Reconceiving Women and Adult Education

Full circle with our story, back to *women*. To revision education, it’s very important to hold meanings of women in mind so we may keep thinking about everything else, aware that it may seem inclusive — like the “generic he/him/man,” but also, say, “history” — but really be partial in all senses of the term. It’s very important because in all our differences and the ways we’ve been defined — the meanings, I’m saying, mind you, not just the occupants of the category, the meanings of woman, of women — have a great deal to do always with meanings of human being. Knowledge and education were skewed as women were excluded and devalued without people noticing it because it was so *normal*, *natural*, to hold that female minds just were but also should be inferior to male minds. Erroneous “knowledge” in, junk out, as is said about computers.

Hillary Clinton (1995), as first lady, had to declare that “women’s rights are human rights,” if you remember (para. 49). That was so radical she was warned not to say it; she *did* need to say it; and — that’s nonsense. Nonsense tells us we’re in the presence of prejudicial injustice. Of course our rights are human rights, what else would they be, animal, vegetable, or mineral rights? I mean, they’re human rights because women actually really are human. To find saying what Clinton did radical was to admit that (some) males colonized the meaning of *human being*. From there (*before* there, or it would not have happened), the normalizing of extensive evils is

well-begun. When your resonant phrases calling for justice, equality, and the truth those make possible, are actually, in a sense, nonsensical, you'll know you're in the presence of the systemic prejudicial errors that skew most peoples' thinking while they prevail. Even "ours."

This is not only about "them." The best and bravest campaigners for truth and justice are caught in it, as Clinton was, until knowledge and meanings are transformed. *I AM a MAN!* read signs carried by Black male sanitation workers on strike when Dr. Martin Luther King was still with us. That's heartbreaking nonsense too: of course, they are *human beings* who must have human rights if there are to be such things. And here also is the problem with *Man*. It strikingly reveals the occupation of *human being* by a few men: To claim human rights both intelligibly and movingly then, the workers had to proclaim themselves *men*. And in doing so, entirely without intent, they colluded in excluding women, who could not without dangerous ridicule have carried such a sign. Nor could women sanitation or other workers have carried signs saying *I AM a WOMAN*. Imagine the catcalls from men lining the street. *Woman* was not a rights-conferring category. Hence, later came Clinton's proclamation, and Hull et al.'s (1982) anthology titled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. We have been tangled in such errors and muddles so long that it is very hard to think ourselves free. This matters; minds matter; education matters. Rights, and even new theories and fields of knowledge, without freer minds may give us less or other than we hoped.

Thought Work:

Thinking, Action, and the Fate of the World

When I emerged from writing *The Evil of Banality*, I was thinking "OK, now what do I do? What's my next question?" But the question was obviously, what do I do? And I realized that I've always worked in education because I care about minds, and I've always been more interested in thinking than in the knowledge about which it is so interesting and useful to think. I like the thinking that comes along and says yes and, or but, or can we do more with that and rethink — it's lively. I love it. All was and is not grim through the years of my mind-story, then. Not at all. Nor did I think I had not been *doing* anything, nor that whatever I was doing was useless. I think you can tell that I don't think that at all. So a colleague, Michael Quinn Patton,

and I decided, as Michael first put it, to ask a disparate group of scholar/practitioner/activists what in their field, in their work, did and did not work against extensive evil, and/or for extensive good, as it is with us in meanings and systems past, as it is potentially and actually present now.

So, we gathered people who are very knowledgeable *and* thoughtful about their fields. People who care about the effects of their work on others, on the world. Among them: scholar/teachers of Shakespeare, system theory, evaluation, philosophy, economic development, political organizing, sociology, community-based public policy, critical thinking, entrepreneurialism.

We asked them to think first about the thinking that characterizes their field: in familiar phrases, thinking like a lawyer, thinking like a psychologist, thinking like a philosopher. “What,” we asked, “is the thinking that characterizes the field that you’re practicing?” And then we asked a connecting question, in another register: “Does or does not that thinking work against extensive evil normalizations, past, present, possible? And/or work for extensive good?”

I was thinking, in particular, about this: *Eichmann was a good engineer* — that ought to be a contradiction. Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor, did experiments on living people held in concentration camps. Some people will say he did good research, by research standards. We’re still struggling with that. Should we worry about “good research standards”? Can we make use of the fruits of Mengele’s research? When are we going to ask such questions *within* fields about how their modes of thinking are actually practiced, how they have consequences in the world?

Some of the authors thought that their field does — or can be taught and practiced so that it does — disrupt anything that might be extensive evil and wrote about how and why. Others had some concerns, noted vulnerabilities. The international economic development expert and the sociologist gave many telling examples of thinking that is problematic in ways that are not often recognized, such as thinking only about the short term; taking inadequate account of contexts; failing to realize key differences in cultural meanings among communities with which you work; not realizing that a valued concept (e.g., *informed consent*) carries assumptions about rational ethical responsibility that can be too narrowly

defined. I wrote about thinking, teaching thinking, and about lying. Michael Patton wrote also about evaluative thinking — thinking, valuing, judging what we purposefully undertake to do.

You, with this webinar and paper series and so much else you do, remind us that we should also keep reflecting about our work as educators, as well as content and techniques about which we should reflect. So also did those who wrote for our book, *Thought Work* (Minnich & Patton, 2019): *how* is at least as important as *what* we think and do.

Circling back again, now with *Thought Work* also in mind, I might observe that being unsatisfied with “adding on” offices, centers, subjects to “fix” old exclusive systems with which I started applies as a concern more broadly. To add on medical ethics, legal ethics, business ethics, even ethics in philosophy, is fine as support for specializations within fields and resources for nonspecialists (including those teaching in the same field but not dealing consciously with ethics). But these “add ons” are not fine if that’s supposed to make fields, whole institutions, responsible ethically. It’s too little, too late, too marginal. You can’t, as was said early on in the Second Wave of feminism, just add women and stir. Nor can you just add ethics and stir. What made the majority of humankind ineligible for human rights, along with what made ethics seem irrelevant and inappropriate to the “real” content of a professional field, also needs to be transformed.

If you want truth, work for justice. If you want justice, work for truth. I find that expressive of how minds matter, and education as and with democracy, is a project. Uncertain, and all the more interesting for that.

Let me end by saying that I know that I have been speaking with and now writing to people who know more and think more about adult education, which is itself disruptive of banalities and exclusive knowledge, than just about anybody. Thank you for letting me tell you my sort-of story of thinking. I know you have your own; I *have learned from them, and look forward to every opportunity to do so.*

References

- Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. Viking Press.
- Clinton, H. (1995, September 5). *First Lady Hillary Clinton: Remarks* [Address]. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China. <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950905175653.txt>
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. The MacMillan Company.
- Hull, A. G., Bell-Scott, P., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us Are brave*. The Feminist Press.
- Minnich, E. K. (1990). *Transforming knowledge*. Temple University Press.
- Minnich, E. K. (2016). *The evil of banality: On the life and death importance of thinking*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Minnich, E. K., & Patton, M.Q. (Eds.). (2019). *Thought work: Thinking, action, and the fate of the world*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Harvard University Press.

Philosopher and educator **Elizabeth Minnich, Ph.D.**, practices philosophical fieldwork, focusing on the intersections of moral political concerns with the knowledge and ways of thinking conserved and legitimated through higher education. Speaking, consulting, listening have taken her to hundreds of education communities in the United States and abroad. Among her publications are *Transforming Knowledge* (1990); *The Fox in the Henhouse: How Privatization Threatens Democracy* (2005; co-author, Si Kahn); *The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking* (2016); and *Thought Work: Thinking, Action, and the Fate of the World* (2019); as well as writing for textbooks, Op-Eds, anthologies, journals, magazines. Positions held include the Alexander Chair in Public Philosophy; Whichard Visiting Distinguished Professor of Humanities and Women's Studies; dean and core professor, Union Graduate School; associate dean of faculty, Barnard College; and director of continuing education, Sarah Lawrence College.

Thinking and “Non-Thinking”

Lynne M. Wiley

Elizabeth Minnich shares her mentor Hannah Arendt’s interest in and commitment to thinking as an activity that is crucial not only to our ability to live well but to be aware of individuals who ultimately serve ends that could be called ethical, i.e., ends that are conducive to living well in oneself and living well in society. Famously, Arendt had witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany and later sought to understand not only what evil is, but why so many citizens of the Third Reich had allowed it to grow and flourish. We live in a time that, to many historians and political scientists, appears not unlike the decade prior to the emergence of Nazi Germany. Fascist and autocratic leaders are gaining power around the globe, and many would argue that that kind of movement is affecting our own country. Minnich challenges us to consider how thinking itself can help us find a way out of the problems that cause some to turn to authoritarianism and others to despair about the future of democracy.

I believe that one of the interesting ways to approach a response to Minnich’s discussion is by considering how we often contrast the word “thinking” with other things. For example, thinking is often contrasted with feeling — and for many feminists, especially those who rose to prominence in the 1980s, one of the problems of Enlightenment rationalism was that in giving primacy to reason rather than experience it failed to account for women’s motives, their moral commitments, the course of their growth, their special view of what is important in life, and the way they come to know and acquire knowledge. One of the earliest works on the subject discussed the presumptively universal feminine developmental experience of being disconnected from what one knows, regarding the voices of others as infallible, coming to recognize one’s subjective inner voice, and understanding that knowledge can be both separate and connected — the latter discussed in contrast to academicians’ focus on critical analysis (Belenky et al., 1986). Later feminist philosophers argued that through social, emotional, and kinesthetic awareness we can arrive at understandings that are in a sense precognitive — understanding to which

our cognition eventually assigns a name, but that we initially experience in a way that precedes cognitive awareness.

There are disadvantages in contrasting thinking with feeling, however. One has to do with the general epistemological weakness of dichotomies — with the idea that something is either one thing or another. A second, more insidious and perhaps far-reaching concern has to do with the suggestion that women may not be as interested in or attuned to thinking as they are to alternate forms of knowing, in a sense downplaying the significance of the thought process in all that women do. This notion — that, instinctively, women are not as cognitively aware as men — is problematic. The contributions feminist philosophers have made to philosophy are significant and have broadened the scope of the concerns that women and men can bring to bear on philosophical topics, possibly bridging what had been a divide between thinking and other forms of knowing. To suggest that “women’s ways of knowing” do not as fully encompass cognition, thinking capacity, and even rational thought as those of men does no one a favor, though. While feeling is utterly vital to living one’s life well and in interaction with others, it need not be contrasted with thinking in the way feminist philosophers first discussed it to be affirmed as a central force in our lives.

A second idea that comes to mind when one considers thinking in contrast to something else is its obverse: “non-thinking” or, perhaps, thoughtlessness. This is the notion that one may be choosing, in some sense, not to think or be thoughtful in their interactions with themselves and the world as they go about their lives — not to be self-aware or critical about what they are thinking, what they know, and how they know it. In higher education, we often refer to this idea as critical thinking, and while educators are convinced of its importance, it is worth asking how widely the concept is understood or welcomed. At this moment, for example, too many people repudiate truths they do not like, a version of “non-thinking.” Truth in philosophy is mainly a metaphysical concept, although it overlaps aspects of epistemology and ethics. If we think well, then ideally, we arrive at a thought that is true in some way. However, during a time in which truth itself is subject to criticism, when people call truths that are unappealing to them “false” and news reports that disagree with their perspectives “fake,” people can come to believe that truth is purely subjective, accepting only opinions or beliefs that confirm

their preconceptions. Subjectivity is anathema to most moral philosophers and to many people who know and understand that, as definitively as each subject allows, there are certain things that can be shown to be true or not true. Truth is also one of the foundations of knowledge, defined philosophically as “justified true belief.” While thinking and knowing are not synonymous, they are indisputably connected. When considering how one can become a more thoughtful person — using cognitive abilities to investigate facts, weigh evidence, and reach conclusions — justification, truth, and belief all come into play.

Do people make choices not to think? Perhaps. At a minimum, whether conscious or unconscious, the act of “non-thinking” reinforces prejudice, narrows one’s worldview, and reduces our capacity to make meaningful decisions. In my Introduction to Ethics class, I ask students to consider what is lost if we fail to see the important choices in front of us — what is lost if we cannot fully understand them as having moral content in addition to practical relevance? What do we lose in ourselves, in our interactions with others, and in society if we are unwilling or unable to comprehend the multilayered nature of our existence? Like Minnich, I believe that an absence of critical thought can be deadly; and, conversely, its presence can help us lead better lives and interact more capably as human beings. Indeed, the ethical component of Minnich’s discussion was very apparent: it seems to me that what she is getting at is the absolute importance of thinking to the enterprise of being human.

There is also an interesting distinction to be made between thinking and “letting happen,” which goes more directly to the connections between thinking, morality, and justice to which Minnich refers. Thinking implies an active process, a process of engagement with the world, with concepts, ideas, people, and policies — in short, with the elements of the culture of the civilization in which we live. Yet we are born into meaning systems whose influence is insidious, determining our sense of ourselves as well as those whom we might uncritically regard as “other.” This prejudicial implant can only be overcome through awareness; if you do not see it, as Minnich remarks, “you collude.” This is, possibly, the fundamental moral recognition underlying her compelling presentation. Thinking is the unique capacity of human beings. It is the thing we do to solve problems, make corrections, address injustices, and invent new ways of coping with the issues that confront us. It is also the source of practical, mental, and moral

invention, including the ability to see the commonality in others — the source, therefore, of empathy and emotional intelligence, which come into play when we pursue moral ends that are vital to our collective well-being. Not to use that capacity is to allow ourselves to become no more than players on a stage whose act may quickly end. As the genocidal crimes and wars of the 20th century demonstrated, the choice to let evil happen — whether one views it as such or not — is in a sense to condemn us all.

Minnich discusses Arendt's famous analysis of the banality of evil not because it is an interesting sidelight, but because it is central to her purpose. If we are moved to think and act in response to consequential social, personal, and political events only when evil appears in the form of a supervillain, we will never act. Arendt pointed out that arguably the most heinous perpetrator of Nazi crimes against humanity, the creator of the "final solution," was merely an ordinary man. He was obviously not, either in appearance or speech, a villain — much less a supervillain. Until the German people came to understand the evil he represented by other means (and rejected the nativist ideology upon which it was based), it was relatively easy to think no further about the moral implications of the actions of a bland bureaucrat and harmless governmental official.

That kind of limiting conception of evil, or the possibility of it, snared great swaths of the German people in its embrace. It was, fundamentally, a culturewide failure of thought and conscience: the inability to comprehend, diagnose, and understand the implications of actions and statements that, in retrospect, clearly communicated purposes that were evil. Victor Klemperer (1998), a Jewish resident of what became East Germany and member of a race targeted for extinction, detailed in *I Will Bear Witness* how the increasing restrictions, exclusions, and injustices against Jews that became commonplace in the 1930s unfolded in a manner that, even for him, allowed him to believe that his life was still "normal" and go about it as if it were for a very long time.

Failing to think beyond one's typical set of interests and be aware of ideas, information, and concerns that are sitting in plain sight can, therefore, be a matter of life and death. Current global events, for example, reveal an incapacity on the part of millions to interpret charismatic and/or brutish leadership behavior for the consequential political activity it is. Thinking more analytically about all aspects of our social and personal lives is

vital. Arendt and McCarthy (1995) regarded this as a purposeful moral and intellectual act — the kind of thinking that “is the opposite of the traditional elevation of thought into an exit visa from the petty world of appearance” and instead brings the world into sharper focus by allowing us to “examine the invisible measures by which we judge human affairs” (p. xv). Minnich encourages us to practice the kind of thinking that makes morality possible, urging us to be disruptive in surveying the contents of our minds. This raises crucial questions about the nature, purpose, and quality of our thinking and the importance of recognizing that our everyday responses to people and events can either help or hinder moral action.

Metacognition is a good place to begin such an analysis. As Minnich suggests, we must become better at thinking about our thinking. Many of us find it easier to identify emotions than to dissect our thoughts. But the requirements of good citizenship and our common cause with humanity demand that we do so. Without it, without enough people who feel both a need and an obligation to think critically and deeply, burrowing into issues rather than avoiding them, we risk disengaging ourselves from all that is important. These are skills that can be learned, and that we in higher education are uniquely positioned to address. Our focus must be both internal and external. During eras in which fear predominates, people can succumb to a degree of fatalism about the future that is unhealthy and limiting. Helping students recognize that we can influence events and our own lives by improving critical awareness is essential. Moreover, thinking must be a capacity that we not only see as important, but nurture, develop, and employ in ways that allow us to move beyond habitual patterns and responses. Aristotle argued that thought or rational activity, when performed well, in accordance with excellence and virtue over the course of a lifetime, allows us to achieve happiness. For a multitude of reasons, the timely significance of the ideas Minnich is discussing cannot be overstated — not for us as individuals, as those involved in personal and social communities, or as those who make up the nations in which we live and work.

References

- Arendt, H., & McCarthy, M. (1995). *Between friends: The correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949–1975* (C. Brightman, Ed.). Harcourt Brace.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. Basic Books.
- Klemperer, V. (1998). *I will bear witness: A diary of the Nazi years 1933–1941* (Vol. 1). Random House.

Lynne M. Wiley, Ph.D., is visiting associate professor of philosophy at SUNY Empire State College. Her scholarship and research interests focus on moral philosophy, ethics and higher education, and the history and philosophy of higher education. The author of numerous articles on leadership and philosophy, including “Building Learning Activism and Critical Adult Education” in *Explorations in Adult Higher Education* (2016), her most recent publication is a book chapter titled “Organizational Complexity in a Progressive Education Environment” in *Principles, Practices, and Creative Tensions in Progressive Higher Education* (2017). Formerly a vice president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges and an American Council on Education fellow, she holds a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

Vulnerable to Collusion

Lucinda Garthwaite

If we're not thinking, then we are at risk. In particular, we are at risk of collusion with extensive evil, and with prejudicial injustices built into dominant and past systems of meaning. This is the core of the generous mind-story Elizabeth Minnich offers in her talk, "Education as a Project: Minds Matter," full of examples of her own experience and thinking, illustrations that, in my view, bring solidly home both the urgency of her subject, and its nature.

There's another generosity that I find in Minnich's work generally, and here. It's in her asides — the places between commas and parentheses, the final words of a sentence, otherwise uncommented on. These reveal side roads, opportunities to explore other implications than those Minnich explores in the piece at hand.

By way of response to Minnich's talk, I've taken one of those turns. It presented itself about halfway through, as Minnich discussed the imperative to notice the obvious obscured by systems of meaning. Such noticing, she suggests, allows us to, "re-conceive' what is possible ... rather than only 're-label' according to a theory that itself then tells us ahead of time what to see."

As a reader, I'm nodding along here, but then come parentheses, inside of which Minnich writes, "*I confess that it makes me anxious when people who are about liberatory change begin to all sound alike [emphasis added].*"

Minnich is commenting on what she's just said, and she's anxious, and I'm curious as to why, so I go back to the previous line, which encourages me to "reconceive ... rather than relabel according to a theory that ... tells us ahead of time what to see."

And here's where I take that turn.

While I was nodding along with that previous line, I was not thinking of “people who are about liberatory change.” I was thinking about other people. Well, more to the point, people who are not like me. In Minnich’s aside, I hear a quiet warning that we (and by we, here I mean people who consider ourselves to be about liberatory change) may be vulnerable to “theor[ies] that [tell] us ahead of time what to see,” and in that way vulnerable to collusion.

By prejudicial injustice, Minnich means, in part, “being treated as a *what*, rather than a *who*, where we discover that there are supposedly *kinds* of human beings and people who think they know, when they decide what *kind* we are, what we can and can’t do, what we ought and ought not do.” The “we” to which she refers here, Minnich is clear throughout, are those who have historically been and still are limited and marginalized by erroneous, dominant traditions. By way of example, she says,

‘You’re a girl, you’re not good at that; you’re a girl, you don’t like that.’ ... They do not know us. They are telling us about ourselves as *if* they did know us — because they have already decided what and therefore who we are.

I recognize this experience. I am, after all, a grown-up girl, and other “types,” and, importantly, attentive to history and the experiences of others. Being treated as a “what” rather than a “who” does not, at the very least, feel good. I’m wondering if that experience is universal, if that is why, as she tells us here, when Minnich referred in a lecture to Immanuel Kant as a “white, male philosopher” — some might say, as a “type” — “people walked out.”

There is another theory about this, of course: the theory of dominant culture fragility (e.g., white fragility, male fragility). But is it possible that theory is, “telling us ahead of time what to see”? Is it possible that we are missing something obvious?

To be clear, I understand that there is an important and meaningful difference between “the whole dominant tradition” about which Minnich is speaking, and the reaction of people who have benefited from that tradition to feeling as typed as others have felt for millennia. The former has reliably resulted in threats to our very lives. The latter is arguably an inconvenience, a minor insult — the “nonsense” of being, as Minnich

says, proscribed rather than described, yes, but without the limiting infrastructure of dominant traditions.

But Minnich also suggests that “nonsense tells us we’re in the presence of prejudicial injustice.” Right here is where the “we” I’ve understood thus far begins to dissolve. Not all have experienced the loss of life and opportunity to thrive that such nonsense often precedes, but if the human reaction to such nonsense is indeed “primal,” as Minnich suggests, then it seems to follow that fearing its result could be universal.

If that’s the case, then dismissing those who have benefited from dominant traditions as fragile, rather than sincerely afraid, may be a consequential error in the interest of liberatory change. Fear is arguably an emotion not to be disagreed with, only expanding when it is dismissed. It’s well documented that thinking-while-afraid is prodigiously difficult, and that fear can breed violence. It’s fair to say, I think, that neither result is in the interest of liberatory change.

“Fundamentally,” Minnich says, “thinking is most evident as the ability we have to reflect even about our own thinking.” It is worth considering, I think, the possibility that shared thinking — theories, assumptions, assertions — about liberatory change can become so clichéd that, as Minnich writes is the case with dominant traditions, “We don’t even see them. We do not then act; we *behave*. Or we see them, and we feel trapped by them ... subsiding into the banality that disguises nonsense, the behavior that disguises collusion.” Indeed, thinking is emerging about the real risks of not subsiding into the mire of theories that can dominate movements for change, so trapped we well may feel (see, for example, adrienne maree brown, 2020).

But — and here is where Minnich’s work consistently offers me hope — she continues, “we can, in fact, think about them if we’re startled back into thought and can abide, hopefully welcome, the freedom of being unsettled, once again having to choose how to act.”

It’s no small feat to be open to being startled, then to abide, even welcome, no less feel free in being unsettled. Still, these are the essential conditions for the thinking Minnich suggests.

Toward the end of her text, Minnich writes, “This is not only about ‘them,’” and later, “We have been tangled in such errors and muddles so long that it is very hard to think ourselves free. ... even new theories and fields of knowledge, without freer minds may give us less or other than we hoped.”

It’s the “other than we hoped” that most concerns me.

Minnich warns, “think of dictators: The first thing that they do is get rid of poets and students and teachers and journalists and the people who think for a living and love to think and help invite others to think. ‘The elites.’” Such extremism turns us and them on its head; we (I’m back to “we” the self-professed liberatory changers now) become the thing to fear. We often respond to that fear with something like the puzzlement Minnich describes. What? Us? You’re afraid of us? But you don’t know us then, we’re the good guys.

It’s happening right now, and we have a choice. We could retrench our practiced responses, or we can allow ourselves to be startled, to notice the obvious — even the banalities — in our own thinking, to abide the feeling of being unsettled, and “think ourselves free.”

Reference

brown, a. m. (2020). *We will not cancel us and other dreams of transformative justice*. AK Press.

Lucinda Garthwaite, Ed.D., is the founder and director of the Institute for Liberatory Innovation, Montpelier, Vermont. As a writer, advocate, scholar, and educator, her focus is on liberatory social and organizational change. She was a leader at Goddard College for over 20 years, serving on the faculty, as academic dean, chief strategy officer, and vice chair of the board of trustees. Lucinda holds a doctorate in leadership for change from Fielding Graduate University, a master’s in education from the University of New Hampshire, and an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College.



Blooming Stages

Intersectional Imaginaries of Academic Labor

Heather Steffen

My project is a history of the academic profession in the United States from the late 19th century through the present, told through an analysis of scholar-teachers' public writing about their work. The project asks three questions: How do American academic workers imagine the nature and content of their labor and its meanings, goals, values, and motivations? How have ideas about academic labor shifted over time as the U.S. university has evolved in response to political, economic, and cultural changes in the surrounding society? How can the ways we imagine and practice scholarly work serve as resources or pose challenges for organizing academic workers and reforming labor conditions in the academy?

Beginning in the era in which the U.S. research university emerged — roughly the 1890s through the 1920s — what I call the “three traditional models of academic labor” took shape in professors' campaigns for higher salaries, academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure. These models are professionalism, unionism, and vocationalism.

The professional model places research faculty at the center of the university. Professionalists value autonomy, expertise, meritocracy, intellectual freedom, and the advancement of knowledge in service to the public good. Professionalist criticism is distinguished by a deep belief that the faculty's power lies in organizing to intervene in policy decisions and codifying procedures grounded in peer review and due process. The successes of early and midcentury professionalists were largely responsible for the faculty's expanded privileges and security in the postwar era and for creating the conditions in which the tenured research professor became the standard image of an academic worker. Today, professionalism is inarguably the most dominant, visible, and well-documented approach to academic labor. But if we focus only on the

dominance of professional culture, I argue, we miss the fact that scholar-teachers' ideas about work have always been multifaceted, complex, and at times contradictory.

To fully comprehend academics' collective subjectivity, two additional models of academic labor must be included in the analytical framework: unionism and vocationalism. The unionist model sees faculty work through the lens of an institutional and political-economic critique that extends beyond higher education. Unionist critics position themselves as workers first and academics second. They advocate for solidarity, economic justice, equality in the workplace, and the socially transformative power of education and research. The unionist model emerged in the early 20th century among small groups of faculty and nonacademic radicals, then became dormant after the university locals of the 1920s failed to sustain themselves. Since the 1960s, it has gained ground as graduate students, postdoctoral employees, and contingent faculty have organized into a vibrant, influential academic labor movement.

The third model of academic labor is vocationalism. The vocational model potentially represents the majority's experience of university work but has not yet been described in the academic labor literature. Vocational academics value student learning, community engagement, and the civic purposes of the university, and their arguments about academic working conditions prioritize middle-class aspirations like economic security, respect in the workplace, and work-life balance. Vocational writers tend to come from marginalized campus groups, and they often produce testimonial accounts under pseudonyms and in nonacademic and narrative genres. Their marginal statuses and rhetorical choices, added to their lack of organized representation, may be why the vocational model is not typically studied.

These models, I hypothesize, serve two functions in academic culture: First, they serve as ideologies of academic labor, because they represent different ways that scholar-teachers understand their relationships to the institutions, social groups, and political economies that constrain and enable their work. They guide scholar-teachers' behavior and are reproduced through the routine practices of academic life. Second, the models of academic labor serve as rhetorical resources upon which

professors draw in describing their work, critiquing higher education, and advocating for workplace reforms.

In order to cover such a long timespan, my project examines a series of episodes in which ideas about academic labor come to the fore because of controversies, legislative changes, or social changes occurring within or around higher education institutions. In the early 20th century period, for instance, I have analyzed faculty writing during their campaigns for better salaries, democratic shared governance procedures, and strict separation of higher learning and business. What I am presenting here is my first case study analysis from the contemporary period: the intersectional critique of academic labor as represented in the two *Presumed Incompetent* collections (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Niemann et al, 2020). By intersectional critique, I mean critique that pays attention to the dynamics of intersecting forms of oppression and privilege and draws on the lineage of thought deriving from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) initial articulation of this concept. In what follows, I argue that the intersectional critique of academic labor highlights the fraught relationship between vocationalism and professionalism, demonstrates that professionalism supports a hostile workplace environment for scholars from marginalized communities, and reveals the insufficiency of professionalist reliance on proceduralism.

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia was edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris and was published in 2012. It contains 29 essays by 35 women, predominantly women of color representing multiple racial and ethnic identities, and is divided into sections on the general campus climate, student-faculty relations, social class, allyship, and tenure and promotion. It concludes with a lengthy chapter filled with recommendations for campus leaders, women of color, and allies. *Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia*, edited by Niemann, Gutiérrez y Muhs, and González, came out in 2020. It follows the same general format, including 32 essays by 38 women, divided into sections on tenure and promotion; academic leadership; social class; bullying, white fragility, and microaggressions; and activism, resistance, and public engagement. Growing partly out of critical race theory work in the legal academy and explicitly taking up an intersectional lens, the two collections represent perspectives from across the disciplines and faculty ranks, though legal scholars and social

scientists account for the majority of contributions. The books also slant heavily toward representing views of academic labor and institutional workplaces from the tenured and tenure-stream ranks at predominantly white institutions, with only three essays coming from adjunct or independent scholars and one focusing on HBCUs (historically Black colleges or universities).

The goal of these collections is to demonstrate that the university workplace is far from immune to the hierarchies of race, gender, and class that many scholars seek to dismantle in the larger society. Instead, as Harris and González (2012) contended in the introduction to the first volume, “not only the demographics but the culture of academia is distinctly white, heterosexual, and middle- and upper-middle-class. Those who differ from this norm find themselves ... ‘presumed incompetent’ by students, colleagues, and administrators” (p. 3). This presumption of incompetence follows women scholars of color throughout their careers, as the collection’s authors show through personal narratives and qualitative studies. By utilizing autoethnographic methods, the *Presumed Incompetent* authors sought to expand our sources of knowledge about academic labor by “recognizing knowledge produced through and by experience” (Ortega, 2020, p. 162). In other words, these authors perform a narrative analysis of their working conditions, questioning when and how their race, gender, and class identities shape their relationships with colleagues, students, and institutions.

Taken together, the essays in *Presumed Incompetent* indicate that most authors have a vocational orientation to academic labor. Beyond the testimonial form of the essays, a number of authors explicitly described their careers as their callings, like May C. Fu, who called her work an “intuitive vocation” (Holling et al., 2012, p. 253). Even when the authors do not explicitly label their work as vocational, however, we can see vocational motivations and values undergirding statements about their commitments to student learning, service to the campus community, and feeling a responsibility to give back to their racial, ethnic, gender, or local communities. For instance, Jacquelyn Bridgeman (2020) wrote about the local importance of her work as a Wyoming law professor. Because her students will go straight into practice, she reasoned that “if we do not educate our students well, the whole state suffers. Once I understood this, my teaching became about how I could best prepare my students for

the jobs they might do upon graduation and much less about me” (p. 15). Several authors cited the vocational motivation and meanings behind their work as a key tool of survival in hostile academic climates, echoing Beth A. Boyd (2012), who wrote that “being involved in my community was actually the lifeblood that sustained me in my professional life” (p. 279).

According to the narratives in *Presumed Incompetent*, women faculty of color enact their vocational values through teaching, mentoring, advising, and counseling students, often with a focus on supporting students of color; by researching topics relevant to their communities, especially issues of race, gender, and class; by employing qualitative and community-engaged participatory research methods; and by undertaking diversity work on committees and as academic leaders. These modes of vocational labor are sites of contestation between vocationalist and professionalist tendencies in the faculty workforce. The core problem, as presented in *Presumed Incompetent*, is that vocational modes of work are devalued in professional evaluation procedures. As the *Presumed Incompetent* writers make clear, teaching, mentorship, and service activities are famously less important and less valued in tenure and promotion decisions than publications and grants. More insidiously, much of the labor of teaching, advising, and counseling students is rendered invisible in official documentation of faculty achievements and takes place beyond the notice of one’s colleagues.

While all faculty are subject to the devaluation of teaching and service labor, women scholars of color who study issues of race and gender, especially those who employ qualitative and community-engaged methods, face an additional barrier to a fair evaluation in professionalist academic culture: Their research may be dismissed as lacking objectivity and rigor or as failing to contribute to mainstream academic conversations. As Patricia Matthew (2016) wrote in *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure*, “the academic workplace is characterized by struggles over the definition of knowledge and what it means to be a knowledgeable person” (p. 11). Scholars of color disproportionately work in fields like ethnic studies, Black studies, Chicano studies, and women’s and gender studies, which undertake scholarship in service of social justice ends and employ community-engaged research methods, what one might call “vocational scholarship.” The authors in *Presumed Incompetent* cite a number of instances in which colleagues in mainstream

departments disparaged work in these disciplines. This hostility might not only be rooted in racism but reinforced by professionalist fealty to positivistic areas of study and the privileging of quantitative and apolitical studies over those using qualitative methods or with goals beyond the advancement of knowledge. “Within the pecking order of the university,” Harris and González (2012) wrote in their introduction, “the most valued pursuits are those that most easily claim rigor, objectivity, and, these days, technocratic mastery” — the scholarly pursuits, that is, that align most closely with professionalist values (p. 4). Thus, scholars working in fields such as ethnic studies labor under a suspicion of subjectivity and lack of rigor, though, as Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo (2012) contended, without a political bent, the work would lose its purpose. The narratives in *Presumed Incompetent* highlight the need for rethinking academic reward systems to ensure recognition, credit, and compensation for all the varieties of labor that scholar-teachers perform.

The second finding that results from reading *Presumed Incompetent* with a focus on ideas about academic labor is that professional culture is a fertile breeding ground for bias and racial and gender violence. In *Presumed Incompetent*, academic culture is represented as a hostile environment for racialized women scholars in two ways: first, through the dominance of white, masculine professional norms of competitive individualism; and second, as a space that allows racism, sexism, homophobia, and other biases to flourish because they are obscured beneath a surface of genteel politeness. These two academic cultural features reinforce one another, with the academy’s middle-class tendency toward polite indirectness providing cover for the policing of identities, work styles, methodologies, and bodies that professionalism can foster. Speaking to the oppressiveness of professionalist culture, Pamela Twyman Hoff (2020) wrote, individualism, rationalism, progressivism, and universalism “act as the barometer determining academic standards and shaping norms and rules of engagement. They are the underlying referents used to evaluate all aspects of the professoriate. The implied and stated expectations that all must adapt to and function within the guidelines of these dominating principles are the powerbrokers’ indicators of productivity, collegiality, value, and capacity” (p. 46). The very values that define academic professionalist culture, that is, can be weaponized by senior faculty and

administrative gatekeepers to prevent women scholars of color from advancing into the upper echelons of the academic hierarchy.

The *Presumed Incompetent* authors have much to say about the constraints that the norms of professionalist culture place on women faculty of color. One account of running up against professionalism's competitive individualism appeared in Nellie Tran's (2020) essay. While co-leading a collaborative, grant-funded project about women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), Tran's work is continually undermined by her white women collaborators, who deny her funding for research basics like participant compensation, research assistance, and summer salary. After this denial, Tran came to realize "that my [w]hite female colleagues created space for me and my work only when I provided checkmarks to their tasks and lent my expertise in areas where they did not have any. These were the additional signs that they would only grant opportunities and access to serve their own careers and goals. I held very little actual power" (p. 248). Later, after Tran has become the grant's principal investigator and while she is on parental leave, she is forced to continue her work on the grant team because her collaborators refuse to pause the project and respect her leave status.

Yet the oppressive tendencies of professionalist culture do not always appear within surface interactions in academe, according to the *Presumed Incompetent* authors. They are often masked by the genteel politeness that distinguishes professional comportment and social interactions. In the contributions addressing social class, for example, a central observation regards the difference between the middle- or upper-class modes of communication that dominate in academe and the modes of communication common in working-class culture. Desdmona Rios and Kim A. Case (2020), for instance, noted that "classed miscommunications" — like being too blunt with advice — "result in detrimental effects only for the marginalized," and they report that in their personal experiences, "middle-class academics label working-class [w]hite women as difficult, unprofessional, harsh, opinionated, overly emotional, irrational, demanding, and reactionary. For Women of Color, the 'angry' label is an added descriptor" (p. 136).

So far, we have seen that many of *Presumed Incompetent's* contributors attribute some measure of their negative experiences in academe to the

predominance of white, masculine norms of competitive individualism in professional culture and professionalism's code of politeness and indirectness, and we have explored the friction between these writers' vocationalist motivations and the academy's devaluation of teaching, service, and research on race and gender. In the face of these kinds of findings, one response is often to call for stronger, more transparent policies to protect academic workers from bias and discrimination. Yet, as demonstrated by the many testimonies to breakdowns of academic policy in *Presumed Incompetent*, it appears that professionalism's strongest tool for changing academic workplaces — its reliance on proceduralism, especially the procedures of promotion and tenure — is in fact insufficient to protect scholars' job security and academic freedom.

Instituted in most universities around the time of the American Association of University Professors' "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," the tenure system may be early professionalist university reformers' greatest accomplishment, ending the era of at-will employment for faculty and ensuring that academic freedom would be protected by due process provisions. The tenure system enshrines professionalist ideology by placing the responsibility for choosing colleagues primarily in the hands of the faculty and by relying on a version of peer review to ensure that scholars are judged by those most capable of evaluating their work — other experts in the field. The evaluative process leading to tenure, often consisting of several reviews before the final tenure review, is the procedure most closely tied to professionalism's meritocratic rationale for academic hierarchy. What the tenure stories in *Presumed Incompetent* reveal, however, is that it is precisely the peer-reviewing nature of tenure that allows space for bias, implicit and explicit, to enter into and wreck the meritocratic ends of this professionalist procedure.

Though each one is different, all the tenure stories in *Presumed Incompetent* make clear that pre-tenure is a time of great precarity for women faculty of color, and all the stories share a common arc: An exceptionally qualified candidate of color — usually one with numerous high-impact publications, excellent course evaluations, and a higher-than-average service record — comes up for review a year or two before tenure, expecting to find that she is well prepared to enter the evaluation process. At the review, she learns that a flaw has been found in her record: several

worrying course evaluations, publications that are forthcoming but not yet in print, articles that fail to meet her colleagues' standards, or complaints about her lack of collegiality. She is shocked. But from there, she must fight a battle of documentation, appeal, and coalition building in order to navigate and, in most but not all cases, succeed in the tenure process.

Where we can see the power of the presumption of incompetence to disrupt or derail careers during tenure is in the process by which these flaws in a candidate of color's record are supposedly uncovered. As Jemima Li Young and Dorothy E. Hines (2020) wrote, "senior faculty often attempt to amass evidence of negligence or deficiency to justify devaluing a Black woman's work by *cherry-picking* within each category [research, teaching, and service] to identify the smallest of their weaknesses" (p. 78). Similarly, a scholar who was denied tenure despite solid qualifications and who writes under the pseudonym Grace Park (2020) explained what she learned from the experience by stating, "If people want to keep you around, they focus on overall patterns, either explaining the outliers or disregarding them completely. If they want to get rid of you, they use your one mistake or outlier comments in one class you taught for the first time, as representative of your character, professionalism, and competence" (p. 286). Other authors of tenure stories cite incidents in which they discovered colleagues had failed to read their dossiers, dismissed their research methods or writing style as unscholarly, or combed through hundreds of course evaluations to locate one negative comment. Overall, the *Presumed Incompetent* collections provide a clear picture of the realities behind the very low numbers of women of color who make it to senior faculty positions. Women of color are not failing to achieve tenure. Instead, the professionalist procedures of tenure are failing to prevent the bias and discrimination found in predominantly white institutions from derailing their careers. Park's (2020) articulation of this failure is worth quoting at length:

A tenure denial is made to seem as if it is the sole responsibility of the person denied tenure, but it is also evidence of a department's and [an] institution's collective failure to adequately mentor, integrate, and help their junior colleague navigate the hidden rules, culture, and politics of their specific institution. It is ultimately a shared responsibility, but because the process is not transparent, systemic patterns of bias may never be addressed, thereby perpetuating the myth of meritocracy in

academia and rendering the challenges Women of Color face in the tenure process invisible. (p. 280)

There is a lot in *Presumed Incompetent* that deserves and demands our attention and that I have not covered here, but I hope to have given a sense of the depth and importance of this example of the intersectional critique of academic labor. Read through the lens of the three models of academic labor and with the theoretical assumption that these models act as both behavior-shaping ideologies and rhetorical resources, the essays in *Presumed Incompetent* reveal several key features of U.S. academic labor imaginaries in the 21st century. First, vocationalism appears here as a resistant, almost insurgent, mode of academic work. Indeed, academic workers in ethnic studies and related fields are leading campaigns to change the professionalist slant in tenure review, seeking to have community organizing work counted for promotion in the same way that agricultural university extension projects do. Second, because the academy is demonstrated to be a workplace rife with racial, gender, and other biases in *Presumed Incompetent*, we see that women of color present a test of professionalism's best solution to academic labor problems: the procedures of tenure, peer review, and faculty self-governance. This is a test that professionalist proceduralism fails. It thus appears that academic workers need to get creative in their thinking about how to fix academic labor conditions, rather than relying on the same professionalist procedural and policy-based solutions that have been the faculty's primary strategy for making change for the past hundred years.

Third, in heeding the writers of *Presumed Incompetent*, it matters to listen for silences as well as statements. Across both volumes, all 850 pages, unions were mentioned only once, and that was when Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs (2020) pointed to the weaknesses of academic worker organizing in comparison to unions in the manual trades (p. 157). Although certainly some of these writers work or have worked on unionized campuses like SUNY Empire State College, unions are mentioned neither as a safe space for women faculty of color nor as a resource during employment disputes. Though unions are not the only solution and though the history of unions and race is complex, this indicates that academic unions have some serious work ahead of them in becoming more inclusive, welcoming, and useful resources for women faculty of color. As Sekile Nzinga

(2020) wrote in her recent and crucial book, *Lean Semesters: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity*,

If institutional transformation and social justice is the goal, then [organized academic] labor struggles should be in solidarity with the labor struggles of marginalized faculty of color by centering the voices, working lives, and material realities of those who are disproportionately affected by the coordinated attacks — both recent and historic — on academic labor. (p. 88)

References

- American Association of University Professors. (1940). *1940 statement of principles on academic freedom and tenure*. AAUP. <https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>
- Boyd, B. A. (2012). Sharing our gifts. In G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 277–284). Utah State University Press.
- Bridgeman, J. (2020). 'Still I rise.' In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 13–22). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Gutiérrez y Muhs, G. (2020). Silent bias and resisting narratives of deficit: Social class and poverty in the academy. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 153–160). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Gutiérrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y. F., González, C. G., & Harris, A. P. (Eds.). (2012). *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia*. Utah State University Press.

-
- Harris, A. P., & González, C. G. (2012). Introduction. In G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 1–16). Utah State University Press.
- Hoff, P. T. (2020). Picked to pieces: The cost of opportunity. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 39–48). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Holling, M. A., Fu, M. C., & Bubar, R. (2012). Dis/jointed appointments: Solidarity amidst inequity, tokenism, and marginalization. In G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 250–265). Utah State University Press.
- Lugo-Lugo, C. R. (2012). A prostitute, a servant, and a customer-service representative: A Latina in academia. In G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y. F. Niemann, C. G. González, & A. P. Harris (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (pp. 40–49). Utah State University Press.
- Matthew, P. A. (Ed.). (2016). *Written/unwritten: Diversity and the hidden truths of tenure*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Niemann, Y. F., Gutiérrez y Muhs, G., & González, C. G. (Eds.). (2020). *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia*. Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Nzinga, S. M. (2020). *Lean semesters: How higher education reproduces inequity*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ortega, A. (2020). They don't call it work for nothing: Navigating classism in academic relationships. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 161–170). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>

-
- Park, G. (2020). My tenure denial. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 280–289). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Rios, D, & Case, K. A. (2020). Unlikely alliances from Appalachia to East L.A.: Insider without and outsider within. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 131–142). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Tran, N. (2020). In name only: A principal investigator's struggle for authority. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 245–258). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>
- Young, J. L., & Hines, D. E. (2020). Promotion while pregnant and Black. In Y. F. Niemann, G. Gutiérrez y Muhs, & C. G. González (Eds.), *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia* (pp. 73–82). Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607329664>

Heather Steffen, Ph.D., is an affiliated scholar of the Rutgers University Center for Cultural Analysis in New Jersey. Her book-in-progress, *Useful Work: Imagining Academic Labor in the U.S. University*, analyzes scholar-teachers' public writing about their labor from the 1890s through the present. Steffen holds a Ph.D. in literary and cultural studies, and has worked as a writing and literature lecturer and as a postdoctoral researcher. Her essays on faculty, graduate employee, and undergraduate labor have appeared in *New Literary History*, *Cultural Logic*, *Academe*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

“My Heart is in the Work”:¹ Presuming Competence and the Value of Academic Labor(s)

Dana Gliserman Kopans

There is much to be said about Steffen’s talk, but what I have not managed to stop thinking about is the way that even at colleges founded apart from, or, moreover, in radical opposition to the professional model of research, faculty focused on student learning as a catalyst for social justice may not have entirely escaped the research university’s ideological effects.

Steffen rightly argues that we ought to consider models of the scholar-teacher that exist alongside (or outside) the professional model, in recognition, as she says, “that scholar-teachers’ ideas about work have always been multifaceted, complex, and at times contradictory.” Her intersectional critique reminds us that power is dispersed, pervasive, and productive, and our subject-positions as academics have us operating in a complex nexus of privilege and oppression. Her analysis of the essays that comprise *Presumed Incompetent* indicates that:

[T]eaching, mentorship, and service activities are famously less important and less valued in tenure and promotion decisions than publications and grants. More insidiously, much of the labor of teaching, advising, and counseling students is rendered invisible in official documentation of faculty achievements and takes place beyond the notice of one’s colleagues.

As both the collection and Steffen argue, devaluing activities central to the vocational model of scholar-teachers disproportionately affects racialized women, who are thus fighting a (professional) war on at least two fronts: in addition to being potentially illegible to colleagues with more standard *vitas* foregrounding publications and grants, they are often “presumed incompetent” by others in the academy — including their own students.

I think that there are several lines of investigation that are certainly worth pursuing, though I won't be pursuing them here (I will, however, be anxiously awaiting Steffen's book). Some work has been done, although I think that there is more to do, about the extent to which the academic work of teaching, mentoring, and service enables or undergirds the work of other professors who devalue it. I also have questions about the ways that the very institutions that invented and that teach critical race theory nonetheless reproduce an environment hostile to traditionally marginalized groups — as Steffen puts it, “the university workplace is far from immune to the hierarchies of race, gender, and class that many scholars seek to dismantle in the larger society.”

Not every college, of course, is plagued by many stories of the variety that Steffen summarizes from *Presumed Incompetent*: stories of exceptionally qualified women of color being identified as having weaknesses or being denied tenure for reasons having to do with personality or the racist dog whistle of “fit.” But institutions at which these stories are not circulating might want to consider whether this indeed results from strong policies, enlightened behavior, or a unionized environment, or whether it instead is the unfortunate result of a failure to attract many candidates who are racialized women.

Steffen usefully explains that the “genteel politeness” of academic culture disguises an apparatus that disciplines and excludes those who resist its dominant ideology. Codes of discourse and behavior that, in theory, function to ensure a safe, inclusive, and comfortable workplace have failed many academics for whom these codes are foreign, unfamiliar, or inaccessible. The lived experiences of faculty members who do not identify as members of the dominant culture bear this out. For marginalized faculty, a college culture that seems, at least on the surface, to be genteel and polite can actually feel threatening or toxic. These codes demand silent forbearance, and read criticism as evidence that the critic is difficult, a malcontent, or angry, depending, often, on the subject-position of the person speaking. The responsibility for systemic failure is displaced onto individuals.

Particularly illuminating for me was her explanation that the tenure and review process — that singular professional achievement guaranteeing conditions of employment and academic freedom — has, sadly, been

weaponized: due process and faculty review have been used by faculty to police their colleagues, placing faculty above and in opposition to other faculty. A process that ought to have unified faculty in collective protection from institutional pressures threatening academic freedom and the vicissitudes of at-will employment has, at times, been compromised by a lack of transparency in its use to protect ideological agendas, as Steffen explains.

All of this is to say that I wonder — thanks to Steffen — about the extent to which we, as a faculty, perpetuate, reinforce, and police the very boundaries that progressive institutions successfully resisted at their founding. We can certainly look at the numbers of white and racialized women who have been hired, tenured, and promoted, and compare them to their male counterparts. If this is a project that is of interest to my quantitatively-minded colleagues, I will look forward to their findings. But I don't think that the numbers will tell the only story, or the whole story, or necessarily the most interesting or important story. I think that, as a faculty, we need to consider — very seriously — the stories that we tell ourselves, each other, and the administration. What is it that we value when we make decisions about whom to hire, tenure, or promote? And where did we get these values? In whose service do they operate, and whose agenda is being followed? Given a system that ensures that the faculty of teaching colleges are trained at research universities, what assumptions are operating? At my alma mater — which is also Steffen's — teaching and service were seen as necessary distractions from the real work of our research. I haven't wavered from my sense, nonetheless, that the strength of SUNY Empire State College is the extent to which the faculty are committed to empowering, transformative education. I have been, and continue to be amazed by the faculty's dedication to students. I have also, of course, been amazed by the scholarly and creative work that these same faculty produce. If we want to see what the institution values, however, I think that Steffen's talk asks us to look less to the mission and vision statements, and instead to look at the results of the decisions being made.

How, for example, do our hiring committees, procedures, and decisions reflect our diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, and what results have we seen? (This is an actual, and not a rhetorical question. Perhaps we have been able to recruit, hire, and retain more faculty of color of late. I hope

that this is the case, but I do not have any data to provide any answers.) How do we demonstrate the value we place on teaching and service as it relates to research? What kinds of research are counting in tenure and promotion decisions, and how much is it weighted? Whose judgment counts, and whose doesn't? Does our rhetoric match the actions being taken? Do faculty, facing increasingly heavy teaching, mentoring, and service loads, have the capacity to pay attention? (That is also an actual and not a rhetorical — or a judgmental — question.)

At this college, and at other institutions at which the governance is a shared responsibility between faculty and administration, we (as a faculty) have an enormous opportunity (and, as a corollary, an equally enormous obligation) to use the power that we have to promote our agenda, rather than an agenda we may be feeling pressure to adopt. I think that we need to resist our instincts to reproduce what we may have experienced at the research institutions from which we may have graduated, and insist that the mission and vision of the college be the basis of and the reasons for the decisions we make. Supporting permanency for colleagues who contribute to the mission supports the mission itself. Promoting individual colleagues who pursue a mission-allied agenda supports the collective faculty agenda. Just as we should presume competence in our students, so should we presume competence in ourselves, and in each other.

Note

- ¹ The motto of Carnegie Mellon University, where Steffen and I did our doctoral work, comes from its founder, Andrew Carnegie: the industrialist, philanthropist, robber baron. It sets up, I think, a work culture at the school that privileges production at the expense of — well, everything else, really. It valorizes an overidentification with work, and with thinking of academic work as a vocation. The irony that the literary and cultural theory program, in which we both studied, emerged from the Frankfurt School, a philosophical movement of critical theory grounded in Marxism and centrally concerned with work and production, was not lost on us.

Dana Gliserman Kopans, Ph.D., is an associate professor in and chair of the department of literature, communication, and cultural studies at SUNY Empire State College. She works in 18th-century British literature and culture, and her interests are in gender and in the intersections of legal, medical, and cultural history. Her teaching interests include the medical humanities, British literature, children's and young adult literature, and other topics in literary and cultural studies. She serves as an associate editor of *The Burney Journal* and is currently working on early modern theories of conception. Other work concerns her personal obsessions with tea and chocolate.

Making Peer Review More Equitable and Inclusive

Chris Price

Heather Steffen's paper "Intersectional Imaginaries of Academic Labor" suggests that the tenure and promotion system is broken at its core and might be beyond fixing. She argues that the problems in the system are more a feature rooted in "hierarchies of race, gender, and class" than they are bugs that can be easily worked out. In her analysis of the cases in the *Presumed Incompetent* books, Steffen exposes how damaging the tenure and promotion process can be to the professional and personal lives of women of color. These stories expose "the insufficiency of professionalist reliance on proceduralism," which results in the "vocational modes of work" undertaken by these faculty to be "devalued in professional evaluation procedures." The dilemma here is that many well-meaning (typically white) faculty who have benefited from the professionalist model often fail to see the harm it causes and tend to defend it as a solid foundation for their scholarly work. Specifically, "it is precisely the peer-reviewing nature of tenure that allows space for bias, implicit and explicit, to enter into and wreck the meritocratic ends of this professionalist procedure." It is hard to accept that peer review is fundamentally broken because of its complicity in white supremacy. However, Steffen argues that under the current system, it is not correct to say that some women of color fail to achieve tenure. "Instead, the professionalist procedures of tenure are failing to prevent the bias and discrimination found in predominantly white institutions from derailing their careers."

What other options exist to realize a more inclusive and equitable faculty evaluation system? Steffen insists that we need to "get creative in [our] thinking about how to fix academic labor conditions, rather than relying on the same professionalist procedural and policy-based solutions that have been the faculty's primary strategy for making change for the past hundred years." At the end of her piece, she suggests that academic unions could play a role here but only after they do some work toward

“becoming more inclusive, welcoming, and useful resources for women faculty of color.” Another option is to look outside our campuses to the scholarly presses and journals that play integral roles in the tenure and promotion process. What steps can we take toward a peer-review process that is less harmful to faculty from marginalized and minoritized populations?

Christine Stanley (2007) addressed the effect of racism in the editorial and peer-review process in her article, “When Counter Narratives Meet Master Narratives in the Journal Editorial Review Process.” This piece is similar to the contributions in *Presumed Incompetent* in that Stanley shared her experience as an accomplished scholar trying to get something published in a traditional journal while going against the “master narrative” of a discipline. Stanley explained that a “master narrative is a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out.” Master narratives are not bad in themselves but become “problematic, because the dominant group in academia writes most research and, more often than not, they are [w]hite men” (p. 14). In other words, master narratives limit “what counts” as scholarship, often disguised (in accordance with the professionalist model) as objective contributions to the discipline. Counter narratives expose the subjective nature of the master narrative through the deconstruction of its origins and through providing “multiple and conflicting models of understanding social and cultural identities” (p. 14).

A common master narrative in many social science disciplines is the belief that quantitative research is superior to qualitative research. If you only look at the surface of this issue, it might be unclear how the privileged position of quantitative research studies causes harm to marginalized and minoritized faculty. After all, this avenue of research is open to anyone in graduate school and as they start their academic career. For this reason, those faculty who defend quantitative methods as better than qualitative methods might not understand how they are excluding some faculty of color. Stanley (2007) explained, however, that many faculty of color enter their academic career because of their experience with racism in a society organized around white privilege. Their motivation is often personal, leading them to utilize their faculty status to “authenticate the prevailing theories about and give back to [their] communities.” In other words, many faculty of color seek out research programs that they hope will go beyond

theoretical contributions and empirical generalizations to also provide concrete benefits to “the discipline, our students, and higher education decision making and policy” (p. 16). Scholars of color often choose qualitative research methods to better achieve these goals because “[p]eople’s lived experiences are not always quantifiable” (p. 18).

Stanley (2007) summarized and reflected on her experience when her counter narrative (a qualitative study of African American faculty working at predominantly white, research-intensive universities) clashed with the master narrative of those who reviewed her manuscript for consideration in a prestigious journal. The feedback from those who recommended the manuscript for publication as well as those who recommended it be revised or rejected was framed according to the master narrative through “the projection of [w]hite privilege and the implications made by a majority of reviewers that the research could be validated only with a comparison group of [w]hite faculty members” (p. 16). Stanley deconstructed the reviews, showing how the master narratives were present in the critiques of “the research methodology, the theoretical framework, the institutions from which the participants were sampled, and the researchers” (p. 17). While she explained much of the criticism as misunderstanding the qualitative study design, “Reviewer 6” questioned whether the research subjects were Stanley’s friends. This comment was problematic for two reasons. First, it showed that the reviewer did not understand the “snowballing sampling technique” frequently used in qualitative research where interview subjects recommend additional subjects. The reviewer’s comment also contained a “racist implication ... that scholars of color, regardless of group membership, know one another and are friends.” Stanley concluded that the master narrative’s failure to properly review her article was rooted in the belief that a study focusing on scholars of color could only be valid if their experiences were compared with that of white faculty members. Instead, she insisted that “it is unproductive for scholars of color to make comparisons with [w]hite faculty members when the playing field is still unequal” (p. 19).

Though Stanley’s (2007) article was eventually published, she concluded with five recommendations for editors of scholarly journals for improving the peer-review process. Her first recommendation was for editors and editorial boards to “[u]nderstand the broad implications of scholarly critique in the manuscript-review process.” While it is important for

reviewers to be rigorous and critical, editors should take steps to filter out reviews that contain “egregious remarks” and “personal attacks” that may be less about the manuscript and more a defense of a master narrative. This led Stanley to also suggest that editors “[w]ork toward a deeper understanding of multiple research epistemologies” (p. 20). If the goal of the review process is to expand knowledge in a discipline, it does not make sense to assign reviewers to manuscripts who either do not understand the research methods of the paper or who fundamentally disagree with those methods. In order to increase the pool of reviews to make it more diverse, you need to “[d]evelop systems of mentoring across race and gender for faculty professional development.” To this end, Stanley suggested that we need deeper cross-race dialogues and mentorships that understand the “role that [w]hite privilege and the master narrative play in academia” (p. 21).

Stanley’s (2007) final two recommendations were to “[r]ecognize that there are invisible systems of [w]hite privilege and oppression in the review process that can work to systematically disempower certain narratives” and to “[a]ccept counter narratives for what they can offer to the enhancement of scholarly discourse in academia” (pp. 21–22). The fact that higher education still struggles with this almost 20 years after her experience places this advice in the “easier said than done” category. However, there seems at present to be a critical mass of scholars who accept that higher education needs to effectively deal with the effects of racism and white privilege. We just need enough of them to recognize that “this is not a call to omit rigor in the manuscript-review process but rather a call for new ways of thinking about what rigor and relevance mean in alternative epistemologies” (p. 22). In other words, the only way to fix the broken peer-review process is to completely rethink how it is done, not so it goes away, but to do it better.

Reference

Stanley, C. A. (2007). When counter narratives meet master narratives in the journal editorial-review process. *Educational Researcher*, 36(1), 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X06298008>

Academic Programs Manager **Chris Price, Ph.D.**, works for the State University of New York (SUNY) Center for Professional Development (CPD). At the CPD, he designs and implements professional development programs for faculty and staff both in and outside SUNY. Prior to his position at the CPD, he was director of the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at SUNY Brockport for 12 years. He started working at Brockport after receiving his Ph.D. in political science from the University at Albany in 2004. Chris continues to teach online for Brockport as an instructor in the Master and Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies programs.



Stretch

Happy Kamala Harris Day: The Impact of the First Female Vice President on Adult and Higher Education

Edith Gnanadass

I am a South Asian American (SAA) and I am Tamil, the same ethnicity as Kamala Harris' mother. Do you recall Harris using a Tamil word in her speech at the Democratic National Convention when she accepted the vice-presidential nomination? She said, "Family is ... my *chitthis*," which is the Tamil word for aunts — mother's younger sisters.

Many of my friends know that I am Tamil, so on Inauguration Day, January 20, 2021, a friend of mine texted me: "Happy Kamala Harris Day!" My friend is an Asian American who lives in California. It was a happy day for her as well. Then I received a text from one of my closest friends who is Black, and she wrote: "Edie, now we have a VP who represents the both of us!"

This made me think about representation and what this historic event meant to all Americans, but especially to Black Americans, Asian Americans, and South Asian Americans like me. This event, along with my research on the racialized experiences of SAAs, got me interested in this topic and was the impetus for this presentation. I am drawing on my research on SAAs (Gnanadass, 2016) that I have presented on and written about in this presentation.

I will go over the outline of my reflections here, but before I do that, I want to briefly discuss the sociocultural context of our times — specifically, the violence against Black, brown, and nonwhite people. We are at the nexus of the Black Lives Matter movement and now the rising violence against Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders to whom I will refer to as AAPI.

I am sure that many of you are aware of the incident in metro Atlanta that happened on March 16, 2021. Eight people were killed and six were Asian women (Taylor & Hauser, 2021). Indeed, violence against AAPI has been on the rise since the pandemic began. “Stop AAPI Hate,” a nonprofit coalition tracking incidents of violence, discrimination, and harassment against AAPI, reported that from March 19, 2020 to February 28, 2021, nearly 3,800 hate-related incidents were recorded, and experts believe that to be just a fraction of the total. The violence has been mostly against AAPI women and the elderly (Jeung et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, anti-Asian racism is not new. AAPI have always been positioned and seen in this country as foreigners who do not belong and as not American (Lee, 2015; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989). Indeed, most times, racism against them gets erased or not acknowledged at all (Gnanadass, 2016).

Black Americans know racism quite intimately. As a friend of mine put it, “I was born into racism and I’m still living in it.” Anti-Black racism and the continued violence against Black people and Black bodies are getting somewhat recognized now, but is such recognition translating to much-needed structural change?

These reflections are exploratory in nature from my positionality as an SAA postcolonial feminist scholar who studies how race and racism are learned so we can engage in anti-racist praxis.

Initially, I was going to focus on the “So what?” and “Now what?” of Harris’ historic election, but based on recent incidents of AAPI violence, I have reframed my thoughts. I have decided to focus on the context of Harris’ election in terms of anti-Black and anti-AAPI racism, and the “So what?” and “Now what?” for higher and adult education. In effect, how we can celebrate Harris’ achievement while also holding her accountable for reimagining our institutions and this country?

Historical Context of South Asian Americans

Who is a South Asian American? The term “South Asian American” broadly refers to immigrants as well as U.S.-born people from India,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives, although this can vary to include people from Afghanistan.

I categorize SAA immigration to the United States in three waves and would add another wave post-9/11, while other scholars might conceptualize the constitution of these waves differently.

South Asians have been in the U.S. since the 1700s, but their larger presence can be traced to the late 1800s when Asian labor immigration began. Asians were recruited to work as laborers on the West Coast and Hawaii to keep labor prices competitive and control the labor force through a divide and control policy (Takaki, 1989).

Many of the Asians were not welcome on arrival and were seen as *other* or strangers by white labor and white dominant society. They were seen as the “Yellow Peril” (Lee, 2015; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989) due to their increasing numbers and their threat to white labor. According to Chandrasekhar (1982), this sense of threat and pattern of discrimination set the stage for discrimination against Asians for years to come, including in our society right now.

South Asian immigrants, the first wave, arrived in this atmosphere of anti-Asian sentiment based on race and labor competition. They faced widespread hostility and discrimination and demands for exclusion and reduction of their political and economic rights almost immediately upon their arrival (Chandrasekhar, 1982; Mazumdar, 1989; Takaki, 1989).

The political interests of the exclusionists and dominant white society converging with the economic interests of white labor resulted in the legal exclusion and restriction of Asian immigration through the passing and enactment of immigration legislation based on race and national origins like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 (Harpalani, 2013; Lee, 2015; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989).

The Asiatic Barred Zone Act, or the Immigration Act of 1917, designated the Pacific a “Barred Zone” (Harpalani, 2013; Jensen, 1988; Lal 2008; Takaki, 1989), which restricted and barred all Asian immigration for more than 20 years. Congress passed the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which opened up immigration and granted naturalization rights to Asian Americans (Chandrasekhar,

1982; Harpalani, 2013; Takaki, 1989), thus changing their history in the U.S.

The Luce-Celler Act of 1946 granted naturalization rights to Asians (Chandrasekhar, 1982; Harpalani, 2013; Takaki, 1989) by setting a small annual immigration quota of 100.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 finally abolished the national origins quota, placed Asian countries on an equal footing with countries from the Western Hemisphere, and most importantly for South Asians, based immigration on skills not on national origins or race (Harpalani, 2013; Lal, 2008; Prashad, 2000). It also established a separate quota for professional and technical workers and gave preference to highly-skilled, professional immigrants.

This post-1965 immigration, the second wave, completely transformed and renewed the SAA population in the U.S., as the majority of professionals and technical workers who migrated here in that period were South Asians from India (Lal, 2008; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989). They were the scientists, the engineers, the doctors, the neurosurgeons, the cardiothoracic surgeons, etc. — the *crème de la crème*. According to Lal (2008), by 1975, “93% of the South Asians in the U.S. were classified as professional/technical workers” in the census (p. 54).

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 also renewed the Asian American population. The Immigration and Nationality Amendment Act of 1976 tightened the 1965 provision, targeting professional and technical workers. As a result, there was an increase in South Asian immigrants coming here to be reunited with family (Prashad, 2000).

This third wave, starting in the 1980s and after, is made up of mostly working-class people similar to the first wave of the early 1900s, and unlike the “model minority” professional and technical workers of the second wave. They are the cab drivers, subway newspaper stand owners, motel owners, etc.

Yellow Peril

In the post-1965 second wave, highly-educated and skilled SAA/Asian American immigrants were typecast as “model minorities” and

essentialized as an inherently high-achieving group and positioned as the solution to America's racial and labor problems (Abraham, 2006; Bhattacharjee, 1992; Lal, 2008; Prashad, 2000; Takaki, 1989). SAAs and the other Asian Americans who make up this model minority myth seem to pose a double threat to American civil society — in terms of numbers and professional accomplishments — and are pitted against the Black and Latinx underclass as well as “the eroding white middle class” (Takaki, 1989, p. 478).

According to Okihiro (1994): “The Asian presence in the United States is treated as a peril of the body (‘yellow peril’) and a peril of the mind (‘model minority’)” (as cited in Prashad, 2000, p. 107).

These assumptions about “yellow peril” set the stage for anti-Asian American racism. Unfortunately, SAAs and other Asian Americans are still seen as “perpetual foreigners,” or like I found in my research on SAAs, “perpetual outsiders” who do not belong in this country (Gnanadass, 2016).

Who is Kamala Devi Harris?

How does Harris fit into all this?

Kamala Harris is the daughter of immigrants. Her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, was from India. She arrived in the U.S. in 1958 to do graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, and became a prominent breast cancer researcher. She was part of the highly-skilled, professional second wave of SAAs, seen as the model minority. Donald Harris, Kamala Harris' father, is a Jamaican immigrant who also came to the United States to get a doctorate from Berkeley. He is an economist and professor emeritus at Stanford University. He, too, fits into the model minority myth.

Kamala Harris is both Black and SAA, which complicates the dominant Black/white binary conception of race in the United States.

My Story

I want to tell my story to briefly illuminate some of the complications of this binary conception of race.

I have a 20-year-old son. We have adopted each other. I met him four years ago when I first moved to Memphis, Tennessee. When he first got to know me, he asked me, “What are you?”

I said, “Indian” or “East Indian” because Indian is often used to refer to the Indigenous people or Native Americans in Memphis.

He replied, “Oh, you are Blindian — Black Indian.”

Until he lived with me, he was not familiar with SAAs — the different shades we come in, our mannerisms, etc. In addition, if I spoke or did anything different from him, he would call me “white.” His lived experience seemed to be the Black/white paradigm — the either/or binary — you are either Black or white.

As he got to know me and my family better, he became more familiar with my heritage and culture. Then one day, he said to me, “Hey ma, I’m Mbluban — Memphian, Black, and Cuban.” His father is Cuban. He had complicated his Memphian Black identity. And yes, he is creative and very smart.

For those of you not familiar with the Black/white paradigm, Perea (1997) explained that this paradigm conceptualizes race as “exclusively or primarily” (p. 1219) made up of two groups, Blacks and whites. Therefore, race relations are seen as the relationships between these two groups. Westmoreland (2013) explained that the implications of this conceptualization of race is that all “other groups are either assimilated into [B]lacks or whites or silenced altogether. ... This paradigm ... presents the idea that racism only occurs against [B]lacks by whites” (p. 3).

This insight is so relevant because it points to the limitations of theorizing race relations and racism as occurring only between Blacks and whites. Such a conceptualization is an erasure of people who are not located in this binary. Moreover, taking this binary for granted erases different kinds of racism and silences racist realities such as the rising anti-AAPI violence and the detainment of children and their separation from their parents at the U.S./Mexico border.

I want to emphasize here that scholars who critique the Black/white binary are not arguing against foregrounding anti-Black racism, nor am I.

We must center anti-Black racism if we want racial justice and structural change in this country.

Anti-Black racism is a postcolonial condition; in other words, it is the outward sign of the continuing legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery. The transgenerational pain of anti-Black racism is real and exists today because the racist past of this country is the living present. (Gnanadass et al., 2021, para 26)

But like Westmoreland (2013), “I am arguing that centering anti-Black racism is complemented by complicating the binary conception of race” (Gnanadass et al., 2021, para 27).

Yes, Harris is both Black and SAA. She disrupts this binary paradigm of race relations in the United States. Her identity is complicated and has meaning and value for many different groups. Her hybrid, complex, and complicated identities and identifications have power in terms of representation.

Harris’ Historic Moment

Kamala Harris’ election as vice president is a historic event and represents many firsts for this country. This is a historical achievement for Black Americans and Asian Americans, including SAAs. For AAPI and immigrants, it is the classic normative immigrant story of why people come to this country and what is possible in the United States.

And most importantly, perhaps through Harris and her representation of Asian Americans, Asian Americans will be seen as Americans who belong in this country and not the Yellow Peril or some foreign virus. Her election during the Black Lives Matter movement also served as a call to SAAs and other Asian Americans to build solidarity with Black Americans in their fight for racial justice.

For example, the South Asian Bar Association of D.C. has formed a Racial Justice Committee as a result of the national dialogue following the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to support the Black community and commit South Asian attorneys to an understanding of and a call to combat racial injustice (S. Massey, personal communication, February 15, 2021).

Harris' election helps us reimagine the current and future possibilities for Black women. Since I am not a Black woman, I am not going to speak. I am going to hold space for Black women and listen. Here is what Kamala Harris (2020) said in her first speech to the nation as the first woman vice president-elect on November 7, 2020:

I'm thinking about her [my mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris], and about the generations of women — Black women, Asian, white, Latina, Native American women — who throughout our nation's history, have paved the way for this moment tonight. Women who fought and sacrificed so much for equality, and liberty, and justice for all, including the Black women who are often — too often — overlooked, but so often prove they are the backbone of our democracy. (0:27)

I am in the process of thinking through the significance of Kamala Harris being elected as our first cisgender woman, Black, SAA, Asian American, vice president and what she and her position mean for this country and the potential for change and transformation within adult and higher education.

So, I invite you to think through these questions:

- How does this triumph translate into adult higher education?
- What does this mean for Black and brown scholars and students?
- Will Black and brown women be increasingly represented in faculty, administration, and leadership of adult and higher education institutions, organizations, associations, publishing, and other professional/scholarly spheres?

We have been working on making change individually, but how do we make change at the institutional level? So, I also want to pose these questions for us to reflect upon:

- How can we critically examine and change the tenure process for professors who are women of color?
- How can we increase the representation of Black and brown women professionals in higher education?

-
- How can the number of Black and brown higher education administrators be increased?
 - How can we make higher education a safer space for students of color?
 - How can we work with Kamala Harris to get federal support for our efforts on the institutional level?

Happy Kamala Harris Day

January 20, 2021, was a historic day in U.S. history with the inauguration of the first Black/South Asian woman vice president. Women across the U.S. wore Chucks (Converse Chuck Taylor All Star sneakers) and pearls to support and emulate Harris, while Indians in Thulasendrapuram, Harris' ancestral village in South India, handed out sweets in celebration.

Still, even at this moment of celebration, we cannot forget the issues and the questions I have tried to identify. But what do Kamala Harris and her position mean for this country and the potential for change and transformation within adult and higher education? What are the implications of both her acquisition of power and the meaning it carries into public and private lives within our institutions? As a South Asian American woman academic, I reflect on the "So what?" and "Now what?" of Kamala Harris' election as it affects the country and adult and higher education, while always remembering that her access to this power and position is on the shoulders of giants — Black women and men of the past and present. May we continue to open dialogues that celebrate Kamala Devi Harris' achievement while also holding her accountable for reimagining this country.

References

- Abraham, M. (2006). Model minority and marital violence: South Asian immigrants in the United States. In R. Mahalingam (Ed.), *Cultural psychology of immigrants* (pp. 197-216). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bhattacharjee, A. (1992). The habit of ex-nomination: Nation, woman, and the Indian immigrant bourgeoisie. *Public Culture*, 5(1), 19-44.

-
- Chandrasekhar, S. (Ed.). (1982). *From India to America: A brief history of immigration; problems of discrimination; admission and assimilation*. Population Review Publications.
- Gnanadass, E. (2016). *Perpetual outsiders?: Learning race in the south Asian American experience* [Doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University]. https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/11395
- Gnanadass, E., Murray-Johnson, K., & Alicia Vetter, M. (2021). Narrating the Immigrant Experience: Three Adult Educators' Perspectives. *Adult Learning*, 32(1), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159520977708>
- Harpalani, V. (2013). DesiCrit: Theorizing the racial ambiguity of South Asian Americans. *New York University Annual Survey of American Law*, 69(1), 77–184. https://annualsurveyofamericanlaw.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/69-1_harpalani.pdf
- Harris, K. [@KamalaHarris]. (2020, November 8). *I'm thinking about my mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, and the generations of Black women who came before me who believed* [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/KamalaHarris/status/1325467051520126976>
- Jensen, J. M. (1988). *Passage from India: Asian Indian immigrants in North America*. Yale University Press.
- Jeung, R., Horse, A. Y., Popovic, T., & Lim, R. (2021). *Stop AAPI Hate national report: 3/19/20–2/28/21*. <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Report-National-210316.pdf>
- Lal, V. (2008). *The other Indians: A political and cultural history of South Asians in America*. UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.
- Lee, E. (2015). *The making of Asian America: A history*. Simon and Schuster.
- Mazumdar, S. (1989). Racist responses to racism: The Aryan myth and South Asians in the United States. *South Asia Bulletin*, 9(1), 47–55.
- Perea, J. F. (1997). The Black/white binary paradigm of race: The normal science of American racial thought. *California Law Review*, 85(5), 1213–1258. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15779/Z38MF05>
- Prashad, V. (2000). *The karma of brown folk*. University of Minnesota Press.

Takaki, R. (1989). *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans*. Little Brown and Company.

Taylor, D. B., & Hauser, C. (2021, March 17). What to know about the Atlanta spa shootings. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/us/atlanta-spa-shootings.html>

Westmoreland, P. (2013). *Racism in a Black white binary: On the reaction to Trayvon Martin's death*. https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://scholar.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1002&context=csrrr_events

Edith Gnanadass, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of higher and adult education at The University of Memphis, Tennessee. She has a Ph.D. in lifelong learning and adult education with a minor in women's, gender, and sexuality studies from The Pennsylvania State University. She has more than 20 years of experience in adult and higher education working with diverse populations. Using a postcolonial feminist lens, her research interests are at the intersection of race and learning in adult education, DesiCrit (theorizing the racialized experiences of South Asian Americans using critical race theory), sociocultural learning theories, the racialized COVID-19 pandemic, and racialized and gendered immigrant narratives. Her selected publications include "Restoring COVID-19: Faculty and Graduate Students Teaching and Learning in Crisis" in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (2022), "Learning to Teach About Race: The Racialized Experience of a South Asian American Feminist Educator" in *Adult Learning* (2014), and a chapter titled, "Gender Still Matters in Distance Education" in the *Handbook of Distance of Education* (2018). She is the co-editor of the upcoming "Being Black in the U.S."-themed issue of *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal* and serves on the board for the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE), Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), and Literacy Mid-South.

Social Equity and Adult Education

Xenia Coulter

After reading Edith Gnanadass' highly informative essay, I stopped to ask myself, as a retired white woman, just what *had* I felt when Kamala Harris was elected. Sadly, I had to confess, although I was happy with the results of the election and I liked Harris' spunk as a senator, her "rise" to vice president did not really excite me. It was nice to know that one woman could represent a "first" in federal leadership for a variety of ordinarily marginalized American citizens women and people of color (both African American and South Asian American). But I did not celebrate her election as a significant change in our culture. The position itself did not carry with it a serious amount of power or prestige. Indeed, women of all colors have long served in "vice" positions on various boards across the country (to say nothing of their often-invisible role in local communities). And I had no illusion that this election meant that the country had now moved beyond gender bias the way I had mistakenly believed that about racial bias when Barack Obama was elected. After the previous four years, having experienced the extraordinarily vicious backlash against Obama's rise to power, I was forced to admit to an embarrassing naivete (and thus, I should not have been at all surprised to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned a little more than a year after Harris was elected). It was foolish to think that Harris' triumph meant that gender (or race) inequality had been significantly reduced.

And yet, and yet, and yet again, one can always hope. For example, I've seen in my grandchildren a much greater acceptance of difference than was present in my childhood two generations ago. In the 1940s, it was taken for granted that women belonged in the kitchen, gay people in the closet, and transgender people in the darkest corners of society. And these beliefs are completely absent in the minds of my grandchildren. Of course, they are not only young but also well-educated not just because they are smart but because they were able to attend schools during a period in our history that did not routinely ban books or demand control over what was discussed in class. (Indeed, when my youngest grandchildren were in middle school some 10 years ago, the school set aside a day for gay children to "come out.") Of course, I'm mindful of

the many young people today who have performed horrible hate crimes, but as far as I've been able to understand these individuals, they were not comfortable or happy in school. They are young, but they did not benefit from their school experience. So perhaps both elements youth and effective education are important in moving our country toward social equity.

But if so, why then does education change individuals, but seem to have little or no impact on our society as a whole? My guess, as a long-time adult educator, is that our educational universe, regardless of teachers' good intentions, and even occasional successes, cannot, by definition, change the culture of which it is a systemic part. We cannot "embrace" diversity, for example, when we also wholeheartedly embrace the concept of gradation where almost every attribute is subdivided into a series of successive conditions rankings from worst to best; that is, from the worst to the most gifted artisan, artist, or athlete through to the most perfect zebra, most active zealot, or prettiest zinnia. No one likes to be inferior, but unless your life has been sufficiently privileged that you can take for granted that you have intrinsic worth, you will seize whatever opportunity available to feel some form of superiority. Gender has historically provided men with such a safe haven, but in today's world, their sense of security has been shaken, not just because of women's apparent successes, but because the binary essence of gender, just as Gnanadass describes with skin color, is no longer secure. And the greater one's sense of insecurity, the harder one fights to maintain the status quo, a scenario we see playing out today.

If this gradation hypothesis has some validity, then it might be possible to weaken a culture of inequality if more people could learn to appreciate their own worth, not in comparison to perpetual standards, but as unique individuals. An educational system that did not grade its students might be an important first step. If the personal interests or needs or goals of each student served as the foundation for their learning experiences, then comparing student outcomes would make no more sense than comparing apples to oranges. In such an educational system, the overriding objective would be two-fold to stimulate both the growth of individual self-worthiness and the recognition of others as equally valuable. This view of education is by no means new, its most recent form being John Dewey's well-known progressive model described in *Democracy and*

Education (Dewey, 1916) and Mayhew and Edwards' (1965) *The Dewey School*. However, despite its logical and humane appeal, Dewey's form of schooling, even with pockets of success throughout the world, has not been able to overcome the power of our prevailing culture that shapes our public schools.

For the past 20 years or so, along with my colleagues Alan Mandell and Lee Herman, we've seriously studied key features and advantages of progressive education. And in a few of our papers, more or less as an aside, we have wondered whether such schooling where students are allowed to pursue their own interests and create their own paths to knowledge may be more welcomed (or less hindered) when applied only to adults. With adult learners, teachers have considerable latitude when it comes to course content and pedagogical approaches. Even as tightly bound to the information transmission model as we are, adult educators often still have the freedom to begin with the lived experiences of their students to shape a more individualized course of study for each one of them.

More than 50 years ago, such an approach was taken for granted as a key feature of adult education. According to Eduard Lindeman (1926), for example,

Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education. ... (p. 11)

Others such as Malcolm Knowles (1973), Cyril Houle (1961), Ivan Illich (1970), or Allen Tough (1979) elaborated upon this vision of education in numerous ways. From a practical perspective, education as attractive (not an "affliction" as Lindeman put it [1926, p. 4]) was necessary because, unlike the case with children, formal schooling for adults was entirely optional. Unfortunately, as Ohliger (2009) in the 1980s and 1990s repeatedly warned, many adult educators soon found student-centered classes difficult to implement and the pull of professionalization, the alluring role of oracles, even harder to resist. As the field of adult

education grew, the adult learners gradually lost control over the curriculum; and as instructors took over the reins, their students devolved (just as Ohliger had predicted [pp. 47-63]) into inadequate objects needing improvement (a situation that children routinely endure). Thus, the positive and optimistic view of adult education voiced long ago by Lindeman (1926) succumbed to the same pressures that so constrain our public schools today. And, as we move into the future, increasing numbers of adults will find themselves forced to take one or another form of “continuing” education or other forms of remediation by ingesting an externally-imposed curriculum. (Who of our readers today has not been required, without regard to their personal experience, to take an institutionally-imposed course made all too easily available through the internet?)

When Gnanadass invites us to consider how Kamala Harris’ triumph might translate to adult education, it seems to me that we educators might respond by rising up to resist the pressures that denigrate the strength and value of our students to recapture the original form and purpose of adult education. Individually in our classrooms, we can do much to recognize the inherent value of all our learners not just of our best adult learners by taking seriously their concerns regardless of whether their relevance to our own purposes is immediately obvious. We can also speak to our colleagues, chairs, and deans about how our current deficit model of education perpetuates the very inequalities we claim to abhor.

In sum, if we want the hard-sought gains of the many currently marginalized people in our country to be meaningful, we must make it easier for the adult student and hopefully someday for all students to value such triumphs without feeling less worthy in comparison. Simple assertions of such truths as “we are all valuable” is a waste of breath. We need in our classrooms to show our students their value and importance. School should not be where they are expected only to reduce their inadequacies. Instead, it should be where they are invited to expand their already valuable faculties and experiences to discover new vistas. Hopefully, students can leave school eager to help others to do the same. We might even hope that a day will come when we are no longer graded against each other on various standards but are instead honestly embraced for the astoundingly unique configuration of attributes that define us. Then we might honor Kamala Harris’ success, not as a woman or

a person of color or multiethnic background, but for the whole person she is and the unique perspective she offers in whatever position she might hold.

References

- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Free Press.
- Houle, C. O. (1961). *The inquiring mind: A study of the adult who continues to learn* (3rd ed.). University of Wisconsin Press.
- Illich, I. (1970). *Deschooling society*. Harper & Row.
- Knowles, M. S. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Gulf.
- Lindeman, E. C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*. New Republic.
- Mayhew, K. C., & Edwards, A. C. (1965). *The Dewey School: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago 1896-1903*. Aldine Transaction.
- Ohliger, J. (2009). Ohliger's words: Accent on the social from a radical liberal perspective. In A. P. Grace, T. S. Rocco, & Associates (Eds.), *Challenging the professionalization of adult education: John Ohliger and contradictions in modern practice* (pp. 43-111). Jossey-Bass.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning* (2nd ed.). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Xenia Coulter, Ph.D., is a professor emerita from SUNY Empire State College with a Ph.D. in psychology from Princeton University. Her original interests were focused upon the basic processes of learning and memory, but over time she became more involved in the study of advanced learning by adults both in formal settings and from experience, international education (having also taught Lebanese and Greek college students), and the writings of John Dewey. She has written numerous articles and reviews, and she and her colleague, Alan Mandell, edited one of Wiley's *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* texts, *Adult Educators on Dewey's Experience and Education* (2018). Other recent publications include: "Dewey, Individuality, and PLA Policy in Higher Education" in *Prior Learning Assessment Inside Out* (2018); with Alan Mandell, "The Teacher Role: From Dewey's Lab School to a Public College," in Avila, Rud, Waks, and King's (Eds.) *John Dewey and Teacher Education: Accountability, Standardization, and Assessment* (in press); and with Lee Herman, "The Lure of Autocratic Education in a Somewhat Democratic Society," in the *Athens Journal of Education* (2020). The most recent book review that she and Alan Mandell completed (in 2022) was of Evans, Kurantowicz, and Lucio-Villegas' (Eds.) *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning*.

Ontological Blackness in Adult and Higher Education

Lisa R. Merriweather

The swearing-in of Vice President Kamala Harris was indeed a moment worthy of celebration but sadly also, like many other firsts experienced in the 21st century, was cringeworthy. As a society, we should cringe at these firsts given the realization that the United States is 245 years old (not counting 1492–1776 — the period before its independence), and it took 245 years for a Black woman to earn a Ph.D. in physics from Yale (Brooke Russell), a Black person to be elected from Georgia to the U.S. Senate (Raphael Warnock), a Black woman to be employed as a full-time NFL coach (Jennifer King), a Black person to be appointed as military chief of staff and to lead any U.S. armed forces branch (Charles Q. Brown Jr.), a Black elected official to lie in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda (John Lewis), a Black person to serve as a Catholic cardinal (Wilton Gregory), a Black person to win the Scripps National Spelling Bee (Zaila Avant-garde), and a Southeast Asian Black woman to occupy Number One Observatory Circle, the vice presidential residence. This is the shortlist. It is moments like these that we are left wondering if we should laugh in celebratory solidarity at the immense historic accomplishments of so many, or cry in our knowing that as a nation, the U.S. continues to fail miserably at fulfilling its promises: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Well, to be honest, it succeeds in doing so for some. For those considered racially minoritized — African American, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American people, specifically — social justice continues to be elusive, but for those in the dominant White racial group, prosperity and the fullness of life are more easily had.

Gnanadass in “Happy Kamala Harris Day: The Impact of the First Female Vice President on Adult and Higher Education” indirectly speaks to this tension, highlighting the complexity of identity, how it is read internally and externally, and its implications on the lived realities of those historically disenfranchised. The adroit deconstructions of racialized ethnic experiences delivered in the essay are necessary for appreciating

the impact of invisibilizing racial and ethnic groups within white supremacy. In this response, I speak to the ontological concerns raised in Gnanadass' essay.

Ontological Blackness and Ideological Whiteness

Our sociocultural context is fraught with discriminatory and prejudicial practices. They are embedded in the fabric of the nation and the psyches of its people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Because of the divisive relationship the U.S. has maintained with African Americans — persons descended from Africa and stolen, transported, and enslaved in the United States — scholars have identified anti-Black racism (e.g., Gillborn, 2018; Gordon, 1995) as a pivotal sociopolitical phenomenon. Riffing off Gordon's (1995) definition, Doss (2012/2013) described anti-Black racism as "the attitude and/or practice of constructing people of African descent as fundamentally inferior and subhuman for the purpose of escaping the responsibility of respecting all humanity" (p. 16). Anti-Black racism is a product of Ideological (Ontological) Whiteness, which is the litmus test for determining who and what is inclusive of whiteness; those who do not pass the test are deemed Ideologically Black. Ideological (Ontological) Blackness speaks to ontological determinations — the nature of being and identity — made by dominant hegemonic society (Fanon, 2008). These determinations are framed with the ideology of white supremacy,

a pattern of values and beliefs that are ingrained in nearly every system and institution in the U.S. It is a belief that to be white is to be human and invested with inalienable universal rights and that to be not-white means you are less than human — a disposable object for others to abuse and misuse. (Ho, 2021, para. 5)

Ontological determinations impact how we see ourselves and others. When they are etched on the psyche of society, they are ascribed the weight of truth.

Such ontological determinations cast blackness (nonwhiteness) as inferior, deficient, and negative, creating an Ontology of Blackness crafted to elevate the status of White people, thus making whiteness the gold standard. The Black/White binary is implicated in ontological determinations in that it speaks to how all people groups are evaluated

against the white standard. To a degree, I agree with Gnanadass that the binary silences and masks the uniqueness of *all* people groups, but I believe that it also has some explanatory power for race relations in the U.S. The binary, in my opinion, is a heuristic better understood as positioning people groups and individual persons along a continuum, a continuum defined by gradations of Ontological Blackness and Whiteness. The issue presented in this conceptualization is less about membership in a sociopolitical, racialized group or as Gnanadass states, “theorizing race relations and racism as occurring only between Blacks and whites.” It is more about exposing the “racialization” of *all* groups, a process of valuing groups based on placement along the continuum wherein groups positioned closer to Ontological Whiteness enjoy more privileges of whiteness.

Shiao (2017) named this “honorary whiteness”: “I use the term *honorary whites* to refer to an intermediate rank in a racial hierarchy that has historically reserved the highest status for whites. Under certain conditions, select nonwhites may become socially perceived as honorary whites” (p. 790), who reap the benefits of whiteness. Conversely, the closer the position is to Ontological Blackness, the more they are treated as being Black, suffering from similar microaggressive assaults. To be sure, every people group considered to be racially minoritized is placed within a circumscribed box by whiteness and grapples with a set of racist stereotypes and tropes ascribed to them, which in many cases are not positive and certainly do not affirm the fullness of their humanity. Black people feel the ill-effects of anti-Black racism more because they are viewed as the antithesis of Ontological Whiteness, positioned the furthest away on the continuum. But make no mistake, other groups who do not hold full membership in the whiteness club also suffer under its weight. The real problem with the Black/White binary is not that other racially minoritized groups are erased, but rather that white supremacy has claimed the power to assign worth in relation to how it sees people groups and individuals by measuring them against itself as the standard and pitting them against each other to claim higher status along the continuum. An example of this was seen in how much easier it was for Americans to attribute the success of people like Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Barack Obama to the non-Black side of their biracial heritage.

Such is the ontological case described by Gnanadass in reference to Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, a group like others that I consciously choose to not reduce to an acronym. The history Gnanadass provides is critical to framing the contemporary experiences of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, specifically South Asian Americans because history has the capacity to humanize and offer a holistic ontological reading. Gnanadass highlights the myth of the model minority, establishing that some Asian subgroups are more prone to being subjected to degradation (Ontological Blackness), while others experience elevated social status (Ideological Whiteness). Gnanadass also demonstrates the power of myth in shaping expectations as well as attitudes that form ontological understandings. Many Asians benefit from privileges bestowed by their perceived proximity to Ideological Whiteness. But welcoming into the club of whiteness is always transitory and in flux, an invitation that is only good until it is revoked. This was most recently evidenced when the U.S. turned on its *model minorities* because of misinformation about the coronavirus. White space is only inclusive of nonwhites when the interest of white supremacy is concomitantly served, as Ignatiev (1995) illustrated in *How the Irish Became White*. Gnanadass' description as "perpetual foreigners" highlights the subliminal space tethered to the interest of white supremacy in which Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders exist, a space wherein they are simultaneously dehumanized while also subjected to status elevation by proxy. That is, they can be *model minorities* in one instance and objects of ridicule in the next. At the heart of this conversation is a much-needed reckoning of anti-Black racist attitudes and behaviors or as Gnanadass writes, "structural change." It is only when America shakes itself loose of its commitment to Ontological Whiteness that authentic ontologies of other groups can be illuminated and allowed to stand outside of the shadow of whiteness.

Gnanadass invites us to consider the importance of the historic moment of Kamala Harris' election to the second-highest seat of power in the U.S. For me, it is a call for adult and higher education to stop using whiteness as the litmus test for the quality of scholarship and teaching, often seen in what publication outlets are deemed high quality or which educators are considered excellent. It is a call to honor the unique ontologies of all people instead of viewing them through a prism of Ontological Whiteness. This often occurs in our unconscious favoring of White students and

sometimes Asian students while being dismissive of Black and Brown students. Finally, it is a call to confront the anti-Black racist sentiment that has been wedded to our field since its inception, examples of which include the Atlanta and Harlem experiments (Guy, 1996) in adult learning and the black and blue books developed to highlight progress in the field that were criticized for being racist and sexist (Kasworm et al., 2010; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). I am a skeptic. I doubt that this historic moment will spark a movement that dismantles rather than affirms a white supremacist-fueled Ontology of Blackness. I doubt we will rise as a field to the challenge of making this moment more than just another first. I hope I am wrong.

References

- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York University Press.
- Doss, A. (2012/2013). Black bodies, white spaces: Understanding the construction of white identity through the objectification and lynching of Black bodies. *Black Diaspora Review*, 3(2), 14–17. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/bdr/article/view/3228>
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
- Gillborn, D. (2018). “Heads I win, tails you lose”: Anti-Black racism as fluid, relentless, individual and systemic. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(1), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1403178>
- Gordon, L. R. (1995). *Bad faith and antiblack racism*. Humanity Books.
- Guy, T. C. (1996). Alain Locke and the AAAE movement: Cultural pluralism and Negro adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46(4), 209–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369604600403>
- Ho, J. (2021, April 8). *White supremacy is the root of all race-related violence in the U.S.* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/white-supremacy-is-the-root-of-all-race-related-violence-in-the-us-157566>
- Ignatiev, N. (1995). *How the Irish became white*. Routledge.

-
- Kasworm, C. E., Rose, A. D., & Ross-Gordon, J. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sheared, V., & Sissel, P. A. (Eds.). (2001). *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Shiao, J. (2017). The meaning of honorary whiteness for Asian Americans: Boundary expansion or something else? *Comparative Sociology*, 16(6), 788–813. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341445>

Lisa R. Merriweather, Ph.D., is a professor of adult education at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte with a Ph.D. in adult education from the University of Georgia, co-founder and co-editor of *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal*, and aspiring writer of historical science fiction centering issues of race and racism. Employing the art of story and dialogic engagement, complete with creativity and innovativeness, emotionality and theorizing, and historical and contemporary cultural and political critique informed by Africana philosophy and critical race theory, Lisa invites readers and interlocutors to a space of reflection through (re)presenting and (re)languaging racialized experiences. Her research interests include culturally liberative mentoring, critical race pedagogy, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) doctoral mentoring, and race and racism in non/informal adult education.



In the Purple Details

Coming to See Systems of Advantage: A Surprising and Rewarding Journey

Peggy McIntosh

About the meaning of this journey: I will tell you how I came to see I have white skin privilege, and how that new knowledge transformed my life.

Three years in a row, men in a faculty development monthly seminar I was leading inadvertently made insulting comments about women, and none of us took the men up on their comments. Why not? Partly because they were very nice men; they were driving great distances to come to the seminar, whose subject was bringing materials on women into the liberal arts curriculum in all disciplines. The seminar was held at Wellesley College. We had two-and-a-half hours of discussion and a very good, big dinner, and then another two hours of discussion.

The men who joined were supportive, interested, and of course, since this was a seminar for faculty members, many of them were seeking tenure, and they knew that this interaction with others might help them to get tenure. It increased their supply of contacts, ideas, and references and, I hoped, would increase their competence as professors, in that they would stop leaving women out of the curriculum.

But three years in a row, the men and the women stopped wanting to sit together at our big dinners. To my surprise, there seemed to be a certain alienation of the women and the men in the group, as any academic year went on.

The seminar was very popular and was always oversubscribed and I wanted to continue it. I'd been doing it for four years at that point. And now I thought that if I found out what I was doing wrong as a facilitator, then I could persuade The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to fund the seminar again. So I went through my notes before writing the proposal,

asking myself, “What have I done to alienate the women from the men? What have I done wrong?”

As I combed through my notes from the first four years, I found that I hadn’t actually done anything wrong. At regular intervals, one of the women would ask why we couldn’t put scholarship on women into the students’ introductory courses. And the men — these very nice men who had communicated that they loved this seminar — would say, “Sorry we can’t do that. You can’t put materials on women into introductory courses.” And one man said (I wrote it down; I was an assiduous note taker): “In those first-year courses, you’re laying the foundation blocks for knowledge. And when you’re laying the foundation blocks for knowledge, you can’t put in soft stuff.” This revealed that he thought the many hardback books about women we had been reading, and all of the refereed journal articles, were soft. Among other things I thought to myself was that he didn’t understand labor pains. Women are not soft. But I said not a word. And no other woman said a word, and none of the men did either.

In my notes, I found that two years later a similar question had been raised by women in the seminar. It was a different group, for we had a different group of 22 faculty members each year. Some women asked, “Can’t we put these materials in at the beginning, in freshman year? Why wait for a senior seminar?” And once again, a very nice man explained why it was not possible. “In that first year, the students are choosing their major. Their major is their discipline, and if you want a student to think in a disciplined way, you can’t put in extras.”

Once again, none of us said anything. But a few days or maybe it was a few weeks later, I thought, “Well, come to think of it, the man who said that was born of a woman. And so, for that matter, was everybody in the seminar, and none of us countered the idea that women are ‘extra.’” And then I thought, “Come to think of it, everybody on the face of the earth is born of a woman.”

But this guy is such a nice man. And I went back and forth in my head. Is he nice or is he oppressive? And in those days, the early '80s, I thought I had to choose — either this is a nice man, or he is an oppressive man. Now I was confused. I knew he was nice but I felt him as oppressive.

I began to wonder what had been done to his mind to make him think that his mother is extra to his existence. *What had been done to his mind?* Then I visualized the steps of Widener Library at Harvard University leading up to a building that, with its associated libraries, has 17 million volumes, virtually all of them about men and by men.

And I thought, "What's been done to his mind is the same thing that's been done to my mind. He is just a very good student of what he has been taught and what I was taught: Men have knowledge, men make more knowledge, men publish and profess knowledge, as professors; men run the best-known research universities and the best-known university presses, and he has become convinced, as I nearly had been too, that men are knowers and knowledge is male."

That's why none of us spoke up. What had been done to his mind is that great chunks of it had been eradicated, including his knowledge of the roles of women in his life. And then I saw that this nice man had a huge lesion in his brain. But so did we all, in not speaking up when he called women "extra." He wasn't intending to insult us. He was saying what we had all been taught. Niceness had nothing to do with it. What had been revealed was a huge fissure between the way women were seen and men were seen, in the minds of all of us.

And then I remembered, to my distress, that Black women in the Boston area had been writing similarly about many kinds of ignorance in the minds of white women. In the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1977, Black women, writing a collective manifesto, had said, though not in exactly these words, that because of their ignorance, white women are oppressive for them to work with.

And I remembered having two responses to their testimony. The first was like a kind of whine: "I don't see how they can say that about us. I think we're nice!" (It's a ridiculous generalization, isn't it? But that's where I was in 1980.) My second response was thoroughly racist: "I especially think we're nice if we work with THEM." You can hear the outright racism in that. And as I looked back on it a few years later, I was ashamed and mortified by the memory, but also fearful for my reputation.

I said to myself, "Oh, I hope they didn't notice. I hope the Black women I worked with didn't notice my racist assumption that I should be thanked

for working with them. I hope they didn't see it." I was at the time teaching Black women's literature, but never with any mention of the white cultures that had produced the problems, experiences, and pain of women of color.

Well, the obvious guess is they did see my racist assumptions. I think they were willing to work with me because it looked as though I was *trying*. I was trying to learn about them but was basically clueless about my own racial experience. I was the scholar on the experiences of others, not on my own.

I began to see that not only was the whole knowledge system on my side but also the money system was on my side; all the financial agencies, all the foundations that gave me money were run by white people who looked like me, and they entrusted with money people who looked like me. And I had to face the fact that I was one of those women who was oppressive for people of color to be with, continually privileged by being given the benefit of the doubt by the financial system as well as the knowledge system.

Now I saw that the racial superiority I had absorbed from this treatment ran parallel to the litany of certainties I had learned about men as knowers. White people have knowledge; white people make more knowledge. Whites publish and profess knowledge as professors. And whites run the best-known research universities and the best-known university presses. And we have internalized the idea that whites are knowers, and that knowledge is itself white.

I was so upset by this recognition that my entire self-image altered. I had previously thought I'd earned everything I had in life. Now that I saw that I had the money system and the knowledge system on my side because I was white, I saw that the reason that Black women in my building couldn't get grants as easily as I did probably didn't have to do with what I previously thought, which is that they just didn't write very good grant proposals.

The whole of the knowledge system and the money system was favoring me, and this wasn't fair. I hated to think I was on the receiving end of such injustice. I thought there was more there that I should look at, and I really didn't want to look at it.

But I asked in that sort of haphazard way over the next two years, “What else do I have that I didn’t earn except the knowledge system and the money system working for me?” My conscious mind refused to discuss that question with me. I’m in the habit of talking to my mind and getting answers — but it refused.

And finally, one night in 1985, I went to sleep, shouting, more or less. My husband says I wasn’t actually shouting but it felt to me like a demand that I was making to my mind, that I would no longer agree to silence on. So I said again: “If I have anything that I didn’t earn by contrast with my African American colleagues at Wellesley, except the knowledge system and the money system working for me, SHOW ME!”

And in the middle of the night came up the first of 46 examples I put in my first paper on white privilege. This example seemed trivial to me. It swam up fully formed, and I have to laugh because I am an English teacher from way back, and all of my examples came up fully worded. I didn’t need to edit them, not even for punctuation. My subconscious mind knew how to phrase this suppressed knowledge. The first example was: I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. I wrote it down, and thought it was trivial, and went back to sleep. In the morning, I looked at it and still thought it was trivial. Now I think it’s a huge advantage that if I wish, I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. It keeps me from having to feel like the only or the lonely.

Night after night, my subconscious mind sent up such examples. I do recommend consulting your subconscious minds for the truths of your existence. My conscious mind refused to acknowledge these facts that didn’t fit into its frame, but my subconscious knew.

After three months, I had many examples, which can be found on The National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project website¹ with the six other papers I subsequently wrote on privilege.

I will read a few more examples from that first paper. One is about the privilege of being seen as an individual, not a carrier of group identity:

-
- I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer my letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of all white people.
 - I can be pretty sure if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.
 - I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
 - I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race won’t work against me.
 - If my day or week or year is going badly, I don’t need to ask whether the situation has racial overtones.
 - I can choose blemish cover or bandages in so-called flesh color and have them more or less match my skin.

And this next point about injustice has stark relevance today:

- If a traffic cop pulls me over, or the IRS audits my tax returns, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

After three months, there were 46 examples of white privilege on my list, and one night my subconscious said, “Peggy, you better publish this. It’s probably the most important thing you’ll do in your life.” And it has turned out to be. But when I took the paper to the working papers committee of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, they turned it down. They said, “We can’t publish this as a working paper. It has no footnotes.” Now, to everybody out there, I’d like to say, try to trust your own observations, even though your conscious mind may be telling you not to. Learning to trust your subconscious may be like learning from those you were taught to look down on. They may become your major teachers. The academic world with all its proffered degrees and honors taught me to look down on my own subconscious. But it knew all these uncomfortable truths that had no footnotes.

I produced the paper myself, and also began to sell copyright permission for college teachers in departments like psychology, sociology, African studies, American studies, English, education, women’s studies, and so on.

My charge, my copyright fee, was 50 cents per copy that they made for their department or used in courses.

I made \$20,000 the first year at 50 cents a pop for copying. So I went back to the committee and said, "I'm making a lot of money from this paper. If you will publish it as a working paper from the Center for Research on Women as a whole, you can charge \$6. And then we'll all benefit; everybody in the building will benefit from the fees."

The working papers committee said it would take a second look. And then they came back and said, "We're sorry, we're going to turn it down again because it's merely anecdotal."

To everyone out there, I'll urge again: Mistrust the education that discounts your anecdotes. They are one source for the psyche that is uniquely your own and, I believe, sacred. You're the only authority in the universe on your own thoughts and your own experiences. Respect them. Build some theories of your own from them.

So now the manuscript was rejected again. Then three months later, the same voice that woke me up to give me the 46 examples woke me up again and said in a very loud, authoritative way, "Freud didn't have footnotes." So I took that to the committee, and said, "I understand we are a Center for Research on Women, and we have to be careful about our reputation for scholarship. But I want to tell you just one thing: Freud didn't have footnotes. This is original work." They looked at each other, all these people with Ph.D.s in political science, psychology, sociology, education, and they paused. And the chair of the committee said, "OK," and they published my first white privilege paper, which quickly became one of our best sellers, besides Nan Stein's important work on gender violence in schools.²

Then the brilliant editor Roberta Spivek asked if she could edit this 19-page paper down into three pages for the magazine *Peace and Freedom*, published by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Philadelphia. I said "yes." Using only my words, she condensed the paper into the version titled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1989), which has made its way around the country and the world. Students who are assigned this reading for their courses

love it because it is so brief. International readers appreciate the light that it sheds on colonialism.

My life was transformed by receiving thanks from those who found my white privilege work useful. Being seen as a professionally innovative and friendly teacher had been rewarding, but being seen as useful to people trying to see what was happening around power in their lives was deeply moving. I think that power is a taboo subject in many American contexts. From countless white people, I heard, "Thank you. I never thought of any of this." From many people of color, I heard something significantly different. "Thank you for showing me I'm not crazy."

Staff members of the Saint Paul Foundation in Minnesota, which funded some of my work, however, wrote to me saying, "Your paper makes us feel very uncomfortable. Can't you write something more cheerful?" And I slept on that. And the same old subconscious said, "Well, white privilege is also like a bank account you were given that you can spend down to weaken the system that gave it to you."

And I wrote a paper using the bank account metaphor instead of the metaphor of the invisible knapsack. It is called "White Privilege: An Account to Spend" (McIntosh, 2009). I explain that because it's white privilege, when I spend it down to try to weaken the system that gave it to me, it keeps refilling because I continue to be given the benefit of the doubt in all our institutions and my daily white circumstances. My life has been much more satisfying and useful since I consciously started to spend down the bank account. And it is wonderful to be more trusted by people of color, though their mistrust is perfectly rational, based on past history and present experience.

After receiving that paper, staff members of the Saint Paul Foundation wrote again saying thank you. "We're spending down our bank accounts and we can see they haven't emptied. We have another question. We have only 4,000 people in our workshops on white privilege and racism. Why don't we have 40,000? What can you write for us now that would bring 40,000 into our workshops?"

I told them, "You're up against five major American myths that keep racism in place. These myths will keep you from ever attracting 40,000 people

into your workshops.” And they said, “Well, what are the myths? Write them down, anyway.”

I described five American myths in the paper “White People Facing Race: Uncovering the Myths that Keep Racism in Place” that I think were taught to us at the unconscious level (McIntosh, 2009). They infect our thinking, and they prevent our working for social justice.

The first is the myth of meritocracy, which is that the unit of society is the individual. And according to this myth, whatever you individually end up with when you die is what you must have individually wanted, worked for, earned, and deserved. It’s a lie, but it’s very deep in American culture. We never had a Marx, and perhaps we haven’t had any major popular thinker who insisted on seeing our society systemically as well as through the truths of our individual lives. So the myth of individual freedom of choice for everyone is still strong among many people who have had the most freedom of choice.

The second is the myth of Manifest Destiny. This myth is that God intended white people to take over all the lands that were inhabited by Native people when the first white colonizers arrived, or people of Spanish descent who were on the West Coast at the time. That’s the myth of Manifest Destiny: manifest meaning clear, and destiny meaning fate that is ordained. So it was seen as “in the cards” that white people should rule the land they found. The United States took over the Philippines because President William McKinley had a vision that he had no alternative but to annex what were thought to be 4,000 islands of the Philippines (now we know it’s more than 7,000 islands). That was a deep dream about Manifest Destiny, justifying whites’ colonial annexation.

The third big myth, white racelessness, is that only Other people have this thing that we whites identified as race. Many Anglo-Americans think they have no race: They are just normal and neutral. (And as Elizabeth Minnich has said, normal, neutral and ideal – imagining that other people who don’t look like us must want to be like us.) The fact is, however, that we are not unmarked racially; we are just as ethno-specific, ethno-particular, and ethno-peculiar as people of other ethnic groups.

The fourth big myth has to do with monoculture, subliminally taught to us. It is the illusion that culturally, the United States is one big, united place.

The prefix “mono” means single. And if you don’t fit into this single united nation, there’s something wrong with you. If you don’t feel accepted in the encompassing American culture, that’s a problem you have made for yourself. When I named this illusion in my 1989 paper, the idea of seeing our nation as plural and multicultural was not yet strongly promoted in the United States. The myth of monoculture ruled, and it justified disrespecting, shortchanging, and abusing those who didn’t “fit in.”

There is a final, a fifth, myth, about white moral and managerial superiority. That myth takes for granted that whites are so influential because they are leaders. We are good at it, right? Even though we have a war-torn world filled with horrors partly of our making. The white patriarchy taught us not only that men are well equipped to run things but that in the English-speaking world, white men are the best at running things, so that’s why they run things, that’s why they are in charge. Such a great breath of fresh air it is whenever we have people in control in this country who don’t assume that our country is morally and managerially superior to everyone else on earth, and who do not sustain the other four myths either.

Notes

- ¹ See Peggy McIntosh’s white privilege papers at <https://www.nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/peggy-mcintosh-s-white-privilege-papers>.
- ² Nan Stein’s work can be found at <https://www.wcwonline.org/Active-Researchers/nan-stein-edd>.

References

- Combahee River Collective. (1977, April). *Combahee River Collective statement*. <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>
- McIntosh, P. (1989, July/August). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom*. https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf

McIntosh, P. (2009). *White people facing race: Uncovering the myths that keep racism in place*. https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/peggy/Peggy_McIntosh_White_People_Facing_Race.pdf

McIntosh, P. (2009). *White privilege: An account to spend*. https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/peggy/Peggy_McIntosh_White_Privilege_an_Account_to_Spend.pdf

Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., is a senior research associate of the Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, Massachusetts. She is the founder of the National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity). Peggy McIntosh is the author of “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989) as well as a book of 16 essays titled *On Privilege, Fraudulence, and Teaching As Learning* (2020, Routledge).

The Reinforced Steel Ceiling: A View From Within

Sheila Marie Aird

"Mistrust the education that discounts your anecdotes. They are one source for the psyche that is uniquely your own and, I believe, sacred. You're the only authority in the universe on your own thoughts and your own experiences. Respect them. Build some theories of your own from them."

—Peggy McIntosh

When approached to write a reflective piece on Dr. Peggy McIntosh's essay titled, "Coming to See Systems of Advantage: A Surprising and Rewarding Journey," I immediately agreed. I was familiar with her work and knew I was situated by the very nature of my nonprivileged self to offer a response that included this idea of privilege from a historical and present-day lens.

Dr. MacIntosh has spoken writ large over the years on white privilege and how it forced her to take an introspective look at the benefits of privilege based on the color of her skin, and unpack her unearned benefits. Yet, how many of the privileged care to take that journey, face that truth, and then become the epicenter of change? Yet, considering that truth, what would make others in that accepted societal position even want to admit that indeed they benefit from their privileged space and that the scales of justice, for one and all, are not reflective of the reality faced by others? Won't that reality then change the scale of privilege?

"Ignorance is bliss," a saying coined in 1742 from Thomas Gray's poem *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (line 99), implies that if a person does not know something then one is oblivious. Dr. McIntosh neatly dissects how she came to the realization of what privilege meant as a white woman and how easily it is accepted as the norm. Initially looking at her space through the lens of a woman, a white woman, surrounded by white males, she had that aha moment that allowed her to see and open Pandora's box of privilege. The author finally realized how she has always

benefited from her whiteness in ways that Black people and specifically in this case Black women do not. It was at that moment in time that Dr. McIntosh began her journey of introspection, starting with self and unpacking the sometimes-covert perceived superiority of white women branded on other women, Black women.

Starting from that premise, and for the sake of this discussion, I ask, can privilege and racism be disconnected, and/or do they go hand in hand? I struggled with disengaging the two and found that to be impossible. Covertly and overtly, particular cultures and the systems in place historically have been and continue to be ruled by privilege based on factors that include social status, aka privilege, connected to the color of one's skin.

To honestly gain any understanding of the benefits that accrue from whiteness, one must actually want to educate themselves and face head-on exactly what that interrogation of self means, a daunting task at the very least. How does one actually disengage from their privilege and actively commit to changing their historically and culturally-rooted superiority over others?

Taking a panoramic view from a historical lens is important to understanding the deeply rooted systems of oppression frameworks of "otherness" and how the historical legacy is still prevalent today. As a cultural historian who focuses on colonial history, I know that the past informs the present and the present will inform the future. From the inception of enslavement, the rules were prescribed, and 400 years later, those same rules can be easily discerned. A recent article by *The New York Times*, as one example, places history, economics, and racism as key components that made and continue to make a nation pay for its freedom (Porter et al., 2022).

Enslaved Africans — whether purchased for trinkets, sold, and/or kidnapped — were always considered beneath their "masters." The treatment of men, women, and children was abominable. Those in charge created and maintained a system of separation and noninclusion that is still prevalent today. Enslaved women had no rights and still are burdened with the layover adverbs "angry," "unattractive," "sexual objects," "mammies," etc.

Once the abolition of enslavement took hold, the “owners” were compensated after arguing for what we can refer to today as a “bailout” due to their loss of labor. The former enslaved were legally freed without compensation, education, and in some cases, without a place to live. Some were allowed to remain on the plantation and work for the former “owner” and pay rent. As time progressed, African Americans purported to be free became the victims of the fears and vile beliefs of the dominant class, as egregious acts took hold including but not limited to lynching, Jim Crow segregation laws, rape, and the use of African Americans for scientific experiments.

Consider how the fear of losing a privileged position controls and fuels the power of the status quo and remains entrenched in our society for the benefit of the privileged and not for “others.” Dr. McIntosh took time to do the work, evaluate her privilege, and offered many examples which can also be viewed on The National SEED Project website (n.d.).

Additionally, Dr. McIntosh’s essay also references the five American myths that help solidify racism in her paper titled, “White People Facing Race: Uncovering the Myths That Keep Racism in Place” (McIntosh, 2009). The five myths are meritocracy, Manifest Destiny, white racelessness, monoculture, and white moral and managerial superiority. McIntosh also points out how “they infect our thinking, and they prevent our working for social justice.” This last line is an extremely important point that highlights how these five myths are connected to the overarching conversation on privilege and I would also include racism.

In relation to upper management leadership roles at universities and other organizations, Black women are oftentimes relegated to the periphery. This sleight of hand is easily recognized and impacts one’s upward mobility, which in turn impacts compensation, the inability to demonstrate leadership capabilities, and diminishes Black women’s valuable input. It also does not allow for a seat at the proverbial table. The few that surmount the odds are considered the face of all Black women and used as examples for the entire race or to offer the impression of inclusivity.

Speaking from a collective experience in a safe space, Black women I am familiar with (as I am not the voice of the entire Black woman experience) continue to share their real-time sense of a lack of recognition and point

out how they must work twice as hard as well as not display an attitude that could be perceived as threatening, angry, or overly confident. And maybe most importantly, these women are expected to not make their white counterparts feel uncomfortable. Black women know they can work as hard or harder than their colleagues, be as intelligent and capable, and yet continue to be overlooked for positions that would allow them to demonstrate leadership skills. Contrary to some beliefs, inclusion does not mean a free ride. Inclusion and respect are basic human rights.

Additionally, if we include the realities of compensation, Black women are rarely on the same pay level as their white female colleagues doing the same job, which is dehumanizing. For many, it's perceived as the "pie in the sky" analogy, as Black women patiently and invisibly wait to be seen and rewarded fairly for the benefit they bring to an organization. The choice for those in this loop is simple: stand tall, stay quiet, stay present or leave with the dual identity of being a woman and a Black woman. These anecdotes only lightly highlight the continuous struggle Black women face. The dance becomes one that is silently played out in a loop in the hope that a leader in the environment can see you and recognize the value you bring.

However, I don't speak for all Black women.

The Present

I have been contemplating the state of women for a long time, particularly, marginalized women of color. I prefer to not use the term "minority" because it denotes a less-than status. In conversations with Black women regarding their status in organizations including universities, what seems to be a recurring thread is some of the points I raised previously. Yet, there are more: The anguish, the pain, and the constant showing up with a veil to protect oneself —are debilitating. For one to be visibly invisible is a sobering condemnation of the structures in place that clearly demonstrate where women of color are allowed entrance and where and how that entrance is denied.

Questions remain as to how, where, and what will affect change in a measurable manner. There are think tanks, quick fixes, and promises of change. However, the numbers are clear, and the lack of systemic change

is obvious. At present, only 1.6% of vice-presidential roles and 1.4% of C-suite positions in the workplace are held by Black women (Lean In, 2020, p. 6). Only 5% of leadership positions at America's top research universities are held by women of color (Fleck, 2022, para. 1).

It is not my job or the job of any Black woman to explain inherent privilege based on race/color. As Dr. McIntosh took the time to explore and face her white privilege, so must others. The truth is that those of us on the non-receiving end of privilege know what the problem is. The question is, when are those in leadership positions willing to make right the imbalance and correct the deliberate, unvarnished, covert, and overt marginalization of others? It is not a gift; it is the right thing to do.

Quite possibly, anyone truly interested in effecting change within the isle of privilege might start as Dr. MacIntosh did by facing the truth. Next comes the hard part: how to use that privilege to actually make a difference and be part of the change. I suggest starting with Dr. McIntosh's occasional paper essay, and then taking an honest appraisal of your contribution to or lack of understanding of the devaluing of Black women in everyday life, including the work environment. The fact is that the ceiling for Black women is not made of glass but of reinforced steel, and so is the struggle to be seen, heard, and valued as a Black woman.

For further reading, please note the list below because, again, I don't speak for all Black women.

Lean In. (n.d.). *The system is failing Latinas and Black women*. <https://leanin.org/research/equal-pay-day-2021#>

McGrew, W. (2018, August 28). *How workplace segregation fosters wage discrimination for African American women*. Washington Center for Equitable Growth. <https://equitablegrowth.org/how-workplace-segregation-fosters-wage-discrimination-for-african-american-women/>

McKinsey & Company. (2021, September 27). *Women in the workplace 2021*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

Nichols College Institute for Women's Leadership. (n.d.). *Facts & stats: Tracking issues in women's leadership*. <https://iwl.nichols.edu/facts-stats/>

Winters, M.-F. (2020). *Black fatigue: How racism erodes the mind, body, and spirit*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

References

- Fleck, A. (2022, May 3). *Gender gap persists at all levels of leadership in U.S. universities, report finds*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/05/gender-gap-us-universities-leadership/>
- Gray, T. (1742). *Ode on a distant prospect of Eton College*. <https://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=odec>
- Lean In. (2020). *The state of Black women in corporate America*. <https://leanin.org/state-of-black-women-in-corporate-america-report>
- McIntosh, P. (2009). *White people facing race: Uncovering the myths that keep racism in place*. The National SEED Project. https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/peggy/Peggy_McIntosh_White_People_Facing_Race.pdf
- National SEED Project, The. (n.d.). *Peggy McIntosh's white privilege papers*. <https://www.nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/peggy-mcintosh-s-white-privilege-papers>
- Porter, C., Méheut, C., Apuzzo, M., & Gebrekidan, S. (2022, May 26). *The ransom: The root of Haiti's misery: Reparations to enslavers*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>

Sheila Marie Aird, Ph.D., is the SUNY Empire State College European director of international programs. She is responsible for four European locations, including Athens, Prague, Thessaloniki, and Tirana. Aird is also an associate professor at the college. Aird received her Ph.D. in Latin and Caribbean history and M.A. in history from Howard University. During her final year of research at Howard University, she was awarded the prestigious Sasakawa Fellowship from the Nippon Foundation in Japan. Aird also holds a B.A. in anthropology and an M.A. in anthropology with a focus on historical archeology from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.



Lavender Lounging



SUNY EMPIRE
STATE COLLEGE

1 Union Avenue
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

www.esc.edu