

## ON WHITE ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A BLACK PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TOWARD EPISTEMOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Ashton R. Cooper 

School of Education  
University of Cincinnati

**ABSTRACT.** Recent challenges to academic freedom in the U.S. have centered on conservative policymakers' attempts to limit academic concepts that they deem as divisive and un-American. These challenges underscore the acknowledged yet unnamed racialized aspect of academic freedom in U.S. higher education, which privileges Euro-western academic thought. In this article, I recognize academic freedom not as a color-evasive and politically neutral professional agreement, but as a race-conscious and ideologically driven tool used to perpetuate intellectual white supremacy. Naming this concept *white academic freedom*, I explain how academic freedom privileges knowledge and knowledge dissemination that (re)creates and protects white supremacy, while stifling knowledge and knowledge dissemination that challenges it. Using insights derived from a Black philosophical approach, I then describe the characteristics of white academic freedom and how they advance epistemic injustice and white supremacy. In naming white academic freedom, I do not advocate for the abolishment of academic freedom for the sake of epistemic equity—rather, I call for the reframing of academic freedom under a Black philosophical lens to embrace collaborative knowledge generation and dissemination, which can disrupt white supremacy in the academy. I name this reframing *Black academic freedom*, as an expansive approach to embracing knowing and knowledge generation outside of white normativity and supremacy.

**KEY WORDS.** academic freedom; epistemological justice; whiteness studies

Despite recent shibboleths about 'academic freedom,' state legislators and boards of trustees have the right—the duty—to redirect, curtail, or close down academic programs in public universities that do not align with the mandate of the taxpayers who generously support them. When public universities violate their part of this social contract, the people ... have every right to insist on reforms.

—Christopher Rufo (AAUP 2023, 9)<sup>1</sup>

White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today ... it covers more than two thousand years of western political thought. Western political theory is not a contract between everybody ("we the people"), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ("we the white people").

—Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997)<sup>2</sup>

Challenges to academic freedom are not new. However, recent challenges to academic freedom in the context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Critical

1. Christopher Rufo—architect of the Critical Race Theory scare in U.S. education and current trustee of New College in Florida—gave these remarks after the conservative takeover of New College, which was led by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and like-minded political appointees. Rufo also stated, "New College will no longer be a jobs program for middling, left-wing intellectuals" (AAUP 2023, 7).

2. Twenty-six years prior to Rufo's statement, Mills (1997) provides guidance to interpret what is left unsaid in the statement. The taxpayers and the people that Rufo makes claims to defend are not all people, but rather those who are considered people in Mills' racial contract—white people and, by extension, the ideology of whiteness.

Race Theory (CRT), gender and queer theory, as well as other scholarly areas that challenge white supremacy (Hutchens and Miller 2023; Vargas et al. 2024)—bring into focus a previously explored but unnamed racialized aspect of academic freedom (Bell 1993; Giroux 2006). Academic freedom is a generally recognized norm in U.S. higher education, influenced by though not inscribed in the U.S. Constitution (Fuchs 1963; Miller et al. 2023). From a western context, “intellectual freedom” granted individuals the right to ponder, research, and teach in a “quest for truth,” so long as it did not disrupt the status quo (Poch 1993, 20).<sup>3</sup> Given the exclusionary, racist (e.g., white supremacist) history of higher education, academic freedom critically unexamined protects whiteness as the ideological status quo. Due to the doxic nature of white supremacy (Bourdieu 2005; Engles 1997)<sup>4</sup> in higher education, I posit that academic freedom exists as *white academic freedom*. In this article, I define and conceptualize white academic freedom—naming its primary characteristics of being brutal and focused on assimilation, neo-liberal, and concerned with maintaining the status quo. I then propose a different approach to academic freedom through a Black philosophical/Black consciousness lens, *Black academic freedom*. Black philosophy and Black philosophical approaches are best suited to illuminate white supremacist practices as they emerge from the experiences of those who experience anti-Black racism (Mills 2021). What emerges from Black philosophy, then, is an awareness of how to address inequality and achieve socially just outcomes in anti-Black spaces—Black consciousness (Gordon 2022). Counter to white academic freedom, Black academic freedom acknowledges the liberatory role of knowledges not grounded in or in support of white supremacy and is grounded in communal care, pluralism, and intellectual expansiveness.

White academic freedom privileges scholars, regardless of racial phenotype, who advance scholarship that does not challenge whiteness and punishes those who pursue meaning-making that elevates, explores, and expands knowledge challenging white normative ways of knowing (Jennings 2020; Liu 2020; Miller et al. 2023). To frame my argument, I use Stovall’s (2021) notion of *white freedom* and a Black philosophical approach (Gordon 2022; Mills 2021) as the challenge to white normative knowing to define white academic freedom. If scholars are to pursue authenticity in higher education, scholars must determine who the current conditions afford the opportunity for authenticity; to wit, knowledge and scholars that challenge white supremacy have been marked as propaganda and divisive (The Florida Senate 2022, 2023; Diep 2023; Roberts-Grmela 2023). Therefore, in using

3. The educational status quo in medieval times would be determined by the doctrinal authority of the church. In colonial times, while there would be no head of church (e.g., religious freedom and plurality), moral norms were shaped around religious themes.

4. Doxa is that which goes without saying or is unquestioned.

ASHTON R. COOPER is Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Cincinnati, e-mail ashton.cooper@uc.edu. His research interests include the history and philosophy of higher education, critical whiteness studies, and leadership.

a Black philosophical approach, I name white academic freedom as a means to validate and extend the work of other critical scholars in critiquing the harmful structures of academia (hooks 1992).<sup>5</sup>

To be free, arguably, is the zenith in U.S. society. Written into the Declaration of Independence from the British monarchy is the idea that all *men*<sup>6</sup> have certain inalienable rights, which include life, liberty (freedom), and the pursuit of happiness. However, due to the U.S. history of chattel enslavement, and the denial and policing of individual rights, the idea of liberty or freedom as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution remains at odds with being non-white (Stovall 2021). Frederick Douglass (1852) highlights the hypocrisy of celebrating freedom in a country that views other humans as animals suitable only for ownership, unable to think and govern themselves, when he posed the question, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

U.S. universities are sites that (re)create and preserve whiteness ideology and white supremacy (Gusa 2010; Cabrera et al. 2016). Though higher education in the U.S. is at times celebrated as a tool for creating an equitable and inclusive society, it exists generally as a place that exercises white dominion over what knowledge is viable, valid, and acceptable within its ivory walls. Therefore, scholars should call into question the supposed race-neutral stance of academic freedom that aims to protect the production and dissemination of knowledge. What, then, to the marginalized scholar, is academic freedom?

#### ACADEMIC FREEDOM: FOR THE COMMON, PUBLIC GOOD

The notion of academic freedom in the U.S. has existed since the inception of the colonial colleges (Poch 1993). Its philosophical foundations were birthed in Greece, adopted by Europe, and tailored to U.S. higher education (Fuchs 1963). Unique to academic freedom in the U.S. is its relationship with the U.S. Bill of Rights and the protections provided to U.S. citizens because of it. The 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2015a) defined the foundational principles of what would come to be academic freedom in U.S. higher education. The document outlined three core purposes of the university: to promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge; to provide general instruction to the students; and to develop experts for various branches of the public service (Wilson 2016). By extension, the AAUP identified three types of academic freedom that coincide with the three core purposes of higher education: freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and the freedom of extramural utterance and action. Vital

5. The act of naming whiteness and white supremacy identifies the harm it causes. It is a way to confront the histories “that attempt to erase, deny, and reinvent the past” (hooks 1992, 172).

6. To be clear, in this context, men is taken to mean exclusively wealthy White men.

for legitimacy, the 1915 *Declaration* served to elevate the profession and to attract the best talent into the profession—extending professional deference to faculty equivalent to physicians and lawyers. Doing so granted legitimacy to the profession not previously given to the tutors of the colonial era of U.S. colleges and positioned academicians as servants of knowledge and truth within liberal education and exemplars of the “ideal Christian gentleman” (Rudolph 1962, 158; Jennings 2020).<sup>7</sup>

The 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* released by the AAUP (2015b) formalized the relationship and role of faculty within the academy. Building on the 1915 *Declaration*, the 1940 *Statement* identified four academic freedoms entitled to higher education faculty: the freedom to research, to publish the results of such research, to teach, and to communicate extramurally. Further clarification deemed faculty’s ability to freely research dependent upon their performance in other responsibility areas, and the freedom to teach reliant upon subjects exclusive to the faculty members’ expertise. Protected extramural speech under academic freedom recognizes a faculty member’s right to free speech as a private U.S. citizen and not as an agent of the institution. However, given the special status of academic faculty, extra care and caution should be taken when speaking extramurally so as not to implicate or speak on behalf of their institution (Poch 1993).

Academic freedom is not a right enumerated in the U.S. Constitution, but rather a professional courtesy that emanates from the First Amendment. Within a professional context, just as lawyers and physicians are granted the right to practice law and medicine, so too are academic faculty given the right to produce and disseminate knowledge as it relates to their academic expertise. Furthermore, academic freedom grants academics the security to pursue knowledge for the sake of answers without regard to political or personal gain, and ideally without fear of professional retribution. Institutions, under this professional courtesy, may choose who benefits from academic freedom by determining faculty appointments, curriculum, and areas of research featured institutionally (Boden and Epstein 2011). Additionally, private institutions are given greater exclusionary preference to shape academic freedom according to the preferences and values of their institution.

#### WHAT IS WHITE ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

Freedom is a dominant theme in the modern western world. In contemporary contexts, western democracies such as the U.S. juxtapose the relative health of their citizenry with the freedom they possess (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2025). While there are scholars (Kendi 2016; Painter 2010) who point to the existence of racism as an immediate contradiction to, and blight upon, the notion of freedom—particularly in the U.S.—Stovall (2021) argues that racism, and the

7. Jennings (2020, 8) states, “Western theological education ... is the father of Western education ... and the foundation of most of the intellectual frames forms which forms of critique have grown up.”

oppression associated with it, are features not defects, associated with freedom in the U.S. As such, freedom and racism are not opposites but rather collaborate to construct a racial hierarchy in the U.S. premised on whiteness. The extent to which one could embody, or approximate, White<sup>8</sup> masculine self-sufficiency (Jennings 2020, 8–9)<sup>9</sup> is the extent to which they could possess freedom. In the colonial U.S., from the elite and erudite to the common and uneducated, freedom meant “having control of one’s own destiny, of being free from domination by others” (Stovall 2021, 13). Even though a wide chasm of experience and opportunity separated White elite and White working-class individuals, people racialized as White coalesced and shaped identity and notions of freedom around not being enslaved—not being Black. Stovall (2021, 11) comes to define *white freedom* as “the belief and practice that freedom is central to white racial identity and that only white people can and should be free.” I define *white academic freedom* as the belief and practice that academic freedom is exclusive to white normative knowing, and only that which promotes and privileges whiteness can and shall benefit from academic freedom.

#### WHITE NORMATIVE KNOWING: EPISTEMOLOGICAL INJUSTICE

Before discussing the properties of white academic freedom, aspects of white normative knowing must be addressed. Du Bois (1999, 18) exclaims, “Whiteness is ownership of the earth forever and ever, amen!” His assertion uncovers whiteness, its relationship to the created category of Blackness, and the dominion over the latter by the former (Du Bois 1999). Whiteness as an identity-shaping ideology depends on the subjugation of the other to justify its existence and the propagation of its ideals—the foundation of white knowing. White norming is the process by which white knowing proliferates through social institutions and manifests preferences that enforce ideals (Morris 2016; Allen 2012)<sup>10</sup> and values that favor those proximal to the White masculine self-sufficient archetype (Jennings 2020; Goldberg 1993).<sup>11</sup> White normative knowing makes a claim to all knowledge acceptable by people proximal to whiteness ideology within the academy, and

8. I choose to capitalize White in this article to identify it as a racial marker, like “Black.” Where white is lowercase, it is meant to signify the larger system and ideology of whiteness and is not exclusive to a singular phenotype. For more guidance, see Nguyen and Pendleton (2020); Matias and Mackey (2016); and Okello (2022).

9. White male self-sufficient masculinity is a way of organizing the world not by a person or a people group, but rather a way of being that informs how people interact with the world.

10. Morris (2016) examines white normativity by declaring that white norms are synonymous with the *ideal* or that which is preferred. He explains that white normativity not only applies to a racial (racist) norm, but also to cultural, political, economic, physical, and scientific norms.

11. Goldberg (1993, 7) gives further meaning of race as an organizing structure: “Nevertheless, race undertakes at once to furnish identity to otherwise abstract and alienated subjectivities... race offer itself as a category capable of providing a semblance of social cohesion, of historical particularity, or given meanings and motivations to agents otherwise mechanically conceived as conduits for market forces and moral laws.”

shapes permissible knowledge to be reviewed for acceptance (Corces-Zimmerman et al. 2021).<sup>12</sup> Jennings (2020, 61) elaborates:

We live in the wake of a decision to limit [knowledges], directing their flow in only one direction—away from non-White [sic] flesh and toward the European.

... That forced affection grew out of a white aesthetic regime that circulated and still circulates ideas of the true, the good, the beautiful, the noble, the insightful, the penetrating, the transcendent... proper speech, correct writing... and all of this woven into a vision of intellectual formation and moral development that found this white aesthetic essential for that pedagogical work.

Overtly, white normative knowing has shaped the racial project in western culture (Goldberg 1993). Scientific knowledge was used to confirm the inhumanity of non-White racialized subjects and to build social structures that adhered to those pseudo-scientific conclusions. Philosophical and theological knowledge was used to affirm the usage of dehumanizing scientific practices toward those deemed nonhuman by science (Wynter 1994; Yacovone 2022). As such, higher education in the U.S. perpetuated these exclusionary practices through facilitating the development and dissemination of knowledge affirming white superiority (Dancy et al. 2018).

Despite the diversification of U.S. higher education, institutions are still responsible for perpetuating white normative knowing. Curricular and pedagogical strategies overwhelmingly favor Eurocentric practices and typically feature discipline-specific “canon” authors—scholars and researchers who are predominantly White and male (Peters 2015; Prescod-Weinstein 2020; Mills 1998).<sup>13</sup> Overrepresentation of a singular ontological perspective renders those non-White and non-male invisible and encourages the continuation of or assimilation into such practices (Rizvi 2022). In some instances, white normative knowing appears to be disrupted by critical praxis (Freire 1970);<sup>14</sup> however, individuals in these examples are either punished for disrupting the status quo or the practices are subsumed into the status quo. When employing critical praxis to disrupt white normative knowing, educators either experience silent and uncooperative classroom environments (Ladson-Billings 1996) or receive lower-than-average evaluation scores, which negatively affect retention and advancement of faculty (Evans-Winters and

12. Ontological expansiveness explains the desire of people who are racialized and who are White to exert control of the spaces, around them. It is the actualizing principle of white supremacy and privilege.

13. Prescod-Weinstein (2020) explores *white empiricism*, which makes an argument about who is a valid observer of physical and social phenomena (White men) and whose experiences are invalidated due to not sharing the dominant identity of physics researchers (Black women). This phenomenon is a part of white normative knowing and explains why whiteness ideology is perpetuated, even if it is known to be harmful. Mills (1998, 4) summarizes this perspective in stating, “[T]here is a feeling, not to put too fine a point on it, that when you get right down to it, a lot of philosophy is just white guys jerking off.” Suggesting that mainstream philosophy may only address “pseudo-problems” or issues that only affect White people, and that moral philosophies are used to justify white domination and satisfy white pleasures.

14. *Critical praxis* is the application of theory to practice that is inclusive of and informed by difference and diverse perspectives.

Hoff 2011). White normative knowing absorbs certain practices and knowledge to provide benefit to whiteness and its perpetuation thereof. Bell (2003, 1622) highlights this notion when he calls diversity a “distraction” with regard to creating sustainable racial equity in higher education, as diversity is only seen as a means to “promote learning outcomes ... better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals” (Bell 2003, 1623). Indeed, the expansion of the curriculum, pedagogy, and research practices may be viewed as tactics to enhance the profile of the university while also benefiting the majority of students in learning how to navigate a multicultural society—while also maintaining systemic barriers that create epistemological injustice (Scheurich and Young 1997; Applebaum 2020; Almeida 2015; Liu 2020).<sup>15</sup>

This mechanism of white normative knowing crafts knowledge that is pleasurable and palatable to the White knower, rather than that which is disagreeable to white ideological norms (hooks 1992, 30).<sup>16</sup> White normative knowing privileges knowledge that affirms white supremacy or does not challenge ideological whiteness and is propagated through the concept of white academic freedom. White academic freedom facilitates the spread of white normative knowing within higher education through its three distinct characteristics: brutality and forced assimilation; neo-liberal logics; and maintaining the institutional status quo.

#### BRUTAL AND FOCUSED ON ASSIMILATION

Historically, western-aligned higher education institutions and agents connect academic freedom to granting time, space, and resource privileges to certain people to develop knowledge (Boden and Epstein 2011). This privilege, however, has traditionally been granted to a distinct group of individuals, primarily White middle-to-upper-class men. To be clear, the inception of the U.S. model of higher education, in the form of colonial colleges, privileged affluent members of society to perpetuate values and practices that would be seen as beneficial to the social, economic, and spiritual health of society (Thelin 2011). The educated sons of colonial aristocracy would not only go on to create and enact laws, practices, and belief systems that influenced the colonies and later the U.S., but also, they would go on to spread their ideology educationally by founding, teaching at, and presiding over other higher educational institutions as they became more ubiquitous in the U.S. (Dancy et al. 2018). As a result, the academic formation

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15. Epistemological injustice is an extension of Scheurich and Young’s (1997, 8) *epistemological racism* or “research epistemologies [that] arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race ... [and] reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures.”

16. hooks (1992) determines that ethnicity becomes the spice that makes white culture exciting, so too can diverse epistemological approaches be used to enliven white normative knowing. Moreover, hooks critiques how white normative knowing is critical of “essentialist” notions of identity when it pertains to culture, race, and gender but has seldom turned its critique to white identity and representations of whiteness.

and intellectual curiosity that academic freedom claims to promote instead bore likeness to colonial brutality and assimilation toward Eurocentric ideals, values, aesthetics, and designs for education and knowledge generation (Spring 2007; Aronowitz 2000).<sup>17</sup> The case of prominent journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones offers insight into this aspect of white academic freedom.

An investigative journalist, Nikole Hannah-Jones reported on issues related to civil rights. Professionally, she is best known for “The 1619 Project,” a long-form journalism project that critically interrogates the history of the U.S, focusing on enslavement as a foundational aspect of the U.S. rather than the political theatre of the American Revolution (Hannah-Jones 2019).<sup>18</sup> Her professional accomplishments earned her the designation as a MacArthur Genius in 2017; in 2020 she won a Pulitzer Prize for “The 1619 Project.” Hannah-Jones’s work was not without critique (Harris 2020),<sup>19</sup> as some scholars offered feedback to suggest an overly critical interpretation of her assumptions. However, beyond the academy, the project became a political lightning rod. In 2021, Hannah-Jones was announced as a Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC). The Knight Chair is a recognition of “top professionals who bridge the newsroom-classroom divide with innovative teaching, major outreach projects and their own journalism” (Knight Foundation n.d.). Her appointment was to come with “the security and academic freedom of tenure” (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2021). However, despite her numerous accomplishments, awards, and support from the students and faculty at the university, the UNC Board of Trustees refused to vote on her tenure package. She was instead offered a faculty position without the protections of tenure that traditionally accompanied the prestige of being named a Knight Chair. Disappointed in the outcome but welcoming the opportunity to teach at her alma mater, Hannah-Jones accepted an offer of a five-year contract with the option to be considered for tenure at a later unspecified date (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2021).<sup>20</sup>

17. Spring (2007) makes the connection of being civilized to being educated in the Eurocentric perspective. Cultural differences (e.g., Native American/Indigenous and Irish) were seen as threatening to western culture in the U.S.; therefore, refusal to assimilate by way of adopting western values (e.g., Christianity and abandoning cultural practices) could result in brutalization by way of enslavement, incarceration, or even death. Furthermore, enslaved Africans were not afforded the option of assimilation and thus brutality was used to prevent their access to education.

18. I use the phrase “political theatre” to emphasize the ideal of ‘all men are created equal,’ expressed in the declaration of independence, yet the intentional and denial of humanity of enslaved Africans at the time of its writing, and participation of the writer, Thomas Jefferson, in chattel slavery.

19. Harris (2020 para. 6) states, “the paper’s characterizations of slavery in early America reflected laws and practices more common in the antebellum era than in Colonial times and did not accurately illustrate the varied experiences of the first generation of enslaved people that arrived in Virginia in 1619.”

20. Hannah-Jones stated, “I did not want to face the humiliation of letting everyone know that I would be the first Knight Chair at the university to be denied tenure. I did not want to wage a fight with my alma mater or bring to the school and to my future colleagues the political firestorm that has dogged me

The decision to deny Hannah-Jones tenure at UNC was not due to her lack of credentials or body of work, but rather the lobbying efforts of conservative political donors and think tanks (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2021). Upset at her framing of the founding of the U.S. “fundamentally racist” (Watkins 2021, para. 2), Hannah-Jones believed her tenure denial to be a refutation of her “viewpoint” and because of her “race and gender” (Asmelash 2021, para. 6). The publication of “The 1619 Project” confronted readers with the practices of enslavement in the American colonies and posited that the nature of freedom in this country must be reconciled with the ongoing disenfranchisement of marginalized people. Her conceptualization of the true nature of the U.S. placed Black humanity at the center of what it means to be American and undermined the White male-centric self-sufficiency narrative that drives the American mythos. Her reframing of U.S. history earned her the right to be named a Knight Chair; however, due to the politicized nature of her work and gender identity, she felt she was not entitled to the benefits of the honor bestowed upon her (e.g., tenure) and was willing to accept a five-year teaching contract without the actual promise and protection of tenure. Though she would eventually decline employment at UNC, win a settlement against the institution, and accept a tenured role at Howard University, Hannah-Jones’s case demonstrates the brutality with which white academic freedom inflicts to maintain white normative knowing and the forced assimilation that ensues to maintain professional legitimacy.

White academic freedom places White male Eurocentricity at its core and develops desirable knowledge outcomes in service to those ideals (Jennings 2020). That which opposes those ideals must either conform to support those principles or be forced to intellectually wither and die without acceptance from the academy. I, therefore, name brutality and assimilation as foundational aspects of white academic freedom. In making this declaration, I recognize the 1957 position of the AAUP declaring exclusion from the academic community because of race as a violation of academic freedom. This assertion by the AAUP came after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and focuses on the phenotypic expression of race, which was the grounds for segregation in the U.S. (Bell 1993). Even from this perspective, legal scholar Derrick Bell (1980) correctly identifies the tenuous nature of forced diversity, noting that such policy breakthroughs only occur at the behest and advancement of white interests.<sup>21</sup> The nature of white academic freedom is not to discriminate based on phenotypic expression but rather based on ideological alignment and malleability towards Eurocentric norms in service to white supremacy (Bell 1993).<sup>22</sup>

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since The 1619 Project published. So ... I signed the five-year contract ... and I did not say a word about it publicly” (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2021, para. 9).

21. Also known as “Interest Convergence.”

22. Bell (1993, 52) states, “But this tragedy meets us in the now, precisely in an assimilation that defines serious, rigorous, scholarly—not with a broad beautiful vision of paying attention, but through a strangled, suffocating vision that defines these ideas by a relentless Eurocentrism.”

## ADVANCING NEO-LIBERALISM

Academic freedom depends upon institutional environments conducive to producing knowledge based on free inquiry, while maintaining the support of other faculty and institutional officials. Boden and Epstein (2011, 481) explain:

The infrastructure of the academy itself is significant to academics' freedom, providing an actual and metaphorical room of one's own. We need tools of our cognitive trade to do our jobs: a literal room over which we exercise control, libraries, laboratories, equipment, travel funds and computers. Academics need non-material resources too, such as time and its appropriate organization: time free from other obligations; time to think.

Within this notion of academic freedom, Boden and Epstein (2011) further point out that as faculty, the university acts as both employer and facilitator of one's research.<sup>23</sup> As an employer, it manages resources (e.g., human, capital, etc.) to achieve certain organizational outcomes, and as a facilitator, it provides resources (e.g., time, funding, equipment, etc.) to foster success towards one's personal research goals. These roles are not mutually exclusive, as an institution may lend more support towards faculty and research that are deemed more grant-worthy or financially viable for the institution (Schleck 2022; Schrecker 2010). This type of exchange economy within academia promotes less freedom and ensures faculty are instead fulfilling obligations to the university, aligning research goals in a manner consistent with what will be supported by the institution both financially and administratively (Boden and Epstein 2011). White academic freedom is therefore neo-liberal in its nature, demanding accountability for the knowledge, teaching, and extramural speech that occurs in service to it. Accountability, in this sense, is not synonymous with responsibility but rather implies that under white academic freedom, there is a quantifiable return on investment, monetary or otherwise, for the resources consumed in producing the knowledge or being subject to retribution (Schleck 2022).

Paul Harris was an assistant professor of education at the University of Virginia (UVA). His research focused on Black student-athletes' college readiness. In 2020, he was evaluated for tenure and promotion, and despite having received positive annual evaluations in research and teaching since 2014, he was denied tenure (Zahneis 2020). According to the dean responsible for his case, Harris had not published nor was he cited enough to satisfy the requirements for tenure within the college, yet the statistical measures of Harris's productivity were above the threshold, and the rationale provided by the dean, as evidenced by his Google Scholar profile. Moreover, the committee singled out a publication in the *Journal of African American Males in Education* as self-published, when it is a peer-reviewed publication with a twenty-three percent acceptance rate (Zahneis 2020). Other factors that appeared to motivate the decision to deny Harris's tenure were that he was advised to ignore official policy for tenure dossiers and instead follow the historical traditions regarding how tenure practices worked at UVA. Following a

23. This is explicitly research for the sake of material production, not the pursuit of knowledge. See also Harney and Moten (2013).

nebulous and unwritten process hurt Harris's case, which the dean of the college later recognized. Harris was also not afforded the presence of content experts familiar with his scholarship on the tenure committee. Doing so would have given him advocates to contextualize his research and publication decisions as unique to his discipline and research agenda. As a scholar who researched race, and Black men and boys specifically, it was beneficial for Harris to publish his work in academic journals that specialized in the topic and where it would be read and considered, rather than in higher impact journals that are not the best fit for the research. After multiple appeals, Harris, eventually granted tenure by UVA, decided to leave the institution for another appointment.

As of 2020 the UVA Curry School had never tenured a Black man, despite having the highest representation of Black faculty on campus (Zahneis 2020). This fact alone speaks to the structural inequality and institutional inertia a Black faculty member would face when going up for tenure and promotion. Given the moving goalposts of productivity and the devaluing of research that does not meet arbitrary statistical standards (e.g., impact factor and citation metrics), faculty who produce scholarship that does not fit in neat or palatable boxes face institutional headwinds without the support of others who understand their work and positionality. White normative knowing is effective not only at deciding what *can* be known but also at determining what *should* be known through its crafting of borders of neo-liberal professionalism within the academy.

Though academic freedom is ascribed the power to protect faculty and students from retribution, historically this has not been the case. During WWI, anti-war professors had their academic freedom curtailed for fear that it might hinder the war effort, and the Red Scare of the 1950s and 1960s saw faculty placed on watchlists for classroom content and alleged ties to communism (Schrecker 2010).<sup>24</sup> Currently, in states such as Florida, Texas, Georgia, and Ohio, legislatures are working to restrict or have restricted what can be taught in classrooms and what types of research activities can be funded by public dollars based on ties to DEI, CRT, gender and queer theory, or other "divisive" and "woke" topics (Martinez-Alvarado and Perez 2023). However broad their policy definitions of such topics, conservative policymakers and opponents of these divisive and woke topics contextualize their rationale as extramural and irrelevant to classroom activities. However, research demonstrates that attention to and awareness of difference facilitates student success in higher education (Bitar et al. 2022). Furthermore, these restrictions have been shown to negatively affect Black faculty not only by reducing the available resources but also in creating environments that are not conducive to the work of the mind for Black faculty (Asare 2023), as was the case for Paul Harris at UVA.

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24. Schrecker (2010, 436–37) states "According to the position taken by some Americans within the academic profession who subscribe to broad principles of academic freedom, certain specific limitations upon that freedom may nevertheless be imposed for reasons of special urgency." Special urgency included professors who were anti-war or had certain ancestry that was believed to be antithetical to the U.S. war effort. Later, this would also include any affiliation or suspected affiliation with the communist party, as it was against the American notion of Freedom.

The protections that academic freedom claims to facilitate are only operationalized if the interests of the faculty or student are in alignment with and beneficial to the institution and, by proxy, the entities that support the institution. White academic freedom, being neoliberal in nature, rewards those who perpetuate white supremacy (actively or passively) and punishes those who actively seek to disrupt and challenge it.

#### MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

Conceptually, academic freedom is meant to give control to faculty in matters of knowledge generation and dissemination (AAUP 1994). The AAUP asserts the importance of academic freedom in matters of shared governance pertaining to higher education. As research and teaching are vital to the academic enterprise, so should faculty as researchers and teachers control matters of the curriculum, pedagogy, and research. Therefore, faculty are an important part of structuring the research and teaching environment by recruiting, developing, and retaining successful faculty members through tenure and promotion practices. Over time, faculty have been responsible for platforming and advancing research and teaching practices that preserve a white supremacist status quo in higher education (Dancy et al. 2018). Furthermore, these research and teaching practices are perpetuated through the attrition of faculty who do not conform to the white supremacist status quo and the advancement of faculty into tenured and executive administrative roles who maintain and advance the status quo (Flaherty 2022).<sup>25</sup> This narrow preservation of white academic freedom structurally maintains white supremacy as the status quo in U.S. higher education.

Dancy et al. (2018, 177) maintain that U.S. higher education “reflects a deep commitment to Black degradation as fundamental to the maintenance of a colonial order.” The colonial order, which they claim to be indicative of U.S. higher education, maintains the status quo through assimilation and brutality, as well as through neo-liberal beliefs and practices about the nature and purpose of higher education. Such beliefs and practices proliferated through higher education historically because of the homogenous pipeline of potential faculty and university administrators. Despite the growing diverse population of college graduates, the expansion of curricula to include intercultural topics of study, and a diverse labor pool—perspectives that challenge Eurocentric ideals are viewed as inferior to those that affirm or expand those ideals. As such, faculty who specialize in these areas are systemically under-hired for faculty roles, routinely denied tenure because of their scholarship, and publicly targeted and subjected to investigation due to their areas of expertise.

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25. These cases, out of many, represent the experience of tenure denial of faculty who conduct research that advances social justice perspectives. These faculty achieved the written standards for tenure and promotion at their respective institutions but were denied due to administrative disagreements about their dossiers. Scholars note that underrepresented faculty face a double standard in promotion and tenure decisions.

Consider the story of Lorgia García Peña, who was denied tenure at Harvard University (Mochkofsky 2021). As a Black Latina, García Peña was hired in 2013 within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and created Latinx Studies as an area of focus within the division. She was highly productive and received awards and fellowships for her teaching and scholarship. Her acclaim eventually led to offers from other institutions, and because of this, she was encouraged to apply early for tenure by her department chair and deans who were familiar with her work. When asked about García Peña's case for tenure, her department chair remarked, "Lorgia is such a charismatic person, an excellent professor, and advisor [sic], so committed to her students and her classes... [I wanted] to make sure she stayed at the center to satisfy the growing demand for a proper ethnic studies program..." (Mochkofsky 2021, para. 6). Despite her acclaim at Harvard, García Peña was advised to develop herself as a scholar of Latin American literature instead of a Latinx Studies scholar, to discontinue doing scholarship and teaching that did not focus on literature or literary studies, and to withdraw a book-length manuscript that interrogated Dominican identity through art, literature, and film (Mochkofsky 2021). Throughout her career at Harvard, García Peña advocated not only for the creation of an Ethnic Studies program but also against the intentions of already tenured and endowed faculty who would be vital to her receiving tenure as well. With support from her department, college, and strong letters of support from scholars outside of Harvard, García Peña's dossier successfully made it outside of her college and to the president's office. It was at this stage that García Peña's accomplishments, line of research, and elements of her dossier were questioned. With a faculty member citing her work as being advocacy and activism rather than scholarship, García Peña was denied tenure at Harvard and forced to leave (Mochkofsky 2021).

When asked about her scholarship, specifically as it relates to the presence of Ethnic Studies within the traditional U.S. higher education curriculum, García Peña asserted, "... standard humanities and social science curriculum—is actually grounded in white supremacy but is masked as objectivity. Ethnic studies is charged with filling the immense gap left by our Eurocentric education systems" (Mochkofsky 2021).<sup>26</sup> The very nature of her work, both in the field and in the classroom, meant amplifying the voices of those who are historically marginalized and ignored in the traditional curricular canon. In doing so, she often found herself in conflict with faculty who did not want to amend their practices or admit to their complicity in upholding a curriculum that exemplified white normative knowing. Her objection to traditional ways of doing scholarship, naming oneself as a scholar, and the student-faculty relationship challenged the perceived power of tenured

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26. García Peña (2020, para. 2–6) expands on this notion in another interview stating, "Ethnic studies is a crucial anticolonial site of knowledge production, learning, and teaching. It... center[s] the experiences and histories of minoritized, racialized subjects. Ethnic Studies upends the dominance of white supremacy in our education. It opens the possibility to see things through a different lens and to question..."

faculty within the institution (Mochkofsky 2021).<sup>27</sup> In defiance of the mechanisms for protections against bias and the notion of “academic freedom,” García Peña’s challenges to the status quo led to the denial of her tenure case.

Scholars have made calls to challenge the structural status quo of faculty hiring and tenure and promotion processes to grow racial diversity among faculty ranks. Their research suggests that hiring committees create hiring procedures that are holistic and inclusive of experiences and research practices that are not traditionally western/white/Eurocentric coded (Croom 2017; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017; White-Lewis 2020). Common among these suggestions is the recommendation to value service performed by Faculty of Color related to diversity and advising (officially and unofficially) for Students of Color; as well as understanding bias present in teaching evaluations towards Faculty of Color, specifically Black women faculty (Chávez and Mitchell 2020). Despite these recommendations, faculty hiring committees routinely maintain the institutional status quo by overlooking qualified diverse candidates, by maintaining fit narratives (White-Lewis 2020), or by being unwilling to critique personal complicity in challenging inequity in faculty hiring. Moreover, tenure and promotion committees use ill-defined processes to scare, prolong, and contest achieving tenure for Faculty of Color—maintaining comparison standards that are white supremacist in nature (Urrieta et al. 2015; Masters-Waage et al. 2024). White academic freedom empowers those whom it benefits to maintain the status quo so they may delegitimize any threats to its existence procedurally or intellectually. Entrenched in the ivory tower, these individuals grant admission to both colleagues and students who will perpetuate or ignore white supremacist legacies and maintain white academic freedom.

#### CHALLENGES TO WHITE ACADEMIC FREEDOM: TOWARD BLACK ACADEMIC FREEDOM

White academic freedom asphyxiates knowledge and knowledge bearers, forcing them to succumb to its machinations and perpetuate its goals. In doing so, it stifles creativity and renders any attempt at authenticity pointless. The desired result of this reality? The death of oppositional thought and practice that seek to disrupt white supremacy broadly in the academy. White academic freedom thus incubates consciousness, imagination, philosophies, and ways of being that are decidedly anti-Black (Gordon 2022; Mills 2021). This includes creating hierarchies of knowledge that delegitimize knowledge aimed at reclaiming and uplifting marginalized communities (Gordon 2022). If we are to build a new academic freedom, we must embrace the idea that our perspectives of knowledge are rooted in our historic and contemporary communities, and multiple perspectives may provide truths rather than an absolute Truth (Gordon 2022). Black consciousness provides a model in which knowledge is not centered in Eurocentric whiteness, but rather that which opposes it—otherness. Black consciousness emerges from

27. García Peña’s teaching extended beyond the classroom, often advising Students of Color at Harvard University and supporting their causes against the institution.

an awareness of inequality and motivates the desire to actively fight against the oppression that comes from it (Gordon 2022).<sup>28</sup> Knowledge within this paradigm is understood not only in its relationship to the community in which it originates, but also in the case of Black philosophy, through its experience with and opposition to domination (Mills 2021). A Black<sup>29</sup> academic freedom requires that knowledge and those who create knowledge are acutely aware of their subjectivity, positionality, and ontology and its role in challenging outdated hierarchical norms—and affirms diverse ways of knowing. The challenge in reading a *Black academic freedom* posits that my argument rests upon the racial binary imposed by white normative knowing. I insist, however, this is not the case. Blackness must be read and understood outside of racial hierarchy. It is that which encompasses possibility and being for all, irrespective of phenotypic expression, beyond the white gaze.

I find the essence of Black academic freedom in communal care and intellectual expansiveness. Knowledge production and dissemination under Black academic freedom concerns itself with the liberatory potential of research from historically dominated communities and its application to stimulating intellectual imagination. Rather than claiming all knowledge as its own in application to a singular epistemological Truth, it welcomes differing perspectives from diverse research communities and their approaches to knowledge production and dissemination. Additionally, Black academic freedom celebrates and advances plurality of and within diverse knowledge perspectives. Doing so facilitates knowledge generation regardless of its assumed profitability and creates feedback loops to develop critical thinkers who are aware of their positionality and empathetic to the perspectives of others. Operating within Black academic freedom offers the possibility for new futures grounded in inclusiveness and equity, as faculty would no longer be incentivized to maintain the Eurocentric structural status quo of U.S. higher education. Rather than hiring, retaining, and promoting faculty that affirm entrenched beliefs of the academy, faculty would be encouraged to recruit innovative and critical colleagues who speak to the plurality of people represented within higher education and teach and research issues important to them.

#### AN OTHERWISE KNOWING: EPISTEMOLOGICAL DECOLONIZATION

White academic freedom encourages the development and dissemination of white normative knowledge (knowing). However, if we are to embrace a Black

28. Gordon (2022, 18–19) contrasts black consciousness with Black consciousness. He contends that black consciousness is mobilized by racialization and actions that seem to uphold antiblack society. He calls this an “immobile” conscious that is aware yet resigned to difference. Black consciousness, on the other hand, is politically motivated consciousness that seeks to “address the choking contradictions of antiblack societies.”

29. I use Black intentionally not to posit a binary existence between white academic freedom and Black academic freedom; rather, I use Blackness in line with theologian James Cone as a marker of goodness and righteousness, and also with Charles W. Mills who declares that Blackness can not only illuminate what is harmful (whiteness) but also demonstrate alternative paths forward. Moreover, the use of Black academic freedom causes the reader to engage in a radical process of rethinking their relationship with Blackness and how it is proposed in this article.

academic freedom that is expansive, pluralistic, and caring, what does knowledge production and dissemination in this paradigm look like? We must be hesitant to claim that knowledge espousing social justice concepts (e.g., diversity) will actually disrupt whiteness ideology in higher education due to the nature of white normative knowing, and by extension, white academic freedom (Liu 2020).<sup>30</sup> Though social justice practices have the potential to be liberatory frames that assume inclusive equity free of dominant ideology, they have been and continue to be distilled to goals related to assimilation and acceptance into the academy (Walsh 2023; Maldonado-Torres et al. 2023; Applebaum 2020).<sup>31</sup> Instead, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014, 19) offers an approach to welcome otherwise knowing through understanding an ecology of knowledges. An ecology of knowledges recognizes the interplay between knowing and ignorance, or the notion that “all ignorance is ignorant of a certain knowledge, and all knowledge is the overcoming of a particular ignorance.” De Sousa Santos asserts it is important to know what is being learned, why it is being learned, and to what extent it is valuable to retain. In a society that values white normative knowing (e.g., white heteronormative capitalistic patriarchy), it is essential to note that one’s cultural or non-dominant knowing is antithetical to white norms and is assumed to be threatening, if not banal. De Sousa Santos instead advocates for the embrace of a principle of incomplete knowledges,<sup>32</sup> which recognizes that all knowledges are incomplete. The incompleteness of all knowledge should then drive community or “co-presences” of all scholars disrupting the status quo and challenging white normative knowing (Rizvi 2022, 225; de Sousa Santos 2014). This is not an attempt to overthrow the academy and privilege certain types of knowledge over others; doing so recreates white supremacy. Instead, it is an invitation to other forms of knowing and the insight they might provide to existing epistemologies. De Sousa Santos (2014, 20) explains:

[F]orging credibility for non-scientific knowledge does not involve discrediting scientific knowledge. It simply involves its counter-hegemonic use. It consists of ... promoting inter-dependence among scientific and non-scientific knowledges. This principle of incompleteness of all knowledges is the condition of the possibility of epistemological dialogue and debate among the different knowledges. What each knowledge contributes to such a dialogue is the way in which it leads a certain practice to overcome a certain ignorance.

Moving toward Black academic freedom and an otherwise knowing is a desire to name and disrupt white academic freedom within U.S. higher education. In doing so, I call for the abolishment of the hierarchy of knowledges and the embrace of

30. Liu (2020, 32) claims that attempts to accomplish diversity, both in practice and through research that is “uncritical and unreflexive” does little to challenge white supremacy.

31. Walsh (2023, 512) acknowledges that “the pursuit of social justice through human and civil rights, critical enlightenment, and the educational equity-based approaches have all-too-often worked to maintain, justify, and sustain colonial structures, including ... social institutions, most especially that of schooling.”

32. Ironically, de Sousa Santos (2014) appears to be applying a scientific theorem (Gödel’s incompleteness theorems) to a social-scientific (e.g., non-scientific) concept, demonstrating his assertion that non-dominant cultural understandings can be used to extend, uncomplicate, and decolonialize western empirical thought.

collaborative knowledge communities that do not center Eurocentric epistemologies. As such, practices developed from this paradigm shift include reimagining research-practice partnerships with community scholars, advancing collaborative pedagogical methods, and rethinking curricular structures to acknowledge and address oppressive ideologies (Ladson-Billings 2021; Love 2019; Paris 2021).<sup>33</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Academic freedom has been and continues to be positioned as a color-evasive and politically neutral professional agreement between faculty and the higher education institutions in which they conduct research and teach. Ideologically, academic freedom aspires to promote the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge to benefit the common public good. However, academic freedom is not post-racial, nor does it advance political neutrality; instead it reaffirms white Eurocentric ways of knowing and systematizes the advancement of white supremacist ideals throughout higher education. Academic freedom is instead white academic freedom: a freedom to pursue, create, and disseminate knowledge as long as it maintains the status quo. The pursuit of Black academic freedom is an acknowledgment of the unnamed but embedded white ideology of academic freedom, and a recognition of the diversity of knowledge and experiences of those who have been othered. Black academic freedom is a rejection of a neoliberal knowledge economy and encourages knowledge generation for the good of the community.

What I offer in this article is a framework to think about how injustice is systemic, epistemologically and otherwise, and the possibilities for change. Representation within the academy does nothing if it simply affirms hegemonic ways of knowing through complicity, ambivalence, or impassivity. As such, a system left unchallenged will continue to operate incongruous to *freedom*. My argument is not a call to reexamine hiring practices, quotas, or statements; rather it is a reminder of the potential and possibility of an academy unburdened by the collective harms of white supremacy.

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33. Such practices were embraced by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Lorgia García Peña.

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