Beyond DEI Rhetoric- Academics of Color Speak Out on Diversity as Commodity Preventing Real Change in Higher Education

Pierre W. Orelus

Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT, USA

Andrew W. Habana Hafner

Westfield State University, Westfield, MA, USA

Abstract

Neoliberal reforms in higher education have entrenched exploitative and inequitable practices, shaping discourses on multiculturalism and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in ways that commodify and overburden faculty of color. This article interrogates these dynamics through plantation theory, critical race theory, and testimonio as a theory-method, revealing how faculty of color and administrators are systematically undervalued, marginalized, and silenced within predominantly white institutions— particularly in education departments. Through the authors' testimonios as borderland academics, the article advances a critical understanding of how faculty of color navigate these structural constraints, resist erasure, and sustain struggles for educational and social justice. By centering lived experience as a site of knowledge production, this work contributes to scholarship on racialized labor, institutional power, and the possibilities of resilience and resistance in neoliberal academia.

Introduction

The rise of neoliberal policies in higher education has profoundly shaped its exploitative and inequitable culture, particularly in how discourses and policies around diversity and multiculturalism commodify and exploit the presence and labor of faculty of color. Neoliberalism, a pervasive capitalist ideology grounded in free-market principles, has permeated nearly all institutions, including colleges and universities (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2019). Marketed under the guise of economic progress and democratic choice, neoliberalism has reshaped public education—from the charter school movement to the corporate culture increasingly dominating higher education.

The corporate presence on campuses—embodied by companies like Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks, and Barnes & Noble—illustrates how consumer choice and profit have been prioritized over educational purpose. At the same time, faculty and administrators are increasingly pressured to secure grants and forge corporate partnerships to supplement institutional funding, even as tuition costs continue to rise. For example, Anderson (2019) critiques public-private partnership initiatives in teacher education, which have restructured the goals and accreditation processes of teacher preparation programs to align with market demands.

Under these pressures, deans, department chairs, and program directors are pushed to increase enrollment and offer income-generating courses. Small class sizes are often deemed unsustainable, leading to course cancellations; adjunct hires replace tenure-track lines; and market pressures compel the expansion of online programs (Giroux, 2010, 2019; Darder & Griffiths, 2016). These trends prioritize financial efficiency over educational integrity, often to the detriment of both students and faculty. Research demonstrates that small class sizes, particularly in K–20

education, significantly improve teaching effectiveness and student outcomes—especially for students from low-income, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Access to higher education has been one of the most visible equity policy movements in recent decades. Yet, as Nishi (2020) illustrates through a critical race analysis of affirmative action legal cases, the benefits of diversity often converge with dominant interests—or *interest convergence* (Bonilla-Silva, 2014)—leading ultimately to reinforcing white advantage through the commodification of diversity. We argue that neoliberalism has not only entrenched inequities in higher education but has also created a modern-day plantation system in which the labor of marginalized faculty, staff, and students is exploited. Drawing from plantation theory (Tuitt, Squire, & Williams, 2018), we argue that today's academy has become a postmodern plantation managed largely by powerful white elites who benefit from the symbolic inclusion yet material exclusion of people of color.

Dancy II, Edwards, and Davis (2018), using a settler colonial framework, highlight the white supremacist foundations of higher education and call for a radical divestment from anti-Black systems. They argue that:
Radical self-determination requires both a departure from the white social contract and directed investment in the creation of Black counter-intellectual and economic spaces. The only way to establish Black human agency is to exit the system that insists upon Black dehumanization (p. 190).

Plantation theory holds that institutional and interpersonal racism—whether subtle or overt—reproduces historical patterns of exploitation reminiscent of the slavery

era. While slavery may be outlawed, its legacy persists in practices that systematically devalue and marginalize minority faculty, students, and administrators—denying them equitable opportunities for advancement, recognition, and leadership. Despite their significant contributions to the academic mission, faculty and administrators of color are frequently unrecognized and undervalued. Orelus (2019) underscores how their diverse perspectives and efforts remain overlooked. This is especially true for what Darder (2018) calls "borderland academics": those who resist neoliberal imperatives and engage in transformative pedagogy aimed at raising students' critical consciousness. Darder explains: "Subaltern voices brush fiercely across dominant interpretations in an effort to halt the assault, struggle, and to decolonize knowledge, and work to (re)prod uce knowledge forms that are in sync with the histories, cultures, languages, and cosmologies of the oppressed" (p. 5).

This paper draws from critical race theory (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Orelus et al., 2020), plantation theory (Tuitt, Squire, & Williams, 2018; Dancy II, Edwards & Davis, 2018), and *testimonios* (Necochea, 2016) to further examine the systemic challenges faced by academics of color. These include the compounded effects of neoliberalism, structural racism, and institutional silencing. We highlight how these educators, administrators, and scholars are frequently underrated, undermined, and rendered invisible. At the same time, we illuminate their resilience and commitment to advancing social justice, even in environments structured to marginalize them.

Higher Education and Historically White-Dominated Institutions

Historically, higher education in the United States has been shaped and dominated by whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity—norms that have systematically

privileged straight, middle-class white individuals, especially men, in leadership roles (Bailey, et al., 2024). These individuals have long occupied most key administrative positions such as university presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs (Orelus, 2018). In contrast, people of color and economically disadvantaged whites are disproportionately excluded from these positions and often denied equitable opportunities for advancement or even entry into academia (Orelus, 2020).

Systemic oppression has resulted in persistent inequities in the distribution of institutional resources, recognition, and opportunities. For faculty and staff of color, this manifests in a lack of respect, support, visibility, and inclusion (Orelus, 2020). Gutierrez y Muhs et al. (2012) offer an intersectional analysis of the distinct forms of oppression experienced by women of color in academia, emphasizing the compounded impact of race, gender, and class in shaping their marginalization. The U.S. Department of Education (2016), under the Obama administration, acknowledged longstanding racial and ethnic disparities in enrollment, attainment, earnings, and social mobility. However, the Trump administration, under both Secretaries of Education, Betsy DeVos and Linda McMahon, reversed course, advancing a neoliberal agenda that diverted public funds to private schools, religious institutions, and for-profit colleges—thereby deepening educational inequality. Moreover, the Trump administration's recent anti-DEI attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) professionals, programs, and services in higher education (and K12 contexts) reflects a hegemonic whiteness that explicitly aims to white-wash education, information and historical knowledge from U.S. society and culture (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2025). Prestigious universities are coerced into compliance and oversight of anti-DEI policies, under threat of losing millions of dollars in federal funding.

Darder (2012) characterizes the neoliberal restructuring of higher education as a reaction to the sociopolitical upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. She argues that the rise of "neoliberal multiculturalism" represents an ideological accommodation—one that promotes diversity rhetoric without allocating the necessary resources to realize equity, justice, or democratic transformation. This version of multiculturalism commodifies diversity while simultaneously disincentivizing liberatory knowledge projects and marginalizing scholars engaged in borderland and decolonial pedagogies.

Neoliberalism, as Darder contends, works not only to suppress the emergence of third world consciousness and borderland scholarship but also undermines liberal ideals of universal human rights. In the context of hiring and tenure, scholars committed to social justice are often marginalized, as institutions adopt a superficial commitment to diversity that reinscribes white supremacist, patriarchal norms. Atasay (2015) extends this critique to multicultural education frameworks (e.g., Nieto & Bode, 2018), arguing that racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity is often framed as a commodity valuable to the global labor market rather than as intrinsic to equity or justice.

Critical pedagogical projects—those that aim to uplift the voices and experiences of the oppressed—are frequently overshadowed by the rise of neoliberal multiculturalism. Picower (2009) identifies the ways in which unexamined whiteness in teachers' ideologies sustains white supremacy within education. Building on this analysis, we argue that scholars and educators must organize from what might be called an "underground" space: one rooted in decolonial critique that rejects neoliberal multiculturalism's distortions of equity and justice into sanitized values of opportunity and individual perseverance.

Borderland scholars—those engaged in the political project of liberation—routinely experience "racial battle fatigue" (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006). Their efforts to disrupt white institutional dominance come with the personal toll of chronic stress, alienation, and resistance fatigue. Darder (2012) captures the exploitative nature of diversity rhetoric under neoliberalism with a powerful metaphor: "Critical notions of multiculturalism and diversity in higher education have been pushed back by an economic ethos that has rendered *difference as whore* [emphasis added] to its own utilitarian pursuits or an enemy of the state." (p. 412–413). This metaphor points to the transactional and manipulative use of diversity by institutions driven by profit, image management, and market logic. In this neoliberal framework, faculty committed to justice become expendable, their work marginalized or dismissed as overly political or insufficiently scholarly. As Darder (2012) states:

> In concert, border intellectuals who persist in their work with disenfranchised communities or anchor their teaching and research on questions of social inequalities or push against the boundaries of traditional methodologies and epistemologies are often marginalized and derisively dubbed as activist scholars. As such, radical scholars can find themselves exiled from meaningful participation in the evolution of university programs and departments by an antidemocratic wave that silences and banishes their contributions to the wasteland of irrelevancy (pp. 421–422).

Neoliberalism, therefore, does not merely act as a trafficker of diversity—it operates as a syndicate, overseeing the full machinery of exploitation. In this system, diversity is subordinated and instrumentalized within patriarchal and colonial logics, reduced to market value and branding. Yet, within this terrain, counter-narratives continue to emerge—through *herstories, theirstories,* and *otherstories*—that resist and reimagine higher education as a space for liberation.

These insurgent narratives and scholarly acts of resistance challenge dominant discourses by proposing new frameworks for equity, rooted in critical pedagogy and decolonial praxis. Diversity initiatives, though branded as radical commitments to human-centered education, are frequently co-opted by neoliberal structures. They appear prominently in institutional marketing, program visions, curriculum vitae, and personal websites, but often lack substantive impact on systemic inequities.

Given the dual nature of diversity discourses—both abstract and material—we must remain vigilant against their appropriation by white privilege and performative allyship. As Darder and Griffiths (2015) note:

> The neoliberal university…works intensely against borderland academics in ways that can provoke insecurity and doubts about the validity of our scholarship…This often can result in debilitating forms of estrangement that fuel and intensify hostilities, distrust, and disaffiliation, even among those who labour within the borderlands. (p. 125)

Building on this critique, Reed (2013) offers a Marxist analysis that links the origins of racial dehumanization to the foundations of capitalist exploitation. From a historical materialist perspective, Reed rejects the separation of racial and economic systems, noting:

> Rigorous pursuit of equality of opportunity exclusively within the terms of given patterns of capitalist class relations—which is after all the ideal of racial liberalism—has been fully legitimized within the rubric of 'diversity.' That idea is realized through gaining rough parity in distribution of social goods and bads among designated population categories. (pp. 53–54).

Despite these formidable barriers, faculty and administrators of color have resisted, persisted, and contributed meaningfully to transforming higher education. The next section draws from the first author's personal *testimonial* as a Black scholar faculty, and former administrator, tracing his journey navigating through systemic racism, isolation, and marginalization within predominantly white institutions while striving. He reflects on his life before entering academia, the barriers he has faced, and the strategies he has used to survive and push forward. In doing so, he seeks not only to expose the institutional challenges he has encountered but also to illuminate how resilience and resistance can generate meaningful, if incremental, change within higher education.

Our Testimonios as Academics of Color

Testimonio 1 (Pierre)

Throughout my adult life, relatives, friends, classmates, and even colleagues have often said to me—frequently without prompting— "You have made it." These affirmations have typically referred to my academic and professional achievements. Yet, I consider these accomplishments not simply personal milestones, but outcomes of historical circumstance—fortuitous and shaped by systemic forces. Such declarations have compelled me to reflect on my journey, particularly my professional trajectory, which includes serving in both faculty and administrative roles as a man of color in higher education. Too often, I suspect, those who congratulate me do so without fully understanding what I have endured.

I earned my doctorate in 2008, a credential that enabled me to become a university professor. Just one semester into my role as an assistant professor, I was appointed to lead two joint programs within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. I held this leadership role twice before accepting a department chair position at

another institution, where I continue to serve. Never did I imagine that I would one day become a university professor, let alone a department chair, in the white ivory tower of American higher education. To meaningfully engage my struggles and highlight my achievements, I must recount my roots—my migration from the Caribbean to the United States.

I was born into a rural, working-class Caribbean family. My mother, an entrepreneur, never advanced beyond sixth grade, while my father, a carpenter, received little formal education and was considered illiterate. I spent part of my childhood in the countryside, around farms, before moving to the city at age 11. In my early twenties, I left my homeland—a place I remember with both tenderness and sorrow—driven by disillusionment with its political corruption and pervasive poverty. I immigrated to the United States in search of opportunity, only to discover a nation riddled with structural racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy, all of which are deeply embedded in institutions such as higher education.

My awareness of racism sharpened only after immigrating. In my native land, I was not made to feel "Black" in the way I would be in the United States. Here, I encountered the full force of being racialized—through racial profiling, street harassment, and subtle, persistent forms of institutional exclusion, even within the academic spaces I now inhabit and serve. After nearly two decades in American higher education, I am acutely aware of how white privilege, particularly white male privilege, manifests—even among self-identified white liberals. The symbolic and material violence I have experienced and witnessed inflicted on other faculty and administrators of color, has convinced me that American higher education is no safe haven for racialized minorities. And yet, paradoxically, it is

the same institution that has enabled my professional growth. It is this tension that frames my lived experience.

The Hidden Cost of Being the First

On January 4, 2017, I received an email from Dean V at Hope University (a pseudonym) informing me that I had been recommended by the faculty search committee for a department chair position. A week later, the dean offered me the job—a role that would fundamentally alter my view of higher education. Hope University is a predominantly white institution located in an affluent New England suburb. Its student body is racially and linguistically homogeneous, as is its faculty and administrative staff. Nevertheless, Hope University frequently invokes DEI rhetoric—especially during public events such as Black History Month. At every institution I have worked at, I have seen this pattern: lofty pronouncements about diversity that fail to address the structural inequalities that persist. Too often, these words—crafted and delivered by white academic liberals—serve as symbolic gestures, masking the tokenization, isolation, and disrespect faced daily by students, staff, and faculty from marginalized communities.

At Hope, I was the first Black male department chair in the history of the School of Education since its founding in 1942. I inherited a department composed predominantly of white faculty, with only one African American woman, who served as a program director before being promoted to associate dean the same year I began my role as chair. While my appointment represented professional advancement—from a program directorship at a public university to a department chair ship at a private one—it also came with extraordinary challenges. The department housed four programs, all led by white faculty. The adjunct faculty were also predominantly white. Across the School of Education, there were only

four faculty of color, including the associate dean—who later left after being passed over for the deanship, which was instead awarded to a white woman who eventually resigned amid controversy.

Many of my colleagues were dynamic, collegial, and appeared friendly. Some offered genuine support. But even with this support, I often felt out of place. The feeling was so intense at times that I would retreat to my office, self-isolating. During my first semester, colleagues were seemingly welcoming a "honeymoon period," as I now see it. In hindsight, much of their friendliness was performative, aimed at making the institution appear inclusive. The lack of racial diversity in my department echoed what I have seen across American higher education. People of color are disproportionately concentrated in custodial, food service, and athletic roles—while managerial and supervisory positions remain overwhelmingly white, especially white male (Orelus, 2018).

By my second year, I was overwhelmed—juggling multiple responsibilities with limited support. I quickly realized I was held to an unspoken set of expectations, shaped by my identity as a Black, immigrant, non-native English-speaking department chair. My accent and skin color marked me as "other," and these markers invited constant scrutiny. At faculty retreats, colleagues would question the origins of my clothing or speak to me in ways they would not dare with white peers. The disrespect came not only from colleagues but also from students. Emails I sent were ignored. Requests I made were bypassed in favor of direct appeals to the dean. When I confronted these behaviors, the explanations I received were patronizing: "Oh, I thought you were still in training," or "I didn't want to bother you." Over time, I came to feel I was being used as a symbolic Black figurehead—visible, but disempowered.

I considered stepping down, but I did not. I feared my resignation would be misinterpreted—as evidence that faculty of color are unfit for leadership—and would be used to justify future exclusions. This is a common institutional tactic: deny racism by blaming the "lack of qualified candidates," while continuing to hire underqualified white candidates over highly competent faculty of color. Surveillance intensified. My office hours were questioned. White colleagues attempted to turn students and faculty against me by exaggerating minor misunderstandings. In one instance, a white male colleague publicly scolded me over a missed advising appointment—even though the meeting had been rescheduled and the student completed his program without issue.

When I confronted him, he denied any wrongdoing, insisting he was only "trying to help"—a textbook example of the paternalistic "white savior" mentality. Other white colleagues acted similarly—some more overtly, others more subtly. Their discomfort with my Blackness was palpable, reflected in nervous smiles, indirect avoidance, and constant questioning. And yet, while I was made to feel alien, students of color increasingly sought me out. My office became a third space—a safe zone—where they could voice concerns, they didn't feel comfortable sharing with white faculty. I became an unofficial advisor and mentor, offering emotional and academic support that went unrecognized by the institution. Though invisible in official metrics, this work has had lasting impact. The following testimonio by the second author continues this critical exploration, shedding light on the structural challenges faced by another faculty member of color with a complex racial, cultural, and ethnic identity navigating the terrain of American higher education.

Testimonio 2 (Drew)

My experience as a faculty member of color committed to issues of equity, diversity, and social justice in higher education has emerged from a distinct trajectory yet navigates similarly precarious institutional terrains. I am a tenured professor in a teacher preparation program at a public, state Historically White College and University (HWCU)—a term that captures the structural legacy of white supremacy embedded in the history of Western education, epistemology, and institutional power (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

I was raised in a liberal college town in the Northeastern United States, situated within a regional cluster of HWCUs. I identify as a middle-class, mixed-race Filipino American—the child of a Filipina immigrant and community development specialist and a white father who was an academic and cultural geographer. My formative years were spent immersed in sports activities, but socially and culturally, my environment was profoundly isolating. While our family maintained global and pan-Asian connections, my town's demographics were predominantly white, with small Black and Latinx populations and a modest Asian Pacific American (APA) presence—mostly Chinese American families, and a growing number of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee families by the 1980s. Ours was one of only two Filipino families in town. Although I did not fully comprehend it at the time, the cultural isolation deeply shaped my understanding of belonging, a realization that only became clear during my undergraduate years at a small, liberal arts HWCU.

That marginalizing college experience was a critical awakening that catalyzed my path toward becoming an educator focused on language, literacy, and educational equity—both in U.S. contexts and international development settings. Eventually,

this journey led me to a tenure-track position in a public HWCU's teacher education program, where I was tasked with teaching a predominantly white, working-class, female student body about immigrant, refugee, and multilingual learners through a critical theoretical lens.

We Teach Who We Are at HWCUs

The intersection of entering a new social context and a new professional role is always a revealing experience. As educators, we continually present ourselves—both intentionally and unintentionally—teaching others about who we are through our interactions. Palmer's (1998) concept of the *Teaching Self*—that "we teach who we are"—resonates deeply with me and informs a humanizing pedagogy in which our identities are in constant (re)negotiation.

My research and teaching are grounded in Palmer's perspective and informed by multiple theoretical frameworks, including critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), critical multicultural education (Nieto & Bode, 2018), critical discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2004), and critical spatial theory (Leander & Sheehy, 2004). These lenses have helped shape my praxis of *Comm.Unity*—a portmanteau of *communication* and *unity* (Hafner, 2013). *Comm.Unity* pedagogy emphasizes the creation of "third spaces" by engaging tensions across three spatial levels: the self (micro-local), the collective (local), and the world (global), all mediated through critical attention to language and discourse. Rooted in the lived experiences of immigrant and refugee communities, this pedagogy strives toward humanizing education and challenges the oppressive dynamics of banking-style education systems (Freire, 1970), especially as they manifest in language policies and practices.

Mentoring in Technicolor: The Nurturance of an "Elder Sister"

Implementing *Comm.Unity* in my teaching, research, and service-activism places language and discourse at the core of both epistemological inquiry and ontological struggle. We are all deeply socialized through language, and my journey in higher education reflects the impact of neoliberal multiculturalism (Darder, 2012) on dominant norms of academic professionalism. When I entered my first tenure-track position, I was eager for mentorship and support. Fortunately, I joined a department where several faculty of color formed a supportive and affirming network. Among them was a senior female professor with over two decades of experience in teaching critical multicultural education and Latina feminist theory. Her guidance became invaluable. She was one of the forerunners who had done the long and difficult work of advocacy, bridge-building, and transformative engagement, often having to move on when those bridges collapsed under institutional resistance.

Her mentorship offered critical insights into department history and institutional politics, helping me strategically "pick my battles" and form meaningful collaborations. Importantly, mentoring relationships among faculty of color often include explicit discussions about racialized experiences and identity politics—conversations rarely acknowledged in institutionalized mentoring models. Her presence reaffirmed the validity of our counternarratives and insurgent commitments within HWCU spaces and served as a buffer against racial battle fatigue (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006).

Colorblind Mentoring: My Brother is Unprofessional

While such culturally sustaining mentorship is vital, it is not often recognized or supported by institutions. Diversity-focused programs are frequently under-

resourced, poorly staffed, and reliant on unstable funding streams. DEI initiatives are often disjointed, existing as siloed interventions that lack synergy or institutional commitment. These surface-level efforts reflect the broader reality of neoliberal multiculturalism, which maintains the white, Eurocentric structures of higher education while making them in progressive rhetoric.

Early in my tenure-track position, I taught a newly required licensure course on language learning theory and pedagogy for English Learners. Of the 25 students, only one—Dennis (pseudonym), a Black male aspiring history teacher—was a student of color. I made an intentional effort to build rapport and offer mentorship, especially given the significant racial, gender, and linguistic disparities in the teaching workforce (USDOE, 2016).

Dennis approached me with concerns about a delayed expungement of a juvenile arrest record that could jeopardize his licensure. His story exemplified the racialized injustices of the school-to-prison pipeline and their long-term consequences. As a new faculty member, I sought guidance from a senior white administrator known for their student advocacy. In forwarding our email exchange, I had greeted Dennis with "Hey brother," an affinity term found in non-standard varieties of English (e.g. African American Vernacular English) and mirrored in Filipino languages in such terms as *kuya* or *manong* (older brother), *ate* or *manang* (older sister). These expressions are part of my cultural identity, translanguaging practice (García & Kleyn, 2016) and reflect my educational philosophy of building inclusive, culturally responsive relationships.

The administrator responded helpfully regarding Dennis's situation but also offered a cautionary note: university emails are official records and can be

reviewed by administration. While reaffirming the strengths of my "informal" style, they advised that email language remain "professional." Though likely well-intentioned, this guidance subtly reinforced white, normative standard of professional communication, thereby devaluing my culturally grounded mentoring approach. It exemplifies how whiteness delineates appropriate forms of professional conduct, often at odds with culturally sustaining pedagogies.

These experiences—of mentoring, resistance, and subtle sanction—reveal the contradictions embedded in DEI discourse at HWCUs. The interpersonal and institutional misunderstandings of culturally grounded mentorship are not isolated incidents; they reflect broader patterns of symbolic inclusion paired with structural exclusion. I have served on numerous DEI committees, task forces, and advisory groups. Yet time and again, I witness a lack of vision, leadership, and resources, even as institutional leaders claim these efforts are central to their mission. Advocacy and activism to promote and institutionalize justice-oriented DEI programs and priorities have been white-washed, defunded, and restructured into divisions and discourses of 'belonging and inclusion'.

In the Trump era, racism and hate have resurged on college campuses, including my own. In response, institutions have invested in external consultants who produce tepid reports with underdeveloped recommendations—gestures that signify commitment without fostering transformation. These dynamics epitomize the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism: performative inclusion without the structural realignment of values and priorities. This testimonio illustrates how whiteness in HWCUs continues to undermine the work of culturally sustaining educators and the critical teacher candidates we need across the country (Paris & Alim, 2017). It is a call to recognize, value, and protect the transformative work

being done by faculty of color who persist—despite the institution—because of the communities we serve, the students we mentor, and the liberatory visions we carry forward.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conversations and conflicts surrounding DEI have become increasingly prevalent in American higher education, especially at HWCUs. Yet, these discussions often obscure the persistent marginalization of historically underrepresented groups. Faculty, administrators, and students of color continue to be hired into tokenized or marginalized roles, despite centuries of institutional existence. The frequent celebration of "firsts"—the first faculty member, department chair, dean, or president of color—is less a triumph than an indictment of the slow and selective progress of American academia. Rather than applause, such milestones should prompt collective indignation and a demand for systemic transformation that equitably benefits *all* members of the academic community—students, faculty, staff, and administrators—across all identities.

Those who are granted the opportunity to be among the "firsts" must recognize their position as both privilege and responsibility. They can, and should, use their roles to illuminate the inequities embedded in academic institutions. This paper aims to contribute to that mission by foregrounding testimonios that expose these disparities. While expressions of gratitude for individual opportunities are common and understandable, they must be accompanied by critical inquiry: Why are such opportunities so rare for people of color? Why must members of minoritized communities be overachievers to receive the same—or even fewer—opportunities than their white counterparts, who may be less qualified (Orelus, 2018)?

Moreover, institutions must not tokenize the few faculty and administrators of color they hire to conceal longstanding structural failings. The continued underrepresentation of minoritized individuals in faculty, administrative, and student bodies underscores the failure of American higher education to be truly inclusive. Even among those few granted access to the academic sphere, many face persistent racial and gendered oppression, often hidden from public view. These challenges are exacerbated by the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, which has disproportionately harmed those already historically marginalized.

The convergence of neoliberalism with institutional racism and sexism produces layered and compounding effects on minoritized individuals in academia. While public discourse—across liberal, neoconservative, and right-wing platforms—oscillates between support and opposition to DEI efforts, the lived realities of people of color in higher education remain marked by exclusion and struggle. These paradoxes must be understood if we are to dismantle oppressive systems and transform them from within.

Darder's (2012) metaphor of *diversity-as-whore* critiques how institutions commodify diversity for neoliberal ends, which resonates with broader interdisciplinary critiques of systemic inequality. Cheng and Kim (2014) offer three paradoxes of gender exploitation and neoliberalism that are useful in considering these contradictions in higher education:

1. A/morality: Neoliberalism's superficial amorality allows for the promotion of a conservative moral agenda under the guise of neutrality.
2. De/politicization: It depoliticizes systemic social risks while simultaneously hyper-politicizing matters of public and national security.

3.   Non/humanitarianism: It perpetuates the creation of vulnerable populations while celebrating superficial humanitarian efforts.

These paradoxes are reflected in our testimonios and the institutional obstacles we have encountered as faculty and administrators of color. The first paradox—a/morality—is evident in the moral ambivalence of institutions that claim progress while enabling systemic inertia. As we work toward equity, we often find that responsibility for change is individualized, while institutional structures remain untouched.

The second paradox—de/politicization—manifests in how institutions obscure the political nature of inequality. Individual risk-taking by faculty or students of color is spotlighted, while the broader systemic forces that necessitate such risk are ignored or minimized. Diversity is often reduced to marketable branding, sidelining the structural work required for true equity and inclusion.

The third paradox—non/humanitarianism—captures how institutions publicly recognize the need to address vulnerability while failing to confront the conditions that produce such vulnerability. This performative allyship preserves the status quo rather than dismantling it. Ultimately, neoliberalism and other entrenched systems of oppression must be critically examined and intentionally disrupted. Higher education must move beyond superficial commitments to DEI and engage in deep, sustained efforts to transform its structures, values, and practices. Only then can a new vision of DEI within higher education emerge—one grounded in justice and humanity for all.

References

Abrica, E. J., & Oliver Andrew, R. (2025). The racial politics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 18*(Suppl 1), S259–S268. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000566

Ahmed, S. (2012). *Being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Apple, M. W. (2012). *Can education change society?* New York: Routledge.

Atasay, E. (2015). Neoliberal multiculturalism embedded in social justice education: Commodification of multicultural education for the 21st century. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies 12*(3):171-204.

Bailey, E. K., Brissett, N. O. M., & Bailey, C. Y. (2024). *Minority voices from the academic super-structure*. New York: IGI Global Publishing.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). More than prejudice: Restatement, reflections, & new directions in critical race theory. *Sociology of Race & Ethnicity I*(I), 73-87.

Bonilla-Silva, E., & Peoples, C. E. (2022). Historically white colleges and universities: The unbearable whiteness of (most) colleges and universities in America. *American Behavioral Scientist, 66(*11), 1490–1504. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221106604

Cheng, S., & Kim, E. (2014). The Paradoxes of neoliberalism: Migrant Korean sex workers in the United States and "sex trafficking". *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society (21)*3 (Fall 2014), 355-381. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu019

Dancy II, T. E, Edwards, K. T., & Davis, J.E. (2018). Historically white universities and plantation politics: Anti-blackness and higher education in the Black Lives Matter era. *Urban Education 53*(2): 176-195

Darder, A. (2012) Neoliberalism in the academic borderlands: An On-going struggle for equality and human Rights, *Educational Studies, (48)*5, 412-426. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.012.714334

Darder, A. (2018). Decolonizing interpretive research: Subaltern sensibilities and the politics of voice. *Qualitative Research Journal.* https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-D-17-00056

Darder, A. & Griffiths, T. G. (2016). Labour in the academic borderlands: Unveiling the tyranny of neoliberal policies. *Workplace, 28,* 115-129.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Garcia, O. & Kleyn, T., Eds. (2016). *Translanguaging with multilingual students: Learning from classroom moments*. New York: Routledge.

Gutierrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y. F., Gonzalez, C. G., & Harris, A. P. (Eds.). (2012). *Presumed incompetent: The Intersections of race and class for women in academia*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Giroux, H.A. (2010). Bare pedagogy and the scourge of neoliberalism: Rethinking higher education as a democratic public sphere. *The Educational Forum (74)*3, 184-196, DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2010.483897

Hafner, A. H. (2013). Sampling an inner dj with hip hop hopes: (Re)writing immigrant identities for English language learners in classroom third spaces. *Radical Teacher, 97* (Fall). *http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/radicalteacher/article/view/49*

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leander, K. M., & Sheehy, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Spatializing literacy research and practice*. New York: Peter Lang.

Necochea, V. (2016). A critical educator's testimonio against the current post-racial fallacy: A call to action. *Regeneración Tlacuilolli: UCLA Raza Studies Journal, 2*(1). Retrieved from: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6963w0hn

Nieto, S. and Bode, P. (2018). Affirming diversity: The Sociopolitical context of multicultural education, 7th Ed. New York: Pearson.

Nishi, N. (2020). Imperialistic reclamation of higher education diversity initiatives through semantic co-option and concession. *Race, Ethnicity and Education.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1718079

Orelus, P. W. (2018). Can subaltern professors speak?: Examining micro-aggressions and lack of inclusion in the academy. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *18*(2), 169-179.

Orelus, P. W., Malott, C., & Hafner, A. H. (2020). Youth of color living and learning in the age of racial paranoia: What social justice educators need to know. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 19*(1). Retrieved from https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss1/7

paperson, la [a.k.a. K. Wayne Yang]. (2017). *A Third university is possible*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Paris, D. & Alim, S., Eds. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching & learning for justice in a changing world*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Picower, B. (2009). The unexamined whiteness of teaching: How white teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race, Ethnicity and Education 12* (June 2009): 197-215.

Reed, A. (2013). Marx, race and neoliberalism. *New Labor Forum 22*(1), 49-57.

Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J, & Solórzano, D. G. (2006). Challenging racial battle fatigue on historically white campuses: A Critical race examination of race-related stress. In C.A. Stanley (Ed.). *Faculty of Color: Teaching in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities.* Bolton: Anker Publishing.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Tuitt, F., Squire, D., & Williams, B. (2018). Plantation politics and neoliberal racism in higher education: A Framework for reconstructing anti-racist institutions. *Teachers College Record*, *120*(14), 1-20.

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Advancing diversity & inclusion in higher education: Key data highlights focusing on race and ethnicity and promising practices.* Retrieved from: http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/advancing-diversity-inclusion.pdf.

Author Details

Dr. Pierre W. Orelus

Dr. Pierre Wilbert Orelus is associate professor at Fairfield University and past chair of the Educational Studies and Teacher Preparation department, where he is faculty and the director of the Teaching and Foundation master's program. His research is intersectional examining ways in which race, language, and class interweave to affect people's lives in general and student learning in particular, often in ways that go unnoticed. His most recent books include All English Accents Matter (Routledge, 2023); *Unschooling Racism* (Springer, 2020) and *How It Feels to Be Black in the USA* (Brill, 2022).

Dr. Andrew W. Habana Hafner (Drew) is an Associate Professor teaching courses on multilingual learner education, critical multicultural education, urban education and critical pedagogy, and social justice education. He has over 30 years of U.S. and international experience in bilingual/literacy education as a classroom teacher, trainer, curriculum developer, program evaluator, teacher educator, and researcher. He spearheaded an anti-racism education project which was awarded a national program accreditation commendation. He has published in peer-reviewed journals including *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, Radical Teacher, Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education,* and *SAGE Handbook for Critical Leadership in Education*. His research, teaching and advocacy builds a critical language pedagogy of Comm.Unity (communication + unity)