



Research Articles

Activism in the University: Opportunities for Reflective Dialogue and Action

Nadine Wedderburn

Dianne Ramdeholl

State University of New York, Empire State College

INTRODUCTION

Although higher education continues to be touted as a pathway to positive social mobility, it is not immune to the inequality produced as a result of the hierarchical nature of society. The academy largely reflects U.S. society defined by patterned relationships between groups divided along lines of race, class, gender, religion, national origin. Accordingly, values typically associated with white, cis-gender male, middle to upper class “American” norms are the presumed standard for excellence and worth. These conditions create environments in which structural injustice due to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, classism and so on, thrive. Young (2013) proffers:

structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities (p. 52).

As in the wider society, any combination of the aforementioned divisions can explain a person’s professional prospects and workplace experience. Hence, arguably, the academy functions as a locus of oppression for people of color whether they belong to the ranks of faculty, staff, student or administration. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2017, of 1.5 million faculty in degree granting postsecondary institutions, 76% of full-time faculty in

universities identified as white, with 41% white males and 35% white females. Five percent identified as Asian/Pacific Islander females; three percent identified as Black females and three percent as Hispanic/LatinX females. Those who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and of two or more races made up 1% or less of full-time faculty. (NCES, 2017). Further, the NCES reports that the lack of diversity is even starker in higher education leadership, with 73% of postsecondary institutions having all white leadership teams and no university having a visibly racialized woman on their presidential leadership teams.

Much has been written about how the academy continues to represent a space in which Brown and Black faculty face institutional racism and daily

...the Eurocentric culture that envelops academia, the ways in which racialized faculty are undermined or erased in the academy are numerous.

microaggressions daily (Ahmed, 2012; Brookfield, 2018; Merriweather, 2019; Lazoz, 2012; Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017). Against this backdrop, Ahmed (2012) problematizes the word ‘diversity’ and its use, contending that, although the idea is being invoked more often, in substance it means less. Evidently, there are fewer and fewer persons from historically underrepresented populations in teaching and research positions, the more senior the ranks in higher education institutions. This gives the impression that racialized faculty simply are not imagined as intellectuals native to the space of the academy. Merriweather (2019) highlights challenges of isolation experienced by being twice marginalized as a woman of African descent. Sadly, this is a common refrain by many racialized women faculty who cite real dangers that threaten, including constant micro and macro aggressions designed to weaken and disparage, and presumptions of their incompetence as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance (Gutierrez y Muhs et al, 2012). Universities, through “color blind” ideologies and policies, continue to entrench deep inequities; for example, the number of racialized faculty who are tenured and get promoted to full professors are likely to end up on senior administration teams that are overwhelmingly white (NCES, 2017). In addition, having curricula that centralizes whiteness can allow whites to collude in or rationalize a systemic process that facilitates and preserves racial inequality and privilege (Brookfield, 2018). Color blindness rewards white faculty for remaining unaware of how these beliefs and actions oppress people.

While all faculty, regardless of social markers of difference such as gendered identity, race, and ethnicity, will face challenges and stressors, racialized faculty bear additional challenges from being ‘othered’. From microaggressions (having one’s credibility subtly or explicitly challenged both by students, colleagues, and administrators) to systemic racism (in the form of policies that do not take into account the expertise, knowledge, or perspectives of racialized faculty), to the Eurocentric culture that envelops academia, the ways in which racialized faculty are undermined or erased in the academy are numerous.

Given these realities, racial and social justice activism in the academy is appropriate and necessary. Unless institutions of higher education are actively involved in acknowledging their own patterns and histories of injustice, they cannot be trusted to be allies in the movement for social change. This paper presents how one affinity group of racialized faculty at a predominantly white institution in northeast U.S.A is “making the road by walking”, to offer its academic community

opportunities for reflection and dialogue towards creating a more just and equitable workplace, and ultimately, world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical social theories such as critical race theory and liberation theology are grounded in Marxist ideology and driven by goals of equality, equity and emancipation. These theories offer a framework for interrogating, analyzing, and confronting power structures and how they operate to ensure social balance, harmony and order. Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that race is endemic to U.S. society, and presents racism as a toxic condition in the social fabric of the country. It challenges concepts such as color blindness and neutrality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and points out that racial inequalities are only addressed to the extent that white interests are also served (Bell, 2018). CRT acknowledges that the insidious nature of racism can only be addressed when racialized persons share their experiences through counter-narratives (Peterson, 2008). The authors believe that CRT informs this paper in salient ways because, in essence, this piece relays a narrative from two racialized faculty that highlights incidents of repeated racism experienced by themselves and racialized colleagues in their place of employment. This counter-narrative tells a very different story from the one that is parlayed about the institution in mainstream discourse, and challenges dominant practice, beliefs, and assumptions that are fundamentally grounded in whiteness and male, Eurocentric norms.

Black Liberation Theology presents God as identifying and aligning with oppressed peoples and states unequivocally that one cannot be racist or white supremacist while calling themselves Christian.

With connections to Marxism, Black liberation theology (BLT) advocates for the liberation of oppressed Black and Brown people through religion. Cone (2011), one of the main thinkers/writers of Black liberation theology, envisioned the framework as a way of realizing justice in

the face of white supremacy and racism, with its target fixed on Black consciousness and the black experience of oppression. Liberating Black people and communities (meaning all who suffer at the hands of white oppression) from the trauma of white supremacy, which persists through systems of segregation and discrimination, is one of the main goals of Black liberation theology. Black liberation theology asserts that to understand suffering one must have experienced suffering. Hence, if one has not been oppressed one is unable to understand suffering and, by extension, liberation.

Black Liberation Theology, grounded in Christianity as a quest for justice, presents God as identifying and aligning with oppressed peoples and states unequivocally that one cannot be racist or white supremacist while still calling themselves Christian. This worldview centers Black liberation; that is, the humanizing of Black people seeking authentic freedom from white oppression (Cone, 2011). It is important to point out that the notion of Blackness is not necessarily based on skin color; rather, it symbolizes the condition of oppression that is experienced by all people who have been racialized on account of white supremacy. A call to humanize Blackness, then, acknowledges that the world is a deeply anti-Black place, in ideology and praxis.

Early proponents of Black liberation theology pointed out that the Church, as a social institution, developed around a white person's religion and is, therefore, inherently racist. Throughout history, and even in contemporary times, the Church has functioned to reinforce dominant social, economic, and political discourses and has upheld laws and practices that promote prejudice, racial segregation, and discrimination. However, according to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, upon which the Church is founded, God intends for all people to be free. This means that in order for all to be truly free, Blackness as a part of God's creation must be embraced and loved by all. To do otherwise is to keep all of humanity in a state of spiritual and societal bondage.

To help focus the central arguments of this paper, the authors bring to the fore the critical theological reflection of "womanist theology". With an ethos of the equal humanity of all people at its core, womanist theology is the resulting paradigm developed by African American women out of a dialogue between Black liberation theology and feminist theology in the 1980s. Womanist theology emerged among Black women religious scholars who referred to themselves as "womanists" – adopting the term coined by novelist and activist Alice Walker in her classic text *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* (Sanders, 1994). Accordingly, Williams (1995) defines a womanist as "one who is committed to and struggles for selfhood, survival, and quality of life among her people as well as for the survival and wholeness of humanity" (p. 118).

Womanist theology provides a decisive and practical way of realizing 'liberty and justice for all' as it consistently seeks to ensure that the full humanity of all persons is recognized and dignified wherever one may find themselves along life's path. Based on Williams' work and that of other Black women theologians such as Katie Geneva Cannon, Renita Weems and Jacquelyn Grant, womanist theology is practiced as a response to and critique of Black Liberation Theology and feminist theology. Womanist

...critical social theories like Black Liberation Theology and Womanist Theology to problems of injustice and oppression, scholars and practitioners alike challenge social institutions to stay true to the noble missions for which they were created.

theology was birthed to recognize and articulate the specific negotiation of spaces where Black women find themselves – between Black liberation theology, which in many ways maintain patriarchal

ideals and enable Black women's oppression, and feminist theology, which participates in the perpetuation of racism/white supremacy and the dehumanization of Black women. Katie Geneva Cannon, pioneering womanist theologian in *Black Womanist Ethics* (2006) writes, "each person's life must be defined, nurtured, and transformed, wherein the self is actualized, affirming the inward authority which arouses greater meaning and potential with each mystical experience" (p. 21). The authors hereby assert that the liberating and transformative essence of Womanist theology presents vital methods and guidance for understanding how to transform spaces of exploitation, marginalization, and inequality to more emancipatory domains by helping to ensure that human beings fully enjoy their birthright of freedom and dignity.

In applying critical social theories like Black Liberation Theology and Womanist Theology to problems of injustice and oppression, scholars and practitioners alike challenge social institutions to stay true to the noble missions for which they were created. The complexity of issues that invariably comprises the focus of critical theories, e.g. justice, equality, freedom, and equity,

demand collaboration and cooperation among various entities on a large scale. Hence, mutual dialogue is crucial to realizing change, as progress is best made in an environment of openness where persons engaged in anti-oppression work are regarded equally, given respect, heard, and valued. Accordingly, the racialized affinity group, the subject of this study, considers dialogue with its community as one of its primary tasks.

CASE STUDY: THE RACIALIZED FACULTY CAUCUS AT SUNY EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

Background

In the spring of 2019, SUNY Empire State College was given an opportunity to begin deliberately working towards diversifying its faculty with the aim of narrowing the gap in representation between faculty and a rapidly diversifying student body. The opportunity came in the form of a grant initiative wherein the institution had to document its history and performance in the areas of hiring and retaining faculty from historically underrepresented populations. Consequently, the documentation necessitated convening groups of racialized faculty to listen to their experiences in order to allow the experiences to inform how the institution might positively position itself to undertake the important work that lay ahead. In the focus groups, persons openly shared their experiences (positive and negative) of becoming employed and continuing to work at the institution. Of particular note was the recounting of experiences of subtle and overt discrimination, from microaggressions on a daily basis to witnessing ways institutionalized racism works through policies that disenfranchise/marginalize/alienate racialized faculty to being told by students that “they want a real professor instead of just someone with a PhD to teach them”, to one of the authors of this article being asked by a student what she personally had against white women, to being asked by colleagues why faculty of color were so angry at the institution, to being told we don’t look the part, or that our scholarship is too narrow. The list of slights seems endless.

A by-product of this period of convening and experience-sharing has been the formation of an affinity group that regularly assembles to provide mutual support within the body and organize around common concerns that continue to affect the work life of racialized faculty in the academy. This organic coalescence of faculty around experiences of race and racism in higher education emphasizes the effectiveness of building community for developing self-identity, solidarity, and resistance to domination (Adam, 1978). Further, Young (1990) in proposing a ‘politics of difference’ submits that respecting and affirming groups that form coalitions around shared identities (e.g. race) should be encouraged and celebrated. Not only is the affirmation liberating and empowering for the groups in question, but such an attitude engenders solidarity among differentiated groups to work against oppression.

Racialized faculty who might have been feeling isolated due to the spatial organization of the institution appreciate the opportunity to come together with others on a regular basis.

An added benefit of the affinity group has been the ability for members to get to know each other and their work in respective disciplines, and to share information for professional development

opportunities internal and external to their shared workplace. Racialized faculty who might have been feeling isolated due to the spatial organization of the institution appreciate the opportunity to come together with others on a regular basis. Members relish the idea of being a part of an organized group that can appropriately represent their unique concerns and experience within a larger institutional context.

Institutional Context

The State University of New York, Empire State College (ESC) is a publicly funded institution within the State University of New York (SUNY) system with 35 locations across New York State and international locations in Europe and the Caribbean. SUNY is the largest comprehensive university system in the United States with 64 campuses across New York State. ESC, officially established in 1971, was envisioned to serve working class adults with the average age of an undergraduate student being 37 years old). SUNY Empire State College serves over 16,000 undergraduates and 1,600 graduate students annually, 60% of whom study part-time as they manage professional and personal obligations. The current average age of an undergraduate student at the College is 35 and graduate students' current average age is 40. The College's 78,000 alumni are active in their communities (ESC's PRODI-G Proposal).

Most Empire State College students are working adults. Many are raising families and meeting civic commitments in the communities where they live, while studying part-time. In addition to awarding credit for prior college-level learning, the College pairs each undergraduate student with a faculty mentor who supports that student throughout her or his college career. Working with their mentors, students design an individual degree program and engage in guided independent study and course work on-site, online or through a combination of both, which provides the flexibility for students to choose where, when and how to learn. Table 1 shows the distribution of faculty by race, gender, and employment status at ESC for the 2018-2019 academic year. At ESC, white women faculty make up the majority in both full-time and part-time categories. With the exception of the Chief Diversity Officer, a position mandated by the university system's chancellor, the entire senior leadership team of ESC identifies as white; 64% female, 36% male.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Faculty at SUNY Empire State College

Race/Ethnicity	Full-time		Part-time	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%			
Asian	1%	4%	2%	
Black or African American	5%	4%	1%	2%
Hispanic or LatinX	2%	1%	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1%			
Two or more races	2%		1%	
White	55%	26%	54%	38%
Total	66%	34%	59%	41%

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) HR Audit Reports prepared by SUNY System Administration

The Racialized Faculty Caucus

The caucus consists of 37 racialized faculty (18 male, 19 female) with the authors as co-conveners – one teaches in the undergraduate division of the institution and the other in the Graduate School. The School for Graduate Studies offers programs completely online. Caucus meetings are held via video/teleconferencing media every other month throughout the academic year. Several of the members of the affinity group are also active members of various committees working to actualize the objectives outlined in the institution’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan. The caucus’ seminal goal is to name and shed light on institutional practices, policies, and procedures that disadvantage racialized faculty and maintain inequity – in particular, racial inequity. The group is also committed to working with the institution’s administration to arrive at transformative solutions that will move the College towards achieving its equity and inclusion goals.

In predominantly white institutions (PWI) like Empire State College, affinity groups form to strengthen networks and provide mutual support for professional development. However, often unintentionally, these groups draw attention to workplace disparities and racial injustices that exist as everyday realities for racialized faculty (e.g., from being chided in meetings after asking a

The caucus ensures that racialized faculty ideas and concerns are acknowledged and included as part of mainstream planning and decision-making across the college, and not as non-existent or merely after-thoughts as they often seemed to be.

question or having one’s perspective discounted to having questions to supervisors met with silence). The racialized faculty caucus at ESC is pushing the institution to be transparent and honest in how equity is

being defined and realized, amidst what seems to be an illusion of inclusion. When diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives appear on paper while structural inequities are left untouched in organizations, the presence and efforts of diversity affinity groups can be effective in getting leadership to take remedial action. The RFC has repeatedly emphasized that DEI work needs to be institutionalized so that every member of the community understands the College’s position and work to ensure that just and equitable policies, procedures, and practices are embedded in all parts of the institution’s life.

Challenges

Sissel and Sheared (2001) remind that when one is invisible one does not take up space in people’s minds, hearts, nor economic, historical, political or social concerns. The RFC has been both hyper-visible in representing issues of race in the university but simultaneously invisible because institutional policies and practices are not shaped with them in mind. The creation of an affinity group of racialized faculty at ESC, for the first time in the history of the College, signaled to the college community that a normative colorblind practice was going to be challenged, and surfaced the truth that racism, an unchecked mechanism used for making decisions in processes around hiring, tenure, promotion, and other advancements within the institution had to be exposed and acknowledged, and would no longer be tolerated. The caucus ensures that racialized faculty ideas and concerns are acknowledged and included as part of mainstream planning and decision-making

across the college, and not as non-existent or merely after-thoughts as they often seemed to be. While this is a somewhat encouraging start, there is indeed much work ahead.

The RFC has raised the issue of Diversity being presented as writing reports but never really addressing real problems or doing the hard work that Diversity demands. Instead, there exist several “diversity-rich documents” which are not put into practice through deep changes in policy and institutional culture. As a result, inequalities persist (Ahmed, 2012). This is an institutional, not attitudinal, issue. The caucus has questioned the institution’s commitment to Diversity, considering its all-white senior leadership team (with the exception of the Chief Diversity Officer). The exception cannot be the rule. We have called out the lack of racialized full-time faculty at the institution, demanded hiring more faculty from historically underrepresented populations, and insisted on promoting more racialized faculty to full professors.

We have posed as a caucus how it is, when calls for diversity in higher education are ubiquitous and current data highlight an urgent need for more diversity and equity, there has been little to no response in meaningful ways in higher education and, more specifically, at ESC. The RFC interrogates this concern by asking, who gets to shape conversations in which policies are created, and whose voices and perspectives are privileged in those conversations? Who gets included and who gets excluded from those conversations? The RFC has argued that racialized faculty must be involved in producing the evidence that refers to them and that will be used to make decisions concerning them. We note that the arguments are being made with the full awareness that when individuals raise issues, they often get labeled as problematic as opposed to the problem being seen as institutional that requires structural solutions (Ahmed, 2012).

Because we are aware of how few racialized faculty there are in the institution coupled with the fact that the number of full professors who are racialized continues to be abysmally low, our collective sense of belonging is doubtful. Racialized faculty at ESC experience profound alienation in their respective locations, although the caucus has helped to make this more bearable through a shared sense of mutual support and solidarity. Often there is only one racialized faculty person present at gatherings. Whiteness as the norm dominates everyday practices and thinking, and racialized faculty involvement is often not considered. We hear accounts in the RFC of racialized faculty participation being treated differently by non-racialized peers and supervisors in meetings and on committee projects, for instance. Although the caucus serves as an organic space of peer mentoring and support amongst racialized faculty, those conversations do not carry the same weight as institutional supports. The RFC has called on the institution to put in place institutional supports to help foster a sense of belonging among racialized faculty and respect for their worth and work.

In addition, over the past year the RFC has consistently raised the issue of the uneven use of student evaluations (SALES) by administrators to make crucial decisions about racialized faculty tenure and promotion. According to numerous research studies (Lazos, 2012; Feldman, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 2015), student evaluations tend to be lower for racialized faculty. Students see us as less competent and challenge us more, and studies demonstrate we face racial performance burdens that non-racialized faculty do not. The RFC has argued that senior administration should make it abundantly clear to deans and associate deans that the role of SALES should be understood as

especially limited for racialized faculty and should not be over-emphasized in the tenure and review process (Lazos, 2012). This is one reason many universities have chosen to discontinue

Racialized faculty are expected to show up when “diversity” would benefit the promotion of the university externally.

using SALES in faculty tenure/promotion decisions. One of the authors is currently on a committee working to have student evaluations removed from personnel decisions and have them used for developmental purposes between individual faculty and their administrator.

Yet, another more complex struggle in which the RFC has been involved is the presentation of racism as a public relations matter instead of a genuine institutionalized priority. Racialized faculty are expected to show up when “diversity” would benefit the promotion of the university externally. For example, when race-based initiatives can improve a grant application or when “diversity” can be used as a vehicle to obtain funds, it is embraced. Tokenism is exploited but diversity work, in general, is not seen as valuable in institutions. It is only in the present context of ongoing mass protests against widespread racism that issues of race have made it on the institution’s radar in any serious fashion. Whether this consciousness will be sustained remains to be seen.

Making the Road by Walking

As stated earlier, the caucus abides by the power of dialogue to enable meaningful collaboration and change across the institution. At the time of this writing, the racialized faculty caucus has been emerging for about one year and has met with the institution’s senior leadership teams with responsibility for academic programming and faculty hiring at least twice. In each of these meetings, the caucus has presented recommendations aimed at realistically achieving racial justice. The caucus has also met with the committee responsible for reviewing key faculty personnel matters and has made clear the biases embedded in tenure and promotion processes that work against racialized faculty. We have courageously made racism visible and spoken out in various spaces and places (panels, webinars, leading reading circles, etc.) with the purpose of raising anti-racist consciousness. As conveners of the caucus, the authors are both strong advocates for social and racial justice at the institution in which we work, and in society, at large.

In meeting with senior administration, the urgency for necessary immediate policy reform to create and implement clear and fair practices that will ensure accountability, transparency and consistency in the hiring, tenure, and promotion of all faculty was emphasized. We are keenly aware of the abysmal retention rates for racialized faculty in the academy and consistently participate in college-wide and system-wide efforts to improve recruitment and retention of faculty from minoritized populations. Because of our experiences as racialized women in the academy we are especially committed to supporting faculty and students of color (Ramdeholl, 2019; Merriweather, 2019). In summer 2020, the affinity group launched a webinar series on racial and social justice to engage the wider community of faculty, staff, and students on practical action-oriented approaches that could be taken to improve equity and inclusion across the campus and in society at large.

Opportunities for Reflection and Dialogue

Racialized faculty challenge, reinvent, and reimagine academia in order to survive; and in doing so, can transform universities in powerful ways. This work should be encouraged and supported. We believe that this can be done by regularly bringing the community together to demonstrate clear commitment to righting historic wrongs that have persisted in the institution and to ensuring that they will not be reproduced in different ways. Reflection and dialogue that enable realistic and positive actions towards change must be constantly encouraged. Such actions include:

Conducting meaningful research and analysis to properly understand the challenges and recognize opportunities. Transparency in data collection, analysis, and reporting is essential to providing evidence on which to base action.

Investing in institutional structures that clearly demonstrate administration's commitment to anti-racist work; beginning with open, honest, "difficult conversations" about the histories of injustice experienced by racialized people – institutionally, nationally, and globally. After all, this is part of the mission of higher education – to engage in the free exchange of complex ideas and complicated thought to arrive at meaningful, practical solutions for the greater good.

Addressing extant systemic racism in higher education to abolish old ways of judging "merit" and thinking about equity and inclusion around scholarship

Innovating new approaches to supporting students from various backgrounds with wide-ranging levels of exposure to college preparation, largely as a result of enduring structural inequalities in K-12 education

Consistently investing in anti-racist work around pedagogy – to encourage faculty to critically reflect on how their teaching holds up in a globalized 21st century. This takes a strategic, not tactical, approach wherein commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is not reactive but proactive. A practical, wholesome outcome of this approach is increased support of faculty to be creative and do quality work that enriches the diversity of research and teaching offerings in the academy. Meanwhile, people will feel that the gifts and graces that they bring to the space are valuable, valued and cherished.

Faculty, administrators, staff and students alike must be engaged in the process of making the curriculum inclusive and representative of different sources of knowledge.

"Decolonizing the curriculum". Faculty, administrators, staff and students alike must be engaged in the process of making the curriculum inclusive and representative of different sources of knowledge. While students are demanding this shift and are eager to learn a variety of ideas from multiple sources, much of what will be uncovered may be *new* to many across the institution. Faculty and

administrators must commit to new ways of research and pedagogy to make their work current and ensure that biased practices are identified and eliminated – in theory and practice. Further, scholars must become culturally competent and critically assess and acknowledge the ways that their respective disciplines have maintained racism and exclusionary practices over time.

These opportunities have the potential to be truly transformative and allows for a new history of the institution to be written. Ultimately, all who become a part of the college will recognize the results of good faith efforts to making the institution anti-racist, inclusive and equitable for all it seeks to serve. Faculty, staff and students will feel a sense of belonging and representation in all aspects of the institution's work – from marketing to recruitment, admissions to graduation, curriculum range and scope to equitable learning outcomes, and from hiring to retention and promotion.

Drawing on anti-oppression/anti-racist frameworks, informed by emancipatory paradigms like Black liberation theology and Womanist theology, this article unpacks the story of a newly formed racialized faculty caucus at SUNY Empire State College that is engaged with the institution's administration in working towards achieving racial and social justice.

Achieving the goals of liberation, equality and equity, as permitted by Black liberation theology and Womanist Theology, means that not only would access and distribution of resources be equitable across an institution but all constituents within the organization would enjoy full support to develop and exercise their inherent capacities and be included to fully participate in the

life of the organization at all levels. Meanwhile, within affinity groups like the RFC, members are afforded space to reflect on their own anti-oppression practice, share expertise with each other, and inspire change in their individual locations.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on anti-oppression/anti-racist frameworks, informed by emancipatory paradigms like Black liberation theology and Womanist theology, this article unpacks the story of a newly formed racialized faculty caucus at SUNY Empire State College (ESC) that is engaged with the institution's administration in working towards achieving racial and social justice. The caucus is becoming a space of mutual solidarity that engenders and supports the development of policies that produce equity, inclusion and justice in faculty recruitment, retention, awareness, advocacy and community-building. By exposing and challenging long-held assumptions about the superiority of whiteness embedded in institutional policies and procedures, the racialized faculty caucus has a potentially transformative and liberating effect for its members and the institution at large. The work of the RFC involves immense emotional labor on the part of racialized faculty involved in this work which is not counted on any committee or tenure or promotion checklist. Nevertheless, we believe racial justice as the most important struggle of our lifetimes, and we continue to make the road by walking.

Serious attention to the demands and recommendations of the racialized faculty caucus can bring about a more honest, open, and just workplace which is beneficial to all who have a stake in the growth and survival of the college. Once people know that the guiding ethos is anti-oppressive at its core, transparency and trust improve, and this creates a better working environment for everyone. A heightened sense of trust and transparency means that racialized people can work without feeling that they are at the whim and sentiment of their white peers. Racialized faculty can know that there are processes in place that will honestly and fairly address their concerns when white colleagues' behaviors are injurious, and white co-workers will know the exact consequences of engaging in racist behavior against their racialized peers. As womanist theologian Katie G. Cannon advises,

Moral agents must evaluate every situation as to whether it contributes to or impedes the growth of human personality and genuine community. Their task is to determine whether inalienable rights are granted or denied. Ethical living requires an intolerance of civil arrangements that result in the horrors of racism, gender discrimination, economic exploitation, and widespread cruelty.

The Racialized Faculty Caucus at SUNY Empire State College holds the academy to its role and responsibility as one of society's moral agent and finds Rev. Dr. Cannon's words precise and instructive. When justice, equity and inclusion are institutionalized goals and practices that everyone has to perform within higher education, because their job and the life of the institution depend on them, a culture shift is most likely, and employees will find unique ways to contribute positively to the cause. Until then, we continue the work of exposing and ending racism and its many manifestations in conference rooms and classrooms across the campus.

REFERENCES

- Adam, Barry D. (1978). *The survival of domination: Inferiorization and everyday life* (Copyright 1978 ed.). Elsevier.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bell, D., & Alexander, M. (2018). *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (Revised ed.). Basic Books.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). *The White racial innocence game*. *Racism Review: Scholarship and Activism Towards Racial Justice*. Retrieved from <http://www.racismreview.com/blog2015/11/12/white-racial--innocence-game/>
- Brookfield, S. D. (2018). *Teaching Race: How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge Racism* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cannon, K.G. (2006). *Black Womanist Ethics* (Reprint ed.). Wipf and Stock.
- Cone, J. H. (2011). *A Black Theology of Liberation - Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (40th Anniversary ed.). ORBIS.
- Frankenberg, R. (Ed.) (1997). *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Duke University Press.
- Gutierrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y. F., Gonzalez, C. G., & Harris, A. P. (2012). *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press.
- Guy, T. (2002). Culture as context for adult education: The need for culturally relevant adult education. In T. Guy (Ed.), *Providing culturally relevant adult education: A challenge for the twenty first century* (pp. #s). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Lazos, S. (2012). Are student teaching evaluations holding back women and minorities? In G. Gutierrez y Muhs, Y Niemann, C. Gonzalez, & A. Harris, *Presumed incompetent* (pp. 164-185). Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.
- Merriweather, L. (2019). The ontological we as prescription for Black female faculty surviving and thriving in the academy. In D. Ramdeholl (Ed.), *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education, Understanding social*

- justice: Learning and movements in adult education* 2019(164) (pp. 71-82). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20357>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, and academic rank: Fall 2013, fall 2015, and fall 2016* (Table 315.2). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_315.20.asp
- SUNY Empire State College. (2019). Proposal to participate in “Promoting Recruitment, Opportunity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Growth (PRODI-G) Initiative”.
- Ramdeholl, D. (2019). Whose social justice? Social movements for whom? In D. Ramdeholl (Ed.), *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education, Understanding social justice: Learning and movements in adult education* 2019(164), pp. 135-144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20362>
- Sanders, C. J. (1994). Womanist Ethics: Contemporary trends and themes. *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 14, 299–305. <https://doi.org/10.5840/asce19941419>
- Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). “We are all for diversity, but”: How faculty hiring committees reproduce Whiteness and practical suggestions for how they can change. *Harvard Education Review*, 87(4), 557-580. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-87.4.557>
- Sissel, P., & Sheared, V. (2001). Opening the gates: Reflections on power, hegemony, language, and the status quo. In V. Sheared & P. Sissel (Eds), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education*. (pp. 3 – 14). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Solorzano, D. G. (2002) *Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research*. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, 23-44. doi:10.1177/107780040200800103
- Williams, D. (1995). Womanist Theology. In *Women’s Visions* (p. 119). World Council of Churches.
- Young, I. M., & Allen, D. S. (2011). *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Revised ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Young, I. M., & Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Responsibility for Justice (Oxford Political Philosophy)* (Reprint ed.). Oxford University Press



Nadine V. Wedderburn, Ph.D., *SUNY Empire State College*, is Associate Professor of Public Affairs at SUNY Empire State College, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. She is Co-Convener of the Racialized Faculty Caucus at SUNY Empire State College.

Dianne Ramdeholl, *SUNY Empire State College*, is an Associate Professor of adult education at SUNY Empire State College in the School for Graduate Studies and co-convener of the Racialized Faculty Caucus at SUNY Empire State College. Before joining SUNY, she was a grassroots adult literacy practitioner for over twenty years, working with community-based organizations. Committed to adult education for democratic social change and justice-centered practice and research, Dianne's work has been grounded in developing educational projects with marginalized populations. She has edited four volumes of *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* (Wiley) that all focus on racial and social justice education in adult/higher education. She is also the author of *Adult Literacy in a New Era: Reflections from the Open Book* (Paradigm/Routledge, 2011), an oral history study of a Freirian inspired adult literacy program in Brooklyn. She has written about race/racism in higher education and the struggles of racialized faculty and students within that context.

