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The Academic Freedom Double Standard: “Freedom” for Courtiers, Suppression for Critical Scholars

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Abstract

Academics are told that tenure and academic freedom protect us whenever we speak out and pursue political or provocative research. But more often than not, this autonomy is not afforded faculty who are of the wrong political persuasion, “race,” or religion. Suppression of academic freedom is especially pronounced for socially defined black faculty who critically examine white supremacy. This essay uses a cultural lens to examine why academic freedom is conditional and how its contingency is used to ensure that most faculty will not use their teaching and scholarship to foment the social seeds necessary to mobilize revolt against systemic oppressions.

Speaking and writing about critical truths in the US academy can subject truth-tellers to ridicule, persecution, suffering, and even death. Despite such heavy suppression, some critical scholars¹ find the courage to identify and name white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism² as the source of ordinary people’s *immiseration*. Critical scholars undertake the mission of exposing capitalism’s deeply rooted structures of oppression so we can begin creating and preserving a human-centered rather than materialist-centered society. Critical scholars use their expertise and information to collaborate with the oppressed, developing our collective sense of agency to eliminate all systems of oppression (including racism, heteropatriarchy, and

capitalism). Rather than speak truth to oppressors—who are really not interested in facts countering their fallacious supremacy narratives—critical intellectuals speak truth to the so-called powerless. This is a formidable task given that oppressed people generally internalize the oppressors’ negative understandings of ourselves, leading many of us to capitulate and comport with systems of oppression.

I count myself among a few intellectuals critical of oppression who find ourselves out of place in an academy valuing only thought and teaching that legitimates systems of oppression. I was thrust into the public limelight after two posts on my personal social media accounts following the not-guilty verdict for the police officer who murdered Philando Castile in Minneapolis and the subsequent Seattle police killing of Charleena Lyles, who was three months pregnant, after she phoned the police to report an attempted burglary at her home. Such consistent, systemic, extrajudicial killing of black people in the US has enraged me for as long as I can remember with virtually nothing being done by those who believe themselves to be “white”³ to hold police accountable for murdering us. Their wholesale inaction suggests that a vast majority of self-identified “whites” authorize the police to do whatever is necessary to protect white supremacy and the white license⁴ it gives them.

To liberate oppressed people’s minds and bodies from oppression, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde intellectual Amilcar Cabral noted that the first step is for the oppressed to reject oppressors’ conceptions of themselves and their reality. By making this break, the oppressed eschew the assumed supremacy of oppressors’ culture. For Cabral, oppressed people’s affirmation of our culture prepares us for the act of rejecting the internalized personality imposed on us by systems of oppression. Culture carries the seeds of revolt because it is a reservoir of people’s history that evolves and equips them with a repertoire of existing and newly created reactions to sociopolitical and economic events.⁵ Cabral understood that societal systems of oppression, like white supremacy, facilitate their domination through organized control of oppressed people’s historical understandings and cultural lives. Through their systems of oppression, oppressors project their history and culture as normative to facilitate oppressed people’s internalization of hegemonic ways of knowing and being. In this way, the oppressed become subjects who operate as accomplices in their own oppression. Though the oppressed retain some agency in opposing their subjection, the powerful social currents and material forces of systems of oppression pressure most into submitting to its omnipresent hegemony. Yet oppressed people’s cultures persistently incubate the elements of resistance—which is why oppressors and their systems of oppression relentlessly work to deny the oppressed their cultural agency. For oppressors and their courtiers know they must control the cultural and ideological processes of civil society to secure people’s compliance with their dominance. For civil society within the cultural and historical context of systemic oppression nurtures critical thinking that questions the ordinariness of oppression.

We Americans live in a nation immersed in a web of lies about itself that most citizens accept as fact. For instance, most Americans do not question the harebrained national lie that the United States is “the land of the free and home of the brave,” even though history and our everyday experiences categorically contradict this claim. As the late Fannie Lou Hamer noted, racially oppressed people in the United States know well that we are not in the “land of the free and the home of the brave”⁶ but, rather, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it, in “the land of the thief and home of the [en]slaved.”⁷ For over four centuries and counting, genocidal settler colonialism and white supremacy have functioned as organizing pillars of life in the United States. Given this fact racially oppressed groups, particularly socially defined black people, experience limited-to-no rights. Though the civil rights movement and other protest movements opened up more space for the oppressed to practice our rights as human beings, this development was short-lived. A “white” heteropatriarchy capitalist backlash commenced in the 1970s to decrease the struggle for basic human rights using mass incarceration (law and order policies and the drug war). This counterattack also included efforts to “resecure” control over universities, which were thought to house faculty whose teaching and research subverted white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. The “white” wealthy .01 percent and their minions mounted this assault on the professoriate knowing that controlling knowledge is far more effective at securing their power than brute force. In other words, they realized that conditioning the minds of the oppressed through higher education instruction ensured their submission to domination and exploitation. Indeed, a central element of oppression is epistemological oppression. For as historian Carter G. Woodson observed, “When you control a [person’s] thinking you do not have to worry about [their] actions. You do not have to [tell them] not to stand here or go yonder. [They] will find their ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send [them] to the back door. [They] will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, [they] will cut one for [their] special benefit. [Their] education makes it necessary.”⁸

Culture’s power as a liberating tool is evident among the few intellectuals in the US academy of higher education willing to challenge the normality of power and oppression. Oppressors fear professors who inform the public of the structural history and workings of oppression and the counterhegemonic actions and ideas emerging to repulse it. White supremacist organizations—among which I include the Liberty Institute, Turning Point USA, Campus Reform, Daily Caller, The Blaze, Fox News, the *Washington Times*—perpetrate terroristic targeting and smear campaigns against these scholars to pressure them to remain silent, self-censor themselves, or moderate their speech, teaching, and writing about systemic oppressions. Similar to the response of twentieth-century critical black intellectuals and scholars, like Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, to terroristic practices waged against them, twenty-first-century critical scholars’ refusal to accept the reigning hierarchal ordering systems invariably leads to our public rebuke and accusations of preaching hate against

oppressors. In short, critical intellectuals are framed as threats to the oppressive status quo. Our scholarship, teaching, and social media conversations are deliberately misconstrued using untrue narratives circulated throughout the white supremacy media network to stir up “white rage.”⁹

We are told that tenure and academic freedom protect us when we speak out and pursue political or provocative research. The autonomy afforded both tenured and, less reliably, untenured faculty members in their capacity as teachers and scholars fulfilling the academic mission of colleges or universities is what is commonly known as academic freedom. With academic freedom, faculty supposedly retain many liberties: freedom to decide our line of inquiry, choose research topics and methodologies, create, curate, teach, learn, disseminate scholarship and creations, criticize institutions (especially our university administrations), express our views extramurally, and experience freedom from censorship.¹⁰ By no means is the preceding list exhaustive; there are many other academic freedoms faculty supposedly possess. Tenure is also designed to shield professors from reprisals, such as those from trustees, donors, and administrators who try to use their money and influence to block or fire academics they do not like or with whom they disagree. For those without tenure, academic freedom provides a modicum of confidence that university administrators will not fire them when they exercise their rights as scholars and teachers.

Despite the tenure system, academics, especially contingent faculty, often lose their jobs when they challenge power. Because regents, trustees, and senior administrators focus on the financial bottom line, they often give more weight to wealthy donors’ interests than those of faculty and students. Most of them approach higher education as a business, though it is not. Education in the United States generally operates as a nonprofit endeavor. Professors are not vendors, and students are not customers but rather neophytes of higher learning whom universities and colleges help to learn and think, so higher education should not be entangled in a for-profit relationship. The education of a student is about much more than merely securing a diploma; it’s also about furthering community, nation, and the planet. College and university presidents lose sight of this laudable mission when currying favor with donors. Neoliberal cuts to public and educational spending in the last few decades have ensured that a university president’s primary job is to raise money, an obligation that administrators assume is incompatible with letting faculty speak freely about systemic oppression. Through their operation universities bolster the hegemony of systems of oppression, muting any who fight against what they protect.¹¹ Consequently, when given a choice between defending the principles of academic freedom or bowing to the demands of their benefactors, college administrators choose the latter.

Even the pretense that universities are havens of academic freedom for professors is never fully extended to faculty who are of the wrong political persuasion, “race,” or religion. Suppression of academic freedom is

especially pronounced for socially defined black faculty who critically examine white supremacy. Sometimes when we attempt to exercise our academic freedom, we are harassed, physically threatened, and warned that we are in danger of losing our jobs because our research, lecturing, and writing about racial oppressors and systemic racism offends self-identified “whites.” The only scholars who truly enjoy academic freedom are those, regardless of their racial designation, who affirm white supremacy’s hegemony.

When socially defined black faculty dare to speak and write truthfully about the collusion of self-identified “whites” in sustaining systemic white racism, we are attacked and maligned. Such vile efforts of silencing by far-right and liberal white supremacists are inverted to support the free speech and academic freedom of academicians espousing racism. Clearly, this is a profound double standard of academic freedom. The true goal of these new “free speech” campaigns is to silence faculty who seek to eliminate white supremacy and promote those who work to shore it up. The fact is academia is a site of lies that hides truths from itself and the public. These may be lies about the university and its increasing dependence on wealthy donors who dictate who is hired and fired, what is taught, and what can and cannot be said or taught as well as lies about how students, faculty, and staff from racially oppressed groups are actually treated as opposed to how we are portrayed by these institutions to those outside of them.

This is what I posted:

June 18, 2017 9:27 PM EST: It is past time for the racially oppressed to do what people who believe themselves to be ‘white’ will not do, put an end to the vectors of their destructive mythology of whiteness and their white supremacy system.
#LetThemFuckingDie

June 18, 2017 9:36 PM EST: I’m fed the fuck up with self-identified ‘whites’ daily violence directed at immigrants, Muslim, and sexual and racially oppressed people. The time is now to confront these inhuman assholes and end this now.

As a critical white supremacy scholar, my research and teaching involves the deconstruction of white supremacy and its associated ideologies (such as “race,” whiteness, colorblindness, diversity, and inclusion) in order to liberate us all from its cruel and oppressive grip. Ideological conflict and speaking and writing straightforwardly are necessary if we truly want to rid the world of racial thinking and systemic white racism. What I wrote in my social media posts was deliberately misconstrued by white supremacist organizations like Campus Reform, Daily Caller, Fox News, and the *Washington Times* to insinuate that I was calling for the death of all “white” people, when in fact I was exhorting for the elimination of whiteness and the system of

white supremacy. I used at the end of my post a hashtag (#letthemfuckingdie) derived from a blog article written by Son of Baldwin titled “Let Them Fucking Die”¹² (in which the author clearly specified he was only referring to racial bigots not all self-identified “whites”) so I could be in on conversations with other people using the hashtag in their posts. This attribution and social media method for identifying posts on the same topic was misconstrued by drivers of “white outrage,” as my calling for the death of *all* self-identified “whites.”

This “white outrage” manifested itself in a torrent of death threats and harassing taunts by way of email, social media in-boxing and posts, voicemail, and written letters, which the college where I am employed further exacerbated through unsupportive press releases.¹³ The college president publicly criticized me for “poor judgment,” especially for using the hashtag, and tasked the dean of faculty with usurping faculty governance through a review of whether my posts violated nonexistent “college policies and procedures.” The college administration’s use of their own review, thereby, circumvented the authority and power of the appropriate faculty committee—the Academic Freedom Committee—for adjudicating their claim that my extramural social media utterances were not protected by academic freedom. Thus the administration’s review was in violation of AAUP standards and the college’s faculty manual for the agreed upon grievance process.

The college’s refusal to support and acknowledge my academic freedom fueled further attacks against my family and me. Virtually no effort was made by the drivers of “white rage” to engage what my posts were arguing. Most importantly, the college quite forcefully refused to acknowledge the importance of what I identify in my posts as empirical fact, the president’s attack on me precluded this possibility. It did not matter that I was calling for the destruction of white supremacy and its plethora of ideologies that induce epistemic violence. No effort was made to understand white supremacy (a system) as differing from whiteness (an ideology) and “white” (a mythical racial category). Nor was any effort made to grasp that “race” is the fictitious meaning given to insignificant phenotypical differences to rank order human worth and allot status. As such, “race” is a historically specific ideology created to organize a definite set of social relations anchored in capitalist systems of production for the explicit purpose of exploiting racialized “Others” around the globe. The ideologies of “race” and whiteness cultivate and engender racial identities and beliefs in individuals that manifest as systemic practices and actions experienced by the racially oppressed as systemic white racism.

From the viewpoint of a critical scholar of white supremacy, whiteness is not about phenotype; it is a social marker for allegiance to power relations grounded in “race.” It is internalized and accepted as normal by both self-identified “whites” and the racially oppressed.¹⁴ White supremacy, as a historically based system of exploitation and oppression, functions to maintain “white” wealth, power, and license. As a type of

systemic oppression, white supremacy is used by self-identified “whites” to exercise control over the racially oppressed. Racism is not merely a manifestation of individual racial prejudice; it is a system of power relations legitimated by racial ideology. Thus, it is best to bear in mind that white supremacy cannot be eliminated merely by combating individual bigots. Its structural sources must be annihilated. Without their destruction, white supremacy’s omnipresence will continue to lead some people to imagine themselves to be “white.”

Extreme right-wing billionaire Charles Koch readily admitted the importance of controlling faculty and knowledge production in a 1974 speech he gave as chairperson of the Institute for Humane Studies:¹⁵

We have supported the very institutions from which the attack on free markets emanate [*sic*]. Although much of our support has been involuntary through taxes, we have also contributed voluntarily to colleges and universities on the erroneous assumption that this assistance benefits businesses and the free enterprise system, even though these institutions encourage extreme hostility to American business. We should cease financing our own destruction and follow the counsel of David Packard, former Deputy Secretary of Defense, by supporting only those programs, departments or schools that “contribute in some way to our individual companies or to the general welfare of our free enterprise system.”¹⁶

This view led the wealthy few to successfully push for the defunding of universities and the establishment, as I mentioned earlier, of a donor network and organizations to spread the “gospel” of white supremacist heteropatriarchal neoliberalism. These far-right neoliberal billionaires, their organizations, and courtiers oppose any scholarship and teaching that expose the true working of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism. The so-called liberal or progressive political wing also works to subvert critical scholars who question the normativity of whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. They attempt to undermine and delegitimize critical scholars by using less overt means to make it appear as if they are not complicit in upholding systems of oppression. Such nefarious actions are rampant in the academy because most academics do not want to confront oppressive systems; rather they seek acceptance through obsequious actions.

Even when academics are aware that they crave incorporation and recognition by the powers that be, concrete structural incentives like job security, promotion, research funding support, salaries, and benefits move most to refrain from opposing systemic oppression. They delude themselves into believing an effective resistance to systemic oppression can be mounted without risking their livelihood. Such academics fail to grasp that they can only retain their integrity and humanity through bold collective opposition to systems of oppression. The fact is, struggling against oppression is irrational because we are socially conditioned to

believe it is wrong to resist. Consequently, battling oppression is an act of conscience against societal consensus that contradicts one's own "better judgment," requiring academics to relocate our conscience, resuscitate it if need be, and personally rescue it if necessary.¹⁷ Without this undertaking we lack the wherewithal to fight systemic oppression when confronted by obstinate oppressors and their courtiers.

Despite being at a heightened risk for being targeted for their work against oppression and oppressors, critical scholars, particularly those who are untenured, contingent, and racially oppressed, carry on with our scholarship and teaching because of our resistant conscience. Our steadfast commitment to the oneness of humanity is viewed by white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalists as a threat to their rationalistic exploitative systems of oppression that exclude, expropriate, appropriate, co-opt, and kill for their egotistical and inhuman material gain. They attempt to normalize their tyranny through deflective language practices that, to their chagrin, critical scholars and teachers deconstruct and expose as instruments for securing everyday people's consent to their own exploitation and oppression. For example, epistemologically violent terms like *minority*, *inclusion*, *diversity*, *equity*, *tolerance*, *multiculturalism*, and a host of other verbal/linguistic gymnastics are used to divert the racially oppressed from recognizing their acceptance, and use of such verbiage means that they are participating in their own oppression.¹⁸ Language is never neutral because it is inscribed in power relations in terms that shape our thinking and perceptions about our reality. To grasp this dynamic, just ask who has the power to set the parameters for what constitutes "diversity," who determines who is a "minority," and who defines "inclusion" and "equity." Such power queries reveal that overt and timid white supremacists are not serious about eliminating their system of domination. Rather these verbal/linguistic gymnastic schemes legitimize systemic white racism, exonerate self-identified "whites," and normalize racialized cruelty. This is the outcome because "white" as an imagined identity and whiteness as ideology are conditioned by the material systemic practices of white supremacy. The only way to overcome this racialized quagmire is to name and problematize the racial subjectivity of "whites" in order to open up space for abolishing the cultural and structural feedback loops sustaining systemic white racism.

Humanity and human knowledge advancement cannot thrive without dissent and critical inquiry. Thus it is imperative that faculty in the academy reject the conditional academic freedom college administrators and trustees offer, thereby securing true academic autonomy that protects our rights as professors to challenge and question the existing state of affairs through our speech, research, teaching, and public engagement. To arrive at this end, faculty must not merely say we believe in academic freedom, we must practice and defend it. We must reject the status quo of systemic oppression, no matter how powerfully endorsed by colleges and universities, if we truly desire to advance human knowledge and aspire to foster a world grounded in human rights and decency. That is, faculty must force our institutions to reject donations with political strings

attached, unionize to ensure we are not relegated to merely sharing our views or perspectives with administrators and trustees but rather are leveraging the powers of shared decision-making, and ensure that any administrator not supportive of academic freedom never gains the trust and compliance of faculty anywhere. These are just a few of the first steps academics can take to ensure higher education fulfills its only mission—to educate. For in an academic environment in which knowledge and understanding are the goals, professors are accountable to discover and then to tell the truth, and to encourage students and the public to do the same. We cannot shirk our responsibility to teach, speak, and write openly and honestly, especially when the truths we reveal generate pushback from oppressors seeking to sustain their systems of oppression. If truths are left unwritten and unspoken, faculty dishonor humanity and our chosen profession. For silence, when there is something that needs to be said, is as much a deception and betrayal as a spoken or written lie.

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Notes

¹ Critical scholars are oriented toward not merely understanding and explaining society but also critiquing and changing it.

² This phrase assumes oppressions to be constituted by separate and distinct but interrelated logics. White supremacy and heteropatriarchy are the building blocks of neoliberal capitalism and empire. For a more detailed understanding of how these systems of oppression interlock and mutually constituted one another, see Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” in *We Have Not Been Moved: Resisting Racism and Militarism in 21st Century America*, edited by Elizabeth Martínez, Matt Meyer, and Mandy Carter, 285–94 (New York: PM, 2012).

³ “White” is a philosophically problematic term that is the matrix or the angle from which whiteness is made possible. To understand what the term “white” alludes to it is necessary to ask what it is and is not. It is an imaginary made real through the actions and attitudes of people who imagine themselves to be “white.” In doing so, these people project to the world their advantaged status in ways that reinforce racial order. So though “white” is problematic, it is a sociologically important descriptor for grasping how it is utilized to solidified the reality systemic white racism.

⁴ White *license* rather than white *privilege* is a better naming descriptor because folks who believe they are “white” are given authority by white supremacy to think and act in racist ways. I take this term from philosopher Lewis Gordon, who used it during a 2017 radio interview in Cape Town, South Africa.

⁵ Ronald W. Walters, *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

⁶ Fannie Lou Hamer, “I’m Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,” speech delivered with Malcolm X at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, December 20, 1964.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Niagara Movement: Address to the Country,” in *Pamphlets and Leaflets by W. E. B. Du Bois*, edited by Herbert Aptheker (White Plains, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1986), 63.

⁸ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, [1933] 1990).

⁹ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

¹⁰ Shannon Dea, "Getting the Story Right on Academic Freedom and Campus Free Expression," *Canadian Philosophical Association*, June 7, 2018, www.acpcpa.ca/blogs/getting-the-story-right-on-academic-freedom-and-campus-free-expression.

¹¹ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹² Son of Baldwin, "Let Them Fucking Die," *Medium*, June 16, 2017, medium.com/@SonofBaldwin/let-them-fucking-die-c316eee34212.

¹³ For the Trinity College president's press releases, see <http://www.trincoll.edu/NewsEvents/NewsArticles/pages/WilliamsUpdatesSummer2017.aspx>.

¹⁴The writings of Martiniquais psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon note that socially defined blacks are enslaved by our inferiority while self-identified "whites" are enslaved by their superiority, leading both people to behave in accordance with their neurotic racial orientations. By "enslaved" Fanon meant that black and nonblack people are made less human and less free by white supremacy. True liberation, he argued, comes with the death of whiteness—an oppressive ideology and category of white supremacy. Both self-identified "whites" and socially defined blacks can only be emancipated when we cease to put into action racist ideas as practice. This requires both social groups to stop believing in imagined "races" and whiteness, and acting on their belief in white supremacy. For more details, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967).

¹⁵ An extremist libertarian nonprofit organization established by F. A. "Baldy" Harper in 1961. It is housed on the campus of George Mason University with the stated goal of "championing classical liberal ideas and the scholars who advance them."

¹⁶ Connor Gibson, "To Charles Koch, Universities Are Propaganda Machines," *Huffington Post Blog*, January 27, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/connor-gibson/to-charles-koch-universit_b_9090404.html.

¹⁷ Kim C. Domenico, "Outing the Dark Beast Hiding behind Liberal Hope," *Counterpunch*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/07/13/outing-the-dark-beast-hiding-behind-liberal-hope>.

¹⁸ Noel A. Cazenave, *Conceptualizing Racism: Breaking the Chains of Racially Accommodative Language* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).