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Commentary

Disrupting the Big Lie: Higher Education and Whitelash in a Post/Colorblind Era

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Abstract: James Baldwin (1998) described whiteness as "the big lie" of American society where the belief in the inherent superiority of white people allowed for, emboldened, and facilitated violence against People of Color. In the post-Civil Rights era, scholars reframed whiteness as an invisible, hegemonic social norm, and a great deal of education scholarship continues to be rooted in this metaphor of invisibility. However, Leonardo (2020) theorized that in a post-45 era of "whitelash" (Embrick et al., 2020), "post-colorblindness" is more accurate to describe contemporary racial stratification whereby whiteness is both (a) more visible and (b) increasingly appealing to perceived injuries of "reverse racism." From this perspective, we offer three theoretical concepts to guide the future of whiteness in education scholarship. Specifically, we argue that scholars critically studying whiteness in education must explicitly: (1) address the historicity of whiteness, (2) analyze the public embrace of whiteness, and (3) emphasize the material consequences of whiteness on the lives of People of Color. By doing this, we argue that critical scholars of race in higher education will more clearly understand the changing nature of whiteness while avoiding the analytical trap of invisibility that is decreasingly relevant.

Keywords: critical whiteness studies; higher education; racism

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1. Introduction

James Baldwin famously referred to whiteness as the "big lie" of American society (Glaude, 2020) [1]. Broadly, Baldwin (1998) [2] was critiquing the ideologies and structures of society that rendered whiteness as inherently superior relative to People of Color. In particular, there were two sets of lies central to Baldwin's claim. The first was the inherent inferiority of Black people, etched into the white American consciousness as inherently subhuman and deviations from the universal marker of personhood—whiteness. Believing in the lie made the dehumanization of Black bodies justifiable for white people. The second set of lies produced a distorted sense of U.S. history, one that is inherently innocent and always progressing towards justice and freedom (Glaude, 2020) [1]. The consequences of this lie are significant, largely because they delegitimized any truthful or accurate reckoning of the historical record of white supremacy and its violent effects on People of Color. Writing about Baldwin's desire to bear witness against these lies, Glaude (2020) [1] explained:

Tell the story. Make it real for those who refuse to believe that such a thing can happen/has happened/is happening here. Bring the suffering to the attention of those

who wallow in willful ignorance. In short, shatter the illusion of innocence at every turn and attack all the shibboleths the country holds sacred (p. 53).

Since Baldwin's time, scholars have argued that whiteness has evolved from a marker of inherent superiority to a marker of social normality, but still maintaining its social dominance (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi and Winant, 2015) [3–5]. For example, in describing colorblind racism, Bonilla-Silva (2018) [6] stated most white people (and some People of Color) conceptualize race as an irrelevant factor shaping people's lives and claim to not notice skin color. (The term "colorblind" has been critiqued for being ableist, and Annamma et al. (2017) [7] specifically call for using "color-evasive" as a non-ableist replacement. We are sensitive to this critique, and we are faced with a dilemma. *Colorblind* is the term two key authors (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, 2018; and Leonardo, 2020) [4,6,8] use, and it would be inappropriate to change their verbiage even with the ableism embedded in the term. Therefore, we use it to represent the term's use accurately, but not as a reflection of our own beliefs.) Within this framework, the "big lie" of whiteness persisted via the persistent denial that race was even a societal issue. Here, again, the lie persisted and functioned to elevate the moral goodness of the United States as a post-racial society at the expense of an accurate telling of the racial structure. Subsequently, this elevation of the moral goodness of the United States ensured that disparities in wealth, education, and employment were understood as personal failures of BIPOC communities, rather than as systems designed to serve white interests. While the content of the lie changed, the underlying structure and logic remained. More recently, Leonardo (2020) [8] extended Bonilla-Silva's analysis by arguing that the era of Trump ushered in a "post-colorblindness," in which whiteness has become more salient. His theorization placed a greater focus on white racial anxiety within a changing national context. In this instance, the "big lie" centers around white racial aggrievement—the result of a distorted sense of history and constructing People of Color as inferior. This context serves as the backdrop for the rise of contemporary white nationalism and race-based hate crimes across the country (Embrick et al., 2020; Glaude, 2020) [1,9].

Though colorblind frameworks continue to shape racial discourse, scholars have contended additional frameworks are necessary for understanding contemporary racial dynamics (Doane, 2017) [10]. Several theorists have used historical contexts to ground their critical analyses of the recent resurgence of racist hate, which they have framed as *whitelash* (Embrick et al., 2020; Smith, 2020) [9,11]. Common across these constructions is the premise that this "new racial speech" (Leonardo, 2020, p. 19) [8] stems from a white racial aggrievement in response to perceived or actual social progress for People of Color. The racial dynamics of larger society frequently play out on college campuses (Cabrera, 2019) [12], and it is from this orientation that we explore the relevance of "the big lie" and the subsequent whitelash to the study of whiteness within higher education scholarship.

We do this as a loving critique of the current body of knowledge to which each of us has contributed. Most commonly, critical whiteness research in higher education engages whiteness as a normative and invisible backdrop (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste & Irwin, 2020, Foste & Jones, 2020) [12–15]. Further, this body of literature largely does not take up the consequences of whiteness for People of Color. That is, they (we) have rendered visible how white supremacy is manifest and recreated within higher education contexts, but there have been very few analyses which then connect these analyses to the material conditions of minoritized college communities (Corces-Zimmerman & Cabrera, 2020) [16]. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to move beyond a 'whiteness is invisible' analytic to interrogate the sociopolitical conditions that make embracing whiteness not only possible, but critical to the maintenance of white supremacy and its harm to BIPOC communities in higher education. To accomplish this, we take up the notions of *whitelash* and *post-colorblindness* in proposing new directions for critical whiteness scholarship in higher education to disrupt the modern-day manifestations of the "big lie." Explicitly engaging with these lies offers important historical and social context for contemporary manifestations of whiteness on college and university campuses (Glaude, 2020) [1]. We

believe that in doing so critical scholarship on whiteness in higher education might capture more aptly, as Glaude (2020) [1] explained, the "complex relationship between history and memory, between what actually happened and the kinds of stories we tell about what happened and for what purpose" (p. 71). Accordingly, we argue that scholars should (1) address the historicity of whiteness, (2) analyze the public embrace of whiteness, and (3) emphasize the material consequences of whiteness on the lives of People of Color.

2. Theoretical Context: Whiteness and Critical Whiteness Studies

First, we differentiate between 'whiteness' and 'white people.' According to Leonardo (2009), "'Whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color. Whiteness is not a culture but a social concept" (pp. 169–170) [17]. Historically, white people in power formed whiteness to assimilate people of European descent into this social category as a way of discursively signaling the supposed racial superiority of white people over all other People of Color (Cabrera, 2017) [18]. This racialization supported the creation of structured white supremacy codified in property, law, education, literature, economics, politics, and virtually every arena of U.S. social life (Cabrera, 2019; Haney-López, 1996; Morrison, 1992) [12,19,20]. The omnipresence of whiteness led to the creation of critical whiteness studies (CWS), a loosely-related group of scholarship across disciplines that interrogates the oppressive power of whiteness in society (Cabrera, 2019) [12]. Many trace the origins of this work to W.E.B. Du Bois' (1920) [21] classic text *The Souls of White Folks*. Instead of offering an analysis of the effects of racism and racial violence on BIPOC communities, this work interrogated the methods of creating racial oppression.

From this orientation in CWS, this paper is theoretically grounded in Leonardo's (2020) [8] work on post-colorblindness and Smith (2020) [11] and Embrick and colleagues' (2020) [9] theorizing of whitelash—primary contributors to manifestations of the contemporary "big lie" of whiteness. Each offers important distinctions in the current racial project that represent departures from colorblind racism and the minimization of race by white people and institutions. First, many white people now embrace whiteness publicly as a racial identity (Leonardo, 2020) [8]. That is, whiteness is increasingly visible to white people as a marker of difference and, in turn, is outwardly expressed as a sense of group position. According to Leonardo, this shift in the visibility of whiteness among white individuals differs from Jim Crow-era discourses (that associated whiteness with personhood and humanity), as well as colorblind rhetoric (that insisted race was no longer a significant determinant of life chances). Thus, though whiteness has frequently been theorized as normative and invisible (to white people), white people are increasingly embracing a racial identity grounded in grievance and victimhood. Colorblind ideology cannot sufficiently account for such actions and behaviors.

Second, this public embrace of whiteness is fueled, in part, by what several scholars have described as *whitelash*—the "individual, institutional, and structural countermeasures against the dismantling of white supremacy or actions, real or imagined, that seek to remedy existing racial inequities" (Embrick and colleagues, 2020, p. 206) [9]. Tracing the use of this term to white politicians opposing the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Smith (2020) [11] argued whitelash has—historically and contemporarily—been based on the false premise among many white voters that racial inequality is the natural order and that white people should have control over the pace at which it is dismantled. Although there is a long historical record of white backlash to racial progress in the United States (Anderson, 2016; Smith, 2020) [11,22], both Leonardo (2020) [8] and Embrick et al. (2020) [9] noted we must recognize the unique social and political contexts that give rise to this particular expression of whiteness today. We might view this new whiteness (Leonardo, 2020) [8] as a response to a multitude of factors signaling a changing America, including the presidency of Barack Obama, increasing numbers of Women of Color in elected offices, feminism and calls for gender equity, contestation over historical symbols, movements for trans* rights, and the rise of Black Lives Matter. When processed through the "big

lie" of whiteness, these symbols of racial progress feed white aggrievement (Leonardo, 2020) [8]. In turn, this white racial aggrievement creates the social and cultural contexts for the production of whitelash on college campuses (Embrick et al., 2020; Smith, 2020) [9,11].

3. Foundations and Limitations of Current Higher Education Whiteness Literature

Critical whiteness scholarship in higher education shares a dominant focus on white people and mechanisms that sustain white supremacy; however, not all of it has been equally effective at disrupting the "big lie." Early works in the first wave of whiteness studies in higher education focused on white college students' processes of racial identity development and sought to inform practices for fostering a white racial identity marked by an increased self-awareness of racial privilege, an internally-derived understanding of white racial identity, and an interrogation of their racial socialization (Hardiman, 2001; Helms, 1995) [23,24]. These early works marked a significant point of departure from previous identity development scholarship in that they disrupted dominant assumptions of white people as race-less. Subsequent critical whiteness scholarship in higher education linked intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional dimensions of whiteness to white supremacy. These latter works expanded upon white racial identity development to consider how whiteness shapes institutional policies and practices; campus environments; and white college students' racial ideologies and racialized behaviors (e.g., Cabrera, 2014a, b, c; Foste & Jones, 2020; Gusa, 2010; Hikido and Murray, 2016; Linder, 2015; Tevis, 2020) [15,25–31]. While this wave was more intentionally centered on disrupting the "big lie" of whiteness, it did so without deeply analyzing the material effects of whiteness on BIPOC communities (Corces-Zimmerman & Cabrera, 2020) [16].

Our propositions are based on three critiques of the literature: (1) critical whiteness scholarship in higher education has largely not addressed the material impacts of whiteness on BIPOC communities, (2) the bulk of critical whiteness scholarship in higher education has theorized whiteness as an invisible unmarked backdrop (rather than a publicly embraced discourse), and (3) critical whiteness analyses in higher education are largely ahistorical.

3.1. Consequences of Whiteness on People of Color

The bulk of critical whiteness scholarship in higher education has centered the development of white people's racial allyship and anti-racist praxis to the exclusion of the adverse consequences of whiteness on BIPOC communities (Corces-Zimmerman & Cabrera, 2020) [16]. Scholarship that has theorized the latter largely exists outside of the critical whiteness in higher education canon. Despite the limited empirical work explicitly linking whiteness to People of Color's experiences in higher education, scholars have made conceptually-based arguments detailing how whiteness impacts People of Color through its embeddedness in institutional structures. For example, some have argued that whiteness has become a tool to operationalize campus diversity initiatives as a means of social control—suppressing campus resistance and exacting backlash against Black people working to advance racial equity (Carr et al., 2021; Williams and Tuitt, 2021) [32,33].

Beyond institutional structures, some scholars have theorized whiteness through a lens that explores its ruptures to the humanity of and relationality to People of Color. For example, whiteness in education has been positioned as a discourse that stifles Black joy, renders Black suffering and dehumanization as sites for white consumption and enjoyment, marks Black bodies as out-of-place, enables an emotional and spiritual detachment from People of Color, and facilitates feelings of disgust towards People of Color (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017; Dancy et al., 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Love, 2019; Matias and Zembylas, 2014; Whitehead, 2021) [34–39]. The material effects of these functions of whiteness on People of Color are their well-documented experiences with various forms of violence, pain, psychological distress, and sense of belonging in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2017; Irwin & Foste, 2021; Matias, 2015) [13,40,41]. Despite these material effects,

the bulk of the higher education whiteness scholarship is framed within the "invisibility" paradigm.

3.2. Whiteness as 'Invisible'

In addition to evading the consequences of whiteness on People of Color, CWS scholarship in higher education largely has not taken up the increasing and recent public embrace of whiteness. Instead, this body of work has frequently theorized whiteness as a normative, unmarked, and invisible (to white people) backdrop and aims to render it visible (Cabrera, 2014c; Cabrera et al., 2016) [27,42]. The metaphor of "invisibility" to describe whiteness stems from two important veins of scholarship. The first is Omi and Winant's (2015) [5] theory of racial formation where they argued whiteness in a post-Civil Rights era has been hegemonically rearticulated as a social norm instead of a marker of inherent racial superiority. In making this argument, Omi and Winant (2015) [5] did not suggest the Civil Rights movement eliminated white supremacy; rather, the changing legal landscape drove white supremacy underground to still maintain its social power over the lives of People of Color as an unnamed ("invisible") social force. Additionally, the metaphor of invisibility was central to Peggy McIntosh's (1989) [43] classic work, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." This text led to a massive uptake in the late 1990s and early 2000s about trainings and pedagogies dedicated to disrupting the "invisibility" of whiteness in educational spaces (Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2009) [17,44].

Contemporary analyses of whiteness in higher education have continued to rely upon constructions of whiteness as "invisible." For example, in an Association for the Study of Higher Education monograph entitled *Whiteness in higher education: The invisible missing link in diversity and racial analyses*, the authors largely frame whiteness as (only) a normative and invisible discourse that structures white supremacy in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2017) [13]. In another example, Cabrera (2014c) [27] used this discourse of whiteness to frame his analyses of white college men's racial views and render visible the ways in which white supremacy is reproduced in previously uninterrogated spaces on college campuses. Similarly, Hikido and Murray's (2016) [29] study named how white college students' understandings about diversity sustained whiteness in ways that reinforced its normality and invisibility. Gusa's (2010) [28] analysis of how whiteness structures campus environments used the metaphor of 'invisibility' in constructing *white blindness*—a "racial ideology that obscures and protects" (p. 477) white racial identity and privilege.

Common throughout the critical whiteness scholarship in higher education are efforts to 'reveal' and 'expose' structures of whiteness embedded within higher education. Although we contend that the normality of whiteness frequently serves to render the processes sustaining it imperceptible to those in power, framing whiteness as *only* invisible is fraught with problems. In critiquing this construction of whiteness as "invisible," Foste and Irwin (2020) [14] warned such framing—when applied uncritically—"ignores the lived experiences of People of Color with whiteness" (p. 448) for whom it is not always invisible. Identifying the normativity of whiteness (i.e., making the invisible, visible) was a central component of the higher education scholarship of the previous decade. However, this framing of the research—much of which we as authors have contributed to—does not address the more overt nature of whiteness in contemporary contexts (Embrick et al., 2020; Leonardo, 2020; Smith, 2020) [8,9,11]. Additionally, uncritically relying upon a 'whiteness as invisible' analysis can reinscribe white perspectives about whiteness and racism to preclude an in-depth understanding of how whiteness shapes People of Color's lived experiences. However, in addition to offering this critique about privileging white perspectives through a 'whiteness as invisible' discourse, we return to Leonardo's (2020) [8] theorization about post-colorblindness and the increasing salience and public embrace of white identity to ask: To what degree does invisibility accurately describe contemporary whiteness?

4. Propositions

In this paper, we offer three propositions to guide CWS research, theory, and practice in higher education in an era of post-colorblindness and emboldened white nationalism. In doing so we acknowledge that the rise of Donald Trump, white nationalism, and a public embrace of white identity politics by a significant number of white people have produced particular conditions previously unaccounted for in CWS in higher education work. The relentless and unending string of deadly violence enacted against Black bodies and other Bodies of Color should serve as an important reminder that whiteness work should not be an academic or abstract exercise, nor should it be primarily or exclusively concerned about the development of anti-racist white people. To be clear, the "big lie" of whiteness has created immeasurable harm to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and this harm should be the central organizing purpose behind CWS in higher education scholarship. From this premise, we offer the following propositions to guide the next generation of CWS scholarship within a post-colorblindness era.

4.1. Proposition #1: Address the Historicity of Whiteness

Our first proposition speaks directly to Baldwin's assertion of the big lie—notably, the racially progressive arc of U.S. history and the insistence that Black people are inherently less than human (Glaude, 2020) [1]. Writing about Baldwin's work, Glaude (2020) [1] described the ways in which he sought to bear witness to history in a way that made it virtually impossible for these lies to be promulgated by white people or, worse, internalized by young Black children. As such, in keeping with the tradition of Baldwin and other Scholars of Color who critiqued white supremacy long before an established field of CWS, we emphasize that whiteness should be appropriately historicized to recognize and name the enormity of white violence on BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. As Glaude (2020) [1] wrote, "like Baldwin, we have to bear witness to it all and tell the story of how we got here" (p. 55). Though a vast majority of CWS scholarship in higher education explores contemporary manifestations of whiteness, divorcing racist rhetoric, policies, and behaviors from the historical record serves to insist these are mere anomalies inconsistent with the values of the institution. Put otherwise, ahistorical accounts of whiteness make possible the all too frequent "this is not us" trope propagated by college and university presidents after the latest racist incident on their campuses. Thus, those who take up CWS work must write, research, and theorize in ways that invite readers in to make connections between the historical record of whiteness and its contemporary manifestations.

This undertaking is especially important work in our current times. As Embrick and colleagues (2020) [9] noted, whitelash is nothing new. White people have long pushed back against real or perceived racial progress for BIPOC communities (Anderson, 2016; Lipsitz, 2011) [22,45]. To understand the current political moment of whitelash, we must name the long historical record of white violence and intimidation that has manifested in response to racial progress. Carol Anderson (2016) [22] documented how, throughout history, white rage has consistently operated in reaction to "blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up" and argued "a formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions has consistently punished black resilience, black resolve" (pp. 3–4).

One of the most prominent examples of white rage, particularly against Black progress, was the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, in which an angry white mob ascended on the predominantly Black Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Framing this event as a riot and pointing to exclusionary clauses that named their lack of liability for claims in such cases, insurers denied Black Greenwood residents' financial restitution because of the massacre. As a result, this community could not rebuild and were denied opportunities for accruing generational wealth (Council, 2021) [46]. This massacre is one of the worst racial violations against Black humanity in the United States and remains largely unknown within the annals of U.S. history.

For these reasons, we name addressing the historicity of whiteness as a priority in CWS scholarship. Avoiding the Tulsa race massacre and countless other historical accounts

of the consequence of whiteness on People of Color (e.g., the Chinese massacre of 1871) allows communities that benefit from such acts to absolve themselves of any responsibility. Worse, these communities can become accustomed and desensitized to racial violence, which surely goes unchecked and unresolved. Furthermore, the outcomes of racial violence frequently become the responsibility of People of Color to wade through and heal from as if it was brought on by themselves. Because historically white institutions of higher education have historically reflected and produced whitelash, racial harms are bound to repeat themselves if campus communities are not educated about histories of racial harm and violence. By omitting these truths, institutions of higher education miss opportunities to prepare students to be informed and engaged citizens capable of disrupting white supremacy. In many ways, then, these omissions serve to exacerbate, rather than interrupt, the race-evasive, distorted sense of history that white students frequently consume in their pre-college communities. Acknowledging histories of racial harm through, for example, projects that encapsulate the racial histories of institutions and surrounding communities can serve as educational tools that provide campus communities with foundations for future action towards racial justice.

Indeed, an enduring feature of whiteness is reflected in the ways individual white people seek to disassociate themselves from the historical terror and violence enacted in the name of white supremacy. Such behaviors represent a deeply ingrained form of not knowing, or what scholars have described as epistemologies of ignorance (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997) [17,47,48]. Additionally, as Applebaum (2010) explained, such ignorance is not accidental, but socially sanctioned and produced. Put otherwise, ahistorical understandings of the United States' racial and racist history contribute to an active form of not knowing the violence and terror inflicted on BIPOC communities in the name of whiteness. Offering ahistorical analyses of whiteness in this current social moment of post-colorblindness and whitelash only further fuels such a disassociation. Those who take up CWS work in higher education should offer their readers, especially white readers, a historical foundation to make sense of current manifestations of whiteness and white supremacy. Drawing on works such as Wilder (2013) [49], Cole (2020) [50], and/or historical documents that shed light on the context under study can offer analyses of race and racism that both account for trends over time and make meaning of present-day outcomes.

Historical understandings of whiteness would also enhance practice. As a microcosm of the greater society, institutions of higher education are not exempt from the practices of white supremacy, whiteness, and racial violence. Early colleges and universities not only profited from the displacement of Indigenous peoples and enslaved labor (Wilder, 2013), but were created to protect and perpetuate white cultural norms, train clergy, and create and conserve the new ruling class (Arendale, 2011) [51]. A rich understanding of this historical context should better inform campus communities, including leadership, and help them make sense of modern-day manifestations of "the big lie" (e.g., when white nationalists ascended onto the University of Virginia campus with burning tiki torches, chanting their fear of displacement; Murphy, 2017) [52]. Accounting for history is not so much to recenter the needs of white people in CWS work, but to ensure that scholars appropriately account for the historical record of whiteness so that it becomes impossible to ignore.

4.2. Proposition #2: Analyze the Public Embrace of Whiteness

Those who take up critical whiteness work should consider what campus conditions and contexts make the overt, public embrace of whiteness possible. Though overt manifestations of white supremacy have always permeated college life, we concur with Leonardo (2020) [8] and Embrick and colleagues (2020) [9] who noted how the rise of the 45th President emboldened and legitimated such racist expressions and speech. How is whiteness embraced as a site of injury and positioned as a publicly embraced racial identity on campus (Embrick et al., 2020; Leonardo, 2020; Smith, 2020) [8,9,11]? Additionally,

what local contexts and conditions, both within our campuses and beyond, make this possible? For instance, scholars have consistently noted that a strong identification with white racial identity is grounded in white people's fear that they have something to lose (Jardina, 2019) [53]. As Jardina (2019) [53] explained, shifting demographic patterns in the United States signal "a potential new reality—one in which whites do not maintain a complete monopoly of power over the nation's economic, social, and political institutions" (p. 260). There are perhaps few institutions in the United States that are more central to the allocation of status, resources, and power than colleges and universities. Higher education represents an important site to examine white racial solidarity and the public uptake of white identity politics.

Beyond discussions of status allocation, college campuses have become some of the most notable sites for the public embrace of whiteness. Indeed, what happened in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia is merely one example of this public embrace of whiteness. This public embrace is also evident in the movement to ban educators from teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT) and The 1619 Project in schools across the U.S., including higher education. Moreover, opponents created a website and database to track which colleges and universities offered classes centered on CRT (Eustachewich, 2021) [54]. In short, the public embrace of whiteness is—in part—a response to perceived threats to status, resources, and power.

4.3. Proposition #3: Emphasize the Material Effects of Whiteness

In an era partially defined by such a public embrace of whiteness, scholars of critical whiteness should focus on the effects of whiteness. That is, CWS work must explicitly name the material effects of whiteness on the lives of Students, Faculty, and Staff of Color. A majority of CWS work in higher education has focused exclusively on white people (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste, 2019, 2020; Tevis, 2020) [12,13,31,55,56]. and has largely operated from an assumption that whiteness is normative and invisible to white people (Cabrera, 2019; Foste, 2019) [12,55]. However, just as Harper (2012) [57] pointedly noted that too often race is explored in higher education without a corresponding attention to racism, we argue that racial violence cannot be fully understood without a necessary attention to whiteness. In our work—be it research, teaching, or practice—we have all too frequently observed others reduce whiteness to an identity without a corresponding attention to the material consequences that investments in such a group position have on BIPOC in higher education. As such, in this current social moment, scholars must attend to the relationship between whiteness and different forms of racist and nativist harm targeting BIPOC communities in higher education (e.g., anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, anti-Asian and racism). In one example of such scholarship, Tevis and Croom (in press) [58] explored the relationship, in this instance, between whiteness and anti-Black racism in higher education to understand what is afforded or foreclosed on when the former, as a system, is not accounted for in conversations and analysis about the latter.

Our critique is not intended to discredit work that examines white peoples' relationships to race and whiteness. Many white scholars likely enter into critical whiteness work due to their own evolving understanding of race, whiteness, and white supremacy and thus seek to examine these systems of power among white students, faculty, and staff. Although we believe critically examining the ways in which whiteness influences white college students' racial attitudes or the development of policies at historically white institutions is useful, this work does not live up to its full potential if it does not also attend to the consequences of such attitudes or policies on racially minoritized communities in higher education. The earliest origins of work that critically scrutinized whiteness sought not to document white racial identity development or the racial consciousness of white people, but rather the physical, psychological, and material consequences of whiteness in the lives of People of Color (e.g., Baldwin, 1998; Du Bois, 1920; Haney-López, 1996; Morrison, 1992) [2,19–21].

Here, again, the writings of Baldwin are useful. In "A Letter to My Nephew," Baldwin (1998) pointedly noted what whiteness does to young Black children, how it strips them of humanity and dignity, and feeds them a lie about their own self-worth. He explained that white people were trapped "in a history in which they do not understand" (Baldwin, 1962, p. 8), [59] which had devastating consequences for Black communities:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of the matter is here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence. You were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do and how you could do it, where you could live and whom you could marry (Baldwin, 1962, p. 7) [59].

Baldwin's letter to his nephew is a telling example of what it means to gaze critically upon whiteness in ways that explicitly connect a nation founded upon a political system of white supremacy and the lived experiences of BIPOC people within such a system. Baldwin wrote about whiteness not in an abstract way, but in very real and concrete terms to prepare his young nephew, and by extension other Black children, for its effects. As critical whiteness work continues to grow in higher education scholarship, we urge researchers and theorists to center the pain, trauma, and violence inflicted by whiteness on BIPOC communities.

In our own work, we have attempted to make this turn and be explicit in naming the material and psychological consequences of whiteness in the lives of People of Color. For example, in an exploration of white college students' processes of racial meaning-making, Whitehead (2021) [39] noted that the whiteness embedded in such processes frequently served to rupture connections to Black people's humanity and subsequently enable Black students' experiences with anti-blackness and racial marginalization on campus. Foste & Johnson (in press) [60] explored the ways in which white spaces of campus residence halls required particular forms of emotional labor on the part of Resident Assistants of Color. Additionally, Feagin et al. (1996, 2014) [61,62] and Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman (2017) [34] made clear the agony of education Students of Color experience at predominantly white institutions. By taking on the material consequences of whiteness, researchers not only illuminate the ways in which institutions of higher education preserve white supremacy, but also begin to unveil the harm caused by such a system and perhaps getting us closer to a resolve.

5. Discussion

We intend for this work to continue disrupting the "big lie" of whiteness, particularly as it relates to higher education scholarship. As whiteness constantly evolves, we argue that this work of disruption involves moving beyond the invisibility paradigm and more directly rooting the work in contemporary frameworks where whiteness is both more socially visible and aggrieved (Embrick et al., 2020; Leonardo, 2020; Smith, 2020) [8,9,11]. Guided by the propositions we offered above, we make two separate but interrelated points. First, we are calling on the field of higher education to align CWS more closely with the original purpose of the work. Second, we push CWS studies in higher education to engage the changing nature of whiteness in a post-45 social environment more directly. Starting with the two premises of *addressing the historicity of whiteness* and the *emphasizing the material effects of whiteness*, we were centrally concerned with CWS slipping into a framework for white people instead of centering the harm that whiteness causes to BIPOC communities (Matias, in press) [63].

Centering the historical development of whiteness provides a central reminder that whiteness is an empty social category, and the cultural ties that bind are the oppression

of People of Color (Allen, 1997; Cabrera, 2017) [18,64]. This is why Roediger (1994) [65] defined whiteness as "*nothing if not oppressive* and *false*" (p. 13, italics original). Returning to the distinction between discourses of whiteness and white people, we want to be clear that calling for an abolition of whiteness is not the same as abolishing white people (Leonardo, 2009) [17]. Rather, it is a way of critically unpacking this historical and contemporary violence that whiteness has enacted upon People of Color (Allen, 1997; Anderson, 2016) [22,64]. This analysis should not simply be a mechanism for whiteness public flagellation. Instead, we are guided by Freire's (2000) [66] argument that, "Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future" (p. 57). Before charting that future, this history of whiteness needs to be explicitly linked to the harm it causes BIPOC communities.

The material effects of whiteness linked to the historicity of whiteness lead to a moral question about what educational institutions owe to BIPOC communities. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) [67] argued that focusing on achievement gaps in education placed blame on BIPOC communities for their marginalized social status. She argued educational institutions, due their historical and contemporary legacies of racialized exclusion and violence, accumulated an *educational debt* vis-a-vis BIPOC communities. Tachine and Cabrera (in press) [68] developed this idea further and specifically for Indigenous students, arguing that due to the (a) Indigenous connection to land and (b) the theft of Indigenous lands on which educational institutions exist, that a *land debt* is owed to Indigenous students. The concepts of *education debt* and *land debt* are important reminders that decolonial, anti-racist education is the larger goal of social justice-oriented research and practice (Tuck and Yang, 2012) [69]. Therefore, centering the history and harm of whiteness—analytically and practically—calls for educational institutions to over-invest in BIPOC communities as a mechanism of addressing the opportunity-hoarding and violence of whiteness.

The other premise for our work, an *increased social embrace of whiteness*, is also a call to redirect CWS research away from the dominant 'invisibility' metaphor in this work (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2017; McIntosh, 1989; Omi and Winant, 2015) [5,18,43]. We must question the continued relevance of this framing of whiteness in a post-colorblindness era (Leonardo, 2020) [8]. For example, in response to Robin DiAngelo's (2011) [70] *white fragility*, Cabrera (2019) [12] argued that since whiteness is such a mobile discourse of social oppression that adapts to changing social circumstances, a more common issue is that of *white agility*. That is, if the nature of hegemonic social structuring is a greater fluidity relative to totalitarian forms of social control (Omi and Winant, 2015) [5], then it follows that hegemonic whiteness will evolve given changing social circumstances (Cabrera, 2018) [71]. Contemporary whitelash (Embrick et al., 2020; Smith, 2020) [9,11] is predicated upon a growing salience and awareness of whiteness as being white increasingly appeals to social injury (Leonardo, 2020) [8]. Therefore, the underlying question remains: To what degree is the whiteness as invisible metaphor still relevant to CWS in higher education?

6. Implications for Research and Practice

Shifting the focus of CWS in higher education requires a far-reaching reimagining of scholarship and practice within the field. Though an exhaustive list of recommendations is beyond the scope of this paper and may run the risk of being too prescriptive, we do provide select recommendations for researchers and practitioners hoping to take up the above propositions. When it comes to engaging in research, examining whiteness moving forward requires a reorientation in (a) the types of questions that scholars ask and (b) the tools we use to answer them.

As described above, far too often, critical whiteness scholars in post-secondary education have directed their attention toward topics such as white racial identity, meaning-making, and racialized behaviors (e.g., Cabrera, 2014a, b, c; Foste, 2019, 2020; Foste & Jones, 2020; Linder, 2015; Tevis, 2020) [15,25–27,30,31,55,56]. Although this body of scholarship has contributed much to the profession's understanding, it has fallen short of engaging the historical underpinnings that have undergirded the contemporary functionings of white-

ness and white supremacy relative to higher education. Therefore, to understand what has made the public embrace of whiteness possible (connected to our second proposition), the field of higher education still requires a critical examination that explores the historicity of whiteness (the core of our first proposition). Guided by this imperative, scholars should further utilize historical analyses to explore institutional and social legacies of whiteness within college campuses. For example, exploring the origins of policies or critically interrogating current practices through the lens of past or prior approaches could disrupt trends that have furthered whiteness and harmed BIPOC communities. Furthermore, questions that examine racial disparities or lack of diversity at any level of the institution would benefit from understanding historical context, given these issues are legacies of racial injustice. Additionally, even in studies that are looking to understand individual attitudes or perceptions of whiteness, researchers should take up organizational lenses to comprehend how institutional policies, practices, and cultures inform such beliefs. Importantly, these same projects should explore the consequences that then are experienced by People of Color.

Given the need to further foreground historical and organizational manifestations of whiteness, as well as the material consequences that follow, we contend that the methodologies and methods researchers use in their studies should also be more expansive to advance these propositions. For example, those interested in contributing to CWS in higher education may consider further engaging historical methods such as archival research or oral histories to trace the genealogies of whiteness that are present at colleges and universities. Additionally, as scholars seek to make connections between individual perceptions of whiteness and the practices on campus that perpetuate these legacies, scholars could use institutional ethnographies (Smith, 2006) [72]—a methodology that uses people's experiences as lenses to better understand the organizational processes shaping their conditions and realities. Therefore, institutional ethnographic approaches can be one way to bridge the individual, organizational, and sociopolitical to understand the functions of whiteness at this present moment and to also call into attention the effects encountered by People of Color. Finally, as quantitative scholars continue to wrestle with the potential of grounding their work in a critical epistemology (Wells and Stage, 2015), there is an opportunity to consider how researchers can mobilize CWS and the propositions named above in quantitative studies. Although these are but three examples, they serve as potential ways through which scholars can take up our call to engage different methodologies and methods to pinpoint how whiteness is operating within colleges and universities.

Beyond implications for future research, the propositions we offer also offer implications for institutional leaders hoping to affect change within their contexts. For instance, as campuses across the country continue to see the rise of committees, task forces, and working groups to confront legacies of whiteness at their institution, these entities must wrestle with the arguments forwarded by the propositions. In particular, these groups cannot afford to see the manifestations of whiteness and racism as separate from the very fibers of their institutions, as frequently named; instead, whiteness and white supremacy are at the core of U.S. colleges and universities (Wilder, 2013) [73]. Taking a CWS lens would then mean to engage how whiteness is perpetuated within institutions as a project that has been in the works since their founding. Consequently, these task forces and working groups should analyze the historical trajectories behind the issues present on campus, exploring how they came to be and how they have led to harmful impacts on Students of Color. It is not enough, nor has it ever been, to treat manifestations of racism and white supremacy as blemishes in higher education's history as they have been the most consistent truths within our educational system.

Moreover, as whiteness has become a publicly embraced identity in society (Embrick et al., 2020; Leonardo, 2020; Smith, 2020) [8,9,11], including within our campuses, institutional leaders must also confront what this means for students, staff, faculty, and themselves. Utilizing CWS in practice at this present moment requires challenging the tools that have been put into place to encourage individuals to reflect on their white identity

and on whiteness in general. Whether through curricular or co-curricular interventions, we must enact a reorientation to account for the ways white racial identities have become publicly embraced in this time. How can educators ground their work with the knowledge (a) that whiteness is now largely perceived as a site of injury, and (b) of the bases and premises of white people's fear when systems of whiteness are critiqued (Jardina, 2019) [53] We must make critical interventions in our practices with these questions in mind.

7. Conclusions

Corces-Zimmerman and Cabrera (2020) [16] argued that, specific to higher education scholarship, CWS has experienced two waves within the field. We are collectively and currently embarking on the third wave that not only builds on the theoretical and empirical work of the last two decades, but also intentionally learns from the limitations of the first two waves of CWS. Ultimately, CWS, much like CRT, is about promoting decolonial, racial justice and it cannot do this if it centers whiteness in this theoretical, empirical, and activist work. Disrupting and decentering whiteness is a core component of the overall goal of creating anti-racist educational space. Tuck and Yang (2018) [74] provocatively entitled their book with the question *Toward What Justice?* as there is no certain future in doing this work. This uncertainty is both the daunting challenge and promise of this work as the third wave develops and evolves.

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