

Article

# Why Are All the White Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: Toward Challenging Constructions of a Persecuted White Collective

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**Abstract:** In the context of ongoing antagonism on college campuses, attacks on Critical Race Theory, and widespread backlash against racial justice initiatives, this paper underscores the growing need to recognize co-optation and other counterinsurgent strategies used against racial justice to make room for transformative scholarship. By presenting qualitative interviews from 15 white HBCU students, we illustrate how diversity research, advocacy, and organizing previously used to advocate for racial justice has instead constructed distorted understandings of race and racism and has been used to expand ideologies of whiteness. The findings show what CRT scholars have cautioned about for decades—when left uninterrupted, ahistorical approaches to racial diversity programming and research may lead to the co-optation of justice-focused diversity language and the appropriation of BIPOC strategies of resistance. This not only inhibits and detracts from racial justice work, but can function to expand white supremacy. We relate these narratives to an emerging racial backlash whereby white people attempt to distort understandings of structural racism to claim a “persecuted” status—a delusion that we argue warrants a new ideological frame. We posit this work lays the foundation for advancing equity in one of the most counterinsurgent eras in higher education (Matias & Newlove, 2017).

**Keywords:** diversity; HBCU education; racial equity; colorblind frames; race evasive ideology



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*That class in particular, there were about 50 students, five of which were white and by the end of the semester, we were all clumped together because of the nature of this professor and the people that were in that class. We were all sitting really close together. Same thing in the cafeteria, the whole time, really.*

*—white male HBCU student*

## 1. Introduction

Before his exit from office, U.S. President Donald Trump, alongside his executive office and constituents, declared war on critical thought and historical fact, as outlined by an executive order that condemns as propaganda concepts such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), white privilege, and any notion that white people currently benefit from or contribute to racism [1]. The now overturned order was part of a broader mobilization by conservative activists and think tanks [2]; it not only asserts disagreement with these concepts but claims that they actively *harm* white U.S. citizens and the United States. This declaration laid the groundwork for a full-on assault on discussions of racism in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Indeed, by the summer of 2021, lawmakers proposed or passed legislation in over 20 U.S. states to ban even the limited acknowledgment

of past and ongoing structural racism in school and college curriculum based on the invention of CRT as a boogeyman that invokes feelings of white victimhood and innocence, stoking fears that lead to white backlash and rage [3]. As Matias and Newlove predicted (2017) [4], we are now in “a moment of emboldened en/whitening epistemology that is characterized by the perverse re-appropriation of civil rights and socially just terminologies and concepts—once used to support the rights of People of Color—to instead strengthen white nationalism” (p. 921). Both federal and local administrations are being encouraged to roll back any progress made toward racial justice and equity [4–7]. And there is a rise in global conservatism as right-wing leaders gain influence internationally in places such as Brazil, India, and Thailand [8,9].

College campuses have always been a site of contestation where this antagonism plays out in the lives of students, especially at traditionally white institutions—U.S. institutions that were explicitly segregationist and did not allow Black and other people of color to enroll before state mandates forced students to integrate. For this reason, in 1997, former Spellman President Beverly Tatum first published her famous book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, which emphasized the importance of interrogating white racial socialization and the fostering of white anti-racist identities as necessary steps toward addressing the racism that impacts Black students at traditionally white institutions. After all, Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria symbolized the failure of Traditionally White Institutions (TWIs) and society at large to address rampant racism and white institutional norms that create exclusionary environments for Black students. Twenty years later, many of these campuses still enroll predominantly white students and conform to white institutional practices [10,11] while Black students across nearly 100 college campuses across the nation have written thoughtful demands in response to racial violence and racism at their schools [12]. It is apparent that Tatum’s lessons remain unrealized. Instead, white students have appropriated Black students’ calls for justice, in an attempt to re-center whiteness. This is exemplified by the quote at the beginning of this article from a former white male student at a Historically Black College/University who felt he and his white classmates were threatened by being in a predominantly Black environment. These white backlash narratives mimic the counter-stories of people of color, such as those from Black students who created counter-spaces to cope with racism and racial isolation in the college cafeteria and beyond [13].

This white backlash speaks to the strategic dilution and appropriation of racial diversity initiatives and advocacy in higher education for the last two decades. Racial justice advocacy (i.e., the fight for laws, policies, and initiatives that reverse the ways white supremacy and racism have impacted the material conditions of racially marginalized people) remains essential because of the history of structural violence at TWIs—as segregationist institutions—and how racism continues to impact students of color on college campuses. Within that, racial diversity initiatives have been an important avenue for racial justice in advocating within limiting legal and institutional parameters [14]. Still, many scholars have been calling for more subversive and critical engagement with the core purpose racial diversity initiatives sought—equity and justice. Scholars have documented the tensions of diversity work as it meets up against its own limitations and how diversity rhetoric can be co-opted to undermine a racial justice agenda and instead serve white interests [14–16]. Consequently, the broad definition for diversity itself “opens the door to the cooptation of diversity into color-blind racial ideology” [17]. Similarly, other scholars have demonstrated how diversity frames can co-exist with race-evasive frames at traditionally white institutions in the U.S. [18,19].

Diversity and equity narratives have been co-opted to support policies and practices that lead to inequitable outcomes. We use “co-opt” here to describe the appropriation of an idea used outside of its originally intended role, at times diluting the significance of the initial idea. For example, arguments for race-neutral admissions (against race-conscious practices) argue that such policies are more equitable to low-income students and white and Asian-American students, while the data shows that inequality is in fact exacerbated

with a so-called race-neutral approach [20]. Moreover, of most relevance to the current study, leaders of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs, universities that were created in the U.S. to provide higher education access to Black students after being disallowed enrollment at TWIs)—and even some scholars who study HBCUs—seem to have taken up analyses of the educational benefits and racial justice strategies of diversity and applied them in decontextualized ways to white students at HBCUs [21]. Norton and Sommers (2011) [22] show that decontextualizing the history of racism and defining it as an individual phenomenon has led to whites viewing the United States' most significant race problem as racism against white people. Absent from our understanding are the limitations of diversity narratives as they are applied in the context of HBCUs and how diversity rhetoric is used and circulated within more racially diverse contexts.

In this paper, we analyzed data from 15 white students who attended HBCUs to identify the ways diversity research, advocacy, and organizing used in previous decades to advocate for racial justice (i.e., the educational benefits of diversity, developing a pluralistic orientation, structural diversity and critical mass, decolonizing curriculum, counternarratives and counter-spaces, and tokenism) were co-opted by white students. Secondly, we relate these narratives to the ongoing antagonism on college campuses (and beyond) whereby white people attempt to distort understandings of structural racism to lay claim to a “persecuted” and vulnerable status—a delusion that we argue constitutes a new ideological frame. Interviews from white students who attended HBCUs provide us with a crucial opportunity to examine the building and rationalizing of these narratives of victimization and reverse racism. They also allow us to interrogate what these narratives teach us about how to contest the limitations of diversity rhetoric not only in HBCUs but also in TWIs, Minority Serving Institutions in the U.S. (MSIs), and society more broadly. We follow the recommendation made by critical whiteness scholars to explore the embracing of whiteness by the general population and critically analyze its impact and implications on people of color [23]. In connection to this Special Issue, we argue that there is a growing need to recognize co-optation and other counterinsurgent strategies used against racial justice to ensure that future scholarship is transformative in its advancement of equity and structural change.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have explored the phenomenon of racial diversity in HBCUs in three primary contexts: historical, economic, and self-reported experiences of nonblack students. We briefly contextualize the history and use of racial diversity as it was popularized (and diluted) in higher education, then review and problematize each context of HBCU racial diversity literature. While we name “white” as a racial category in this paper, we also think it important to acknowledge that the construction of whiteness is based on the violence and exclusion of people of color [24,25]. We therefore move away from the capitalization of the terms “white” and “whiteness” to avoid granting additional power to such terms.

### 2.1. Overview of Diversity Advocacy and Scholarship

To understand why advocating for diversity as a guiding strategy toward racial justice is and always has been limited, it is vital to understand how the discussion of diversity became commonplace in U.S. higher education in place of racial justice efforts. Discourses of diversity and the institutionalization of diversity were largely born out of affirmative action court cases. Justice Powell's opinion in the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* rejected restorative-justice-oriented arguments for race-conscious admissions, putting forth the compelling interest in a diverse student body as the only legally defensible justification [26,27]. Jayakumar et al.'s (2018) [14] analysis of the legal environment's construction of diversity as an avenue for advocacy within a conservative legal debate over affirmative action demonstrates how it went from vehemently contested to co-opted.

Though *Bakke* was foundational in protecting race-conscious admissions, which does function as redress for ongoing systemic racism, the initial impetus and purpose for affirmative action was semantically diluted into one surrounding *diversity*—a concept that centers white interests rather than race and racism [14,15,28]. This move by the courts aimed to protect whiteness rather than acknowledge and pose a direct challenge to the racist institutional fabric of U.S. higher education [29–31]. Nonetheless, scholars and practitioners have worked within this limited paradigm to serve students of color and advocate for racial justice over the last three decades. For instance, concepts related to advancing racial diversity and equity on college campuses—such as promoting the educational benefits of diversity (pluralistic orientations), increasing representation (structural diversity), diversifying and decolonizing university curricula, creating a more inclusive environment (healthy campus racial climate), addressing racial isolation stemming from tokenism and stereotype threat, and advocating for counter-spaces and resistance strategies to cope with racism—have been deployed to improve the experiences of underrepresented students in postsecondary education. Indeed, while diversity experiences are not always positive and are more likely to include conflict and hostility than homogeneous groups, in the context of a healthy racial climate, the potential for growth and innovation is very real [32]. However, these concepts related to advancing racial diversity and equity have always been limited in scope as the focus on race and racism was strategically diluted by legal and institutional actors [28].

## 2.2. White Racial Frames in Higher Education

Exploring the ways in which scholars have documented the development of white students' racial ideologies is pertinent to contextualizing the current study. Scholars describe the process of "racial priming" as one that socializes students with messages about race through informal lessons in oftentimes racially segregated homes, schools, neighborhoods, and other social environments [33–36]. In conjunction, Bonilla-Silva's (2014) [33] groundbreaking work has described how colorblind (what we will refer to in this paper as race-evasive) racism has emerged as a dominant racial ideology in the United States following the end of the de jure Jim Crow era. Race-evasive ideology is described as an indirect, pliable form of racism that allows for the covert reproduction of racial inequalities through its four frames (abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism) while claiming the existence of race and racism as a thing of the past. This racial ideology rationalizes the social conditions and practices of white supremacy and ultimately enable whites (and people of color using the frame) to blame marginalized communities for their material conditions while subscribing to a race-evasive worldview that ignores institutional racism and whiteness [37]. It is also important to note that racial-evasive ideology, like any other racial ideology, is an ever-evolving, ongoing process that will adapt to new discourse and social contexts [17]. Similarly, the racial frames expressed by individuals, both shape and are shaped by a particular racial ideology, which in turn is embedded in and reproduced by social structures that rely on specific sociopolitical contexts.

As whites' new understandings became situated within a developing mass consciousness of race and racism, there has been a need for new frames that name how whites' access and utilize their understandings of structural racism to expand white supremacy. Building on Bonilla-Silva's frames, a fifth frame (disconnected power analysis) was introduced to explain how a white person can align themselves with understandings of structural oppression and racial violence while dissociating their own behaviors, experiences, and actions from said analysis in order to maintain their positive sense of self as an advocate for racial justice [38]. The literature on race-evasiveness has highlighted the contradictions and fortification of this racial ideology. For example, scholarship has found that racial "progressives" have come to appreciate their neighborhood diversity while simultaneously displaying tenets of race-evasive ideology [39]. Even when confronting and admitting that

whites benefit from systematic advantage, white people were found to stay rooted in a race-evasive ideology [40,41].

Similar to many white students' previous schooling experiences, (white) racial isolation is prevalent in many TWI contexts [18,19], and race-evasive ideology is thoroughly documented in these spaces [33,42–47]. In addition, TWI environments tend to have cultural norms, expectations, and hidden curricula that largely center whiteness and meritocracy, which support race-evasive ideologies [10,11,48,49]. Thus, there is arguably an alignment between the race-evasive culture of TWIs and students' race-evasive frames within them. In other words, even though some white students feel encroached upon and express race-evasive frames in the TWI context [43,50], they are still "at home" with whiteness [51]. HBCUs, on the other hand, have a unique history of preserving and uplifting Black culture and students as well as historically (and in some cases currently) having a primarily Black student body [52–54]. Because of this, scholars have begun to explore the unique habitus that HBCUs provide where white normativity is relatively more contested [38,55]. Examining white racial frames within a context where white normativity is relatively less established and even disrupted could lead to new understandings of how race-evasive racial ideology becomes contested, affirmed, and/or reasserted by individuals [56]. The current study is one of very few [38,57] that take up an analysis of counterinsurgent narrative strategies in nondominant contexts, in this case, specifically exploring how white students use diversity rhetoric in HBCU settings and examining the emergence of a new racial frame.

### 2.3. Historical and Economic Context of HBCUs

Unlike TWIs, HBCUs have never practiced institution-level racial segregation. Foregrounding this historical point about HBCUs is essential, given the perception of some observers that HBCUs' primary mission of serving Black students is anachronistic [58]. On the contrary, history shows that the legacy of HBCUs is one of choice and options for Black students (and nonblack peers) and one of the few sites that center Black students' needs and offer a reprieve from the segregationist, racist climates of TWIs [59,60]. Scholars have highlighted the aftermath of numerous court rulings such as the 1992 *United States v. Fordice* case [61] and the *Ayers* case in Mississippi [62,63], among others, as problematically applying the same desegregation mandate at TWIs to HBCUs. These cases falsely presented HBCUs as segregationist and equated white students as the "minority." The *Ayers* case, for example, applied a problematic/ahistorical approach of the diversity rationale to HBCUs and mandated public HBCUs in Mississippi reach 10% nonblack enrollment to receive additional funding [62,63].

It is also worth noting the literature that has documented the economic realities that face HBCUs and the focus on racial diversification as a strategy for institutional solvency amidst declining market shares. Some suggest that HBCUs must pursue racially diverse students more aggressively if they are to survive, let alone compete, with rapidly diversifying TWIs [64,65]. The economic pressures for recruiting Black and nonblack students alike are valid, but the historical context for *why* HBCUs were pushed to actively recruit nonblack students is important. These economic and state-mandated pressures to recruit nonblack students have led to various initiatives to attract white students, such as "minority scholarships" and emphasizing the need to diversify the institution to realize the educational benefits of diversity [66].

### 2.4. De-Racialized and Decontextualized Diversity: The Framing of White HBCU Student Experiences

If HBCUs are under pressure to *attract* nonblack students for economic reasons as these studies suggest, it follows that HBCUs must consider ways to *retain* them. This led to numerous studies of nonblack students' self-reported experiences at four-year HBCUs and how to serve nonblack students [21,67–79]. Although the motivation of understanding students' experiences to serve them better is sound on its face, many of these studies and scholars have equated white students and administrators at HBCUs with Black students

and administrators at TWIs in ways that pass over power and historical analyses and enable whiteness, privilege, and the co-opting of diversity narratives by white students to take place unchecked. In addition, journals are also responsible for allowing these decontextualized analyses to be legitimized through publication.

For example, studies published in the field of higher education have applied terms and concepts that describe the overt racism and hostile climates Black students at TWIs experience to describe the stress and invulnerability white HBCU students experience when confronting racial tension. These co-opted terms and concepts include claims that white students endure racial microaggressions [21,68,69]; that white students must act as spokespersons for their race, are singled out for their race, or must self-censor [21,69,78]; that white students had courageously “overcome” their racist views and thus were able to attend an HBCU [21]. This can lead to problematic recommendations that re-center whiteness. In one example, Mobely et al. (2021) [74] appropriates literature on culturally relevant pedagogy for Black, U.S. Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in white spaces to suggest a parallel approach for students “learning in ‘temporary-minority’ situations within HBCU contexts” (p. 12). This demonstrates a dangerous disconnect from power analyses—white students are not actually victims and minoritized, despite some scholars’ attempts to frame them as such.

Therein lies the significant problem with the extant HBCU racial diversity literature and legalized concept of diversity. The stripping of racism and white supremacy from the legal rationale not only fails to destabilize white interests in TWIs but also, as we argue in this paper, opens the door for a decontextualized understanding of “minority” status wherein white students’ racialized experiences are viewed as comparable to the minoritized experiences of Black students in TWI contexts. This comparison may validate white students’ feelings of white fragility and shield them from engaging in anti-racist work to expose and disrupt whiteness and privilege that one might hope they would undertake while immersed in predominantly and culturally Black HBCU environments. As we show in our analysis, this decontextualized understanding and appropriation of diversity rhetoric—meant to serve a racial justice agenda—may lay the groundwork for further co-optation of Black experiences by white students specifically and inhibit structural change by further expanding ideologies of whiteness.

### 3. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

#### 3.1. *Critical Whiteness Studies*

Guided by Critical whiteness Studies (CWS), whiteness encapsulates the ideological functions, discourses, and material effects stemming from white supremacist thought and violence [29,31]. Accordingly, Rodríguez (2017) [80] urges us to consider white supremacy as “simultaneously an ideological, epistemological, cultural, institutional, militarized, and aesthetic structuring of power, (legitimated/state and illicit/state-condoned) coercion, and social identity” (para.1). This definition draws attention to whiteness’s global and insidious reach as a sociohistorical formation that spans empire building, constructions of humanity, and social thought [80]. Thus, this study seeks to highlight how whiteness within higher education is weaponized to engulf and co-opt racial justice and diversity narratives and instead operationalize them toward counterinsurgent discourses that harm people of color while privileging white people, entities, and ideologies above all else [29].

#### 3.2. *Use of Diversity*

Sara Ahmed’s work draws us to the question of *use*—how diversity narratives, rhetoric, and shifting definitions are operationalized within institutions. When used and circulated on college campuses, diversity is often used as a proxy for race and thus lends itself to fetishizing representation—to equating representation of individuals who embody “diversity” as the institutional goal [15,51,81]. When Traditionally White Institutions take up diversity in this way, it is often used to instill the performance of inclusion. In addition, another challenge of diversity work and initiatives is when they are housed in

compliance-oriented campus units focused more on avoiding litigation than institutional change. Diversity initiatives, offices, and goals have been found to represent a shield that institutions hide behind rather than take action to address historical and ongoing racism and other systems of oppression [15]. For instance, many scholars have documented the challenges diversity and equity practitioners face when advocating for racial justice. They report that diversity takes on various meanings depending on the institutional context, often used as a word for the institution to implicitly acknowledge race without attaching it to racism—rendering it a “nonperformative” strategy to avoid action [15,82]. Furthermore, they report that practitioners who pushed for racial justice under the cloak of diversity initiatives were met with increased resistance from institutions [15,51].

So, while the institutional *use* of diversity often perpetuates racism and hinders transformative work at TWIs, the taking up of diversity initiatives—particularly when used as a proxy for race—may have a more destructive effect when circulated at HBCUs. As we have pondered on this possibility, there have been questions that have guided our thinking on this topic: If problematic/diluted notions of “diversity” at TWIs are applied and circulated at HBCUs, what are the resulting narratives and effects? Simply put, how does “diversity” function and circulate within HBCUs, and to what end? As we contend, when diversity is used in the HBCU context and not appropriately contextualized within systems of oppression and white supremacy, the ahistorical approach can have destructive effects.

#### 4. Methods

The current study is based on qualitative interviews with 15 white participants—12 female; 3 male—who were undergraduates ( $n = 13$ ) and master’s students ( $n = 2$ ) at 3 HBCUs in the mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States. Students were traditional age college-going students. The majority came from segregated white precollege neighborhoods. Across the three campuses, the proportion of Black students ranged from 80 to 90 percent, and full-time enrollment was approximately 2000 to 6700 students. We used a semi-structured interview protocol initially intended to explore white students’ college choice processes and experiences at HBCUs. (See Appendix A for the full interview protocol, with questions relevant to this study noted). This means the questions were in no way designed to elicit responses reflective of racist attitudes or biases but rather focused on white students’ co-curricular experiences in a predominantly Black environment. Interview topics included participants’ college choice processes; friends’ and parents’ perceptions of their college choice; participants’ perceptions and experiences related to co-curricular activities, in-class engagement, and intellectual/social growth; and how their race affected their college experience, social interactions, and feelings of belongingness. Human Subjects Institutional Review Board approval was given by Norfolk State University and participants were recruited through snowball sampling [83]. The only criterion for participants was being a white HBCU student or graduate. Per outlined in the IRB proposal, the first few students were located for the study. After they were found, they were asked if they knew of any other white HBCU students. All interviews were conducted by a white male faculty member (the fifth author of this study), which perhaps facilitated a more comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

#### 5. Data Analysis

Acknowledging how central researcher positionality is to the research process [84], it is important to note that data were analyzed by two female faculty members of color and a white female doctoral student (the first, second, and third authors of this study). The fourth author, a Black man and doctoral student, supported in the development of the discussion and implications sections. We were guided by a critical race praxis for educational research (CRP-Ed) lens, which is rooted in critical race theory and posits the centrality of critically conscious advocacy and reflection as crucial throughout the research process [28,85]. Based

on our prior analysis of the dataset using a different theoretical lens [38], we were prepared to analyze racist discourse and tactics that re-centered whiteness; nevertheless, examining students' co-optation of BIPOC resistance discourses was taxing, and we often had to step away from these triggering, emotionally exhausting narratives. Nevertheless, the CRP-Ed lens helped us remain committed to the process in order to name and challenge racial injustice with a vision toward transformation.

The present study used a thematic analysis to examine the collected data [86]. Preliminary analyses and published findings from the same project [38] as well as this study's theoretical perspectives informed our research questions: How do white students narrate their experiences with diversity in the HBCU context and how, if at all, did the institutional context inform their rationalizations? In what ways, if at all, do white students co-opt racial justice narratives stemming from diversity research and advocacy, and to what end? We engaged in a general qualitative inquiry guided by a critical theoretical paradigm. Three of the authors trained in critical theory engaged in an initial collaborative coding phase to define deductive and inductive codes before using Dedoose, a qualitative data management and coding application, to code the remaining transcripts [87,88]. Deductively, the researchers coded the data according to extant literature which identified various frames of race-evasive ideology. We then used an inductive approach to develop additional codes that named the various strategies, narrative-arcs, rationalizations, and emotions that participants described throughout their college experience. For the purposes of this paper, we highlight themes stemming from a subset of codes that identified participants' strategic use of "diversity rhetoric" and their accompanying strategies for maintaining their individual personal comfort and epistemologies of whiteness more broadly. We compared our code applications as part of an ongoing and iterative process of establishing trustworthiness, consistency, and inter-coder reliability among researchers. We did so until our disagreement was negligible. While writing reflective and analytical memos, any disagreement between researchers' interpretations were discussed in team meetings as part of a process of deepening/sharpening our analysis and ultimately building theory. Together, we utilized the constant comparative method to examine coded excerpts and further delineate codes and discuss emerging themes [87,89]. This process resulted in a 56-code codebook. The remaining transcripts were coded independently among the 3 researchers, resulting in 515 coded excerpts across all participants. After all transcripts were coded, we compared themes and confirmed consistent code applications across transcripts [90]. Lastly, we engaged in a peer debriefing exercise with the interviewer to discuss themes, alternative interpretations of the data, and how the context of the interviews may have informed participants' views and perspectives [91]. These exercises, along with presenting contextualized responses from participants, were used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness [87,91].

## 6. Findings

As previously stated, scholars have used the paradigm of diversity to serve students of color and advocate for racial justice. This data finds that nearly every argument for the benefits of diversity was used by participants to advocate for the *negation* of racial justice. Overall, 13 out of 15 participants strategically utilized language associated with racial diversity and inclusion advocacy and research to protect themselves from perceived discrimination and victimization. We begin by presenting concepts that have been used to advance racial diversity and equity on college campuses and how participants co-opted these concepts. We then show how and in what ways students appropriated strategies of resistance used by BIPOC students at TWIs. Finally, we present evidence that signals an evolution in race-evasiveness in which whites embrace recognizing a distorted, delusional definition of race and racism that allegedly functions to persecute white people exclusively.



### 6.1. Using Diversity Rhetoric against Racial Justice

Ten out of fifteen participants co-opted diversity rhetoric by appropriating arguments about the educational benefits of diversity. They advantageously extracted from the language of diversity and inclusion to further absolve themselves as contributors and beneficiaries of white supremacy. They did so by utilizing legalized diversity rhetoric (the benefits of pluralistic orientation) and co-opting the need for structural diversity and the importance of racial representation in the curriculum.

#### 6.1.1. Structural Diversity

Increasing student body racial diversity (also called compositional or structural diversity) has been a crucial first step for creating more equitable environments at TWIs—many with segregationist legacies and exclusionary frameworks that linger into the present. Furthermore, structural diversity and ensuring a critical mass of black students has been empirically associated with the educational benefits of diversity, supporting the only legally permissible defense for race-conscious admissions at selective TWIs [92]. Several students in this study critiqued the compositional diversity of their institution and the need for HBCUs to enroll more white students. When not directly advocating for more white students, they advocated for more nonblack students. For example, Sandra felt that there were too many Black students at the HBCU she attended. She felt that for her to fully develop and get the most out of her education, an increase in nonblack students would be beneficial for her. She justified her stance by claiming that going to a school with predominantly Black students does not benefit her when it comes to learning to communicate with others and workplace diversity. She drew from the educational benefits of diversity rhetoric that universities must diversify their student body and used this logic and language to support the increase of nonblack students for her gain:

*I think that this world is not Black and white it's not, you know that, there is gray area, you know and you have to learn how to interact and how to understand people from all over, you're not going to go into a workplace and just be with the same people that are just like you. You have to know how to communicate and work with others. So sometimes I think that HBCUs are narrowed in that because of its roots. Um but I think that where my school was that it was diversifying and you get a lot of different um color and ethnicity and all that and I think that's really important so I think that sometimes, you know you can lack that with HBCUs.*

Similarly, Maggie felt that the lack of representation of white and nonblack students both physically and in the curriculum was a “turn off.” She felt that by increasing the number of white and Asian students at the school, it would be more welcoming:

*I think they're going to need to cater to other cultures and not just African American or Black students. So, I would say put more white students or Asian students on your website or in your pictures and make it look kind of like they're wanted there, because right now, if I go on the ECSU website, it just caters to Blacks. That's like closing the door to many other cultures and students who may look at [Bright City] and may look at [Bright City] as a college they want to go to, and they might be turned off by that they only cater to one culture.*

A lack of racial analysis within diversity rhetoric allows students to call for the educational benefits of diversity while disregarding the contemporary and historical purpose of HBCUs and Afrocentric curricula and practices.

Both Mitch and Rambo's call for a more diverse student body revolved around the argument that HBCUs actually harm Black students. For example, Rambo stated:

*I would look mostly at students that grew up in a town where there were no white people, or it was very segregated. A student that goes to a Black college that grew up in that environment is setting up for failure.*

Rambo's suggestion that Black students were racially segregated and set up for failure because they would develop stereotypes about white students aligned with Johnny's logic

that more white students would enhance the academic credibility of the university and thus benefit Black students. He postured that having a degree similar to his Black counterparts was an embarrassment because they lacked the level of knowledge he had attained and went on to pose:

*So, is this being really productive to society and really helpful to society? I know it's nice because everybody can go to college now but is everybody meant to go to university or college. Is that our goal? I don't—I guess for me—this is, again, from the white perspective, I would say "How do we better integrate all universities?"*

#### 6.1.2. Pluralistic (Dis)orientation

Pluralistic orientation—the ability to understand people different from oneself—is associated with cross-racial interaction at TWIs, particularly for white students accustomed to segregated white spaces precollege [93,94]. While pluralistic orientation is argued to be a steppingstone toward intergroup dialogue that interrogates individual and structural inequities and builds toward empathy and trust [95], it often stops at being an end in and of itself that centers white interests. This, in fact, has always been dehumanizing to BIPOC students. The legal definition of diversity as a compelling institutional interest that serves all students (read: white students) is carried over into the HBCU context by study participants.

In this study, over half of the white HBCU student participants mentioned how their college experience contributed to an increase in their knowledge of other “cultures”, their “open-mindedness”, and/or made them a more “well-rounded person”, to the extent that their exposure to Black people was beneficial for their personal development. For example, Sandra dismissed any notion of institutional or structural racism and solely discussed her exposure to BIPOC as a personal benefit. She explained that she “gained so much knowledge of the culture”, “really broadened my knowledge”, and made her “such a more well-rounded person”.

She went on to discuss how she could even further benefit from diversity, stating that by adopting Black children, she would be able to pass this pluralistic orientation onto her white children:

*Umm and it's influenced me in so many aspects, like umm I always wanted to adopt children but umm I would love to adopt children that are from a different country and stuff like that. Like I want my kids to understand diversity and be raised in a family of diversity. Umm so that has really influenced me a lot. Umm and I knew that being at you know being there for my undergrad, I knew that I wanted to go somewhere for my graduate studies that was diverse because I don't, I wouldn't know how to not see diversity and not to be around people that didn't look like me all the time and I wanna see that.*

This notion of dispossessing, dehumanizing, and objectifying Black children for the benefit of whites’ “well-roundedness” aligns closely with the problematic assumption that solely increasing the number of students of color at TWIs would cure institutions from a legacy of white supremacy and white students’ racist beliefs and behaviors.

These voyeuristic positionalities by white students at HBCUs were also exhibited by Nancy. Nancy compared her new understandings at an HBCU to going to a different country and exploring the landscape and reaping its benefits similar to behaviors demonstrated by colonizers:

*The social aspect of it is amazing and it contributes so much to understanding and there's so much that you need to learn there's is so many opportunities for growth and personal growth never ends, so it really just sends you on this quest of getting experience, understanding what you need to do. But I feel like especially if you want to like explore and learn new things it's the same thing if you were going to study abroad in a different country, like that's the only way you're really going to know yourself and test your waters*

*if you leave the comfort of your own place and I can, to do that in America, it's some people do not do anymore.*

Relatedly, Judy felt that her exposure to Black students helped her be less afraid of Black people:

*Like and when I graduated, I would come home and I'd have to drive through a city to get home and there would be like an African-American person on the street and I'm just like, "Ooh, I'm scared and I hope the light doesn't turn red". And then, after going to [Mountaintop University], like that is just ridiculous now. Like, because it's just the exposure to all these different, you know, you have, you know, African-American people that act stereotypically the way, you know, that white people think that they do, as a group, like that- that's just how they are. These, of course, you have people, because where do stereotypes come from? Somebody acted that way, but you have so many people of all these different types of backgrounds and different family circumstances and so although, it really helps you overcome a lot of stereotypes.*

Here, Judy's achievement of a pluralistic (dis)orientation was devoid of any structural knowledge, empathy, or accountability for enacting harm, but instead was used to help her recognize her racist beliefs. Furthermore, Judy's idea of diversifying her family is comparable with how TWIs operationalize diversity for the sole benefit of the institution instead of creating antiracist understanding and actions that would benefit BIPOC. The above quotes demonstrate how white students absorbed and operationalized the institutional logic of diversity to further extract from Black students and contribute toward the maintenance of white supremacy.

### 6.1.3. Re-Colonizing the Curriculum

Efforts toward multiculturalism, ethnic studies, and decolonizing curricula at TWIs have been central components of racial justice work that goes beyond increasing representation to purposefully supporting BIPOC once they arrive on campus. For BIPOC to be genuinely included in environments that have explicitly excluded them by design, it is essential that they see themselves in what is taught and by whom [96]. In this study, three students appropriated this imperative to argue that the curriculum at their HBCU was deficient, racially problematic, and generally not representative of "the world" or topics they should be learning about, insisting that the curriculum needed to be *diversified*. They deemed any issues that centered Blackness as either problematic or useless. In other words, they attempted to re-colonize the curriculum. For example, Maggie claimed the curriculum was too centered on Black history and needed to be broadened:

*If I had to choose something, I think they focused a lot on Black history, and I'm not sure if that's because it's an HBCU. I would think that's the reason. But I think it's because there's more ethnic groups attending, maybe they would want to expand to many different cultures instead of just a few different cultures and a lot of African studies.*

Barbara also felt the curriculum was too focused on Blackness and thus marginalized her. She suggested that for HBCUs to have higher enrollment rates, the curriculum should change to include nonblack people:

*I think the weakness that stood out to me the most was that they didn't gear a lot of their extracurricular towards white or Latina or other ethnicities. The plays were about strong Black women and things which are fine, but as the white student you kind of feel like okay well they kind of forgot I'm here. Nothing is really geared towards you and that's understandable being a historically Black college that's your forte. That's your population, but I think they could market to the other ethnicities a little more.*

Nancy echoed similar concerns, claiming that white students had a great deal to offer and HBCUs should shift their curriculum and include more white voices to lift their academic standings. Here, students were able to call for the *diversification* of curricula and ignore the normalization, centering, and uplifting of a Eurocentric curriculum throughout all levels of the US educational system.

## 6.2. Co-Opting Strategies of Resistance

BIPOC have a historical legacy of resisting white supremacy and racism in spaces of higher education and beyond [97]. We identified 5 out of 15 participants who explicitly co-opted strategies of resistance from BIPOC to protect themselves from their perceived discrimination and victimization. Participants mirrored three dominant behaviors oppressed peoples commonly use as strategies of resistance: identifying and naming racism, developing counter-narratives, and the creation of counter-spaces for safety and healing. Below, we highlight white students' perverse co-optation of BIPOC's brilliance and essential strategies that oppressed peoples have and continue to develop in the face of injustice.

### 6.2.1. Naming "Racism"

White students discussed their experiences with purported injustice at the hands of their Black counterparts within the interviews. Participants seemingly constructed their own theories as to why racism existed and expressed how they confronted these perceived discriminatory behaviors. For example, Rambo claimed that he was called racial slurs for being called a "cracker". He advocated that Black students adopt a race-evasive stance in order for Black students to not be racist, stating:

*I would say probably more than anything, it's a misunderstanding of white empowerment, I think. You don't know where I'm from, I don't know where you're from, but because we have white skin that makes us privileged or whatever it is. For me, I don't really care.*

Rambo felt he had never experienced racism until race was salient for him, drawing from his exposure to racial justice language. Rambo continues his theorizing of racism stating:

*We all have the same brains, same skull structure, all that kind of stuff like that. It doesn't really matter. I don't care about your skin color. Never did before, never did after, I don't care about mine.*

Rambo's narratives of reverse racism built toward Mitch's assertion that he was suffering from reverse racism structurally. Mitch co-opted language and analysis stemming from intersectionality [98] to assert that white people are structurally discriminated against. He did so by stating that his institution "does not reciprocate Title IX" and therefore unfairly privileges Black women at his expense.

### 6.2.2. White "Counter-Narratives"—Reinserting Dominant Narratives

Counter-storytelling arises from critical race theory and has been used by BIPOC to magnify their often-untold experiences and narratives with oppression [99]. In this study, several students developed narratives that mirrored these counter-stories. These narratives seem to be different from classic dominant narratives about white students in higher education in that these narratives are in response to white students' perceived victimization. For example, Nancy felt marginalized and sought out race-evasive peers for validation to justify her demands to change a sorority rulebook that was initially developed to carve out a Black space for Black women. She compared her fight for "equality" to the civil rights movement:

*So my senior year, that was my biggest involvement and that's when I feel like the claws came out where people and professors like attending faculty meetings tried to defend the fact that students would come, and you know I had three years prior of being in leadership roles, being in the [HBCU] community, and then people trying to justify, "Well we don't want you to represent us because you, you are the minority, like you are the less than one percent". And then professors would come in and it was one professor in particular who had an issue and said, you know, "This is what's wrong with the, the Black community and America that white people have to come in and kind of like set a new structure" whatever it is he felt I was trying to do and then he pointed out like this is, cause he was an African professor, and he kind of took me running that last year as, this is what's wrong with the African American community.*

*Then he would go and tell the students and at that time two of my sorority sisters, I mean there was issues prior because they had to change the rulebooks. Before it was African American young women who wanted to join and then when they selected me, they were like okay let's just say all women. So my sorority sisters, we were friends before we were selected, so there was a process before that and then during the process where I was running for student government, they would approach me and be like, "You know I'm comparing this to the civil rights cause our professor's like 'why do we have to involve white people? Why do you have to represent the school when you don't look like us?'" and then I had you know the same thing like in the background, another professor who would say but you are a student and nothing else should matter. So, I really had the best of both worlds with that.*

By identifying race-evasive people for validation, in her "struggle" for equality and inclusion, Nancy had supporters for her cause toward white racial justice. The purpose of her lengthy "counterstory" was to push back on the narratives of Black professors and students who took issue with her encroaching on their space.

Similarly, Mitch felt that he was stereotyped for being white. He took advantage of affirmative action language that BIPOC oftentimes share when having to prove they belong at a university. Claiming a similar experience, he stated:

*Um, you know, going back, you know, with, like, where, you've had white students sue, like Texas, University of Texas, for not getting in and they said it's due to affirmative action. People being let in and maybe Black students at, you know, majority universities . . . Um, might get looked at and you know, people think well maybe they're just here because of affirmative action they don't know if it's merit or not . . . and it's just an assumption that's made. Um, and I got a lot that people are like, "Well, you're here because of the white people scholarship".*

### 6.2.3. White "Counter-Spaces" and Affirming Racial Pride

More than half of the students who co-opted strategies of resistance strategically created spaces exclusively for white students to feel safe, affirmed, and soothe each other. As demonstrated by the opening quote to this paper, some students created white spaces and deliberately segregated themselves to seek refuge from perceived anti-white racism and discrimination. This was best exemplified by Rambo, who felt that to navigate a racially hostile Black environment, white students needed to sit together for protection and support:

*That class in particular, there were about 50 students, five of which were white and by the end of the semester, we were all clumped together because of the nature of this professor and the people that were in that class. We were all sitting really close together. Same thing in the cafeteria, the whole time, really.*

He clarified his stance even further, stating, "So it kind of became that whole thing where it was we just sit together and everyone else was kind of separated away from us".

Throughout the interview, Rambo also made claims that Black people misunderstand what white pride really is and mistaken it for privilege. Rambo shared how he and his white ROTC comrades created a faux-counterspace through paintballing as a strategy to ensure white student safety while also cultivating a shared white pride among them:

*We had a paintball tournament on campus . . . and one of our friends that was not playing with us, he was like, "Yay, Saltines. Let's go White Crackers". The stand just realized why we were called the Saltines, they were like, "What!" I guess it was well received, no one got beat up or something like that. It was a white guy calling people White people cracker, but it was pretty good. Everyone—you know, because of the population there, there was no one but white people on the field. Everyone on the paintball team was from ROTC and we'd just brought the same class of like seven people, all from the same community college. It was a bunch of white people, so we just all went and shot people up. That was*

*the team and we just felt like why not call it the Saltines. So, might not turn out great every time.*

Rambo's detailing of how he and his white friends reclaimed the word "cracker" by forming a paintball team named the "Saltines" points to their imagining that "cracker" is a racial slur and was a sign of their belief that they have been historically oppressed. Overall, it appears students' awareness of being the "minority" fueled narratives about being minoritized and/or facing interpersonal and structural harm—thus leading to the co-opting of strategies of resistance developed by BIPOC. Mitch also positioned himself as having multiple oppressed identities as a bald white male over six feet tall—but he proudly stated he "was born this way" and thus proud of his whiteness.

## 7. Discussion

As we look out into an emboldened era of white nationalism, we find Beverly Tatum's language centering the importance of racial representation, critical mass, and counter-spaces—language intended to promote racial understanding and justice—being co-opted toward defending white supremacist logics. Stemming from the work of scholars who have unveiled how the legal system and higher education institutions semantically dilute diversity into race-neutral policies and performative practices [1,15,28,82], our analysis demonstrates that white students themselves have broadened their encroachment on racial justice and began co-opting all aspects of the language of diversity. As critical scholars have warned, this faulty logic that co-opts language from diversity and social justice initiatives is becoming more prevalent in our current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. [1,5]. It is important to note, while our findings may inform analyses of whiteness and white supremacy across the globe, we do not claim them to be generalizable beyond the U.S. context.

Some might expect white students at an HBCU to use their exposure to and experience in a predominantly Black environment to garner an understanding of structural racism and strive towards an anti-racist identity. On the contrary, our findings demonstrated that some white students used this exposure to rationalize their co-optations and defensive moves, appropriating diversity language, research, and advocacy efforts to benefit whiteness. These appropriations directly dismiss Black people's experiences with racism and paradoxically frame white students' experiences of "racism" at the hands of their Black counterparts as the central issue. These findings are not only illustrative of new examples of white racial defensive tactics but also of how those defensive moves contributed toward the expansion of white supremacy and the emboldened white supremacist delusion others have named as an urgent concern for educators [1,5,7].

It is clear that the co-opted strategies of resistance analyzed in the findings section are not isolated tactics but were born from a larger burgeoning ideology based on the core belief that whites are systemically and structurally oppressed in the U.S. The classic strategies and maneuvers that often categorize the traditional frames of race evasiveness do not account for this study's participants' dispositions [33,38]. For example, conventional notions of race evasiveness described in the literature review demonstrate whites' belief in equality and that racism is a thing of the past [33]. Conversely, this frame—that we term the phantom persecution frame—did not meet the overarching criteria for traditional race-evasive frames, nor the disconnected power-analysis frame [38]. This frame relies on a phantom notion—or a figment of the imagination—in which white people believe they are in a world that is oppressive not to BIPOC but to white people. Its core function is rooted in the looting of resources, knowledge, and contributions cultivated by BIPOC based on their everyday experiences with white supremacy. In other words, the frame's core function is to manufacture a false equivalency between white peoples' perceived victimization of living in an anti-White society and BIPOC's real experiences with racial injustice. This manufactured crisis is then embodied to enact further violence onto BIPOC, thereby (ir)rationalizing whites' actions in today's "anti-white" society. Overall, this belief

system leads to the perverse appropriation of resistance and diversity advocacy strategies to protect and serve whiteness as property.

The logics of the phantom persecution frame appear to signal an evolution of race-evasive ideology. It answers Doane's (2017) [17] call to pay attention to how racial ideology and race-evasive frames in particular continue to evolve in relation to structural contexts and ideology. In this study, we observed a white racial frame that departs from Bonilla-Silva's (2014) [33] and other articulated frames that are race-evasive at their core. We suggest the emergence of a new frame responsive to elevated mass awareness about racism that whites confront as racial injustice has become more exposed by critical race scholars and grassroots knowledge, as demonstrated through the Black Lives Matter movement. The phantom persecution frame is also predicated on an understanding of structural racism as a phenomenon that negatively impacts and subjugates white people as a racial group—it is an epistemological *return* to centering race (whiteness) by denying factual, historical processes of structural racism and power.

The crux of the phantom persecution frame is the belief that anti-white racism is rampant in both interpersonal relations and structural systems. The rationale is that BIPOCs' false ideas about racism and white supremacy ultimately hinder whites' progress due to unjust antiracist policies and practices that threaten to uplift BIPOC by dispossessing whites' accumulation of wealth earned through their hard work, not racism. This frame allows for the appropriation and distortion of the meaning of racism, wherein whites utilize theoretical understandings of how historical and current societal structures oppress people of color, toward an inverted reality where white people are the true victims of structural racism.

This study demonstrates how the state-defined logic and institutionalization of diversity serves as a foundation for further white co-optation; white participants in this study drew from their distorted and decontextualized experiences of being a "minority" to absolve themselves as beneficiaries of white supremacy and instead propagated notions of "anti-white" racism and white persecution. For example, our analysis showed that participants demonstrated contradictory notions of individualism and merit while simultaneously asserting a collective persecuted white identity by claiming to experience racially hostile and unsafe campus climates, unjust policies and practices, and a marginalizing anti-white curriculum. Furthermore, participants asserted that BIPOC claiming to be victims of racism actually perpetuated racism toward whites. Although this claim is exposed by the four frames of colorblind/race-evasive ideology based on Bonilla-Silva's decades of research (2014) [33]—this study revealed how whites operationalized this logic in more nuanced ways, primarily strengthening their stance by claiming a persecuted collective white identity. Fundamentally, the phantom persecution frame draws from individual distortions of reverse racism and feelings of victimization to build global truths about the world. The rationalizations and maneuvers of this emergent frame have largely been undocumented in the literature until now and are of heightened importance as racial justice educators and advocates try to combat white counter-insurgent practices that intend to negate the progress made toward racial justice. Most importantly, this co-optation of diversity and strategies of resistance—and the subsequent renewal of a collective white identity that asserts their racial victimization—has life and death consequences.

## 8. Conclusions and Implications

As universities across the U.S. continue to become more racially diverse and race-conscious, the emergence of white students' whiteness and overt racist dispositions, with support from conservative media outlets and government officials, are becoming increasingly disruptive and harmful for students of color [100]. Scholars attribute systemic racism and white institutional norms as the underlying cause for unequal outcomes in education [101–107], and any attempt to ensure equity for BIPOC students must be paired with the dismantling of these policies and practices. Indeed, the recent surge in protests by white student groups claiming new victim status, alongside trending free speech rallies in defense

of hate speech and white supremacist rhetoric, highlight this concern. As white students in the U.S. begin to experience campus cultures where race is salient and more initiatives focus on antiracism, we must be aware that new tactics to uphold whiteness and neglect racial justice and equity can take hold if these initiatives are not contextualized within systems of power and history. The convergence of our findings signals the emergence of the phantom persecution frame that supports a collective (mis)understanding of racism by whites to justify their imagined status as a persecuted race. When left unchecked by institutions of higher education, the phantom persecution frame may be a catalyst for increased white supremacist violence. Furthermore, we must be wary about how the phantom persecution frame supports the ideology and proclamations stemming from it—such as the conservative-right’s war on critical thought, CRT, and CWS. Rationales consistent with this phantom persecution frame can be deployed in courts by Trump appointed judges to explicitly advocate for the interests of whiteness. Therefore, it is critical to document and name the phantom persecution frame and its logics in order to delegitimize it and prevent further harm to BIPOC, including students.

As we continue to gain more insight into the phantom persecution frame and how diversity is co-opted, a deeper understanding of how government officials, students, and administrators legitimize and enliven this frame ideologically and structurally within the institutional context is of utmost importance. While it is essential to recognize the racial justice initiatives advanced as a result of years of diversity work, it is also crucial to acknowledge the potential for the state-defined concept of diversity to be used against these very same initiatives, as shown by the findings of this study. For instance, this logic has already been institutionalized within policing at Ohio State University (OSU); OSU campus police recently characterized a Black student allegedly calling a white student “cracker” as a hate crime and subsequently arrested two Black students—a criminal charge that is paradoxically rarely invoked for real hate crimes when the victim is BIPOC [108]. Much like Rambo imagined the word cracker to be attached to oppression and thus a word he and his white friends must “reclaim”, the ahistorical, power-devoid analysis of what constitutes a hate crime by OSU falls within the logics and function of the phantom persecution frame: Imagine a society that is oppressing white people, claim victimization at the hands of a person of color, and demand damages for said victimization. As such, thwarting these baseless and egregious distortions of reality by re-centering structural racism and structural violence in conversations and legal debates about diversity needs to be at the forefront of policy and curriculum development within higher education. More specifically, advancing equity means moving away from state-defined diversity approaches in favor of approaches that intentionally address systemic racism and attempt to make structural change in our higher education institutions. TWIs need to reexamine their policies and practices and expand their standards for student conduct in order to protect students of color from experiencing racially antagonizing, harmful behaviors and policies that create an increasingly unhealthy and racially hostile campus [32].

These long-lasting policy and practice constrictions have been a result of U.S. public schools at all levels (re)producing and upholding a legacy of white supremacy [109–112]. Educational research spanning close to a century has documented the struggle to humanize U.S. public schools that honor the identities, backgrounds, and contributions of BIPOC by exposing and working to abolish racist policies and practices [107,109,113–122]. At the crux of these studies, several crucial dispositions that educators developed and engaged with included, but were not limited to: the cultivation of a critical consciousness [109]; the development of a curriculum that exposed, examined, and confronted all forms of racial injustice guided by a CRT lens; and the building of healthy and humanizing relationships with students, colleagues, families, and community members toward healing and racial justice. In the classroom, coupled with the phantom persecution frame, educators now find themselves facing even greater constraints, in what was an already constricting institutional context.



The emergence of the phantom persecution frame has already begun informing racist policies and practices that are attempting to or have already banned the teaching of systemic racism and/or CRT in at least 20 states [4,123]. Additionally, university funding allocated for equity, diversity, and inclusion programs and initiatives are being cut [124]. What we are witnessing is a violent attack on decades of collective work toward racial justice inside and outside of classrooms resulting in even greater constraints when working toward racial justice [125]. The economic, political, and structural decision-making informed by whiteness, anti-Blackness, and class apartheid that shape and normalize Eurocentric curricula, practices, and policies render Black, U.S. Indigenous, and students of color as disposable [120,126]. The emergence of the phantom persecution frame requires educators to engage with even further strategic maneuvering, the development of fugitive spaces [126], and carving out new possibilities for racial justice.

Lastly, HBCUs have a legacy of centering, honoring, and uplifting Black knowledge, culture, and students while simultaneously being inclusive of students from all racial backgrounds [53,127]. However, several past studies that examined the experiences of nonblack students attending HBCUs have framed the need for diversity initiatives that would serve white students in problematic ways [21]. As discussed in our literature review, several of these studies operated from a false premise that equated white students' experiences of being the minority on campus to Black students' experiences of being *minoritized* in society. We want to be clear that it is not our intent to place the onus on HBCUs for educating white students about race and racism. Rather, our findings offer a caution to researchers, administrators, and practitioners at racially diverse institutions and/or HBCUs and MSIs about equating white students being the numerical *minority* versus the experiences of students of color being *minoritized* in a racist society. As we demonstrated, a decontextualized understanding of diversity—one that detaches diversity from structural violence and systems of power—nurtures white supremacist delusions about oppression in society. Thus, we echo the sentiments of scholars such as Orellana and Gutiérrez (2006) [128] who call for critical reflection on our own scholarly practices within research paradigms and fields that are never race-neutral. In their words:

*We need to think carefully about the problems we name and reflect on how we may be led to them by the genre itself as well as by the dominant framework at work in the field. Whose problem is it? For whom is it a problem? What other problems might we identify if we began to look from different vantage points?*  
(p. 118)

When it comes to university programming and practices in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion, we must interrogate how refusals to acknowledge racism and decenter whiteness fundamentally contribute toward the violence students of color consistently experience on college campuses [109,129]. Simultaneously, we must be aware of and ready for white resistance to decentering whiteness—the backlash, co-opting of racial justice language, and particularly the phantom persecution frame that will inevitably arise in the face of formidable challenges to white supremacy.

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## Appendix A

*Note: This interview protocol is being shared to demonstrate that questions were not designed to elicit defensive responses. In addition, we have italicized the specific questions most relevant to the current study from which data are drawn.*

**Introduction:** Thank you for participating in this interview today. I am trying to understand the college experiences of recent graduates of HBCUs, and I appreciate your contribution. Your responses will remain confidential. If there are times when my question is unclear to you, please let me know. The first few questions relate to your decision to attend college and enroll at this particular school.

- What were some of the reasons you wanted to attend college?

(Probe: What aspects, if any, were you looking for in college that weren't available in high school?)

- Describe your decision process for identifying or selecting a college to attend.

(Probe: What types of schools did you consider?)

- Describe your decision process for deciding to enroll at this particular school.

(Probes: What attracted you to this school? How much did you know about this school before deciding to enroll? Tell me how aware you were that this college was an HBCU prior to enrollment.)

- Reflecting on your engagement in college, in what ways-if any-were you involved in the classroom?
- How would you describe your extracurricular involvement?
- To what degree do you perceive your engagement within and outside the classroom as similar to other students? Different?
- Were there times you wanted to be more involved or engaged in ANY aspect of the university but did not become more involved? What factors prevented that involvement?

**Now, I would like to ask you a few questions about your understanding of HBCUs and their role for students and graduates. Do you have any questions so far, or anything to add to our previous discussion about your experience?**

- What do you know about the history of HBCUs?

(Probes: How much knowledge did you have prior to enrolling? Did you learn more after enrolling? If so, what did you learn and what was the source(s)?)

- Based on your knowledge and experience, how would you describe the modern role of HBCUs like the one you attended in American postsecondary education?
- What were the greatest strengths of your HBCU?
- What were the greatest weaknesses of your HBCU?

**I have a few additional questions about your identity and your experiences at an HBCU.**

- What do you think about being a member of your race/ethnicity?

(Probes: In what ways, if any, are you proud of it? Ashamed of it?)

- How, if at all, do you see your race/ethnicity influencing your life today?

(Probe: Can you provide me specific examples? For example, do you participate in any clubs, communities, or activist causes directly associated with and/or in support of your race/ethnicity?)

- In what ways, if any, was it a factor when deciding to attend an HBCU?

(Probe: What sort of feedback did you receive from your family and friends when they learned you were enrolling in a “Black” college?)

- In what ways, if any, did it influence your experiences at an HBCU?

(Probe: How, if at all, would you have wanted to be treated differently?)

- How, if at all, has attending an HBCU influenced your thoughts about your own race/ethnicity?

(Probe: Can you give me an example?)

- How, if at all, has attending an HBCU influenced how you think of Black/African American people?

(Probe: Can you give me an example?)

- Are there any other things that have changed for you as a result of attending an HBCU?
- If you were to provide tips to prospective students about the experience of attending an HBCU to prospective students, what would you say?

(Probes: All students? Students who did not identify as Black/African American? Students of your specific race/ethnicity?)

- What recommendations do you have for university administrators and faculty to foster a positive experience for students and graduates?

(Probes: All non-Black students? Students of your specific race/ethnicity?)

- Have we left anything out that you feel is important to communicate?

**Thank you for your time. I hope that I can contact you should I have additional clarifications or to ensure I am interpreting your responses correctly.**

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