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Academentia: Physiological Stress, Toxic Work Sites and the Neutralization of Blackness by the Whiteness Standards of Professionalization

Abstract

Using auto-ethnographic methods, supplementing by current race theories, along with interviews from other scholars, I regard academentia as a form of professionalism most readily communicable to academics of color seeking advance. It can also infect those whose embrace of blackness (widely defined across cultures) is the least tolerant of the racial designs of white cultural practices. Where in the interest of students and colleagues, such academics challenge the whiteness criteria defining academic success, most of their peers adhere to the racial standards of professionalism.

Enoch H. Page, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts

Studying antagonisms between blackness and whiteness has been rendered unsound in most academic circles, but few recognize this trendy unpopularity in racial theorizing as a defensive product of white academics. Overwhelmed by demands for change forwarded with charges of racism since the 1970s, many scholars have defended the white cultural practices that advance their own careers. They capitulated first to what the law required and, second, they manipulated legal requirements by engaging in versions of diversity politics benefiting the white establishment more than communities of color.

Through adjacent surfaces of this prism is refracted the spectrum of academics of color in all its gender and ethnic diversity. Rendered upwardly mobile mainly by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and thereby freed to pursue their intellectual and educational interests, academics of color, formerly excluded, were installed in the ivy halls of academe. Despite their great success, what remains unexamined are the terms of matriculation and the hidden fees or taxes exacted pound for pound from the flesh of their bodies and imposed on the communities of color from which they hail.

Using auto-ethnographic methods, supplemented by current race theories, along with interviews from other scholars, I regard academentia as a form of professionalism most readily communicable to academics of color seeking advance. It also can infect those whose embrace of blackness (widely defined across cultures) is the least tolerant of the racial designs of white cultural practices. Where, in the interest of students and colleagues, such academics challenge the whiteness criteria defining academic success, most of their peers adhere to the racial standards of professionalism.

I explore three interrelated themes:

- The whiteness standards undergirding academe are taken for granted;
- Becoming academic presupposes a willingness and an aptitude for propagating white cultural practices; and
- Opposition to such practices exact a toll on the well-being of dissident academics

(faculty, students and staff) who embrace standards of blackness over the prescribed racist (also sexist and classist) standards of whiteness.

Expectations to measure up to whiteness standards are hostile to most academics and inordinately are toxic to the promoters of blackness in academic work and/ or research. These standards are kept in place through forms of informal and formal discipline imposed by various agents, not only on academics of color, but also on whites. So, the larger significance of this study exceeds the racial dimension to suggest, as well, that many academics who defy the game .are harmed by the whiteness standards of academic professionalism. This harm is normally silenced.

Yet, physical and emotional harm can occur when such standards capture and entrain the research attention of academics of color, enslave their academic productivity and divorce them from their communities by requiring them to make academe the center of their lives. I recommend the formation of activist coalitions in opposition to establishment forces, coalitions that open up new space for a full racial range of academic approaches once protected by deference to 'academic' freedom, so rapidly being eroded. No longer can academic unions be relied upon to address the undermining of dissident academics whose preference for blackness over whiteness compels them to supersede diversity responses to racial equality by demanding academic freedom and justice for all. Daily academic injustice moves them to contemplate more eclectic and humane ways of being academic in the 21st century. Privately licking our wounds and sharing our stories only with confidants must translate into coherent action.

Presenter

Dr. Enoch H. Page is the Associate Professor of Anthropology and former president of the Association of Black Anthropologists (section of the American Anthropological Association). Enoch Page has done applied ethnographic research. His focus has been the study of racial bureaucracies and their impact on black people, including; his most recent, soon to be published, study "Unofficial Black History in the National Parks of New England." His more recent pedagogical development is a seminar reliant on film called, *Spiritual Anthropology: Personal Transformation Through Various Modes of Self-discipline and Social Activism.*