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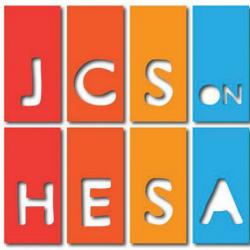
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Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

“Diversity & Inclusion & Free Speech & Civility”

Oppression and Marginalization through Diversity Rhetoric

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— Abstract —

As higher education institutions increasingly roll out diversity and inclusion initiatives, they intend to signal particular commitments. In this manuscript, we employ critical literacy as a framework for understanding the text and subtext of moments on our campus related to diversity and inclusion offices and initiatives. We first present the text of two particular moments, including the actual text of signs, messages, and conversations, but also including as a text the actions and inactions of university administrators. For each moment, we first present the *text*, including the actual or physical text(s), the superficial meaning(s), and the sequence of events. Then, we present the *subtext* and *critical reading* of the moment. We argue that universities take up the language and (il)logics of diversity discourses to perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reproduce white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy.

Keywords: Diversity, Inclusion, Higher Education, Critical Literacy, Oppression

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We walked onto campus that fall, greeted by new, large banners in institutional colors and large bold lettering that read, “DIVERSITY&INCLUSION&FREESPEECH&CIVILITY.” We are all faculty members in a college of education at a large, public, land-grant institution in the Deep South. Like all public colleges in the region, it has a history of racism (Causey, 2011; Shiver, 2016), segregationist presidents and leaders (Olliff, 2008; Rickard, 2014), and involvement in the forced removal of Indigenous people (Draughon Center, 2020), legacies which are still visible on campus today. We chatted amongst ourselves, remarking that, at first blush, the institution might seem to be endorsing some laudable ideas and values. But wait, “civility”? And, “free speech”? We knew these messages to be dog whistles for right-wing ideologues, providing opportunities to spew hate-filled rhetoric under the guise of First Amendment protections. We glanced at each other as the last two phrases began to settle—deep sighs all around. Some students rushed by the banner, glancing up on their way to class. Others paused to stare—contemplative looks on their faces. Banners were visible in the student center, on student transit, and outside major buildings across campus, some of which bear the names of prominent segregationists from past and present. One building on campus was even named after the infamous segregationist and Klan-sympathizer Governor George Wallace. The banners were variations on this theme and included phrases like, “LISTEN HARDER WHEN YOU DISAGREE” and “FREE SPEECH IS A TWO-WAY STREET.”

These new banners were reflective of an institutional mission to promote critical conversations amongst students, faculty, and staff. The banners also heightened visibility of promotional efforts to adver-

tise the new conversations series, sponsored by the also new office for inclusion and diversity. The office designed the speaker series to feature public intellectuals and celebrities representing juxtaposed ‘sides’ of an argument. For example, one ‘conversation’ included a renowned African American scholar of race opposite a white,¹ politically conservative ideologue; although the African American scholar was a much more recognized public intellectual on campus and beyond, the white speaker ultimately claimed, and the moderator granted, much more talking time at the event. This series of banners, the “Critical Conversations” series, and the promotional campaign around them, were moments where we witnessed the co-opting of language and the conflation of criticality with dominant ideologies and institutional priorities. The constant re-appropriation of language and claiming of our labor as critical scholars served simply to reinforce the white supremacist heteropatriarchy (hooks, 2013) of the institution.

Ahmed (2012) asked, “What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity?” (p. 1). In this paper, we take up these questions in relation to “diversity and inclusion” efforts at a large, predominantly and historically white-serving research university in the Deep South over the last 4 academic years. We construct a series of vignettes, like the one above, describing our experiences as academics navigating a contested terrain and working within and against the structures and systems of the institution. We describe our interactions with these efforts, including events, interactions, and the university’s public-facing marketing and promotion materials. We analyze these moments and narratives to explore how discursive practices that center “diversity and inclusion” and other ideas, such as “free speech” and “civility,” serve to reify dominant norms and values. We examine how diversity rhetoric on our campus continues to perpetuate white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy and impedes efforts for equitable and just practices in higher education. In this work, critical literacy affords us a framework to explore and make sense of

¹ We do not capitalize white identities in this manuscript. This decision is informed by Dumas (2016) who wrote, “White is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror.” (p. 12).

these discourses and moments, as we juxtapose them against institutional priorities and missions designed to promote critical thinking. We explore how positioning critical thinking as an endpoint presents opportunities for discourses to prop up dominant norms and perspectives. Conversely, critical literacy practices present opportunities for scholars and practitioners to examine power structures inherent in diversity rhetoric and the pervasive culture around ‘both sides-ism.’

The Limits of Diversity and Inclusion

Since the rise of diversity work as an industry both within corporate and educational structures (Shi, Pathak, Song, & Hoskisson, 2017; Wilson, 2013), scholars have highlighted the problematic deployment of diversity discourses, critiquing the ways that “diversity and inclusion rhetoric asks fundamentally different questions and is concerned with fundamentally different issues than efforts seeking equity and justice” (Stewart, 2017, p. 5). A focus on diversity and inclusion allows institutions to engage in ‘diversity work’ in ways that are color and race-evasive (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017) and circumvent conversations on marginalization and oppression (Mayorga-Gallo, 2019), opting instead to focus on “celebrating difference,” grounded in an assertion that “we are all diverse in our own way.” On our campus, as elsewhere, administrators and faculty commonly invoke the term *diverse* when they really mean that “thing that is other than White and middle class” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 219), cishet, and able-bodied. Furthermore, focusing on diversity and inclusion also encourages and allows administrators to take up partisan political affiliations and ideological positions as “diversity issues,” rendering the term *diversity* vague and almost meaningless (Chang, 2002). This distortion and dilution of the meaning of diversity and ideas about inclusivity serves to re-instantiate dominant power structures within institutions rather than underscoring and undertaking what movement is needed for justice and equity in those institutions.

Ahmed (2012) also explained, “Diversity enters

institutional discourse as a language of reparation; as a way of imagining that those who are divided can work together; as a way of assuming that ‘to get along’ is to right a wrong” (p. 164). The choice of these linguistic tools and the way they are taken up as false equivalents with other terms, such as “civility” and “free speech” has important consequences for the ways institutions carry out their missions and (under)serve people of Color, women, queer people, and other historically marginalized groups. For example, the Honors College at our campus screened a documentary about white nationalism and white supremacy and invited a representative from a white supremacist organization to speak afterward, allowing the speaker to attend through Skype audio with their image blurred. After about 25 minutes, a student in attendance shut the laptop, disconnecting the representative. This event, it should be noted, was scheduled as a follow-up to an event sponsored by the Black Student Union. Hosting an event about white supremacy and inviting a representative to defend that perspective became a way for diversity work to protect the institution (Ahmed, 2012) from critiques about only presenting ‘one side’ of an issue and instead support viewpoint diversity in lieu of working to actually make the institution diverse. This broad and evasive approach allows sometimes violent opposition to equity and justice to become part of the umbrella of what diversity means (Berrey, 2011).

Diversity and inclusion work also positions marginalized people as in need of more civility and politeness in discourse around their own humanity out of respect and deference to ideological diversity (Strunk, 2019). Furthermore, minoritized and marginalized students tend to make use of and perpetuate those discourses through the imposition of things like respectability politics (i.e., the belief that conforming to white, cisgender, and heterosexual ideals of “respectable” appearance, dress, and comportment are prerequisites for humane and equitable treatment) and meritocratic beliefs (Strunk et al., 2018). Indeed, our institution regularly sponsors programming that

includes, for example, etiquette dinners for women and students of Color, supporting the argument that “diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence, as well as the efforts that stem from them, are often co-opted to promote agendas that maintain the status quo and uphold white privilege” (Harris, Barone, & Morrison, 2015, p. 22). Scholars have continually documented the ways diversity practices on college campuses often re-center dominant ideologies such as whiteness (Gusa, 2010) and institutional diversity efforts often fail to address the experiences of marginalized students (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). Such efforts also de-energize social movements and drain the emotional and intellectual energy of activists (Herr, 1999).

In this paper, we interrogate both literal texts and discourses embedded within them as well as moments, movements, and actions institutions engage in as they reproduce marginalization, especially of people of Color, women, queer people, and people across the intersections of those identities. We treat these moments, movements, and actions as texts intended to be read uncritically and at face value, and then, we suggest ways to read those texts critically, unearthing their hidden and occult meanings. We further describe the episodes in which various actors produced, interpreted, and reinterpreted these texts as *moments*, which we analyze as data units surrounding the texts themselves.

Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking

In order to make meaning of this discursive work and the languages and texts we work within and against in our work as faculty, we draw on the concepts of critical literacy and critical thinking. Critical literacy is an instructional approach stemming from Marxist critical pedagogy that advocates for the adoption of critical perspectives toward text and language. Critical literacy encourages readers to analyze texts actively and offers strategies for uncovering underlying messages (Luke, 2012). There are several different theoretical perspectives on critical literacy that have

produced different pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. All of these approaches share the basic premise that literacy requires literate consumers of text to adopt a critical and questioning approach (Luke, 2012). According to Hagood (2002), critical literacy is the ability to take apart various texts in media or writing to find any possible discrimination that authors might have embedded in their presentation of the world since authors have social and political influence. Individuals accomplish this by analyzing messages found in media and written materials that might otherwise go unnoticed and promote inequitable power relations. Critical literacy involves reading beyond authors’ words and examining the manner in which they conveyed their ideas about society’s norms to determine whether these ideas contain language of marginalization and inequality (Hagood, 2002). Scholars have applied critical literacy to helping students understand the intra-action of discourses in campus messaging around race and other identities (Eaton, 2016).

Oftentimes, critical literacy is paired with the concept of critical thinking. While critical literacy and critical thinking involve similar approaches and may overlap, there are important differences. Critical thinking involves troubleshooting problems and solving them through a process involving logic and mental analysis (Shor, 1999). Thus, critical thinkers attempt to understand the outside world, recognize other arguments beyond their own, and evaluate the reasoning for such arguments. To make sense of the bias embedded within the claims first uncovered by critical thinking, critical literacy goes beyond identifying the problem by analyzing power dynamics that create the written and oral texts of society and questioning their claims (Shor, 1999). Practicing critical literacy lets individuals challenge both the author of the text in addition to the social and historical context in which the text arose.

According to proponents of critical literacy, this practice is not simply a means of attaining literacy in the sense of improving the ability to decode words

and syntax. In fact, the ability to read words on paper is not necessarily required to engage in a critical discussion of texts, as texts, from a critical literacy perspective, can include television, movies, webpages, music, art, and other means of expression (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). In addition to print sources, critical literacy also evaluates media and technology by looking at who owns these forms of information as well as whom they are writing about and their goals in creating these various texts. In this paper, we take up a broad definition of what might comprise a text and then suggest approaches and tools to critically read texts. We now turn to moments we have encountered and the vignettes we constructed about them, using critical literacy practices to analyze these moments and what they tell us about diversity work.

Moments

Below, we present two moments from our campus. For each moment, we first present the *text*, including the literal text(s), its superficial meaning(s), and its sequence of events. Then, we present the *subtext* and *critical reading* of the moment. In an effort to demonstrate how critical literacy can lead to new and more critical understandings of diversity work in higher education, we explore the text's implicit meanings and discursive moves and interrogate them through critical theoretical lenses. While these moments are specific to our campus, we hope they may prove to be instructive models for critically reading and interrogating moments of diversity work on other campuses.

The Text

One moment on our campus that we use to highlight the dynamics of diversity rhetoric and the importance of critical literacy occurred in the fall of 2015. That semester, following the widely publicized anti-racist protests at the University of Missouri (Seltzer, 2018), students on our campus began to organize. In particular, students of Color began talking about protests, potentially including protesting football

games (the university's top revenue sport and most public-facing activity). In an effort to quell unrest, university administrators proposed a campus climate study and pledged to act on its recommendations—a strategy that is common in U.S. higher education (Strunk, Bristol, & Takewell, 2016). Student leaders accepted this as a necessary and meaningful first step, effectively diffusing the threat of public protests. That study, conducted by an outside consulting firm, produced a series of recommendations, despite lacking methodological rigor and having few data points. Notably, administrators acted on those recommendations by hiring of the institution's first vice president for inclusion and diversity and creating an office of inclusion and diversity. The literal text of this moment included administrators' public statements, their very public involvement with campus climate consultants, and their expenditure of human and capital resources in diversity work. This moment also produced many physical texts, including a climate report that was data-anemic but recommendation-rich, banners, video messages, and social media campaigns, all touting the institution's newfound dedication to diversity. The institution, in highly public and noticeable ways, created a narrative that it was demonstrating and acting on a commitment to diversity work.

The Subtext: Our Critical Reading

As suggested by Ahmed (2012), "an appointment of a diversity officer can...represent the absence of a wider support of diversity" (p. 23). In this instance, the appointment of a diversity officer was an attempt to create the impression that diversity work was being done. Because diversity work was being done, there should be no need for protests. We see here two ways that diversity rhetoric and diversity workers are positioned to quell the work of equity and justice. First, the initiation of a campus climate study bought time for administration to act and react without the threat of public student protests. Second, the appointment of a diversity officer signaled a point of arrival rather than a point of departure. Not only was diversity

work *being done*, the work of diversity *was done*. The engagement of checkbox diversity in the absence of actual change was clear in subsequent interactions with administrators, when, for example, a university administrator was asked about meaningful work to create queer- and trans-affirming environments. The administrator responded that the institution had invested a large amount of money in hiring a diversity officer and staff; thus, they considered this work done or at least off their plate. Of course, the hiring of administrators does not actually produce internal change. It most clearly accomplishes a public relations goal of spending on diversity and giving a person the sole responsibility for diversity.

In this moment, the university created a process by which it considered *diversity* to be *done*. Moreover, it created a discursive tool to deflect accountability and responsibility for ongoing inequity and injustice on campus. “We spent money on the diversity office” became the common refrain to ongoing concerns. On the surface, the existence of such an office and a chief diversity officer signaled commitment and action. The creation of such an office was intended, however, to ensure inaction and that commitments remained superficial. In our experience, the diversity office became a source of frustration, blockage, and an unending *process*. As Ahmed (2012) suggested, the purpose of these diversity processes is to always be in process, thereby avoiding real action. Student protestors and activists sought changes to the racial composition of faculty, services for students of Color, anti-racist education, policy reform, and changes to student activities. What those students got was a new office with three staff members that was not empowered to enact real changes, in addition to some colorful billboards about free speech. After the creation of the diversity office, the faculty and student body became *less* diverse over the following years, as in many places (Bradley, Garvin, Law, & West, 2018).

We also noticed the use of discourses of equity, justice, diversity, and inclusion in university efforts in ways that concealed the university’s intentions.

They publicized events on, for example, poverty, race, Black History Month, Latinx Heritage Month, and others. The clear public message was one of commitment to change and ongoing movement. Behind this public messaging, the machinations of the university were much less clear. Administrators in the office often invoked language about “being in process” and “developing maturity models,” offering narratives of ongoing progress and ongoing intentional change in ambiguous, meaningless language. The taking up of this language of becoming and the refusal of an arrival point provides an interesting counterpoint to poststructural and queer scholars who refuse “being” in favor of “becoming” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Critical and poststructural scholars use the ideas of becoming rather than being to indicate that equity and justice are never truly accomplished and that “freedom is a constant struggle” (Davis, 2015, p. 61). However, the university used this idea to resist actual change. By being “in process,” they avoided being “in progress.”

Furthermore, in marketing these commitments, administrators co-opted the work of critical scholars among the faculty. For example, in a presentation to faculty about plans to market and share information about new institutional commitments and missions, administrators publicized the “critical analysis of education, including the study of systemic, cultural, and political factors that contribute to marginalization, oppression, and subjugation”. University leaders took this language verbatim from the website of a group of critical scholars (including authors of this paper), who work to actively resist the university’s oppressive efforts. An uncritical take of this message in university marketing plans appeared superficially to be supportive; yet, university leaders used this commitment from the work of a community of scholars without permission or attribution. Thus, university administrators took up the work of critical scholars to market the university as being in process, while refusing to support the scholars in progress. Their commodification of critical scholarship as a marketing tool also

erased the fact these scholars had labored in opposition to and in resistance of administrative efforts, and instead presented that commitment as a benign partnership or a generative collaboration. This can, in effect, gaslight critical scholars by suggesting that their experience of coming up against a wall is an illusion. Ahmed (2012) argues that when such scholars come up against a wall that others do not perceive or refuse to perceive, they appear to be stopping themselves. It can have the effect of making critical scholars appear to fight against thin air, obfuscating their struggle under marketing efforts and in process and progress narratives. This leads to questions of why scholar-activists are so upset, why they are “being dramatic,” and why they do not simply “talk to the diversity office” to take care of things.

Next, we turn to another moment on our campus. This moment also represented a potential public relations crisis, which administrators sought to manage. However, this second moment focused on the text and subtext of the College of Education rather than the university. A focus on the college rather than the university-level response allows a more nuanced analysis of administrative uptake of diversity discourses and anti-equity work. In our context, the responses from college and university administrators were also rather disparate from one another and violated our typical expectations that more faculty-proximal administrators (e.g., college leadership) would demonstrate more solidarity with faculty.

The Text

Another moment at our institution involves the university’s defense of academic freedom and viewpoint diversity. After a student newspaper article brought to light years of transphobic, homophobic, and racist public social media posts and op-ed letters from a professor in the College of Education, college representatives voiced strong support for academic freedom and freedom of speech. One administrator remarked that “he has freedom of speech...his personal beliefs are really no concern of mine” (Medina,

2019, para. 56). Beyond this initial statement, the two months following these revelations largely involved complete silence from college administrators. The only other public reading of the situation was by administrators who claimed no students had formally complained to the college, and that if complaints were made, administrators would have addressed them.

The texts of this moment included public statements, posts, and writings of one professor. His posts were clearly and undeniably transphobic, homophobic, and racist attacks, and students voiced the harm those comments caused them. But we also take up as a text the discourses college administrators deployed (or refused to deploy) in reading and explaining the apparent text of his posts. The fact that the college did not produce any messages, posts, responses, or even emails about these incidents is itself a text. College administrators presented an unwillingness to critically read the text of his public posts, engaging instead in a superficial reading that emphasized viewpoint diversity, individual rights, free speech, and academic freedom. In so doing, their reading reinforced the dominant ideologies of white supremacist cisheteroatriarchy. College administrators also engaged in a superficial reading of the meaning of academic freedom, rather than an interrogation of its contours and limitations when those academics who engage in attacks under the cover of academic freedom do real harm to students, faculty, and staff both within and beyond the professor’s classroom (and other areas of work).

In the end, most of the public interpretation by college administrators about this professor’s posts was limited to silent handwringing—a silence that became its own text. That silence was often accompanied by informal claims of complexity—“it’s complicated”—and that complexity was the reason for more handwringing and more silence. Notably, in our particular experience, the university president and provost were more receptive and open than the diversity office or the college were, at least at first. The president and provost presented themselves as concerned allies invested in rapid response to the posts, while

the diversity office initially presented a blockage. The diversity office described the situation as tricky, involving nuances of academic freedom and viewpoint diversity, while the president and provost were quick, in our meetings, to denounce the professor's transphobic and homophobic language. What is less clear is whether university administrators were positioning the diversity office as the "bad cop," as other scholars have suggested (Tuit, 2019), or if that office legitimately opposed equity work. However, college leadership remained unmoved and silent up until the time of this writing, more than a year after this moment.

The Subtext: Our Critical Reading

Viewpoint diversity is problematic in that it positions all views, ideologies, and discourses on equal footing, even those that are dehumanizing and oppressive. For example, viewpoint diversity frameworks posit that anti-racist and racist views deserve equal treatment, time, space, and venues for expression (Ray, 2018). Viewpoint diversity ideology exists as part of an imagined neo-capitalist marketplace of commodified ideas, language that our institutional administrators used verbatim in formal communications about diversity and when faculty and students challenged both-sides-ism. Neo-capitalist (il)logics (Stewart, 2020) posit that everything exists in a marketplace of commerce, including ideas and discourses, and that competition and free markets decide the right outcomes. The idea is, if racist ideas are really so bad, then imagined consumers in this supposed marketplace would refuse to "buy" those ideas, and those ideas would eventually die out. But public discourses do not function as marketplaces where the best ideas "win." Instead, these discursive practices often serve as a means of re-centering white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy (Mayorga-Gallo, 2019). There is no marketplace; instead, there are systems that reify and reproduce discourses, sustain privilege and power, and suppress and marginalize discourses that aim to interrupt power. In the case of this moment, a professor's ideas about trans people – as inherently bad, evil,

unworthy, unnatural, and psychologically disturbed – were given the same time, space, and bandwidth as those ideas of people advocating for trans-affirming pedagogy. Both views, then, were subsumed as diverse viewpoints, and administrators held up the simultaneous existence of both as an example of a commitment to diversity at the institutional level. In other words, the deployment of viewpoint diversity transformed an anti-diversity, anti-equity, and dehumanizing performance into an exemplar of diversity itself.

Administrators accomplished this discursive shift, transforming an anti-equity text into an exemplar of the commitment to diversity without articulating any particular position. Administrators, through this shift, were able to assert a pro-diversity position without ever clarifying if they supported trans students or anti-trans professors. On a closer reading, they may have been attempting to claim both positions simultaneously. Moreover, would this same approach apply to other kinds of "diverse" viewpoints? Recent incidents at campuses across the United States suggest that all free speech is not equal in the eyes of viewpoint diversity. Scholars with public views against Israeli occupation (Flaherty, 2015) and in favor of boycotts (American Association of University Professors, 2018) as well as racial justice advocates (Bolling, 2019) have been terminated or had their academic job offers revoked because of public speech that institutions and stakeholders viewed as too controversial or contentious. At our own institution, several administrators privately remarked that if conservative students complained that our speech was too radical or anti-conservative, the reaction would be much stronger and more decisive. In other words, not all speech is equally free, and diverse viewpoints are only tolerated to the extent that they uphold ongoing power structures and align with dominant ideologies.

When faculty pointed out the problematic nature of specific social media posts from this professor, which the student newspaper brought to light and called for action from administration, one common response was that the situation was "complicated."

Superficially, this might have been true; there were personnel issues, legalities, contracts, and committees involved. The notion, though, that faculty are unable to engage in complexity or understand complicated systems is patronizing. But the deeper impact of such a statement is to dismiss not only the expertise of faculty but their investment in issues of equity. Asserting complexity also obscures the operation of ideology. What was complicated about this case, but not others? Why were faculty read as incapable of understanding and contributing in this moment, but not others? The university frequently calls on faculty to deal with complex problems and come up with novel solutions. The assertion of complexity in this moment felt more like a refusal to explain the (il)logics by which administrators made decisions and an attempt to render illegible the operation of power. Furthermore, the assertion of complexity mirrors the idea of perpetually being in “process,” which we highlighted above. It serves to stall and ensure things are always so complex that no process can ever progress; no tangible efforts can ever be realized.

Further implicated in the claims of complexity is a drive to bureaucratize. By installing multiple layers of bureaucracy, institutions create time and space for (in)action, working to exhaust faculty resources and activist energies. For example, in our ongoing work over three years on campus to demand that students have the right to indicate their pronouns and chosen names in the university student information system, we have faced a series of meetings with university administrators discussing how “complex” things are, what being “in process” might mean, and who ought to process through the processes. These have included multiple governance meetings, strategy meetings, open forums, listening sessions, proposals, and faculty and staff workshops (led by faculty and staff advocates) that take time, energy, and resources. By bureaucratizing work towards the humanization of queer and trans students (in this instance), the university administrators effectively delayed, taxed, and exhausted faculty, staff, and student activism. Thus,

the process of bureaucratization imposes a very real and unsustainable cost on activists and advocates, and when those activists express frustration or exhaustion, there is a return to gaslighting. The administrators suggested that people asked for change and voice, and this process aims to provide it. Why, then, are activists and faculty so unhappy? Bureaucratization, combined with commodification and the assertion of complexity (Hachem, 2018), effectively instantiates claims that the faculty activists create problems, exhaust themselves, and are impossible to please. As with other means of being “in process,” bureaucratization serves to stall meaningful work and exhaust faculty energy and resources. Again, these processes serve to ensure that unending process never yields much in the way of progress.

Conclusion

The moments we presented provide examples of how institutions often tout the discourse of “diversity and inclusion” as a broad umbrella under which efforts for equity and justice can be pursued. However, hidden in the very title of those efforts are the seeds of anti-revolutionary and anti-equity efforts. Diversity and inclusion efforts too often elevate white supremacist and cisheteropatriarchal ideas as equal to (and deserving of equal consideration and airtime as) equity and justice efforts. Furthermore, those efforts often target minoritized and marginalized students as bodies in need of discipline so they may “fit” within institutions not designed to serve them. That is, rather than asking how institutions could be reimagined to serve minoritized bodies, these efforts reimagine minoritized bodies in service of the institution. This continues a historical trend in which institutions of higher education exploit minoritized bodies and their emotional and physical labor to build, sustain, and reinforce institutional structures both literally and metaphorically.

While we centered our analysis at the level of faculty and students interacting with institutions of higher education that continue to engage in oppres-

sive power relations, we recognize several implications for higher education administrators, as well. As critical theorists have posited, discourses can be self-reproducing, and often the hidden curricula of those messages are not immediately evident to those producing them (Apple, 1971; Giroux, 2011). As such, administrators and higher education institutions can benefit from engaging in critical literacy practices with regards to the messages their offices issue. Even if unintended, what are the implicit messages institutions send? For example, we see as implied in both sides-ism and the emphasis on dialogue between two ostensibly juxtaposed sides, the eventual goal of compromise or meeting in the middle. As Jones (2018) writes,

For many Americans it is painful to understand that there are citizens of our community who are deeply racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic. Certainly, they reason, this current moment is somehow a complicated misunderstanding. Perhaps there is some way to look at this—a view from the middle—that would allow us to communicate and realize that our national identity is the tie that will bind us comfortably, and with a bow. (para. 10)

This “fetishization” of the middle ground and the assumptions that underpin it do not, however, push higher education towards justice and equity. In education, faculty and staff must ask: In what ways do these messages and actions instead prioritize the institution and its entrenched power over, and at the cost of, marginalized students, faculty, and staff? We further encourage administrators to critically evaluate the texts they produce and those they consume.

As academics, we navigate shifting, contested terrain as we work both within and against these institutional machinations. Critical scholars in education must recognize the tense relationship of their work within these machinations and seek ways to do mean-

ingful work to transform institutions while understanding that dominant ideologies constantly recenter themselves in those efforts. Critical literacy practices have afforded us opportunities to examine how diversity discourses at our institution and how mechanisms by which they are shared, have ultimately served to uphold both sides-ism and bolster the idea that “we’re all diverse in our own way.” These discourses remake efforts that might operate in service of justice and equity to, instead, champion viewpoint diversity, creating a false equivalency between, for example, anti-racism and white supremacy.

Employing critical literacy practices has also crystallized our understanding of how viewpoint diversity, and those who promote it, minimize the experiences of marginalized people and re-center white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchal normativity. This re-centering and the rhetorical devices associated with it move conversations and equity work back to marginalized bodies. In this way, we, like scholar-practitioners at other institutions, have witnessed the use of diversity frameworks to oppress rather than uplift. We have explored those practices here, giving examples of critical readings of institutional moments, to make legible our work within and against institutional policies and processes for other scholar-practitioners. As we move forward on moving ground, we continue to consider how to claim criticality and define our work in ways that get co-opted, reshaped, and refused.

Importantly, an uncritical reading of the messages and texts produced by campus administrators around notions of diversity could easily lead to errantly relying on those offices to do the work of equity. Institutions of higher education are resilient to change and quick to find new ways of constructing messaging and producing texts that superficially appeal to those seeking equity. By illustrating moments involving such texts in our own context, we hope to illustrate the importance of critically reading such messages. By understanding texts’ implicit and hidden meanings, those working for change in higher education can better respond to administrators and campus of-

fices. However, we also recognize that, given the resiliency to change of educational institutions, each new linguistic and discursive shift is likely to result in changes in how institutions and administrators craft texts. This requires constant vigilance and criticality from those working for change in higher education to critically understand, interrogate, and interrupt these superficial messages that serve to maintain oppressive structures and practices.

“I wonder who they’ll put on the task force?”

We close this piece with another, more recent, moment and encourage readers to interrogate it via critical literacy practices. In the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, our institution, like so many others, issued a statement. Specifically, the university president issued a statement by email, saying the “events of the past 10 days have been painful for me.” The statement went on to describe the “pain of yet another brutal death on our streets; the pain of rights infringed during peaceful protest; the pain of fear; and the pain of frustration, wondering if anything will ever change.” His stated commitments included that “we as an institution will seek meaningful action to confront the pain, fear, systemic racism, and injustice faced by the black [*sic*] community.”

Discussing the statement, we noted, “Well, at least they used the ‘R’ word.” We were surprised to see “systemic racism” and “injustice faced by the black [*sic*] community” named. We had never seen them use such direct language before. But, we also noted that the statement used passive voice—pain and brutality were inflected, but the statement was not clear by whom. We continued reading to find that the plan was to “form a task force to guide the university through meaningful change.” We wondered who they would put on the task force and what its goals would be. We also noticed the use of individualizing language, such as, “We must treat all people with respect and civility as individuals, not as groups.”

A new task force. A new process. A new plan to be in process. We do not yet know what will come of these new developments on our campus, but we invite those working in higher education to critically evaluate the statements and actions coming out during this time of renewed social uprising and movement building. Using the skills of critical literacy, those in higher education can seek to recognize, interrupt, and revolutionize unending processes to move toward justice.

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