

## EMPLOYING WHITENESS AS PROPERTY: LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SIGNALING DIVERSITY WHEN YOU ARE WHITE

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### Abstract

Academic leaders in the United States are tasked with establishing university strategic plans that facilitate a holistic educational experience in order to meet the needs of our diverse student populations. A holistic education includes the academic, social, emotional, and spiritual (meaning of life, finding purpose) necessities of our students. To this end, let us consider the leaders accountable for upholding this ethical imperative. This autoethnography examines the concept of Whiteness as Property (WaP) (Harris, 1993) to identify how the distribution of power amongst educational leaders maintains whiteness in a space of racialized privilege while using people of color to signal their commitment to establishing a diverse university culture.

Using the WaP lens, allows for the analyses of the practices, behaviors, and other social performances administrators engage in to construct their leadership identities in relation to the current sociopolitical milieu concerning inclusion and diversity. Autoethnography illuminates these leadership practices in unique ways—the narratives are from the perspective of the non-traditional leader. We serve to collectively lead our universities in the right direction to meet our strategic goals and provide equitable education for all students. As a working-class Latina occupying educational leadership roles, autoethnography permits the theorization of my liminal perspective to underscore the interconnected role of universities as apparatuses assisting in capital accumulation, legitimation, and production. The narratives provide an analytical and profoundly humanistic understanding of the experiences that shape our conscious behaviors, actions, and thoughts in our workplace.

**Keywords:** *Whiteness as property, critical race theory, autoethnography, Latinx issues, leadership in higher education.*

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### 1. Introduction

The movement to integrate diversity and multiculturalism into the fibers of American universities is a trending topic, so to speak. As a minoritized female academic and autoethnographer in the United States, I am at the epicenter of a trajectory that has slowly been evolving over the course of my now twelve years in a diverse Southern California large public four-year university. Hence, my unique position allows me to observe how leaders, and recent aspiring leaders, in higher education are advancing this responsibility. This autoethnographic study examines the concept of Whiteness as Property (WaP) (Harris, 1993) to identify how the distribution of power amongst educational leaders maintains whiteness in the space of racialized privilege while using people of color to signal their commitment to establishing a diverse university culture.

Whiteness as Property came my way during graduate school, a concept that continues to intrigue me for its convincing premise: racial identity and property rights are never mutually exclusive concepts. In her seminal study published in the *Harvard Law Review*, Harris begins by tracing the historical construction of racial identity since the early 1600, positing that whiteness, as a property interest protecting political, cultural, and economic systems, continues to be centered on the right to exclude for those who fall outside the white racial markers established by the law. In this study, addressing the ways in which whiteness as property is performed by leaders in higher education, at the tipping point of systemic changes related to diversity initiatives, permits the discovery of how property interests are protected at the university.

The advantage of my unique frame of reference stems from the following statistics: consider that only 0.13% of the Latinx US population hold a Ph.D. (Semega J. L., Fontenot, K. R., & Kollar, M. A., 2017). Bearing in mind that there is a very small percentage of Latinx professors and academic leaders in American universities, at the same time that the demographic shifts in American schools show increase in underserved minoritized student populations, imposes upon universities to establish resources that

effectively support our current student population. The increase in minoritized student populations has impacted many universities to consider how best to retain and successfully serve all students in order to close equity gaps. While admitting diverse students to the university is only one aspect of diversity initiatives, it has been challenging to retain them. Recent studies demonstrate that only 51% of Latinx and 40% of African American first-year, first-time college students graduate within six years compared to 62% of whites (Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2018). There are numerous reasons for this. However, the most prevalent studies emerge from deficit perspectives, who limit their claims on the lack of appropriate academic skills on the part of the students. More recently, however, studies have acknowledged that a lack of inclusive university environments contribute to students' disengagement and lack of sense of belonging.

Fortunately, universities are seeking to change. One way this is manifesting, is through the language in university mission statements and strategic plans across the United States. A university's mission statement demonstrates its values and expectations, naming specific strategies that guide its mission towards accomplishing their goals. A study analyzing the language of a sample of university mission statements found that 75% of these universities included the concept of diversity in their mission statements (Wislon, Mayer & McNeal, 2012). While the advancement to indicate a commitment to diversity as a priority and a sense of purpose for the university is a step in the right direction, the conclusions reached by Wilson's study must be considered. They motivate us to consider the following, "If one believes that diversity is an essential obligation of all public higher education institutions, then these figures are disappointing as they imply that 25% to 35% of public institutions do not include diversity issues in their primary documents, (p.137). While we cannot hypothesize why institutions chose to include or exclude diversity, it may be enough to suggest that institutions reflect on whether their statements accurately describe their values or if they do not and then explore why that may be so (p.138)."

## 2. Design & Methods

The increasing sociopolitical accountability on the universities' to develop just, equitable, and inclusive spaces that accommodate the diverse student body's holistic needs has created a driving impetus for leaders to be, at the very least, eloquently versed in such settings. This autoethnography examines the concept of Whiteness as Property (WaP) (Harris, 1993) to identify how the distribution of power amongst educational leaders maintains whiteness in a space of racialized privilege while using bodies of color to signal their commitment to establishing a diverse university culture. Using the WaP lens, allows for the analyses of the practices, behaviors, and other social performances administrators engage in to construct their leadership identities concerning inclusion and diversity mandates across higher education.

Examining these acts within the theoretical lens of WaP, allows for this study to analyze specific acts that signal how whiteness establish their commitment to diversity while maintaining ownership and control of their existing racial dominance. This study considers how academic leaders engage in situations where they employ whiteness as a property right engaging in what is known as reverse passing—attempting to be reclassified and aligned with people of color in order to strategically signal their role within diversity for the purpose of being seen as inclusive. I maintain that educational leaders must be open to examining how they participate in such acts so they may be unearthed, and therefore, interrupted. Autoethnography is a methodology I use as it was initially conceived, that is, "cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their 'own people,' in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being 'native,' acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied" (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). Using autoethnography is my deliberate stance against the highly operationalized and measured studies that positivist research support, speaking against the false objectivity normalized in traditional published research. In autoethnography, the author purposefully establishes their positionality. I deliberately use my educational experience, as called upon by critical race theorist (CRT), to uncover inequality in education. CRT is centered on the following tenets: the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of subordination; the deliberate challenge to dominant forms of ideology, a commitment to social justice, the positioning of marginalized voices at the center of knowledge; and the interdisciplinary approach to understanding race and racism (Yosso, 2005). Moreover, using storytelling to speak to theory, Neumann (1996, p.189) contends that "autoethnographic texts...democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power." As a critical race theorist myself, I am situated in the margins of these elite spaces, a prime location to think about how best to create authentically inclusive spaces. Together with an autoethnographic design, I draw on my unique perspective to contribute to areas of research that strive to understand how multicultural progress is debilitated by ideological acts of racism that normalize dispositions and behaviors in whiteness who employ WaP rights.

### 3. Discussion

This is only the beginning of my research. This discussion will be fully elaborated during the conference.

Academic leaders in the United States are tasked with establishing university strategic plans that facilitate a holistic educational experience to meet the needs of our diverse, and traditionally underserved, student populations. A holistic education includes our students' academic, social, emotional, and spiritual (meaning of life, finding purpose) necessities. To this end, let us consider the leaders accountable for upholding this ethical imperative.

As a working-class Latina occupying leadership roles in higher education, autoethnography permits the theorization of my liminal perspective, underscoring the interrelated role of universities as apparatuses assisting in capital accumulation, legitimation, and production. Using the WaP lens, this study reveals the practices, behaviors, and other social performances administrators engage in to construct their leadership identities in relation to the current sociopolitical milieu concerning inclusion and diversity.

Autoethnography illuminates these leadership practices in unique ways—the narratives are from the perspective of the non-traditional leader who has identified the ways in which white academics engage in reverse passing in order to climb the administrative ranks. This autoethnography provides an analytical and profoundly humanistic understanding of the experiences that shape our conscious behaviors, actions, and thoughts in our workplace.

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