Whose University? Racial Politics and the Claims of Postracial Whiteness

Uzma Jamil

McGill University

In the summer of 2020, protests by Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements in the US and other countries focused attention on ongoing problems of anti-Black racism and violence. College and university students mounted campaigns to interrogate the histories of their institutions and their links with trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism. While illustrative of a political momentum, this was not a singular political moment. Rather, it is part of a larger context defined by the increased visibility and power of the spectrum of conservative, right-wing, and far-right, white nationalist groups and individuals in politics, in the media, and in the public square. It has implications for higher education, for example, in the construction of moral panics about free speech and academic freedom by conservative politicians and media in the US, UK, and Canada.

This paper explores the tensions between racialized bodies, ideas, and the university as a white space in light of racial politics. The university is constructed as a particular type of space, situated within white settler colonial projects in North America. While it reflects the structural conditions of whiteness in society, without necessarily being fixed or reduced into a static replication of it, it is also responsive to contemporary racial politics. In the first part of this paper, I discuss the relationship between bodies, spaces, and ideas as constitutive of whiteness, connecting whiteness in society to whiteness in universities. I then introduce the postracial and what I mean by the term "postracial whiteness." Whiteness in universities is reinforced through claims to the postracial, as both a response to and illustration of contemporary racial politics. In the second part of this paper, I analyze the events involved in the tenure denial case of Nikole Hannah-Jones at University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill in 2020-2021, as an illustration of postracial whiteness in response to racialized faculty whose work challenges the status quo. Postracial whiteness operates as

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION | Winston Thompson, editor

an assertion of whiteness while claiming to be otherwise, pushing back against the presence of racialized faculty and their ideas and reclaiming the university as a white space.

WHITE BODIES, WHITE SPACES

Charles Mills' work on whiteness and the racial contract is a useful starting point for thinking about the system and the logic that underpins the relationship between white and non-white groups in American society. Whiteness is a system of racial privilege of white groups over non-white groups, based on the racial contract.[1] This system of white supremacy includes the enslavement of Black people and the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas between 1492 and the 1830s.[2] It is reflected in the settler colonial foundations of American colleges and universities that were built for the privileged, primarily white men, in society. These institutions provided an education for white men who would go into the church, for gentlemen who belonged to the landed classes, and for white men who would go on to fill leadership positions in the government or in the British colonial empire.[3] There were both direct and indirect links between the slave trade and colleges and universities. For example, Georgetown University in Washington DC profited from Jesuit-owned plantations, which included the ownership of enslaved peoples who worked on those plantations.[4]

While society has moved from an explicit to an implicit racialized hierarchy over time, the racial contract and the logic of whiteness endure, according to Mills. Whiteness in society is reflected in how spaces and bodies are organized, through the privilege attributed to white bodies to take up and own space as theirs. Applied to the nation, it allows for a demarcation of areas that are exclusive to white people and areas that are for non-whites. However, the presence of non-whites in the nation as a white space, writ large, means that they remain in a state of permanent tension with it.[5] Thus, moving from the abstract idea of the nation to the particularities of geographically specific spaces, white bodies constitute the whiteness of spaces, while at the same time, non-white bodies in those spaces disrupt them.[6] In the context of universities as white spaces, racialized, non-white bodies can be seen as existing in a state

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

of tension with and within it.

Particularly relevant to universities is how the logic of whiteness is reflected through the racial contract as an epistemological system, one which determines what counts as knowledge of and about the world. The epistemic authority of whiteness facilitates an understanding of the world in which white supremacy is normalized and entrenched. It sets the terms for this, "about what counts as correct, objective interpretation of the world." If one agrees to this view, "one is ('contractually') granted full cognitive standing in the polity, the official epistemic community."[7] However, this contract requires "an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority."[8] White epistemic authority is built on an epistemology of ignorance, which requires the deliberate denial and ignorance of the world that white groups themselves have made and live in, including the realities and consequences of slavery, conquest, and colonialism.[9]

If we consider the university as a white space, it brings together and holds this overlap between white bodies, spaces, and ideas. Universities are constituted not only through the presence of white people, but also through the epistemic authority of whiteness, which privileges an "objective" understanding of the world, viewed through the lens of the racial contract. In many disciplines, this is reflected in the Eurocentrism of what constitutes the canon, the (often) white thinkers and scholars whose work sets the foundational terms for the discipline.

Sara Ahmed's work extends Mills' ideas further into how whiteness is constructed and maintained within the university through the orientation of bodies in spaces. Institutional whiteness is shaped through the proximity of white bodies to each other, such that "white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces."[10] This proximity is based on habitual comfort, and vice versa. White bodies function as both constitutive of and extensions of white spaces in the university, while non-white bodies operate instead as interruptions.[11]

Ahmed draws attention to the relationship between 'use' and 'fit' in how institutional whiteness comes to be, shaping who the university is meant

for, who fits into it, and who does not. Put simply, the university was designed to be used by those who already fit into it. Far from being an arbitrary outcome, this was purposeful and intentional, from the selection of building materials to the naming of buildings to the people who are hired and admitted into those buildings. "Institutions are built from small acts of use, from uses of use, from how building blocks put together, over time, become walls, walls that enable some bodies to enter, stay put, progress, others not."[12]

A "good fit" is possible if the space exists for one to fit into. As Ahmed argues, this "fit" is predetermined to some extent. It is shaped by those who are already used to fitting in, those who extend the whiteness of the space because their white bodies are already seen as belonging within it. In contrast, non-white groups are not considered a "good fit." The university can operate as a white space because there are already entrances and pathways that have been created to ease the movement of the people who already fit into and through the institution. Thus, over the long term, it becomes easy to see how institutional whiteness reproduces itself through the people who are admitted as students and those who are hired as faculty, those who can own the space and those who are seen as disrupting it.[13]

While whiteness in universities is constituted and maintained through this relationship between bodies and spaces, between "use" and "fit," there is also the specific role of universities as intellectual spaces. To return to Mills, the racial contract is maintained through the centering of a worldview that privileges whiteness. The epistemic authority of whiteness is reflected in not only what counts as "correct" knowledge of and about the world, but also in who has the capacity to learn and to hold that knowledge.[14] If we bring this together with Ahmed's work, it allows us to see the relationships between bodies, spaces, and ideas, and in particular, how the whiteness of universities is constituted through these proximities and tensions.

POSTRACIAL

Whiteness may be invisible to those who inhabit it, and most visible to the non-white who experience it.[15] I have described whiteness as part of

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

the social and political conditions that shape how universities function. In this section, I consider how whiteness is tied to the postracial, as a product of the white liberal imagination.[16]

According to David Theo Goldberg, the postracial claims that race and racial discrimination are "over." Seen through a long trajectory of linear progress, racial discrimination is considered to have dwindled away to "a point today where, if existing at all, such discrimination is anomalous and individually expressed."[17] Thus, racial discrimination, where it is an issue, is seen as a problem of individuals, rather than as an outcome of systemic inequities.

Although the postracial may deny it, the racial logic that underpins society continues to endure, and racist expressions continue to thrive.[18] "What the claim about postraciality as the end of race suggests, rather, is simply that a certain way of thinking about race and implicitly of racist expression, has given way to novel understandings, orders and arrangements of racial designation and racist expression."[19] This novel order explains the anomalous existence of racism as a problem of "bad" individuals who can theoretically be educated into not being racist. This confirms a liberal view of racists and racism, highlighting the importance of "good white people," as the norm.[20] It therefore obscures racism as a systemic issue.

The postracial does racial work by denying the visibility of race and racism.[21] It maintains the racialized logic and the hegemonic power of the invisibility of whiteness, thus demonstrating the enduring logic of whiteness that Mills discusses as constitutive of the racial contract in society. In the academic context, the postracial continues to uphold whiteness as a racial logic and structure by not naming it. This configuration is important because it not only allows the status quo of institutional whiteness to continue, but also protects it from attack by couching it in other terms, such as "objectivity" or "impartiality." The case of Nikole Hannah-Jones illustrates this further, as an example of how postracial whiteness works in the midst of contemporary racial politics.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES AND UNC

Nikole Hannah-Jones is the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and

founder of the 1619 Project at the *New York Times Magazine*. She was initially offered the position of Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at UNC Chapel Hill in 2020. Funded by the Knight Foundation, the Knight Chair has traditionally been offered as a tenured position to professional journalists. She was recruited by the Dean of the Journalism School, Susan King, because of her work with the 1619 Project and the increased attention to racial politics after the BLM protests across the country in that summer. As Hannah-Jones describes the motivation to offer her this position: "Our country was undergoing a racial reckoning, and she [King] talked about the moment we are in and how important it was for the upcoming generation of journalists to have the knowledge, training, historical understanding, and depth of reporting to cover the changing country and its challenges."[22]

Hannah-Jones prepared and submitted her tenure dossier in the summer of 2020. It received very positive reviews from external reviewers as well as internal support from the faculty and the promotion and tenure committee at UNC.[23] Having been approved all the way through the process, it ran into trouble, however, when it came to the final step, the vote from the Board of Trustees. Her tenure case was scheduled to be voted on twice during their regular meetings, once in November 2020 and again in January 2021. However, it was pulled each time, without any clear reason or explanation given. Instead, she was offered a five-year contract, with tenure to be considered at a later, unspecified date. Not wanting to create bad publicity for either herself or for the university, Hannah-Jones accepted the offer and signed the contract in February 2021.[24]

However, in April, the James G. Martin Center, a conservative think tank in North Carolina, published an article criticizing UNC for hiring her, despite the Board of Trustees' denial of tenure. Shortly after, the NC Policy Watch published an article that revealed the details behind Hannah-Jones' hiring and tenure process.[25] Alumni, donors, faculty, and students all mobilized, many in support of Hannah-Jones. Among these, UNC Black student protests ultimately forced the Board of Trustees to vote on her tenure case in June.[26] Though her tenure was approved and a revised offer made, Hannah-Jones

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

ultimately turned it down for a tenured position as the inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Reporting at Howard University, a historically Black university. She plans to set up the Center for Journalism and Democracy there to "produce journalists capable of accurately and urgently covering the perilous challenges of our democracy with a clarity, skepticism, rigor, and historical dexterity that is too often missing from today's journalism."[27]

Reflecting on why she chose Howard, Hannah-Jones wrote,

> "I have decided that instead of fighting to prove I belong at an institution that until 1955 prohibited Black Americans from attending, I am instead going to work in the legacy of a university not built by the enslaved but for those who once were. For too long, Black Americans have been taught that success is defined by gaining entry to and succeeding in historically white institutions. I have done that, and now I am honored and grateful to join the long legacy of Black Americans who have defined success by working to build up their own."[28]

THE 1619 PROJECT

The 1619 Project was first published as a set of essays in the August 18, 2019 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*. The title is based on the date of arrival of the first ship in Hampton, Virginia, in the then-British colonies, carrying twenty-odd enslaved Africans. It is also the starting point for a retelling of the foundational history of the United States. The essays focus on the integral contributions of Black people, both past and present, to the creation of the nation and its ideals of liberty and equality. The lead essay, written by Hannah-Jones, argues that the founding fathers built the framework for American democracy on the backs of the enslaved, because they depended upon the wealth and profits from slavery.[29] Black people not only fought for their freedom against slavery, but also contributed to the civil rights struggles and the laws that made it possible

for other groups to achieve the same kind of rights as well.[30] "Black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true 'founding fathers.'"[31]

It became clear in the course of the press coverage on Hannah-Jones' case that the donor that the journalism school at UNC had been named for, Walter Hussman, was instrumental in holding up her tenure approval. He had concerns about Hannah-Jones' journalism, particularly in the 1619 Project, both for its content and its implications for the field of journalism as a whole.[32] First, he believed that it presented a problematic view of American history and the role of slavery in it. Hussman was troubled, specifically, by her argument about the importance of slavery to the American Revolution. "I abhor slavery, I think it was terrible," Hussman said. "But slavery got to be a big problem after the founding. And we did have some slavery then. But it became pretty clear to me that the Founding Fathers thought slavery was bad and they wanted to get rid of it."[33]

In contrast, Hannah-Jones states that the founding fathers seceded because they wanted to protect slavery, as they profited from it, while there were already calls for its abolition in London at the time. "We may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue."[34] Jefferson's earlier draft of the Declaration of Independence blamed the English king for forcing slavery upon the colonists, though the drafters ultimately cut out that passage. The final Declaration did not mention slavery explicitly, but it protected it through this omission.[35]

Hussman was not alone in his disagreement over the role of slavery in the American Revolution. A letter signed by five historians, Sean Wilentz, James McPherson, Gordon Wood, Victoria Bynum, and James Oakes, was published in the *New York Times* in December 2019, a few months after the 1619 Project magazine issue came out. The signatories challenged the historical credibility of the Project and asked for corrections. Among their concerns was Hannah-Jones'

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

assertion about the role of slavery in defining the foundations of the country's history. They believed, like Hussman, that protecting slavery was not central to the American desire for independence from Britain."[36]

What is at stake, however, is not a question of factual details, but about differing views of American history and society. The historians' view illustrates the strong investment and attachment to the idea of American history as a story of linear progress, one which may be slow and falter at times but which still strives for perfection, in line with the ideals of liberty and justice it was founded upon. In contrast, Hannah-Jones and her colleagues take a much more pessimistic view by critiquing those ideals, and pointing out how they might not be as perfect as imagined because the country has not progressed as much as it likes to believe it has, given the enduring afterlife of slavery through the presence of anti-Black systemic racism in American society.[37]

But the disagreement of Hussman and the historians who wrote the letter reflects something deeper: the attachment to the epistemic authority of whiteness to narrate American history, especially the importance of its foundational ideals, which Hannah-Jones is critiquing in her work on the 1619 Project. She raises questions about not only who has the "right" to narrate national history, but also the legitimacy and authority of that narrative too. Namely, that the American history that centers white men as the founding fathers of the country is in fact skewed because it excludes the ongoing contributions of Black people to the construction of American national identity and the values it holds dear.

Hussman's second objection to the tenured appointment of Hannah-Jones was that he believed her work to be contrary to his core values of journalism, "objectivity, impartiality, integrity and truth-seeking."[38] These values are also listed on the wall of the building that houses the journalism school at UNC. He took issue with Hannah-Jones' public display of her politics, describing her as an "advocate," someone with opinions on political issues, rather than an "objective journalist" who ought to be impartial and not take a public stance on the topics she covered. Hussman worried that given Hannah-Jones' "'celebrity' status…the school would become more closely identified with the

1619 Project than with his own core values of journalism."[39]

This second point also illustrates the discomfort with challenges to the epistemic authority of whiteness, but couched in terms of "objectivity" and "impartiality." The subtext of this critique is a moral judgement on the value of her work, the implication that her journalism is not as "good" because it is not "real" journalism, according to Hussman. Terms like "objectivity" and "impartiality" are also used to indicate "fit," as Ahmed describes it. In this case, it is meant to signal that Hannah-Jones is not a "good fit" with the journalism school that has its core values listed on its walls. She is also not perceived as a "good fit" because her work is seen as "political opinion," or advocacy, rather than journalism. The claim that the work of racialized academics is "too political" or "too subjective" as a form of activism rather than scholarship is commonly deployed as a way to undermine their epistemic authority and legitimacy as scholars in universities.[40]

It raises the question of how and why these criticisms were deployed against Hannah-Jones. On the surface, this incident is about the violation of academic freedom, as a result of political interference by a university donor. However, institutional racism and bias were also present, which Hannah-Jones recognized easily because she is a Black woman and, like many others, has had to deal with racism through most of her career.[41] As she states, "The Board of Trustees wanted to send a message to me and others like me, and it did."[42] That message was not only that she was not wanted there, but that her work was too challenging to the status quo of whiteness. Her work and credentials were publicly questioned and undermined because Hussman believed "that a project that centered Black Americans equaled the denigration of white Americans," and the leadership of UNC supported this through their actions and inaction.[43]

Going back to the ways that bodies, spaces, and ideas are connected together to constitute whiteness, Hannah-Jones was a disruptive presence, as a Black woman who did not view the world in the "correct" way, whose work displaced the centrality of white men and their moral authority as the founders of the nation. She did not "fit" into the university, epistemologically speaking,

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

nor did she do so as a racialized non-white professor in a university that has been historically white and remains predominantly the same. She named it explicitly in her statement about why she chose to go to Howard, a Historically Black University, because it was an institution built for the formerly enslaved and their descendants.

My last point is about why I describe this case as an example of "postracial whiteness" rather than plain old racism. The implicit racial order that Mills describes requires a postracial vocabulary to operate in the present. The premise of the postracial is that racism and racial discrimination are supposedly over, but a new vocabulary is needed to describe the enduring logic of it, while not naming it as such. This vocabulary takes the form of the objections that Hussman raised, concerns about historical truths and "objective" journalism, which obscure any explicit racial bias. In sum, this case illustrates how postracial whiteness in universities works to restore the hegemonic invisibility of whiteness in how the space is constituted, who it is meant for, and who does not belong in it. While this is neither an inevitable, nor permanent outcome, it helps us understand better how whiteness operates in society in light of contemporary racial politics.

CONCLUSION

While American racial politics in the past five years inform the larger political context for the events discussed in this paper, the US is not unique. Rather, similar kinds of racial politics exist in different countries, where conservative, right-wing politicians and their governments have had an impact on university activities and academic freedom—for example, in the UK, Canada, and France. It points toward the emergence of a transnational analysis of whiteness that offers fruitful possibilities for thinking more deeply about the relationship between racial politics and postracial whiteness in universities across western countries.

1 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

2 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 21.

3 Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2018), 17; Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivory: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

4 Georgetown University, "Report of the Working Group on Slavery, Memory and Reconciliation to the President of Georgetown University" (Washington DC: Georgetown University, 2016), 12, http://slavery.georgetown.edu/history/working-group/report/

https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/nzo1tx4elaerg13akjwxuve3pv9sb03a.

5 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 53.

6 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 42–53.

7 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 17–18.

8 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18.

9 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18–19.

10 Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (August 2007): 157.

11 Ahmed, "Phenomenology of Whiteness," 157.

12 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 191. See chapters 1 and 4 in this book for more detailed discussions on the concept of use and its application to universities as institutions.

13 Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 165.

14 This leads us towards thinking about epistemic injustice, though a full discussion is outside the scope of this paper. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26, 2, (2011): 236–257; Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

15 Ahmed, "Phenomenology of Whiteness," 157.

16 Barnor Hesse, "Whiteness and Culture Wars," March 11, 2021, in *We Need to Talk*

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022

About Whiteness, produced by Myriam Francois, podcast, episode 21, https://www.weneedtotalkaboutwhiteness.com.

17 David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 2.

18 Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, viii.

19 Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, 6.

20 Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

21 Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, 4.

22 Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Nikole Hannah-Jones Issues Statement on Decision to Decline Tenure Offer at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and to Accept Knight Chair Appointment at Howard University," *NAACP Legal Defense Fund*, July 6, 2021, 2, https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/NHJ-Statement-CBS-7.6.21-FINAL-8-am.pdf.

23 Joe Killian and Kyle Ingram, "PW Special Report: After Conservative Criticism, UNC Backs Down from Offering Acclaimed Journalist Tenured Position," *NC Policy Watch*, May 19, 2021, http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2021/05/19/pw-special-report-after-conservative-criticism-unc-backs-down-from-offering-acclaimed-journalist-a-tenured-position/.

24 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 2.

25 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 2–3.

26 David Folkenflik, "After Contentious Debate, UNC Grants Tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones," *NPR*, June 30, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/06/30/1011880598/after-contentious-debate-unc-grants-tenure-to-nikole-hannah-jones.

27 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 6.

28 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 6.

29 Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine,* August 19, 2019, 18.

30 Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 16.

31 Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 17.

32 Nicole Moorefield, "Hussman Says He Was 'Concerned' About His Core Values of Journalism and 1619 Project," *The Daily Tar Heel*, June 9, 2021, https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2021/06/hussman-concerned-core-values-1619-project.

33 Moorefield, "Hussman Says He Was 'Concerned."

34 Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 18.

35 Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project," 18.

36 Adam Serwer, "The Fight Over the 1619 Project is Not About the Facts," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/.

37 Serwer, "The Fight Over."

38 Moorefield, "Hussman Says He Was 'Concerned."

39 Moorefield, "Hussman Says He Was 'Concerned."

40 For example, see the denial of tenure to Lorgia García Peña, professor of Latinx studies at Harvard University in 2019. Graciela Mochkofsky, "Why Lorgia García Peña Was Denied Tenure at Harvard," *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-education/why-lorgia-garcia-pena-was-denied-tenure-at-harvard.

41 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 4–5.

42 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 4.

43 Hannah-Jones, "Statement," 4.

DOI: 10.47925/77.4.022