

A 12-Step Program for Decolonizing the University

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ABSTRACT

Long-standing calls to uproot structural racism across the world have gained impetus, especially within academia, in the wake of dozens of killings including the murder of Breanna Taylor and George Floyd. Universities, as one of the principal sites of European dominance, is central to any decolonizing efforts. As Europe colonized much of the world, it installed its major institutions, such as politics, family, economic systems, religion, and education.

Decolonial processes within the University refer to curriculum, pedagogies and methodologies that delink, deconstruct, and unhinge Eurocentric stereotypes. Decolonizing the University means recentering the various voices of peoples of color, taking them from the margins to the core. Indigenous counter-narratives are being produced that both challenge the centrality of European established knowledge systems, while simultaneously recognizing that counter-narratives will be generated by canon proponents that challenge both the legitimacy and authority of these indigenous counter-narratives. Universities have become the site of contested spaces not only in the United States but worldwide as symbols of our colonial, confederate, and imperial past have been challenged. We must provide the spaces where all, particularly the marginalized, can be heard. In this paper we shall explore the 12 steps for accomplishing this.

KEYWORDS

Decolonization, academy, Eurocentric stereotypes, counter-narratives, allyship

Long-standing calls to uproot structural racism across the world have gained impetus, especially within academia, in the wake of dozens of killings including the murder of Breanna Taylor and George Floyd. Universities, as one of the principal sites of European dominance, is central to any decolonizing efforts. But what does it mean to decolonize the university? And how can professors, faculty members, students, and academics work to create this change?

As Europe colonized much of the world, it installed its major institutions, such as politics, family, economic systems, religion, and education. These institutions, found in the West, throughout India, Africa, and the Caribbean primary purpose were to guarantee Western ideas and knowledge systems, racial hierarchies and identities that would prevail. As former colonies have struggled to remove the imperial colors, their efforts have been stifled in many ways by the institutions that are central to their existence. The University is no different. Within the University, as with all other European imported institutions, white privilege, space, and identity have been not only preserved but continually reified. Consequently, history in the Americas start with colonization, the Indigenous Peoples, Africans, and others take their identities from this starting point. Most Indigenous cultural systems, systems of knowledge, and world views were not only denigrated but also ridiculed as being backward, unsophisticated, and disregarded. The colonized and the slave were treated as people without history, without substance or essence. They had no

agency and only existed in juxtaposition and as a reaction to Western Imperialism. Even when forced to take these various groups into consideration, reluctantly it did so by creating identity programs such as Native American, African American, Asian and Latino American Studies programs. This left intact, much of the foundations of European history, White identity, and privilege. Ironically, even these programs continue to be marginalized, while areas, such as Global and American studies, which primarily concentrates on the Western experiences, are again the dominant voices even among identity programs. Decolonizing the University means recentering the various voices of peoples of color, taking them from the margins to the core. In these presentations we shall explore the 12 steps for accomplishing this. But first let us consider what a colonized educational system, its scholarship, and pedagogy has produced.

Decolonizing the University: 12 Step Program

Decolonial processes within the University refer to curriculum, pedagogies and methodologies that delink, deconstruct, and unhinge Eurocentric stereotypes. This process simultaneously challenges the canon and dominant ideologies of Western based systems of knowing, theories, and information systems. As a result, these have become contested sites for decolonial activists, scholars, theorists, researchers, and policy artists. It is an ongoing process directly related to the anti-, post- and decolonial struggles developed in China,

India, Asia, Africa, and the Americas that challenge the Eurocentric control of knowledge, theory, and praxis.

Indigenous counter-narratives are being produced that both challenge the centrality of European established knowledge systems, while simultaneously recognizing that counter-narratives will be generated by canon proponents that challenge both the legitimacy and authority of these indigenous counter-narratives. If the canon proponents are successful, they will not only deflect criticism but also perpetuate the colonial based orientation that marginalizes formerly colonized and subjugated peoples. As we begin, we recognize that any authentic conversations must start from places of safety...so before we begin let us go over the rules of engagement...

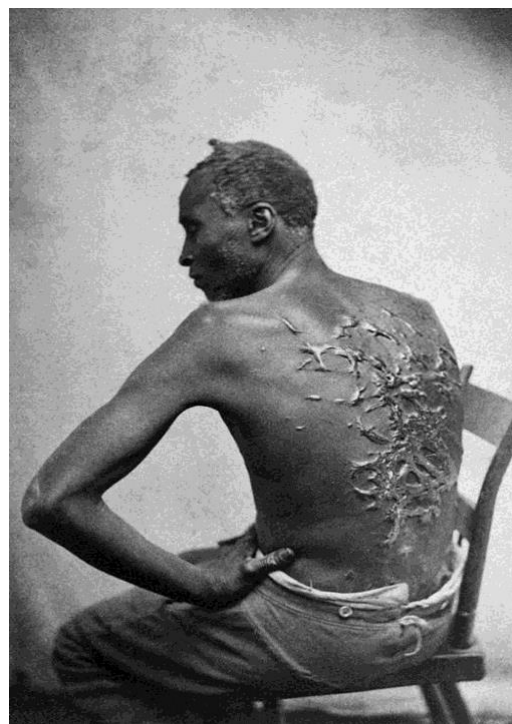
emotional safety

comes from:

Sara Kuburic, CCC, @millennial.therapist

- Being acknowledged (*seen and heard*)
- Being appreciated
- Being treated respectfully and justly
- Having our feelings, thoughts, and experience validated
- Having space and permission to show up authentically

Decolonizing the University – Step 1: Beginning the Dialogue



Have you noticed near every major corporation there has been discoveries of black pain, abuse, and distress? All the major firms have come out with statements of feigning shock and sympathy, huge banners but there are limited support provided past the verbal recognition of the problem. Everyone is getting on the bandwagon, many of which rolled that same wagon over us in the past. See we care that you are broken and bruised, let us help. Unfortunately, such pandering ignores the social reality of not only this moment, but the movement that has brought it into being.

How we interpret social reality reflects our biases. Preconceived notions of racial inferiority have long since been a part of academia. If we look across time, over the past few centuries we see these same racist

structures being reified throughout academia. Hence:

1. Universities across the Western World glorified, embraced, and celebrated colonization, genocide, slavery, rape, pillage, and theft of Indigenous lands.
2. Academia was silent as racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism were enshrined into both law and public policy after the so-called end of slavery.
3. With the end of slavery, the Western academy was silent or turned a deaf ear to the cries of the newly enslaved under European colonialism that invaded India, the Middle East, and Africa.
4. Universities across the Western World, during the first 40 years of the 19th century, were silent as thousands of African Americans were lynched, millions of Indians were slaughtered under British rule, Jews were systematically exterminated, and Darwinism came into being under Hitler.
5. Academia was virtually silent as eugenics and the Mississippi appendectomy targeted Blacks, Native Americans, and the urban poor.
6. Academia discovered the civil rights movement late in the game and did not really embrace the social movements until long after the riots, long hot summers, and the assassination took the lives of King, Malcolm X and Kennedy's.
7. Academia was virtually silent as retrograde and conservatives, upset with the presumed progress of the civil rights movement began to systematically dismantle the structures reluctantly put into place, and to purposefully create the cradle to prison pipeline.
8. Academia was silent or blind to the killing of Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth until three brave Black mothers began the Black Lives movement.
9. Academia continues to discover blacks, Hispanic, and Native Americans as problems, as victims, but rarely as conquerors and overcomers. In ways that DuBois queried "what is it like to be a problem". Hence the continual problematization of these lives by academia and rarely can one find any significant attempt to empower, address their concerns, or repair the damage caused by white fragility.

Decolonizing the University – Step 2: Difficult Conversations



Universities have become the site of contested spaces not only in this country but worldwide as symbols of our colonial, confederate, and imperial past have been challenged. While it is great that the symbols of our racist past, such as the Confederate flags, statues of Edward Colston (director of the Royal African Company that dominated the African slave trade), King Leopold, and other monuments are being retired, we must do way more. We must dismantle the colonial, imperialist, and racist structures that continue to deny identity and agency, history and cultural realities of the those that were subjugated, whose liberties were denied, and who even now call for justice. If indeed we are to move forward, we must commit to more than symbolic gestures and dedicate our efforts to making substantive changes. This means being

willing to engage in difficult conversations and put our resources where our values are.

Difficult conversations about privilege and racial discrimination requires us to first be honest. We must provide the spaces where all, particularly the marginalized, can be heard. So often we want to bring in outsiders to tell us what is wrong. I find this strange when the real experts are there in the room. Bringing in an outsider who controls the discussion, essentially tells the insider who is a person of color that their experiences are not of value. Outsiders can indeed facilitate, but should not dictate, the conversation. Legitimizing the voices of People of Color (POC) who are insiders sends a clear message that ownership of the conversation and the solutions are internally driven. When privilege dictates not only whose voices will be heard, but how these voices will be evaluated only reaffirms privilege. In this strange game, conflict arises between the various peoples of color as each strives to be validated. Decolonizing the institution and anti-racism movements are not exclusive zero-sum operations, but inclusive and additive processes. Decolonizing is not affirmative action but equitable action. It is not equal opportunity but equitable opportunity.

Briefly, affirmative action set aside a proscribed number of slots for those deemed harmed by racist and sexist policies and practices. Within academia, the chief beneficiary were White women, while only token position, scholarships, and opportunities were granted to Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and others. Recently published data reveal that at our elite public institutions in higher

education, the number of Black and Hispanics has not changed in 20 years. The reality is that they, like much of our school systems, remain as segregated as they were at the height of the Civil Rights movements. Equitable action would acknowledge these historical processes that have denied access to far too many of our citizens. It would at the very least insist that public institutions should reflect the demographic realities of their respective states. Equitable opportunities within higher education would recognize that historical racism has resulted in significant racial wealth and education gaps. It would respond by establishing scholarships and pathways to progress. We shall return to these in step 8, which will be discussed below. Failure to accomplish this means that we will fail to diversify, become more inclusive or experience real social justice within the University.

Decolonizing the University – Step 3: The Emperor's New Clothes



We have all read or heard of the children's story *The Emperor's New Clothes* by C. A. Reitzel. Dealing with #whiteprivilege is treacherous, particularly for persons of color. In real life, not in children's stories, what happens when one challenges power and privilege? It is interesting that Reitzel,

shortly after writing this story, that was decidedly political satire, received a ruby ring from the Prince, which was the last political satire critical of royalty that he would write. In academia and corporations, as those of lower status challenge #whiteprivilege they are similarly either bought off or punished. Often, rather than face scorn, lowered evaluations and consequently decreased salary raises and likelihood of promotions many simply stop caring and become less critical. Such things as student evaluations and performance reviews are frequently used to punish those who would dare reveal and challenge White privilege. Strange, the ire is most severely reserved for those people of color that provide such critiques. Consequently, when we notice lower class sizes and student evaluations, we point to the professor of color as being the problem, not the #privileged.

The past, with regards to Indigenous Peoples, Black, Hispanic/Mexican, Asian, and for women and other gendered groups have been reduced, redacted, and remained obscure. Much of the problem has to do with the stock narratives that continually fuel our scholarship. Thus, we continue to discover racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and homophobia. We have discovered both the truly advantaged and the truly disadvantaged, in every field of human endeavor. And while these narratives are important – hell they sell books and are the central driving forces for all our professional conferences – they do not tell the counter-narratives. They fail to capture the work of women over the past 40-50 years, especially by women of color, like Patricia Hill Collins, who ushered in lots of exciting sociological work that does center the voices of people of color. These

counter-narratives, such as stories of resistance, rebellion, and transformation tend to be conflated with social movements, civil rights, and the like. Again, while these movements are important, they fail to capture the moments that make up the lived experiences of the majority of people. These moments and their stories fill in the gaps and demonstrate how the marginalized transform the system and “How we got over.” These tales help us understand how agency is realized, experienced, and articulated in the everyday lives of those we so conveniently socially constructed. We are left with the objectification of others, rather than the subjective understanding of us.

Decolonizing the University - Step 4: The Meaning of Allyship



It seems that everyone now wants to embrace Black people by sharing our pain and joining us in our struggle. Thanks for your honesty and humility. As we begin this journey, let us now discuss what [#allyship](#) means. It means to walk a mile in our moccasins, pulling alongside us the cart of our complaints, and sharing our vision. Please, however, remember that this is our struggle, our complaints, and our visions. If you would join us, then embrace these and we will welcome you

into our struggle for [#socialjustice](#) and an [#equitable](#) future. So yes, recognize the [#allyships](#), but please also remember the reason why we came to the table in the first place, which has to do with Blacks’, Indigenous Peoples’, and People of Color’ struggles. Many now are trying their damndest to figure out ways that they can benefit, at the expense of their Black colleagues, from this current surge in White angst. This is the real danger. If we fail to understand this, then academia and America will continue to be racist, and our efforts to decolonize and produce anti-racist policies, systems, and structures will be failures. This will mean we will be back here in a couple of years again, mourning the death of another Black man, Black woman, Indigenous man or woman, or an unarmed migrant worker.

Decolonizing the University – Step 5: Allyship vs. Catering to The Audience



There is a difference between allyship and catering to the audience. The former is focusing on what is right, while the latter is appearing to be right. Allyship is about being in the trenches, dodging bullets, taking chances. Catering is about pimping the movement, looking for photo ops, and promoting personal agendas. We do not need the crowds mimicking our pain, but those willing to share that pain. Those who want to demonstrate authenticity in our

struggle, go to your job or place of business and begin to identify and dismantle racist barriers. Take some risks, make some individual and collective sacrifices by funding some scholarships, provide skills training, open up some pathways to occupations, and crafts. Then you will demonstrate that you are indeed an ally. It's what you do when the cameras are off that makes a difference #allyship, #socialjustice, and #equity.

Decolonizing the University – Step 6: Defining White Privilege



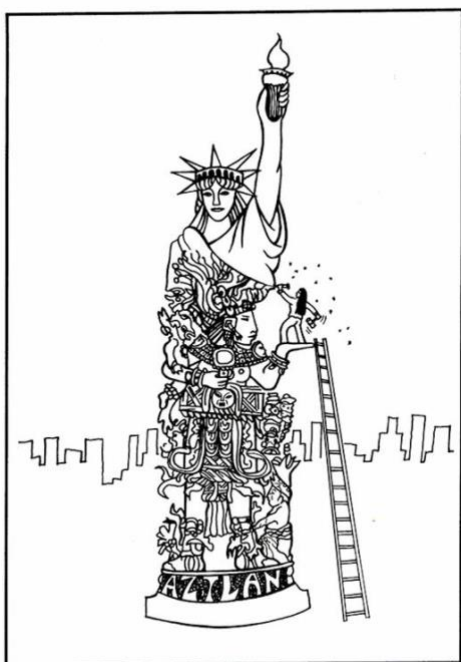
The Black Power movement was a deliberate attempt to challenge and critique white institutions within the U.S. and Britain. Institutional racism, as used by Carmichael and Hamilton, made reference to the attitudes, practices, and systems that produce racist outcomes. Further, these racist outcomes assumed to be normal were neither questioned nor interrogated by major societal actors and embedded within institutions, to include the academia. Defining #whiteprivilege is quite easy. The #whiteprivilege is a product of racial hierarchies, which are embedded within

racial institutions/structures. We describe the processes as structural racism. Systems of racism, where several key racial institutions/structures overlap, socializes each new generation, and accepts the racial systems, hierarchies, and privileges as being normal. Any patterns of racial inequities are typically assigned to individual incapacities, neglect, or inabilities. From these structures, white privilege derives by which all Whites collectively benefit not only as individuals but as a group. Persons of color, within these systems, suffer as a consequence of a form of internalized colonialism whereby their statuses, political voices, and life chances are significantly circumscribed by race. Embedded within internalized colonialism are also gendered, sexual, and other forms of oppression and social control. In all fairness, the work of W.E.B. DuBois, while never using the term internalized colonialism, nevertheless presaged this area with both theories and research. As early as 1906, DuBois was demonstrating that the life chances of Blacks were a result of social, economic, and political isolation. Improved life chances (both in terms of mortality and upward mobility), he argued, would come about by improving education, offering enhanced economic opportunities, and removing other institutional structures that maintain internalized colonialism ([Du Bois 1906](#)).

Hence higher incarceration and conviction rates, expulsions and failure, graduation, wealth, and health gaps are defined as individual or group failures, not the failures of the system. The irony of [#whiteprivilege](#) is that it allows the recipient the veneer of innocence and plausible deniability. As a result, even in

the face of decades of scientifically verified and objective data, and the constant complaint of people of color, the [#whiteprivilege](#) are able to operate cluelessly while the storm rages.

Decolonizing the University – Step 7: Structural Racism



Consider the number and types of courses, leadership positions, and staff at your institution. If the majority of your faculty of color are teaching identity courses, then you may have a problem and if these are the only courses they teach you have a crisis. If this pattern is duplicated within your administrative structure, where the majority of the diversity, inclusion, and equity leaders are people of color, you have a problem, if these roles are exclusively filled by people of color you have a crisis. Finally, if your staff are bifurcated, with one area say administrative/clerical are all filled primarily by Whites and the janitorial, grounds crew are more diverse, then again you have a problem. If even these positions are primarily filled by Whites,

you have a crisis. If whites are the only face one sees, even in the lowest of staff positions, again you have evidence of structural racism. Decolonizing the Institution starts here, with both a strategic plan for diversifying the opportunities within your institution for your personnel and one for long range hiring. The first priority is to provide pathways that allow each employee to maximize their development, expand their capabilities, thus enriching theirs' and the institution's experiences. The latter is accomplished by initially conducting a census to determine the frequency of turnover and retirements, then developing a strategic 5-year diversity hiring plan. I will discuss each of these steps in detail in the next sections.

Decolonizing the University – Step 8: Pathways 2 Progress



I believe in us. We just need to be brave enough to talk openly and honestly. Then act in deliberate ways to strategically decolonize the institution. Together, we can be transformative as we ourselves are transformed. The first step in

the process is to identify the ruts and channels which divert and deny people of color access to the range of rewards, privileges, and opportunities within the institution. Do a detailed census of all levels within the institution, determine if, when and where these blockages occur. Then dismantle them. If, for example, you note students of color are less likely to be admitted and successful in say Business or STEM, have some frank discussions with current and former students about their experiences. These are the experts. Use these as your core faculty and allies to staff your courses, help you transform, and rebuild your system. When necessary hire additional faculty members with proven track records. Of course, you also have to ensure that the pathways are open and provide a robust, reliable flow into these areas. Alternatively, if major streams of students believe they are being diverted into less desirable areas we need to understand why.

Decolonizing the University – Step 9: The Perfect Storm



As many institutions are just now assessing the damage caused by COVID-19 many fiscal problems are only being exacerbated. Prior to COVID_19, universities across the country were

already facing a fiscal cliff through declining enrollments, increasing costs with filling the slots, and the continued erosion of state fiscal support. Secondly, COVID-19 promises even deeper budget deficits as fewer international and out of state students choose to stay at home, as an estimated third of high school graduates plan on taking a "gap year" off, and as state budgets get even tighter. Added to this, the costs of repaying students for dorm and related expenses, tuition reimbursements, and expenses associated with going fully online. Thirdly, #blacklivesmatter will mean certain racial unrest as these students come to campus and challenge the racial climate at their respective universities. Collectively these amount to nothing less than the Perfect Storm. COVID-19 will eventually be resolved. The escalating budget crises faced by universities is a looming nightmare. Already, universities have cut faculty and staff to the bone and are now facing even more cuts. But the crisis is also due to a shrinking White and international student base. These numbers will not improve, either short-term or long-term. The only real solution is to expand the pathways for underrepresented students. But herein lies the real problem: it is called the cradle to prison pipeline. Strange that we would spend 60k to lock up a young person, yet can find little to no money to educate, provide scholarships and training. Added to this the reality that Black males stand a 1 in 3, and Hispanic males a 1 in 6, chance of going to prison for at least 4 years, while each has only a 3 in 10 chance of going to college. We can keep doing the same things, and the certainty of extinction will be realized as the Perfect Storm hits, or we can expand

the pathways to progress through partnerships with local schools.

Decolonizing the University – Step 10: Goodbye Ivory Tower



In some nostalgic mythical place, the university existed on a hill, the Ivory Tower, where all not only saw but were attracted to its light. Academe prided itself in its exclusivity, its difficulty, and its failure rates. However, academia could not survive such a model. The very meaning of the university, derived from its Latin roots, refers to a community of scholars and learners. The reality is that functional universities are tied to their capacity to serve the community. Although the core mission of the university remains the same, the mission is expanding. The future of the university lies in its capacity to develop community partnerships. These partnerships are most robust when they encourage pathways linking diverse constituencies to successful and thriving lives as responsible, liberally educated citizens. If the university cannot accomplish this, in today's competitive environment, it will cease to exist. On the front end, this means working with local schools to help articulate and model what pre-college skills and experiences are most appropriate for college success. On the back end, we need to ensure that we maximize the number of diverse students

who graduate with the skills and experiences to enter society ready to be fully engaged. The pathways that lead through the university must be demographically diverse and reflect the composition of the wider community, state, and/ or nation. The pathways that lead from our universities must be equally diverse across the full spectrum of opportunities afforded by the university. Chief among the skills needed of our graduates include the ability to positively interact with an ever increasingly diverse world, the ability to think both critically, logically, and analytically to solve complex problems, and to be an accomplished scholar. Barriers to access and success must be identified and eliminated in order to maximize the core mission of the university.

Decolonizing the University – Step 11: Giving Lions a Voice



As we discussed above, for much of the history of the academia the stories of Blacks and others have been othered, and not central in the conversation. Then when the academia was forced to discover, hire, and give space to Black voices, it created such things as ethnic studies, black studies, and other studies. This was indeed an advancement for the university, but soon

everyone became experts on the Black condition. Books, symposiums, and a whole cottage industry came into being celebrating the "authentic" black, Latino(x), Indigenous, and Asian voices. Now the University is replete with those who speak for the Black and other people of color, who have used the "voices of lions" to become experts on these voices. In the process the Lions' voice has become tame, has become marginalized, and has become muffled. This is particularly true at Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCU). While we welcome these allies in our struggle, they should not be given priority to the "authentic" voices of the Lions. Specifically, many can teach using the works of DuBois, Crenshaw or Collins, or José Martí and José Enrique Rodó or Crow Creek and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, or Jeffery Paul Chan, and Lucie Cheng but only those who have walked in these paths can use their own experiences in the caldron of race, struggled to remove the stench of forced marches, still cringing from being forced into reservations, internment camps and ghettos, been segregation, lynched, raped and incarcerated. The various contemporary expressions captured in the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #AsianLivesMatter, #IndigenousPeople'sLivesMatter and Chicano Lives Matter movement provide radically nuanced meanings when articulated by Lions voices. The system, particularly at HWCU's penalizes authenticity with more critical evaluations, lower class enrollments, and more tenuous appointments. The average student at HWCU's avoids these difficult conversations and classes by avoiding those taught by Lions. When forced to take such courses, these same predominantly

White students are more likely to punish the Lion who dared to challenge them, the hunter. We have long understood that faculty of color teaching particularly courses in critical race and ethnic studies are more likely receive lower evaluations, their research more likely to be marginalized, and their voices within the university more likely to be muffled. Strange, given the centrality of race in the history, economy, politics, and realities of America -they become marginalized within the Academy, discipline, and our realities. Stranger still, when we can talk about theory, critical inquiry, history, and America in general that we can do this without any reference to race, class, or gender. Only by giving centrality to these voices and protections can such voices continue in clarity and authenticity. We can ill afford to allow the hunters to dictate when, where, and how the Lion speaks. Decolonizing the institution means giving Lions Voice while understanding that the hunters will be troubled.

Decolonizing the University – Step 12: We Need Strategic Processes Not Slogans



Universities and Corporations across America are frantically trying to

wordsmith their way out of the crisis #BLM presents. Slogans, pithy statements, and crocodile tears aside, this is not a Public Relations moment. This is a time for deliberate, strategic, and protracted change. This is not a moment but a movement. The usual band-aid approaches will not work. Bringing out your beleaguered Black and other people of color to stand alongside you on the front lines will not deflect the coming storm. Carefully phrased strategic plans without strategic investment in change will not halt the hemorrhaging wounds systematic racism continues to inflict. Naming, blaming, and shaming selected targets while providing some immediate gratification only makes the next crisis certain. We are in this crisis today because we have done all these things in the past. We have whole shelves, thousands of pages of documents that document our willingness to say anything to get past this moment. Promises made in the heat of the moment often shrink when the moment has passed. We do not need another revival where some anointed “diversity leader/ pimp” tells us how bad we were/are. We do not need to rehearse all our many failures as we have repeatedly promised yet avoided any real change. We are sorry when there is no

reparation, redemption, or restoration is the epitome of hypocrisy. This is not a virus where a vaccination will cure our indifference, this is not a rash where a bit of salve will relieve the discomfort, and this is not an infection where a bit of quarantine will make it all go away. What we are looking at are system wide and structural problems that only systematic and structural changes will solve. The solutions therefore are radical processes that redefine who we are, transform our cultures, and redirect our resources in meaningful, tangible, and measurable ways. It should ultimately be realized that unless there is a significant investment in recruitment, retention, and promotion of people of color at all entry points and levels of our universities and corporations then we will continue to see the same problems manifest themselves. This is our chance to transform and decolonize the university and corporation. If we fail, no worries, we will be right back here in the next cycle. The only thing is, that the longer it takes, the more severe the strain and the costlier (both in human and other resources) the fix. We need strategic processes not slogans.

Author Biography

Rodney D. Coates is a professor of Global and Intercultural Studies at Miami University. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He is a public sociologist engaged in critical race, social justice, social movements, social policy, and practice. For Coates, being a public sociologist means that the work he does must have an impact in the wider communities — both within and external to the university.

As a public intellectual he is frequently featured in both national and local press to include NBC and NPR. He is a published poet, essayist, and editorialist. His sunset photos have been featured as the covers of several books, multiple exhibits. These photos have also been the basis for the HOPE endowed scholarship at Miami University for underrepresented students.

His books have won awards and charted new territory. Currently he, and co-authors, are revising their SAGE-published *The Matrix of Race: Social Construction, Intersectionality, and Inequality* having sold over 2,000 copies in its first 2 years since publication. It is currently being revised for the 2nd edition slated for publication in January of 2021. Coates has a record of scholarship which spans 3 decades and includes numerous published peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters, and collections.