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Seeing Through Whiteness: The Particular Formation of Academic Institutional Racism as 'Professional Snowblindness'

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore a particular formation of institutional racism within academic organizations. First, I detail the recent positive recognition of systemic barriers to inclusion in Canada through the rhetoric and policies from national research funding agencies, university managements, and faculty unions. I go on to suggest, however, that there is a contradiction in the promotional framing of these commitments as 'inclusive excellence' because the discourse of excellence implies that the institution is already performing at peak function and hence needs no systemic organizational change. I argue that this contradiction undermines the development of genuine motivations to address exclusions and reduces equity policies to tokenistic promotional branding. The excellence discourse appeals to the vanity of the academics who are being encouraged to be more inclusive, a vanity of 'excellence' that is a manifestation of the broader epistemological understanding of our profession as both very intelligent and neutral or objective in our approach to generating and assessing knowledge. This professional epistemology anchors our understanding of why the profession looks the way it does: white ethnic dominance is taken as a reflection of objective merit, which then prevents any consideration of whiteness as a contributing privilege to entering and progressing through the academy. I term this equation of whiteness with our professional capacities as 'professional snowblindness' because it prevents recognition of the whiteness of the profession precisely through recourse to our professional skills and capacities. I argue that this 'snowblindness' is the particular formation of institutional racism in the academy and, crucially, that it needs to be named and discussed if we are to create genuine motivations for equity.

Keywords academy, diversity, equity, inclusion, institutional racism

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Voir à travers la blancheur : la forme particulière du racisme institutionnel universitaire en tant qu'« aveuglement professionnel »

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Résumé

Dans cet article, j'explore une forme particulière de racisme institutionnel au sein des organisations universitaires. Tout d'abord, je détaille la récente reconnaissance positive des obstacles systémiques à l'inclusion au Canada par le biais de la rhétorique et des politiques des conseils nationaux de financement de la recherche, des directions d'universités et des syndicats de personnel académique. Je suggère toutefois qu'il y a une contradiction dans le cadrage promotionnel de ces engagements en tant qu'« excellence inclusive », car le discours de l'excellence implique que l'institution fonctionne déjà à plein régime et n'a donc besoin d'aucun changement organisationnel systémique. Je soutiens que cette contradiction nuit au développement de motivations réelles pour lutter contre les exclusions et réduit les politiques d'équité à une stratégie d'image de marque symbolique. Le discours sur l'excellence fait appel à la vanité des universitaires qui sont encouragés à être plus inclusifs, une vanité de l'« excellence » qui est une manifestation de la conception épistémologique plus large de notre profession comme étant à la fois très intelligente et neutre ou objective dans notre approche de la production et de l'évaluation des connaissances. Cette épistémologie professionnelle nous permet de comprendre pourquoi la profession ressemble à ce qu'elle est : la domination ethnique blanche est considérée comme le reflet d'un mérite objectif, ce qui empêche toute considération de la blancheur comme un privilège contribuant à l'entrée et à l'avancement professionnel dans le milieu académique. J'appelle cette assimilation de la blancheur à nos capacités professionnelles « l'aveuglement professionnel » parce qu'elle empêche la reconnaissance de la blancheur de la profession précisément par le recours à nos compétences et capacités professionnelles. Je soutiens que cet « aveuglement » représente une forme particulière du racisme institutionnel dans le monde universitaire et, surtout, qu'il doit être nommé et discuté si nous voulons créer de véritables motivations en faveur de l'équité.

Mots-clés milieu académique, diversité, équité, inclusion, racisme institutionnel

Introduction

My central aim in this article is to explore the particular way institutional racism exists in the academy, focusing on the Canadian post-secondary system as my case study but with a particular address to faculty colleagues in unions. I take the position that racism is systemic when it exists within social organizations, drawing on conceptualizations of institutional racism.[1] More specifically, I do not focus on the type of institutional racism explicitly codified through law or policies (as Apartheid was, for example), but rather I focus on the form that critiques the apparent neutrality of policies and practices within organizations as having (unintended) effects of disadvantaging racialized groups because they are, in fact, derived from the experiences, assumptions, and practices of a dominant group — in this case, white people in Canadian academia. I begin with a recognition of recent attempts to address institutional barriers throughout the Canadian academic system and point out that these comprise a new stage in equity policy because they are anchored in an explicit recognition of the systemic social basis to the under-representation in faculty cohorts and knowledge paradigms. I argue, however, that there is a tension between the framing of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) efforts as 'inclusive excellence' and the commitment to address systemic change in institutions that provoked the new EDI culture. Focusing specifically on the under-representation of racialized faculty, I argue that there is a danger that a discourse of 'excellence' affirms that the long-standing practices of recruitment and advancement, which have produced an overwhelmingly white workforce, are an indication of organizational success. This implication of already existing 'excellence' makes it difficult to acknowledge systemic or institutional racisms which, in turn, undercuts any motivation to change policies, practices, and culture. This contradiction potentially reduces equity policies to mere university branding.

The promotional branding of equity as simply expanding already existing excellence serves to reassure the professional vanity of the already existing white majority workforce. I unpack this vanity by exploring how the discourse of 'excellence' is illustrative of a deeper assumption about what academics are supposed to *do*, as opposed to who they are and how they got where they are. I argue that this vanity of being excellent is a manifestation of the broader epistemological understanding of our profession as both very intelligent and neutral or objective in our approach to generating and assessing knowledge. Hence, academic knowledge production is framed as a merit-based outcome derived from superior skills in applying objective judgement to recruit the 'best' and produce the 'best' forms of knowledge. Crucially, this does not mean that our profession cannot see or understand systemic racism, but rather, the exact opposite. Our colleagues

have superior analytical skills and so can understand the facts of racism, but those superior skills also work to suggest that we, as a profession, cannot possibly be replaying the regressive behaviours of racism.

In this sense, I argue that there is an epistemology of our professional existence that has led knowledge production to become identified with whiteness, and that this idea of 'professionalism' contributes to our ongoing inability to recognize this fact; we fail to see professional norms as reflections of white norms, insisting that we are way too smart, by professional definition, to fall prey to systemic biases. I describe this inability to see whiteness as 'professional snowblindness' and argue that this condition dominates all in the academy and leads, inevitably, to a rejection of systemic racism as a problem precisely because racism is seen as too regressive to fit within our professional analytical skills of knowledge production and knowledge assessment. Put simply, the core skills of the already existing excellent academic preclude any acknowledgement of white bias.

We need to confront this epistemology as foundational to our institutional practices if we are to achieve fundamental transformations of our organizations instead of mere institutional tokenism. Indeed, our ability to produce credible knowledge in both research and teaching is enhanced through exposing the assumed equation of whiteness with traditional academic practice, allowing us to achieve a fuller understanding about what may be missing from our professional capacities and how we can improve these skills. Since this is a position that does not accept that knowledge creation is a purely objective process, it is important to render visible my positionality within this argument. I draw on my relevant experiences as an advocate for EDI within my own institution and at the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), as well as asserting that my knowledge and experience of the workplace is often very different from those in a majority group because I am a racialized queer immigrant.[2] I do not claim that my experiences give me any conclusive authority on how systemic racism operates in my workplace and profession, but I do argue that it gives me an 'outsider' perspective from the dominant norm, allowing an initial starting point that permits, as the philosopher Sandra Harding (2015) suggests, a fuller objectivity on how social relations and institutions operate. In common with standpoint theories, Harding argues that we cannot know the full dimensions of the social, or its oppressive effects and relevant solutions, until we take into account those most marginalized who are experiencing these effects. The experiences of the 'outsiders' widen our understanding of the social and, hence, provide a more objective knowledge because they help us recognize that knowledge is partial if it comes from only one orthodox or authoritative position. My discussion here is a theoretical

exploration, but one based on experience with policy and advocacy and anchored in being the 'other' who is struggling to 'call in' my colleagues and make whiteness in the academy visible. Like the dark matter at the centre of our physical universe, whiteness is there, but we can't readily see it to study it and so we must look for its effects and impacts, especially on those who are not white. Here I argue that, in our academic universe, whiteness remains our dark matter.

'Excellent' EDI Intentions and the Slippage Into Promotional Veneer

While the discourse of achieving fairer representation is broadly the same across international Anglophone contexts, the policy language in Canada is 'equity, diversity and inclusion' (EDI), and it is fair to claim that we are in a period of good intentions. Through a combination of long-term social movement impacts on public discourse, laws, and policies, as well as changing demographic compositions, issues of equity are a reflection of changes within Canadian society as a whole.[3] Hence, while EDI issues have been around for many decades in terms of employment pay equity and anti-discrimination policies, they have taken a more prominent role in the post-secondary sector over the last several years in two distinct ways: a focus on systemic social underpinnings to the lack of equitable representation and an intentional broadening out from a focus on gender equality to recognizing social exclusions for Indigenous, racialized, and queer peoples as well as those with disabilities. We must credit the federal-level national research councils for leading the way on a broad range of EDI initiatives, recognizing institutional racism, including towards Indigenous populations, as well as sexism, homophobia, and ableism, through their increased emphasis on equity achievement in order to access funding and positions in the prestigious Canada Research Chairs program. In response, university managements have also recognized their failures of inclusion and are beginning to explore best practices for addressing the gap between rhetoric and reality, including the appointment of many senior management positions dedicated to advancing equity institutionally.[4]

There is much to feel positive about in this current era of good intentions around EDI.[5] The discourses and proposed remedies often focus on systemic, institutionally embedded, barriers to achieving equity and, in doing so, admit that existing policies of non-discrimination have not worked to transform our organizations for the better. There is an understanding of the need to transform processes and cultures rather than focus on individual behaviours of discrimination and a crucial commitment to rigorous quantitative and qualitative data collection on under-

representation. Much of the existing evidence is focused on the intersectional under-representation of racialized populations, and my argument is focused on racialization as well, although it does not deny the importance of the oppressions faced by other groups. In Canada, studies such as CAUT's Equity Report (2018) and research on universities in *The Equity Myth* (Henry et al., 2017), and Frances Henry and Carol Tator's work (2009, 2010) provide ample evidence that racialized and Indigenous groups are under-represented in permanently or securely employed academic jobs and that all racialized groups are over-represented in precarious contracts, particularly racialized women. There are also numerous studies that demonstrate the same in other western contexts and all concur that long-standing institutional anti-discrimination policies have not had the effect of equalizing access for racialized groups (Ahmed, 2012; Dar et al., 2020). Moreover, there is evidence that minority academics who have made it into the profession suffer from stress and overburdened workloads both because of institutional racisms and expectations that they will carry the responsibility for dealing with equity issues in all its institutional forms (Zambrana, 2018). From this we can conclude that something more permanent, more systemic, than individual racism is at work in our institutions, and the recent EDI policies discussed above are, in part, a recognition of systemic problems and failures to address them. An Associate Vice-President for EDI described various forms of institutional cultures and governance as part of the 'enduring challenges' to progress on equity, despite 30 years of policy (Al Shaibah, 2020) but went on to frame the discourse needed as one of 'inclusive excellence,' echoing a widespread policy and framing language in Canadian universities.[6]

The good intentions are, therefore, both real and focused on structures or systems, but 'inclusive excellence' is a confusing goal. It acknowledges some recognition of failure but also suggests that past and current university practices have already achieved the 'excellence' that highly educated academics are supposed to embody; excellence already exists, it just needs to be more inclusive. This claim may seem simple enough at first glance, but it is internally inconsistent because the emphasis on inclusion sits in contradiction to recognizing and addressing *systemic* barriers to equity. A focus on inclusion moves us away from thinking sociologically and organizationally about *institutional* racism because it suggests that the problem is *not* the totality of current practices, procedures and cultures — the focus of institutional racism as a critique — but rather their *application* by individual faculty and administrators within the organization. A focus on improving current practices only permits an emphasis on transforming individual behaviours in specific settings through training. This 'training' solution undermines any commitment to, and implementation of, strategic, fundamental change because

it does not address the overall culture — in which all individuals participate ,— but emphasizes that the culture and those of us within it are already 'excellent' and, therefore, in little need of 'improvement'; any small improvements that are (perhaps) needed can be brought into being through 'training.'

We know that unconscious bias training can provoke resistance in white workforces (D'Angelo, 2018) and may reinforce the emphasis on individuals as the 'problem' rather than focusing on institutional practices (Das Gupta, 2023). It is illogical to get faculty to commit to 'training,' let alone be transformed by it, when they are also being told that the recruitment and hiring processes that they went through to get to their positions are already 'excellent.' One direct consequence could be that any specific new policy or training simply does not resonate enough with individuals or departments and administrative units to provoke serious changes in their practices precisely because they are told that they are part of the excellence paradigm.[7] There is a danger that the discourse of inclusive excellence actually *undermines* the ability to develop and implement effective outcomes because it fails to engage people in genuine reflection on systemic biases — reflection that is needed for an organizational culture shift to achieve equity. It individualizes, de-prioritizing the solutions, and, in doing so, undermines any reason for engaging with the problem in anything other than in a tokenistic or 'compliance' way; the excellence paradigm reassures existing workers that how *they* got there isn't really the problem and that one or two tokens of our commitment to equity will solve the issue.

We may argue that it is not productive to use institutional racism as part of the rhetoric of goals and strategy, but this argument is predicated on the notion that 'racism' is the preserve of the uneducated and, therefore, any implication of racism, even at the level of unintended institutional practice, is offensive to the highly educated 'excellence' paradigm that frames university and faculty profiles (Satzewich, 2021, p. 208). This aversion to discussing institutional racism is a keen example of the manifestations of institutionalized white fragility (Di Angelo, 2018) to be sure, but it is also an attempt to reassure the professional vanity of the highly educated. We are, by definition, too smart to fall prey to institutional biases, particularly when we are smart enough to know that these exist 'out there.' But it is difficult to begin to develop strategy within departments, or engage in difficult debates with colleagues, governance structures, and administrators if we cannot see or name institutional racism as a reality of our organizations' practices and culture. Without this, we are left with mere gestures toward change, and some tokens of transformation that illuminate our ability to expand 'excellence' to be more inclusive such as targeted hires that reinforce a sense that equity is not

central to the profession. Thus, the inherent contradictions of the inclusive excellence discourse compound the lip service approach to equity, and specifically, anti-racism efforts, that has plagued the sector thus far. Not only does it de-motivate systemic change, but the deployment of the discourse can become a dual-purpose veneer — a thin layer of external promotional commitment that simultaneously reassures the vanities of the already existing white workforce.

Seeing through whiteness: 'professional snowblindness' as the particular formation of institutional racism in the academy

I consider here the deeper questions of whether the 'excellence' frame is a manifestation of the epistemological understanding of the academy as a neutral, objective, and merit-defined profession and how this relates to whiteness in the academy. The critiques of whiteness from critical race theory, postcolonial studies, and critical whiteness studies broadly share a central theme; whiteness is an ideological system that privileges and normalizes white people in the maintenance of a social order that is taken to be analogous to a racial order but, crucially, does not acknowledge whiteness as a racial or ethnic category, thus precluding interrogation of the ways a 'white gaze' structures how the world is perceived and understood (Kobayshi & Peake, 2000). There is a similarly expansive literature on whiteness in the western academy sharing a central theme that universities have normalized whiteness and can only include racialized others as long as they conform to and fit with the standards of the institution, which are claimed as neutral and universal (Ahmed, 2012; Dar et al., 2020). Both sets of research agree that white populations have no racial self-consciousness. Gloria Wekker (2016, p. 17) argues that there is a discourse of 'innocence' associated with whiteness — an innocence that is both a denial of overt racism and/or its relegation to the past but also, more pertinently, a desire not to know or see race or its inequities. Robin DiAngelo (2018) identifies the unwillingness to see whiteness as a key component of the white fragility that underscores the fierce resistance to any discussion of systemic racial hierarchies and the need to learn about unconscious biases that derive from these hierarchies. These critiques echo Charles Mills' (2007) characterization of an epistemology of ignorance when it comes to acknowledging whiteness as a social identity. It is not difficult to understand that the inability to see whiteness as a privileged ethnic category has consequences for attempts to address systemic privileges or racisms within organizations. As argued in the discussion above, the 'excellence' discourse reinforces the vanity of the white

workforce and individualizes potential solutions, all without naming whiteness as part of the culture that needs to transform.

Drawing on these insights, I suggest that there is a specificity to how whiteness becomes normalized in the academy that is not based on 'innocence' or a desire not to think about white dominance, but rather on a dismissal of such issues by the epistemological understanding of the profession, what I term 'professional snowblindness.' This epistemology is anchored in the assumed superior approach to knowledge production and knowledge assessment that position us above normal intellectual capacities, as well as most definitely outside of distasteful, *uneducated*, social biases. This epistemology is grounded in a set of professional skills that position the academic as both a rigorously analytical and rigorously objective *producer* and *arbiter* of knowledge, which translates into a merit-based, neutral approach to teaching, research, and evaluation of our colleagues, specifically when we evaluate job applications. It is, of course, also a reflexive epistemology — a way of knowing ourselves and an instinctive and immediate reaction to any challenges to our professionalism.

This reflexive epistemology of professional skills produces the default explanation for why our profession in the west looks the way it does; the outcomes of who is in the profession are claimed to be the result of neutral, merit-based processes and that cannot be challenged because it is the core of who we are. This general assumption of skills-based merit and neutrality is not empirical fact, however, but rather an epistemological assertion — a way of knowing our profession that *prevents* any consideration of whiteness as a contributing privilege and historical barrier to entering and progressing through the academy. We are unable to see the dominance of the profession by whiteness because we only see our excellent superior skills; the whiteness of the profession is so overwhelming that we unintentionally conflate the profession with whiteness, and we cannot see that what counts as 'merit' may derive from historical white dominance.[8] It is, in fact, both the particular formation of institutional racism in our profession and, at the same time, is seen as somewhat benign in that it is predicated *not* on prejudice or ethnic superiority but an assumption of core skills that anyone can develop through education. Recognizing long-standing institutional racisms grates against the professional epistemology that we have a highly trained objectivity that permits the neutral adjudications of merit, ranging across all our activities, and are capable of understanding *general* patterns and explanations, rather than individualized ones, regardless of discipline. Thus, we *must* have the intellectual skills to understand the social formation of racial hierarchies, including the presence of white people within those divisions, and as a result are too aware of these problems to share in

repeating these behaviours. The valorization of our profession results in an active *preclusion of the very possibility of systemic biases* such as racism because, by definition, the academic is a superior intellectual and thus the professional environment this intellectualism creates *cannot be blind* to seeing general patterns but is concurrently too superior to repeat them. This is the core epistemology of the profession as a whole regardless of discipline; our way of knowing our colleagues, careers, workplaces, and the meritorious measures of success of both are anchored in a professional assertion of apex objective intellectualism that prevents any admission of systemic bias.

This results in the benign assumption that we are fully objective when we are, in fact, *unable* to acknowledge that we only 'know' and 'see' through whiteness, even as we can recognize that racisms exist. Our profession has an epistemological approach to our capacities and skills that precludes any acknowledgement of socially pervasive biases within the individuals who comprise the profession, or the practices and processes that they collectively develop and implement throughout the university.[9] Snowblindness is the general cultural epistemology and everyday lived environment of our profession: it is a dazzlingly 'excellent' blanketing norm that overwhelms our ability to see how the positive skills and processes of our profession have become equated with white dominance and prevents us from even knowing that there is anything but whiteness out there. This is not the common reaction of a general 'white fragility' that does not want to see individual or systemic racism or understand whiteness in racial terms (Di Angelo, 2018), but rather a particular academic fragility that sees (and overwhelmingly rejects) individual racism and understands whiteness as an identity, but cannot see *systemic* racism because of the valorization of the *positive* aspects of our profession as highly intelligent, neutral, and merit-focused practitioners of knowledge production and assessment. You don't have to be white to suffer from snowblindness because it is the empirical norm translated into an epistemology of who we expect to see teaching, getting jobs, getting promoted; we *all* suffer from its effects, racialized and non-racialized faculty, managers, and students alike.

To illustrate briefly, let's consider a common objection that many who argue for equity initiatives have experienced, particularly around hiring.[10] We are often told that the reason our profession looks the way it does is that departmental planning and hiring committees focus on *merit* rather than actively discriminating against under-represented racialized and Indigenous applicants. If hiring outcomes are indeed the result of a merit-based process one implication is, however, that under-represented groups are just not as good as the dominant groups that usually get hired. Unless you retain a belief in (scientifically discredited) biological causes of

gender and ethnic inequalities, then it is not really credible to argue that racialized groups are less intellectually successful than dominant white groups. Even arguments that suggest that there isn't a 'pipeline' of suitable candidates fail the credibility test because they are overwhelmingly evidenced by anecdote and assumption, rather than by data. For example, the Tri-Agency's equity targets for the Canada Research Chairs are based on data from the labour force. I have heard colleagues bemoan that this isn't accurate in specific disciplines, but they never have the data to counteract the Statistics Canada data. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of motivation to pursue rigorous data collection and to acknowledge that the individual departments and institutions where we work are part of the pipeline and can address the issue, rather than externalizing the 'pipeline' as a social force that we have no control over. The research cited in the first section of this essay shows that the lack of presence seems to have more to do with lack of equal access to opportunities to study, publish, or to secure research funding, and/or the lack of seeing the achievements of under-represented groups as equally valid as those of dominant groups. The question then becomes whether we are able to recognize that socially learned but unconscious biases affect who we judge to be meritorious in planning, hiring, and promotion processes. Our professional snowblindness is the epistemological vanity that prevents this recognition because it dazzles us with our own excellence and, in doing so, prevents us from seeing the whiteness in our assumptions, processes and standards.

Seeing *through* whiteness: towards a fuller objectivity in our excellent profession

Hitherto, my argument has been a critical diagnosis and, in that sense, can be understood as 'calling out' management, funding agency, and union equity discourses that are becoming the norm in Canada, while also acknowledging their good intentions. I have argued that current methods of embedding equity through training regimes are unlikely to work when the academic constituency is 'snowblind' to the need for improvement because we are told we are already 'excellent.' In this final section I attempt to sketch a path towards the more practical direction of 'calling in'; bringing constituencies on board with the aim of achieving change.[11] How can we move towards a more impactful transformation when the vanities of the excellence discourse are a central feature of our profession?

We know that organizational transformation is one of the most difficult tasks to achieve in managing institutions. In universities especially, bureaucratic transformations are hampered further by a constantly changing environment of

people and policies (Manning, 2018). Given the shifting populations of universities, advancing equity requires efforts to create sustainable engagements with various aspects of the institution's structures. It is important to recognize that faculty are a key constituency for achieving fundamental transformation in our organizations because academic freedom give us significant control over pressure points for change. For example, achieving change at a departmental level would require a normalization of equity values when reviewing departmental curriculum, debating and deciding on priorities for hiring in relation to teaching and research, and conducting hiring searches and interviews. In the wider institution, equity mainstreaming requires the engagement of faculty-level committees that oversee research, curriculum, tenure, and promotion, and above that, executive leadership needs to be engaged through Boards of Governors, university Senates, Presidents and their management teams. Throughout this culture, the faculty union can and should be a strong partner and, moreover, one that can both call out the 'snowblindness' and help to lead a discussion towards addressing it, particularly because it is union activity that can connect the improvement of our professional practices to the *benefits for all* in the profession.

First, we need much more data on whether and how attempts to mainstream equity are succeeding as the policy regime in Canada is developed, implemented, and assessed. It may be, for example, that even tokenistic policies or limited actions end up having a more enduring organizational effect. The recent cluster hiring of Indigenous and Black faculties may be sparking a rethink of the overall approach to hiring practices and assumptions, for example, and it could be that the same is happening in institutions that have taken no action beyond making rhetorical commitments. We have to be wary, however, of the 'delay by data' tactic, where executive decisions are paused until we have 'evidence,' as in the surreal situations where all-white departments or executive level managers question the fact of under-representation. Nonetheless, there are commitments to understanding the shape of equity presence from funding agencies and managements, and to some extent by unions. I have no doubt that these will be slow, slowed, or fail to materialize in most cases, as has been the case thus far across the whole sector when it comes to equity issues. Capacity is clearly not the issue when managements and unions can deploy surveys at will, which points to snowblindness as a probable culprit. I welcome being proved wrong by comprehensive data that shows we have achieved fair and just levels of representation.

While we live through 'delays by data,' we can still press for the allocation of resources by executive management to equity hiring, and even to training. Indeed, the era of good intentions has produced some clear progress on this issue, both

through cluster hires and by increased bargaining around this issue by many faculty unions. These outcomes may also be having a broader impact within institutions in terms of signaling the importance of the issue and forcing departments to confront the relevance of equity at the very practical level of their curriculums and staffing. Again, we have no data on such impacts, and it will take some time to garner this information and the organizational will to assess implementation rather than focus on equity as branding. One reason to be hopeful might be that the various policy documents on EDI referred to throughout this paper acknowledge that racialized and other equity-seeking groups experience the hiring, promotion, and everyday workplace procedures differently, and provide some evidence of these facts. Could the wider dissemination of such knowledge through the promised implementation procedures of mainstreaming equity begin to 'call in' those faculty who are 'snowblind' to the way our profession operates?

Beyond the wait for data, there remains the danger that the gradual widening of equity debates and procedures as 'inclusive excellence' will still leave the vast majority of faculty uncommitted to fundamental change because they do not recognize that our profession is fundamentally flawed. Thus, we may be left with preaching to the converted; those who have already decided that the profession needs to change, either because of their own experiences or for reasons of political allyship with equity-seeking groups. The lack of mainstreaming an understanding of the failures of universities may force the ghettoization of equity issues within particular departments that are oriented towards social justice issues and undermine commitments to improvement through training. If only certain departments or constituencies already identified with social justice research are the vanguards of equity, broad-based organizational commitments to learn how to be anti-racist (Kendi, 2019) or how to confront 'white fragility' could be undermined (DiAngelo, 2018). I am not suggesting that the educational attempts are pointless, but rather that the case for why they are needed is not well served by the current framing of equity policies. We cannot call in a constituency that sees itself as above the failures of racism and has that view reinforced by management.[12] I have no expectation that university managements have the organizational will to acknowledge that our professional competencies are equated with whiteness.

However, we can, as groups of faculty in departments, and particularly through unions and professional associations, put the question of our professional epistemology on the agenda. Specifically, we can make a case that the positive aspects of our professional capacities have already prepared us to reflect on the limits of current professional practice; the methods of achieving objectivity through assessing intellectual and empirical diversity in differing research agendas, results,

and peer review all share a common commitment to consider what is incomplete about, or missing from, a particular piece of research. Indeed, in much social justice research, there is an acknowledgement that incorporating the experiences and standpoints of marginalized or oppressed groups leads us to a more nuanced understanding of the social world, or what Harding (2015) has called a *fuller* objectivity in understanding the formations of, and solutions to, social problems.[13]

Snowblindness need not be permanent, but we need to start developing some intentionality about how we challenge its normalization throughout our profession and institutions. To do this requires the operationalization of a reflexivity about why and how the norm exists. This should not be seen as a fundamental challenge to the objective and superior intellectual skill set that structures our profession and our individual careers. It should be seen as a crucial and core requirement of the job to engage our professional skills reflexively, rather than respond with a reflexive professional snowblindness.

Conclusion

Clearly, universities are actively deploying their engagements with equity to further their promotional strategies for recruitment and branding. Understanding the promotional value of signing on to charters and rhetoric, they display concern for racism and the experiences of racialized groups through various symbolic means but create no motivation for systemic change because the 'system' is already 'excellent.' In the university sector, the reduction of equity to a branding tool has an established history through tokenistic visual representations in marketing and recruitment tools and the tokenistic use of racialized students and faculty to 'educate' others and to demonstrate that the workplace cannot be racist. Most racialized faculty in white-dominated institutions will recognize these strategies and will have been drawn into participating in them, helping to embody the myth of progress that such 'black faces in white spaces' are used to support (Pinkett et al., 2018). I confess to the same and have always worried that I am performing 'institutional brownface' in these contexts; I provide a surface simulation of equity presence that benefits the organization that, at its worst, comprises collusion in a parody of concern about under-representation.

Policy development and implementation is crucial to institutional transformation, and so my intervention here has been directed at encouraging faculty to engage in shaping this ongoing process within universities so that we can prevent good intentions turning into another iteration of institutional tokenism around equity. Unions are better placed to start and guide these debates. In them, we are better

placed to see all our colleagues, find out where they are on these issues, and lead discussions that seek to expand the understanding of our profession rather than to limit or define it by empty branding. The dominance of the 'excellence' discourse in Canadian post-secondary environments can prevent fundamental change because it implies that there is no systemic problem in our workplace organizations. It limits our ability to reflect upon, change, and improve our professional practices. Union activity, on the other hand, includes precisely these kinds of reflections, and aims to protect our autonomy to make the profession work for us rather than let it be defined by management preferences. While the 'us' is increasingly and justly more than the white majority, we are all implicated in equating the profession with whiteness. Unions can shape a discourse that permits discussion of what isn't permissible to discuss, that dark matter of whiteness that structures our existence. Unions can also anchor a discussion that shows how improving procedures and practices for equity will be an improvement in *all* professional practice. EDI is fundamentally about justice, and that is also the core of any labour movement — wages and benefits are about justice, too. But EDI isn't only about justice, it is also about us being smarter by reflexively improving our core professional skills to further our capacities on our excellent adventure.

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Endnotes

[1] See Satzewich (2021) for a fuller explanation of different formations and examples of the unintended institutional racism that I am considering, including within universities (2021, pp. 207-211). There are now innumerable analyses of institutional racism, but the key insight remains that 'normal' practices and standards are, in fact, often derived from the expectations and experiences of white majorities and so disadvantage those whose route into and experience within the organization or institution is conditioned by their racial difference. We have an established literature on how institutional racism operates within the university sector, including within Canada (Henry et al., 2017; Henry & Tator, 2010; Kobayshi, 2009).

[2] Thus, I write both as a racialized gay British Bangladeshi who has been living and working in Canada for the last 17 years and as an active union member focused on equity issues, serving as the co-chair for equity on the Executive for our national union, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) from 2018 to 2022. I am both privileged as a male tenured full professor and extremely conscious of my minority status as a gay and racialized academic, since everywhere I have worked has been dominated by white and straight faculty and administrators.

[3] Canada is a settler colonial country where the Indigenous populations were gradually displaced, physically, legally, and culturally by French and British colonists who settled the land in the European imperial period (15th to 20th centuries). After independence from Britain in 1867 (confederation of the nation but still within the British Empire), Canada continued to receive many immigrants, but this increased significantly in the late 1960s and also shifted to immigrants from non-European source countries (see Statistics Canada, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016006-eng.htm, and see Satzewich, 2021). Thus, current immigrant populations are overwhelmingly racialized and if current immigration trends continue, the number of children with an immigrant background will increase in the coming years, reaching between 39.3% and 49.1% of the entire population of children aged 15 and under living in Canada by 2036**.** (See Statistics Canada, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016015/98-200-x2016015-eng.cfm).

[4] See https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/InterAgency-Interorganismes/EDI-EDI/Action-Plan_Plan-dAction_eng.asp

[5] Under Canadian federal and provincial polices, a range of employment equity requirements have existed for many decades, including within academic organizations, and social movements have also impacted these institutions, often through union activism. Nonetheless, the impacts of such policies were uncertain enough that a new wave of EDI policies have emerged in Canada, with a particular focus on addressing systemic barriers as opposed to simply providing a baseline of anti-discrimination.

[6] A quick online search will bring innumerable examples of the use of this discourse by universities, unions, and funders.

[7] The question of evidence is important here, but as argued throughout the paper, we are lacking in systematic evidence on the experiences of mainstreaming equity. Nonetheless, discussions with colleagues in equity forums for CAUT and at my own university suggest that this problem of disengagement is a real one, even to the point that those who undergo training on biases simply ignore it in practice, because they think it does not apply to *them.*

[8] And, of course, male-identified, straight and able-bodied ones.

[9] My main research field of Queer Muslim politics and identities draws on queer postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, which often challenge the epistemological foundations of knowledge developed in the west and/or by white thinkers. Hence, my arguments here are certainly influenced by my own disciplinary locations, but I am not suggesting that every discipline needs a decolonial stock-take of its own analytical frameworks. My focus is more general, emphasizing common understandings and practices of the profession as a whole, rather than individual disciplines.

[10] Again, while not derived from specific data, this example has come up numerous times in discussions of hiring practices in various forums during my time as CAUT Equity Co-Chair, in my own union's discussion of bargaining for equity.

[11] This issue of critique versus building solidarity for action — calling out versus calling in — is a key debate in contemporary justice politics. See, for example, https://creativeequitytoolkit.org/topic/anti-racism/call-out-call-in-racism/, and the Canadian academic unions' toolkit at https://www.caut.ca/publication/calling-in-and-calling-out-a-discussion/.

[12] There is also the question of seniority within individual departments and across university committees. Peer review procedures for advancement can also inhibit earlier career (often younger) colleagues from criticizing more established and higher status colleagues, even though this should not be the case in the characterization of our profession as based on the merit of ideas. However, we also have to be cautious in assuming that a younger generation of academics is more consistently grounded in equity understandings. Again, we lack data on this issue as in so many other dimensions of equity.

[13] I am drawing here on the feminist methodological approach of standpoint theory that attempts to research the experiences of marginalized or oppressed groups by understanding their standpoint on objective reality (Harding, 2015). Aligning with postcolonial perspectives, such as Said's (1978) argument that the experiences and knowledges of the other are delegitimized through Orientalism, and critical race sociology grounded in Du Bois's (1903) characterization of the double consciousness of reality that

oppressed groups experience, the standpoint perspective takes all knowledge as relative, arguing that a group's location in social hierarchies of difference reflects divisions of power and thus affects its ability to make its knowledge (of its particular experience) both heard and taken as legitimate. Standpoint methodology provides 'strong objectivity' — or a more accurate understanding of the full dimensions of social power and inequalities by starting from the 'outside,' both in terms of focusing on those communities whose knowledge and experiences have been marginalized, and in terms of starting outside a specific academic discipline's established theories and methods (Harding, 2015).