

RACIAL HEALING

Wall of Whiteness: Bricks in the Ivory Tower

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Peggy McIntosh's 1988 essay used the "invisible knapsack" metaphor to identify often-unrecognized advantages afforded to White Americans. While this list was instrumental in fostering self-reflection and empathy, its focus on individual-level experiences and a static understanding of race limited its scope for driving systemic change. This conceptual paper revisits McIntosh's list of examples, illustrating that it is insufficient to merely identify them; we must actively dismantle the "wall of Whiteness" perpetuating racial inequality. Drawing upon contemporary scholarship that builds on process-centered understanding of race, we present a revised framework identifying both individual/interpersonal and institutional/structural factors that contribute to this wall, particularly within academia. Based on this understanding, we advocate for a shift from a sole focus on critical self-reflection to a commitment to institutional and systemic changes, providing academics with the tools to recognize and dismantle these barriers, thereby creating a more equitable and inclusive academy.

Keywords

Whiteness, academia, Ivory Tower, inequity, inequality

As of 2025, 30 states across the United States have adopted anti-critical race theory measures, fundamentally altering the landscape of public discourse, education policy, and the ability of institutions to acknowledge and address systemic inequities (CRT Forward Tracking Project 2025). In this constrained environment, conventional public administration (PA) approaches that rely on essentialized understandings of race, such as increasing the number of Black teachers or promoting women through representative bureaucracy theory, have become increasingly difficult to implement. However, a robust and growing body of PA scholarship offers more nuanced and dynamic conceptions of race, power, and institutional oppression (Bearfield et al. 2023; Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Feit 2024; Gooden 2015; Heckler 2017; Love and Stout 2024; Riccucci et al. 2024; Scott and Leach 2024; Witt 2018).

Despite the richness of this literature, we recognize that many who most need to engage with these ideas are not actively participating in these discussions. Thus, we return to a familiar and widely cited work: McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." While McIntosh's essay, over 30 years old, focuses primar-

ily on individual-level experiences of privilege, it remains an accessible entry point for many. Given its popularity and relevance in public discourse, the piece offers a foundation for expanding the conversation from individual privilege to institutionalized Whiteness in academia.

Individual racial categories are often derived from sources like the U.S. Census, Office of Management and Budget, or other governmental institutions. These categories shape how race is understood and operationalized in policy and practice, and may also reinforce the idea of race as a static, measurable attribute—ignoring its deeply contextual, contested, and fluid nature. Whiteness, in particular, is not a fixed category but a social construct that adapts to maintain power (Glenn 2015; Heckler and Nishi 2024), shifting over time, place, and political considerations (Collins 2000; Hale 2010; Strmic-Pawl 2015). This fluidity enables Whiteness to expand or contract in response to perceived threats, absorbing new groups when convenient and excluding others when necessary. This points to the importance of understanding Whiteness not as phenotype or ancestry, but as a position within a racialized social order.

Moreover, Whiteness does not operate in isolation.

It is deeply interwoven with other oppressive systems, including ableism, Christian supremacy, heterosexism, cissexism, and Eurocentrism, that together constitute the broader structure of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Collins 2000; Leonardo 2002; Tilly 1998). These systems are mutually constitutive, reinforcing one another and determining who can occupy the position of Whiteness in a given context. Thus, while our focus is on Whiteness as an organizing force in academia, our analysis must also acknowledge its interdependence with other hierarchies in a matrix of domination (Collins 2000).

Discussions of race and racism too often remain at the level of individual identity, overlooking the broader institutional and structural dynamics that uphold racial inequity (Lipsitz 1995; Matias et al. 2014). This narrow focus is prevalent in PA, where efforts to interrogate systems of racial power are frequently constrained by legal, political, and professional norms (Bearfield et al. 2023; Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Gooden 2015; Starke et al. 2018). In today's political climate, restrictions on teaching or addressing racism make it even harder to confront these systemic issues. For PA in particular, the imperative is clear: we must prepare future public leaders to serve increasingly diverse communities effectively and equitably.

This conceptual paper aims to shift the focus from White privilege, understood at the individual level, to Whiteness as an institutional and structural force that builds, reifies, and maintains institutional norms, values, and practices. This system benefits mostly White individuals through the invisible logics of an often unexamined oppressive structure. To help make this system visible, we reconceptualize McIntosh's "invisible knapsack" as bricks in the Ivory Tower. While the original checklist was never intended to explain institutional power, its clarity and accessibility continue to resonate, and we leverage this list as an entry point for individual contemplation. We believe the checklist can be adapted to illustrate how structures of Whiteness operate in academic spaces, shaping who is welcomed, whose knowledge is valued, and which ways of being and knowing are legitimized. The checklist in this paper offers a reflective tool for educators and presents a broader call to action within higher education.

The metaphor of bricks should not be read only as symbolic fragments of Whiteness, but as the very material scaffolding that holds up institutional power. Each "brick" represents not only an individual privilege or

cultural norm, but a tangible structure that confers durability of inequity. These are load-bearing walls of the ivory tower: materially reinforced through funding streams, disciplinary hierarchies, and credentialing processes that determine whose knowledge is built into the foundation and whose is left outside (Ray 2019). By conceptualizing Whiteness as both symbolic and structural, we can better understand how institutions reproduce themselves through bricks of policy, prestige, and exclusion; mechanisms that seem neutral yet maintain a racialized architecture of belonging.

From the Individual to Institutional: From White to Whiteness

A prevailing view within the PA literature, particularly in relation to the theory of representative bureaucracy, is that race is a fixed individual attribute capable of causing unequal outcomes (Strader et al. 2023). Although essentialist beliefs about race persist, sociologists have long argued that race is a social construct, rather than a biological reality (Roth et al. 2023). Racial categories do not naturally exist, but instead require ongoing social reproduction to maintain categorical boundaries and institutionalize racial differences, such as through segregation, to establish dominant racial *meanings* (Omi and Winant 1986). Racial categories and identities are fluid, contingent on political realities, economic conditions, and historical circumstances, and can be used to gain control of resources and power (Glenn 2015). Historically, essentialist logics have been used to establish White supremacy, such as linking skull size to intelligence, and to justify discrimination (Omi and Winant 1986). With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, overt forms of discrimination have become less tolerated in the United States, while racial attitudes and covert racism remain seemingly intractable (Pager and Shepherd 2008).

It is becoming increasingly rare to encounter outright bigotry that would be considered "racist," but in reality, we all participate in the maintenance of systemic racism by privileging dominant and normative modes of behavior (Bonilla-Silva 2021). The notion that hiring more bureaucrats from minoritized communities will solve inequality fails to challenge the dominant and normative modes of behavior within a system designed to uphold the very power structures that exclude those same communities. This tendency to not ques-

tion White normativity embedded within the field of PA has been pointed out by the lack of representative bureaucracy scholarship interrogating the actions taken by White people, while placing responsibilities on non-White bureaucrats to address systemic racism (Portillo et al. 2022). The inability or unwillingness to challenge (or even acknowledge) White normative rules and practices, in turn, enables existing racial structures and unequal power relations to remain intact; hence, systemic racism continues (Bonilla-Silva 2021). But if White normativity is woven into the social fabric of our lives, including academic organizations (Ray 2019), how do we illuminate the mechanisms through which racialized power hierarchies are (re)produced?

To move away from the static notion of race and begin dismantling systemic racism, we need to look inward and outward to challenge what we call the wall of Whiteness within academia. This wall refers to the way that racial structures are (re)produced in the academy through seemingly race-neutral organizational processes that serve to center Whiteness at the expense of others (Ray 2019). Social processes, according to this view, are built on a series of interactions in which individuals and groups, within their specific sociohistorical contexts, perceive their reality. These perceptions, in turn, shape their behaviors and interactions with others. Through this dynamic process, they collectively create, sustain, or alter the shared meanings of their reality, which are communicated through symbolic and non-symbolic means like language, facial expressions, and physical proximity.

For example, Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation illustrates how the concept of "Whiteness" in the United States is not a fixed biological category but a social reality that has been continuously created, negotiated, and redefined over time. Omi and Winant's racial formation theory demonstrates how race, as a dynamic social construction, continuously shapes institutional structures to systematically maintain racial orders through interlocking economic, political, and cultural systems.

Racial meanings are translated or transformed into tangible structures that, while not always as obvious as, say, separate classrooms, still function as part of the organizational and institutional fabric in covert ways. These structures may include subtle tracking in academic advising, unequal access to mentoring networks, or the overrepresentation of certain groups in lower-sta-

tus departments and positions, all of which perpetuate racial hierarchies. Scholars from various disciplines have worked to capture this process-centered understanding of Whiteness not merely as a racial category but as a system and social identity that confers benefits and privileges within society (Love and Stout 2023; Matias et al. 2014).

As Table 1 illustrates, this is a multidimensional construct that functions as the underlying mechanism of racialized power relationships beyond the Black-White binary. For example, Whiteness often operates through normative practices that are seen as the standard but ultimately impact everyone without being questioned (Lipsitz 1995). By not questioning these embedded practices, scholars argue that we collectively uphold White supremacy (Love and Stout 2023; Strmic-Pawl 2015). This allows White logic and ignorance to frame elite White perspectives as objective knowledge, while obscuring the reality of injustices (Mills 2007; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Furthermore, when critical evaluation of the social processes linking individuals to these structures is called for, emotional responses like White fragility and guilt may emerge, allowing individuals to avoid racial stress and become defensive (DiAngelo 2011; Grzanka et al. 2020; Leonardo 2002).

These interconnected processes result in what appear to be race-neutral organizational practices that, because of their subtle and often unquestioned nature, continuously reproduce racism through differential outcomes (Bearfield et al. 2023). This invisibility is key to the endurance of the racial hierarchy because it allows its multidimensional forms, such as White logic and White normativity, to operate without being challenged. This is precisely how Whiteness structures our society, creating and maintaining tangible inequities for those deemed not White.

What Does Whiteness Do?

Institutional Whiteness is not accidental; it is purposeful, productive, and protective. It operates through formal and informal systems that uphold dominant norms, reward complicity, and neutralize dissent (Love and Stout 2023). In doing so, institutional Whiteness benefits individuals who align themselves with the epistemologies, discourses, and professional practices that maintain and advance systemic White supremacy. This is not limited to White-identifying individuals alone;

Table 1. Concepts of Whiteness

Term	Definition	Source
Whiteness	“A social identity that carries privileged status within the legal system and administrative state.”	Love and Stout 2023
White privilege	“The undue and unearned benefits that White people receive.”	Strmic-Pawl 2015
White guilt	“White guilt can be a paralyzing sentiment that helps neither Whites nor people of color. White guilt blocks critical reflection because Whites end up feeling individually blameworthy for racism.”	Leonardo 2002
White fragility	“A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.”	DiAngelo 2011
White ignorance	“Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land.”	Mills 2007
White logic	“White logic assumes a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite Whites and condemns the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity.”	Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, eds. 2008
White normativity/invisibility	“As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”	Lipsitz 1995
White supremacy	“The systematic and systemic ways that the racial order benefits those deemed White and operates to oppress people of color.”	Strmic-Pawl 2015
Racism	“Racism is the outcome of institutional practices that are committed by individuals that, in the aggregate, produce White privilege and power.”	Bearfield et al. 2023

rather, anyone who upholds and reproduces White normative structures can benefit from its rewards (Feit 2024; Vidal-Ortiz 2024). Here, we focus specifically on how institutional Whiteness in academia functions to safeguard the safety, advancement, and perspective of faculty members, particularly those who support and sustain the prevailing systems of racial hierarchy.

We define **safety** as encompassing physical, mental, and emotional well-being; conditions that Whiteness helps to produce and protect for those aligned with its norms. This safety is focused on freedom from harm rather than freedom from discomfort, often invoked to suppress dissent. These protections are rarely extended to those who challenge dominant racial narratives or engage in critical work that disrupts the status quo.

Advancement, in this context, refers to the production and protection of professional reputation, status, and upward mobility within academic institutions. Faculty whose work conforms to White epistemologies, such as positivist methodologies, race-neutral framing, or “objective” scholarship, are more likely to receive

funding, tenure, and leadership roles (Blessett et al. 2016). Their scholarship is often seen as credible, generalizable, and “rigorous,” in contrast to work rooted in lived experience, critical theory, or decolonial methods, which is often devalued (Vidal-Ortiz 2024; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Institutional Whiteness thus becomes a gatekeeper of prestige and professional capital.

By **perspective**, we mean the protection and validation of a person’s worldview, ideological assumptions, and intellectual frameworks. Whiteness defends certain ways of knowing as neutral, universal, and legitimate, while casting others, particularly those grounded in minoritized or decolonial perspectives, as niche, ideological, or advocacy-based (Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Blessett et al. 2016; Doharty et al. 2021). This often results in the marginalization of critical perspectives in the classroom, peer review, and faculty governance. Ideas and assumptions aligned with Whiteness are more likely to be accepted without interrogation (Emas et al. 2022; Vidal-Ortiz 2024), while those who challenge White normativity must constantly defend the legiti-

macy of their perspectives. Whiteness ensures a degree of insulation from critique, retaliation, or the scrutiny disproportionately experienced by scholars of color (Doharty et al. 2021; Vidal-Ortiz 2024).

Naming these key dimensions of institutional Whiteness (safety, advancement, and perspective) renders its architecture visible. Doing so helps interrogate the *credentials of Whiteness* (Ray 2019), or how Whiteness operates as a form of unearned legitimacy, authoritativeness, and access to resources and recognition in the academy. It is through these credentials that Whiteness continues to organize academic life, shaping who is heard, promoted, protected, and believed.

To further illuminate these dynamics, we distinguish between **individual and interpersonal** experiences of privilege and racism, and **institutional and structural** ones. At the individual level, White privilege often manifests in the daily interactions, behaviors, and assumptions that advantage White faculty. For instance, the presumption of competence, freedom from stereotype threat (the situational fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group; see Steele and Aronson 1995), or the ability to navigate academic spaces without being viewed as an outsider (McIntosh 1988). These experiences are frequently framed in terms of microaggressions, biases, or interpersonal dynamics.

At the institutional and structural levels, Whiteness is sustained through policies, norms, and practices that systematically benefit White ways of knowing, governing, and organizing higher education (Bonilla-Silva 2021). This includes admissions, hiring, promotion, and tenure practices that reproduce racial hierarchies, as well as decisions on curricula and research agendas that value Eurocentric epistemologies and ways of knowing. These structural dynamics do not merely shape individual experiences; they create the conditions under which those experiences occur, ensuring that disparities are reproduced even absent overtly racist intent. While much of the discourse around Whiteness focuses on individual or interpersonal interactions, our concern is the institutional arrangements and structural processes that embed, sustain, and legitimize Whiteness in academia.

Whiteness in the Ivory Tower

The concept of the Ivory Tower refers to a mindset of intellectual isolation where scholars are disconnected from practical concerns and everyday life. Not all higher

education institutions are considered part of the ivory tower—a term often reserved for elite, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) that are wealthy, exclusive, and socially removed from the lived realities of marginalized communities. Institutions such as community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are often excluded from this designation, not because they lack academic rigor or value, but because the dominant standards of legitimacy and prestige in academia are shaped by Whiteness. This exclusion reflects the broader systemic nature of institutional Whiteness, where power and prestige are concentrated in spaces historically built to serve White, higher-income populations.

These elite institutions produce graduates who go on to hold positions of influence and, in turn, reinforce the reputation of the institutions they attended. This cycle of elite reproduction (Wapman et al. 2022) allows Whiteness and its exclusionary practices to remain embedded in higher education unless there are equity-driven interventions. These PWIs uphold Eurocentric values and norms, often devaluing or erasing non-White forms of knowledge (Bernal and Villalpando 2002), despite labeling themselves as inclusive or progressive. Without an honest reckoning with how institutional Whiteness functions via curriculum, funding, leadership, and institutional norms, schools will continue to reproduce oppressive systems (Vidal-Ortiz 2024). The ivory tower is more than just symbolic; it reflects a real structure of racialized privilege that must be critically examined, disrupted, and dismantled for higher education to become truly equitable.

To ask what it means to be inside the wall of Whiteness is to reckon with how systems of power both protect and provide for those who operate within their norms. The wall of Whiteness represents the cultural, institutional, and structural boundaries that uphold Whiteness as the default mode of legitimacy, authority, and success in academia. It protects those who conform to its rules, even non-White faculty who succeed by navigating rather than challenging the system. To succeed, all academics, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, must learn to play the game. They learn to write in ways that are validated, publish in journals that are valued, and pursue research agendas that align with the expectations of White norms.

Often, non-White academics succeed not by

transforming academia but by adjusting to its incentive structure. This often means deprioritizing public communication, advocacy, and community-engaged work, which are often viewed as less rigorous or not rewarded by tenure and promotion systems. Instead, metrics such as publishing in elite journals, securing large grants, or affiliating with prestigious institutions serve as benchmarks for success. These benchmarks, shaped by elite systems such as the Carnegie Classification, have long served to maintain existing hierarchies. Academia often ends up reproducing the very legacies it claims to critique, recreating the social, racial, and class divisions that shaped many scholars' own formative experiences.

Elite institutions are central to this dynamic. They don't just house elites—they create them by conferring legitimacy and influence that extends beyond academia into public discourse. This cycle of elite reproduction ensures that institutional Whiteness remains intact, even as individual demographics shift. When those who have made it inside the wall challenge the structures that benefited them, they often become vulnerable. The experiences of Nikole Hannah-Jones (at UNC) and Kathleen McElroy (at Texas A&M) are telling examples of nationally respected Black women scholars whose appointments were undermined when their scholarship and values conflicted with institutional or political expectations. Their stories demonstrate the conditionality of the protections offered by the wall of Whiteness and how the system can be weaponized against those who challenge its core logics. Just as these cases reveal the fragility of belonging in elite spaces, we must also confront how our own positions are bound up in and sustained by similar logics of White supremacy.

Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

We acknowledge that, as scholars at a research-focused PWI in the United States, we function within and benefit from these systems structured by Whiteness. These systems shape our institutions, disciplines, and daily practices. However, we commit ourselves to the ongoing work of challenging said structures, both individually and collectively. We hold this tension with clarity: while we cannot separate ourselves from the identities and contexts that afford us privilege, we can and must take responsibility for how we engage with and disrupt them.

We also recognize the gradients of privilege that exist

within and across institutions, shaped by our individual identities and professional roles. As full-time faculty, we experience levels of institutional stability, recognition, and authority that staff, adjunct faculty, and students often do not. Our positions grant us access to platforms and protections that others may lack, and we name this to be transparent about the comparative privilege embedded in our roles. Resisting Whiteness is not peripheral to our work as academics but essential to it, guiding how we teach, create knowledge, engage with others, and contribute to our scholarly communities. With this acknowledgment of our positionality and the privileges it affords, we turn to a more concrete examination of how Whiteness operates structurally and interpersonally within academia.

Conceptual Framework: The Wall of Whiteness

To further illustrate how the wall of Whiteness operates within academic institutions, both protecting and policing those within, we offer a revised framework that builds on the foundational work from scholars of color and expands McIntosh's original checklist of privilege to reflect the specific dynamics of the ivory tower. Table 2 identifies not only the level at which the privilege arises (individual or institutional), but also whether the safety, advancement, and perspective are being safeguarded.

This table systematically adapts McIntosh's original checklist to the academic context. For instance, McIntosh's statement, "I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking," is rearticulated as "I can study and write about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking." Likewise, the item "I can speak in public to a powerful group without putting my race on trial" is reformulated as "Within and beyond the academy, I can speak to those in power without putting my racial identity on trial." These modifications draw on the authors' lived experiences within academic institutions as well as scholarly literature, thereby maintaining conceptual fidelity while ensuring contextual and methodological rigor.

In this adaptation of McIntosh's list, we identify 30 examples of how the wall of Whiteness protects or provides for those in the ivory tower, of which 15 reflect the individual/interpersonal level and 15 are found in the institutional/structural level. On this list, we identify 13 instances in which safety is protected, nine examples of advancement, and eight related to perspective.

Table 2: Wall of Whiteness

Individual and Interpersonal Level	What Is Protected?	Institutional and Structural Level	What Is Protected?
I can attend campus events and professional conferences and see plenty of people who share my racial identity.	Perspective	The norms of the school and profession align with the social norms I grew up with.	Perspective
In my research and teaching, I can easily ignore the perspectives and knowledge of individuals who do not share my racial identity.	Perspective	I can be sure that students receive curricular materials from my colleagues that acknowledge the contribution of people who share my racial identity.	Perspective
I am never asked to speak on behalf of people who share my racial identity.	Perspective	I can study people who share my racial identity without it being criticized as nonessential or trivial.	Perspective
Given the racial composition of my department, paying no attention to those who do not share my racial identity will not impact my personal well-being.	Perspective	When I am told about our field's "founders" or the "canon," I am shown that this includes people who share my racial identity.	Perspective
I can remain oblivious of the culture and customs of my colleagues without any penalty for such obliviousness.	Advancement	There is no need for me to actively seek out, read, and cite studies published by non-White scholars for me to be successful in my field.	Advancement
If things are not going well in my career, I cannot help but wonder if each negative episode or situation had racial overtones.	Advancement	If I disagree with my colleagues about the tenure and promotion case involving a person who does not share my racial identity, I can be pretty sure that my career won't be negatively impacted.	Advancement
I can study and write about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.	Advancement	I can take a job without having my coworkers suspect that I got it because of my race.	Advancement
Given my racial identity, I can be pretty sure that if I escalate a work-related issue at my institution, my complaint will be taken seriously.	Advancement	I can easily find mentors at my institution who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about professional development.	Advancement
I can do well in a professionally challenging situation without bringing attention to my race.	Advancement	Within and beyond the academy, I can criticize public policies and administrative practices without being dismissed or marginalized.	Safety
Within and beyond the academy, I can speak to those in power without putting my racial identity on trial.	Safety	As a professional, it is common to find situations where I am surrounded by people who share my racial identity.	Safety
At my institution, people who look like me can swear, ignore emails, show up late, or dress casually without it being attributed to my racial identity.	Safety	If I get pulled over by my campus police officers, I can be sure I (and people who look like me) will be treated with respect.	Safety
If I get into an argument with a colleague who does not share my racial identity, I can be pretty sure that my colleagues will find ways to support me.	Safety	Regardless of where the conference is being held, I can easily find lodging without fearing that people of my race will be mistreated at the place I have chosen.	Safety
I don't have to worry about colleagues commenting on my appearance or attire in relation to my racial identity.	Safety	My institution's policies help protect me when I receive backlash from my teaching on emancipatory themes.	Safety
I can set my research and teaching agenda so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.	Safety	I feel welcomed and "normal" in work settings.	Safety
I can speak up against leadership at my institution without fear of retaliation.	Safety	I can go home from most department meetings feeling connected, rather than isolated, outnumbered, unheard, or unsafe.	Safety

Individually, scholars should reflect on whose voices are prioritized, and engage with and listen to scholars of color as peers with vital perspectives and deep expertise. Actively engaging with scholars of color challenges that exclusion and fulfills PA's democratic and representative commitments to inclusivity in knowledge and practice (Bearfield et al. 2023). Those whose perspectives are protected can read and cite critical race theory and Whiteness studies, practice reflexivity and positionality to conduct more ethical and socially just research, and regularly and intentionally interrogate how their identity and privilege shape their teaching, research, and institutional influence. Race-consciousness, grounded in critical race theory, is essential for ethical administrative practice and for countering administrative callousness (Blessett and Gaynor 2021). Reflexivity and accountability thus serve as tools for ensuring socially just and transparent research. Those with institutional protection have a moral and professional duty to advance social equity and institutional fairness, and dismantling structural racism requires concrete implementation strategies that redistribute opportunities and power (Bearfield et al. 2023). With the protection of advancement, faculty can leverage their social capital by writing about racism and power, supporting colleagues confronting promotion-related issues, and amplifying the work of colleagues of color. Protected faculty who intervene against racism or microaggressions enact public administration's justice-oriented and accountability principles (Love and Stout 2024). Regarding individual safety, protected faculty can speak up regarding issues of racism and problematic power hierarchies and stand up for colleagues facing microaggressions, such as those related to their attire or appearance.

Regarding perspective, conducting syllabus audits and recognizing non-Western epistemologies advances epistemic justice and representative inclusion, challenging what Bernal and Villalpando (2002) identify as the "apartheid of knowledge." In the area of advancement, reevaluating tenure and promotion policies, auditing job ads, and implementing equity-focused searches embody social equity and organizational accountability, addressing structural racism embedded in administrative systems (Portillo et al. 2022). Alongside additional interventions, institutions can pursue cluster hires, as this approach may improve retention of scholars of color (Sailer 2023; Sandekian et al. 2022). For the protection of safety, empowering DEI committees and supporting

faculty under attack for engaging critical race or antiracist work fulfills the justice and protection dimensions of PA's ethical responsibilities (Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Riccucci et al. 2024). Finally, ensuring that conference locations safeguard all participants demonstrates ethical stewardship and fairness, reinforcing PA's duty to cultivate safe, equitable spaces for professional engagement (Bearfield et al. 2023).

We offer a conceptual checklist, not to reinforce static understandings of privilege, but to help educators and scholars "see" the bricks in the wall of Whiteness that surround them. By naming and investigating these structural dynamics, we hope to provide a resource that enables deeper reflection, more critical engagement, and ultimately, a more just and equitable academic environment. This list is not intended as a comprehensive solution, but as a starting point for readers to acknowledge and grapple with their discomfort and complicity in our own lives and academic practices. In many ways, this checklist approach is used to create accessibility and clarity, but we also recognize its limitations. In attempting to distill complex systemic issues into actionable steps, we risk oversimplifying or falling short of radical critique. However, our goal is not to provide the final word, but to open space for deeper reflection and dialogue.

The constraints in PA around confronting race, such as legal, political, and professional norms, are deeply reflected and reproduced in academic structures, particularly in how PA is taught, researched, and institutionally supported. Academia often works to maintain rather than dismantle Whiteness via our individual-level actions, interpersonal power dynamics, institutional rules, and structural-level norms and practices. By reconceptualizing privilege as structural insulation, beyond just personal advantage, we highlight how academics participate in, reproduce, and benefit from systems designed to protect institutional Whiteness.

Conclusion

This paper invites readers to engage in a critical inquiry of their daily lives as academics, and the checklist presented here offers a tool for reflection. Consider the metaphorical wall that defines who belongs in academia. This wall creates feelings of belonging for some by signaling who is safe, whose perspectives are valued, and who is likely to advance successfully. It also reinforces exclusion, creating an environment where others

must constantly justify their presence, value, and perspectives. Though we are all part of the academy, the experiences of belonging are deeply unequal. Identity shapes how welcome we feel, how easily we enter, and how much labor is required to stay.

It is also crucial to confront the myth that diversity alone will save us from institutionalized Whiteness. This false belief allows organizations to feel progressive without addressing the foundational structures that perpetuate inequality. Diversity without equity is harmful. It masks deeper structural problems while placing the burden of change on those most marginalized. Change doesn't only happen through policy; change happens in hallway conversations, syllabus design, hiring decisions, and mentorship. You have agency, and it matters both in personal relationships and institutional processes.

Without explicitly acknowledging the benefits and protections conferred by Whiteness, scholars cannot evaluate the world as it truly is. As higher education institutions have historically transformed themselves to meet the demands of shifting geopolitical, economic, and demographic conditions, we must now adapt again. If we fail to engage seriously with questions of race, power, and equity, we risk losing credibility and relevance.

Ultimately, dismantling the wall of Whiteness requires more than awareness. It demands material reconstruction. The bricks that uphold inequity are not abstract but embedded in policies, budgets, and institutional reward systems that prioritize stability over justice. Transformative change, therefore, must target the institutional structure itself: reimagining how funding is distributed, how legitimacy is conferred, and how faculty and curricula are evaluated. This means shifting from symbolic inclusion towards redistributive and epistemic justice, where power, recognition, and resources are aligned with equity rather than Whiteness. If we are to deconstruct the ivory tower's wall of Whiteness, we must also reengineer its foundation, replacing its bricks of privilege with the principles of collective accountability and structural repair.

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