

# Racialized Realities: The Need for Activist Leadership and Scholarship on Campus

By Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher

Over the weekend, white supremacists penetrated the University of Virginia and Charlottesville, Virginia so-called galvanizing to save the statute of the Confederacy's head General Robert E. Lee. Footage from Friday night, August 11th, show several hundred White men and women marching around UVA's campus spewing hate and doing Nazi salutes chanting, "White Lives Matter", "You will not replace us," and "Blood and Soil". The latter Nazi slogan is particularly ironic, as their ideology asserts the blood of their descents coupled with the territory (i.e., soil) is the true measure of ethnicity, inherent ownership, and allowable occupancy — in other words Whiteness as property rights. This claim of "Blood and Soil" are a great example of the perpetuation of White privilege and continual colonization of folks of color. The cultural amnesia, alternate reality, and White fragility on display the last three days is a case in point of how oxymoronic the "Blood and Soil" assertion is given this is RED land belonging to Indigenous Native American brothers and sisters — this country's first people.

The Friday night pre-rally at UVA and Saturday Unite the Right rally at the recently renamed Emancipation Park (formerly Lee Park) memorializing Robert E. Lee was declared an unlawful assembly. Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency as violence broke loose. Saturday a protester deliberately drove his vehicle into a crowd of counter protesters. One young woman is dead from being struck by the vehicle of the White supremacist, two Virginia policemen died in association with the rally, and over 30 were injured.

The Unite the Right rally was initiated by self-proclaimed pro-White activist Jason Kessler, promoted by David Duke ex-Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and supported by Richard Spencer, a University of Virginia alumni who organized a protest in Charlottesville in May, where Spencer stated to attendees, "We will never back down from the cowardly attacks on our people and our heritage. What brings us together is that we are White. We are a people. We will not be replaced!"

In July, North Carolina-based Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan organized in Charlottesville cloaked in Klan robes and confederate flags protested over the statue of Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson and the renaming of the Stonewall Jackson Park to Justice Park. This rally resulted in police use of tear gas on protesters. And rounding out the weekend was the Freedom rally sponsored by the Patriot Prayer Group in Seattle where many protesters carried shields, wore masks, and helmets. Again, little to suggest their intent was to engage in a peaceful demonstration.

## Old Fashioned Racism Revisited

The racial divide is nothing new in the United States. Being Black in America, I know all too well the psychological and sociological dilemmas in difference as race is often a defining tool in perpetuating discrimination and inequity in America. This country has always bear the scar of race and will continue to do so given the visceral hatred that festers and cultural misinformation much of White America holds about Black bodies, Black lives, Black realities. Anti-Black affect has become so mundane in character that the normalization of racism manifests in the countless unarmed Black men and women that die at the hands of police without law enforcement being culpable. The reality of race in America is often

painted dichotomously — Black and White. Consider the militarization and police state at Black Lives Matter demonstrations which are by and large peaceful in contrast to the handling of Unite the Right rally protesters who did not seek peaceful demonstration with their helmets, shields, batons and visible hand guns.

The “alt-right” group behind the Unite the Right rally is largely White men that embrace alternative facts that suggest a world where racial justice, religious pluralism, and same-sex love are threatening to their very existence. This completely alternate universe and worldview is undergirded by a sense of entitlement, where White men are the victims of diversity, when progression in terms of social justice and equity are oppressive and found to be offensive. Hence, the call to action by White nationalists to “Take the country back” and “Make America great again”, all of which is playing out post-Trump with emboldened Whites freely engaging in hate speech and discriminatory acts as unfettered rights like the days of old.

Former First Lady Michelle Obama at the 2012 Democratic National Convention said, “The presidency doesn’t change who you are. It reveals who you are”. While many are disappointed by the lacking response of the outspoken, Twitter-addicted, unfiltered Trump to the Alt-Right’s White supremacy display, I’m not surprised by his unresponsiveness. One of Trump’s first acts as commander in chief was appointing Stephen Bannon as an executive officer. Bannon, former executive chair of the far-right Breitbart News that serves as the primary platform for the Alt-Right was Trump’s early pick to serve as his chief adviser. Why would President Trump point the finger and call out despicable acts of neo-Nazi, White supremacists at the Charlottesville or Seattle rallies when he put one of them in the White House?

There’s a saying that, “A fish rots from the head first”. This expression contends problems can be traced to the top and in this case, the country’s leadership. There is decaying humanity and deterioration in American race relations under the helm of Donald Trump. As a presidential candidate, Trump fanned the flames of racial hostility, peddled and profited from prejudice releasing the new “old” racism from the shadows. Now as president, Trump who usually always has something to say and someone to bash, has little to nothing to say in condemning White supremacy. He did not call the driver that plowed into counter protesters a domestic terrorist nor did he emote empathy as he read his poorly scripted remarks. Trump did little to soothe those adversely affected by the racist rally but instead appeased his base, many of whom are White nationalists.

### **Call for Activism in Halting Hostile Hallways**

As campuses begin to welcome students back to school this week and over the weeks to follow, I feel this past weekend demonstrates the importance of activist leadership and scholarship. Activist leaders and scholars don’t conflate First Amendment freedom of speech with hate speech or confuse the right to peaceably assemble with yielding to vitriol, thuggery, and inciting harm. The Friday night march of lighted torch carrying, armed White supremacists on university grounds harassing, threatening, and physically assaulting UVA students that were peacefully counter protesting was anything but peaceful assembly or discourse that should be considered protected speech as there was explicit hate speech and acts. Activist leaders and scholars understand the true tenor and tone of White supremacists and would

not confound counter protesters calling for racial justice as equivalent. Activist leaders and scholars do not promote alternative facts and revisionist history but acknowledge White privilege, historical and contemporary racism, the need for decolonization and rebuke other repulsive forms of injustice. Activist leaders and scholars value the experiences of minoritized people, attest to the real, lived pain and trauma felt from racism and do not consider racism a thing of the past or argue that we are in a post racial society. Activist leaders and scholars recognize the history of oppression that displays like those at UVA are not isolated events; understand that there is still not an even playing field, and that there is a depersonalization and pathology of White racism as evident in the emergence of the Alt-Right, their denial of reality, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism.

Twenty-five years ago, Andrew Hacker authored the text *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* in which he argues that the deepest and most enduring division in American society is race. In 1992, Hacker felt that race not only defined America's past, but would also be the defining issue of its future. It is daunting that in 2017, our children have to face the same aversive racism and bigotry. When it comes to race in America, the scar has yet to heal. At best, there is a scab however it is continually picked, spreading infection, with the wound deepening.

The racial legacy of this country has remained White as the dominant group and norm reference by which all others are examined. One way dominance functions is by remaining unexamined. Activist leaders and scholars examine the disparate treatment, conditions, and outcomes that have routinely disadvantaged communities of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ folk and other marginalized groups. Activist leaders and scholars can see how Whiteness has been deemed the complexion for protection in upholding the status quo. Activist leaders and scholars do not turn a blind eye to inequities or are silent and complicit in the immutability of racial hatred. Activist leaders and scholars realize that it is a necessity to speak out against all forms of intolerance and call out heinous acts that promote concern for self at the expense of others. Activist leaders and scholars have a clear stance on diversity, know that it is not a euphemism for inclusion or equity and take deliberate action on their campuses to foster each. Activist leaders and scholars advance access, seek equitable outcomes, and actively work to have racially just and inclusive educational environments.

Activist leaders and scholars communicate a clear message of institutional values of diversity, equity, and inclusion to constituents on and off campus. Activist leaders and scholars hold themselves and others accountable for being culturally proficient, racially just educators that deliver culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and programming to the campus and surrounding communities. Activist leaders and scholars understand the power of and need for dialogue that is ongoing across divergent groups in proactively identifying tensions and concerns, in providing agency across the campus community, and building a culture of inclusion. Activist leaders and scholars seek to improve poor policies and failed practices as well as create actionable strategies that produce culturally responsive approaches that lift all learners. Activist leaders and scholars openly share their disdain for discrimination in all forms, see the humanity in all people, and do not tolerate hateful behavior. Activist leaders and scholars debunk racial tropes and do not center racial meaning making assigned by Whites to people of color. Activist leaders and scholars employ critically race-conscious approaches in theory and practice. Activist leaders and scholars are not dismissive of inequities in race, power, and privilege in academia and look to dismantle segmentation of opportunity. Activist leaders and scholars understand

that colorblindness negates racial oppression and instead seeks to illuminate the voices of the oppressed to own their stories, name their realities, as well as the intersections of their identities. Activist leaders and scholars don't straddle the fence with neutrality or split hairs when it comes to the toxicity of White supremacy and racially motivated domestic terrorism. Activist leaders and scholars grasp that in order to remedy an ill and to solve a problem, you must first call it by name.

American college campuses are microcosms of the larger society and the scene at UVA and in the streets of Seattle is likely to recur under the Trump administration. As the new academic year begins, I call you to be activist leaders and scholars. More specifically, be the educator that doesn't decouple racial justice from social justice but see them as inextricably linked and imperative. To truly be socially just, you must call racist bigotry out. What was on full display this weekend in Charlottesville and Seattle for the world to see was the ever-present seething wound, the American scar that has yet to go away — and it's called racism.

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Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher is Professor of Higher Education/Community College Leadership in the Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is also Director of the Office for Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL). She holds a PhD in Higher Education Administration with a specialization in Community College Leadership and Educational Evaluation from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her teaching, research, and consulting activities largely include psychosocial adjustment and transition of marginalized collegians, transfer, access policies, student development and services at community colleges. Dr. Zamani-Gallaher is a recipient of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) Senior Scholar Award, is an ACPA Diamond Honoree and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Council on Ethnic Participation Mildred B. Garcia Senior Exemplary Scholarship Awardee. Dr. Zamani-Gallaher served as president of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC), an affiliate of the American Association of Community Colleges and currently is Director for Research and Scholarship for the American College Personnel Association (ACPA).