

Lost in Translation: The Role of Whiteness in Institutional Betrayal & Academic Trauma

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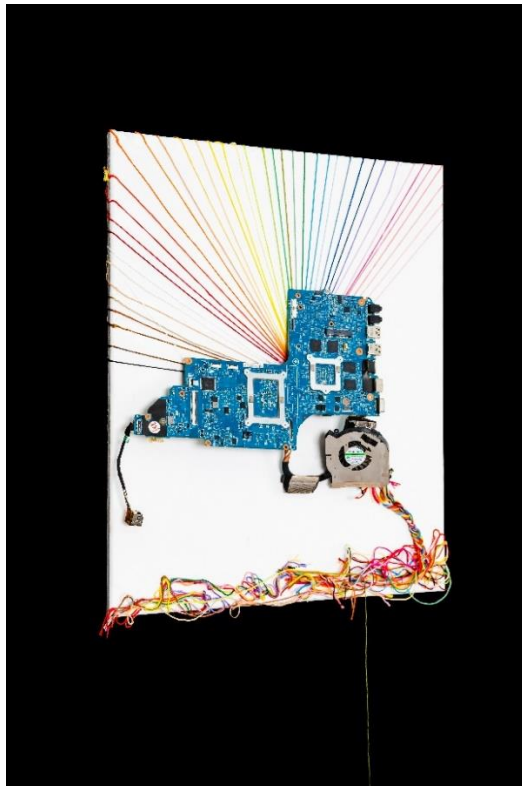
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Lost in Translation: The Omnipresent View

Mixed media installation



*Pulled into
individual strings and stripped
of complexity,
the interwoven tapestry
of identities and experiences
is ripe
for invalidation.*

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“Lost in Translation” is an expression of how the system of whiteness inherent in academia functions as a vehicle by which our identities and experiences become decontextualized, deconstructed, and invalidated. “Whiteness,” as I describe it here, is a socially and politically constructed ideology that centers the beliefs, values, experiences, and behaviors of white people. It is a method that controls and incentivizes adherence to whiteness as the default frame of reference for the human experience (Sue, 2006).

The interwoven and colorful strands of yarn at the bottom of the canvas reflect the complexity of one’s identity, how the whole of us is greater than the sum of our parts. The depths of our various identities inform one another and can’t be siphoned or divided without unraveling the truth of our reality. As a queer, white, Mexican-American and cisgender woman, my identity

embodies many intersections of privilege and marginalization. This piece is an expression of my anxieties, fears, and frustrations about my identity and lived experiences, particularly in academic spaces.

The individual strands splayed at the top of the canvas are distinct and categorical, representing the oversimplified self. These strands are the outward-facing and artificial product that is superimposed on everyone by whiteness. The white spaces between the strands demonstrate how whiteness inserts itself into our identities. The expectation for scholars to bring authenticity to their work in an environment where the full integration of their identities isn't safe, supported, or protected, is a mechanism of institutional betrayal (Crumb et al., 2023).

The motherboard in the middle of the canvas represents the intentionally designed system of whiteness as a central processing unit in academia. Whiteness functions to erase the dialectic nature of my existence as someone who actively straddles seemingly opposite truths and reinforces a false dichotomy of the oppressed and oppressor. It is true that I have a tremendous amount of privilege in being able to choose when to show and how to disclose my identities to others, and it is true that I am marginalized by their invisibility. While I may share the cultural milieus (e.g., collectivistic values, familism) with my queer and/or Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) family, I am not implicated by my race in ways that add layers of systemic-level discrimination and racism. This tends to position me as an outsider, within. Whiteness harms both BIPOC and white people. This is because whiteness functions to suppress authentic personal and professional identity development, which produces, maintains, and perpetuates academic traumas.

Whiteness as a System: Institutional Betrayal and Academic Trauma through Cultural Invalidations

Cultural invalidations encompass identity threats across a range of social identities, both seen and unseen (e.g., ethnicity-race, gender, social class, etc.). These experiences extend beyond the scope of racial microaggressions and often include invalidations from both white and BIPOC communities (Durkee & Gómez, 2022). This isn't meant as a comparison, hierarchy, or ranking of experiences. It is a vulnerable display of my version of institutional betrayal and academic trauma. The system encourages participating in a zero-sum game (Norton & Sommers, 2011), where if I express my joy or my pain, others somehow lose theirs. Whiteness plants an insidious seed of fear that when *I* live in my truth, *your* truth is minimized or denied. Whiteness spreads scarcity, to pit people with marginalized identities against one another. Below is an example from my time as a clinical psychology doctoral student.

Early in my graduate career, I was provided the feedback from a white faculty member on my competency evaluation that I was “emotionally dysregulated,” “hostile,” and my “interpersonal process is experienced as containing significant levels of negative affect.” I was told that I did not meet expectations in my ability to “address distress, conflict, and uncertainty in a professional manner that reflects a carefully measured emotional response.” At the time, I didn't understand the ciphered message that “professional manner” meant conforming to the pervasive emotionally reticent and race-evasive environment that engendered our department culture. I attempted to discuss the role of my own culture (e.g., in my case—a high-context communication style which emphasizes the non-verbal, such as body language, affect) that may have contributed to potential miscommunication and asked for resources to learn more about Midwestern culture. In response, I was told by another white faculty member, “I had a Mexican

student in my lab before and she wasn't aggressive at all." The collective faculty proposed that I read the book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Rosenberg, 2015). I struggled to find support in this experience from the few students in the program with minoritized identities. When I described this experience as a proverbial stereotype of Latinas being "fiery" or "having an attitude," and assumptions of culture as homogenous, one of my peers replied, "You should just be grateful that you're white, you don't have it as bad as the rest of us."

The internalization of this double-sided invalidation made me question my own reality. On one hand, I resented feeling forced to assimilate to the dominant culture as an act of self-preservation. I monitored the level and tone of my voice, hand gestures, etc. to avoid further recourse. I even stopped wearing my big hoop earrings for fear I might be called "hood" or "ghetto." I felt (and still feel) an immense amount of anxiety that sharing about my academic trauma will be perceived as weaponizing my emotions in the name of white supremacy. I feel conflicted about receiving a diversity fellowship to fund my graduate education, considering whether or not to attend seminars for BIPOC practitioners/researchers, or belonging to professional organizations for queer or LatinX groups, and speaking as someone with lived experiences of community and gang violence to advocate for policy change, etc.

It brings up an existential question that many communities face—how is group membership determined? I recognize that my privileged identities operate as the norm because that is how people perceive me and that the system incentivizes my whiteness. My anxiety stems from an intense internal interrogation of my intention and impact as it relates to accountability of my privilege: *Am I respecting community preservation (e.g., BIPOC-only spaces)? Am I exploiting membership for personal and/or professional gain? Am I claiming to experience something that I don't really experience?*

My academic trauma is a fragmentation of self, a low humming unsettledness that I am not the expert of my own experience and that other's perceptions of me are more truthful or "correct." Institutional betrayal has created uncertainty of how I communicate the multiplicity of my seemingly opposite social identities involved in my experiences. Institutional betrayal has generated a tension about how I reconcile my experiences in the context of my privilege while honoring the validity of my experiences.

With respect to scholarship in academia, my work isn't labeled as biased or unscientific, or used to discredit my expertise, the way self-relevant research often is for BIPOC and queer scholars (Devendorf et al., 2023). Instead, my identity itself is questioned. For example, I can recall a prominent academic in LatinX mental health responding to my interest in collaboration and sharing my background by suddenly speaking to me in Spanish, as a form of vetting my proximity to my heritage. When I started to explain my qualifications (in Spanish) he interjected, "But you don't look Mexican. Your eyes don't look Mexican, your nose doesn't look Mexican, your lips don't look Mexican, and your skin doesn't look Mexican, nothing about you looks Mexican," and promptly ended the conversation.

I can appreciate that because my appearance alone evokes institutional and multigenerational harms, I will receive questions about my intentions to work with specific populations and to pursue particular research topics. I am grateful for those who ask these questions, as they are also doing their best to protect, advocate for, and empower others. I can hold that truth in my spirit and simultaneously experience the frustration of constantly refining my "identity elevator speech" about how the intersections of my identities uniquely position me to share novel perspectives and innovative contributions. I am able to de-construct the insider and outsider perception of positionality (Bukamal, 2022), as someone who not only continuously

alternates from holding majority and minority statuses and privileged and marginalized statuses, but as someone who can present in spaces with these pieces of myself synchronously integrated. I don't want to compromise myself in an effort to be viewed as legitimate by an institution that never wanted me in the first place. I don't want to feel forced to contour myself to be valued by people alongside whom I am trying to work to dismantle whiteness. This flavor of invalidation sits heavy on the chests of scholars who hold diverse and intricate existences that blend together the lines drawn in the sand that whiteness drew to separate our identities into distinct categories. The omnipresence of whiteness requires a multifaceted approach to dismantlement, and there are an exponential number of angles from which to attack this problem, including perspectives of those with racial and ethnic "mismatches." My voice has value because of its nuance.

Addressing Institutional Betrayal: Perspective and Steps

Prevailing values and norms of whiteness within academic institutions reinforce a universal method for evaluating not only who is a scholar, but how a scholar should think, believe, look, and behave. Entrance into the field itself was structured to reinforce systems of power through arbitrary benchmarks of intellectual potential. For example, longstanding selection tools for graduate school admissions such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) have poor predictive validity of graduate school completion, particularly with more diverse samples (Feldon et al., 2023). Such conventions and structures that have historically created a glass ceiling for underserved and underrepresented groups of aspiring professionals have ultimately contributed to the lack of greatly needed diversity in higher education. Valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion is a necessary but not sufficient condition to improve knowledge, and has become a profitable landscape for rebranding many fields. Institutions that profess a strong allegiance to social justice will need to integrate social justice as a part of daily work and

compensated time, rather than relegate it as optional or additional (e.g., committee meetings held during lunch breaks). Without commitment to changing the practices, we further perpetuate inequities.

In this vein, there is a need to disassemble the current structure of meritocracy. A scholar who comes from a collectivist worldview should be able not only to prioritize, but be incentivized for centering teaching, community engagement, and service experiences over peer-review publications or scientific presentations. From graduate school admissions to grant proposals and review standards for tenure, the academy should consider how someone's contributions to the field may reflect their cultural values. Intentional and concentrated efforts to change the whiteness paradigm in academia are imperative to break multigenerational harms and institutional betrayals.

The attempt to maintain cultural ties to identity while simultaneously assimilating to white cultural norms will guarantee the erosion of one's mental health. It pains me to see academics forget the richness of human experience, both seen and unseen, and the sociocultural and systemic tensions that shape why certain aspects of ourselves are shared, and others are tucked away, saved for particular spaces. I long for people, individually, and as a collective, to be mindful of intersectionality, myself included. Every day I work through some variation of the manifestations of my academic trauma—the ruminative, negative cognitive distortions about myself, and the hypervigilance of how my name, my clothes, and my language will land with others.

After institutional betrayals ranging from microaggressions to inappropriate academic evaluations, I am finally growing into my skin. This shift happened through my own radical acceptance of the fact that no matter how I have identified in my life (e.g., Mexican, LatinX,

Hispanic, Mexican-American, person of color, white, queer, bisexual, pansexual, etc.), I have always received, and will continue to receive questions. I have to deliberately remind myself of the phrase I share with therapy clients at the outset of treatment, “You are the expert of your experience.” The only party benefiting from my self-doubt is the system. I have come to understand that “my place” in this work is built into my very existence and I am changing the narrative from that of burden to strength. Looking forward, I dream of cultural humility over cultural competency. And in making this dream a reality, I work to decolonize myself, to dismantle my complacency. I strive to simultaneously hold my privileged and marginalized identities with authenticity and walk in line with my values, knowing that while I may never be “enough” of any one thing for anyone else, I am wholly enough of me, for me.

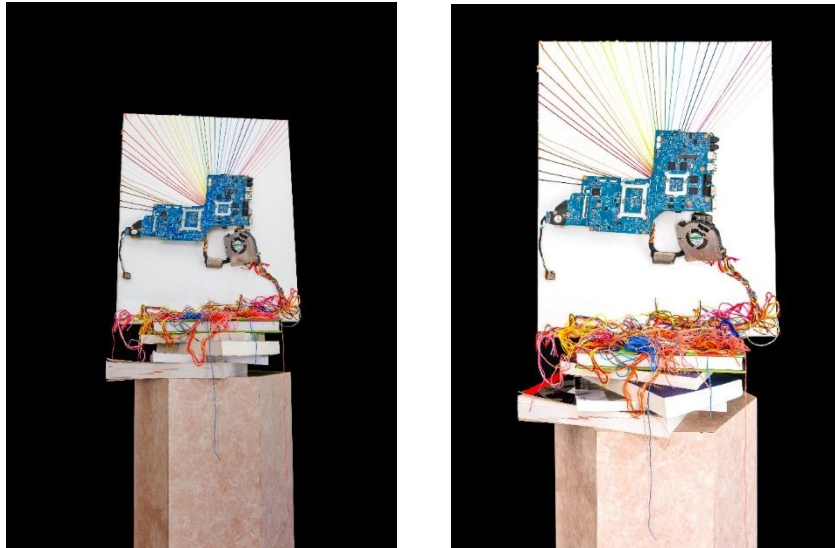
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Lost in Translation: The Ivory Tower Views

Mixed media installation (canvas, embroidery thread, fishing wire, glue, motherboard, pillar)



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*Institutional betrayal
Values the
Oppression of
Rights, &
Yearns for assimilation.*

*Trauma in academia means
Only those
W(hite).E(ducated).I(ndustrialized).R(ich).D(emocratic).
Expressions are permitted
Research is objective/fying*

Katherine Kelton, PhD, MSPH (she/her/ella) is a licensed psychologist with expertise in the assessment and treatment of people with complex clinical presentations, including trauma-related and substance use disorders. Informed by her training in public health, she also strives to cultivate a broader lens for promoting high-quality, interdisciplinary science driven by cultural humility. This value is reflected in her research, which encompasses how socio-structural and systemic inequities, such as incarceration and homelessness, impact individual mental health. Overall, she views her role as a psychologist to advocate extending space and diverting power to people who hold marginalized identities.