



TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE FUTURE? WHITENESS AS FUTURITY IN UNIVERSITY RESPONSES TO ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE

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Towards an Equitable Future? Whiteness as Futurity in University Responses to Anti-Asian Violence

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In this study, I investigate how the rhetoric used in university responses to anti-Asian violence maintained institutional status quos to protect whiteness in higher education. Using whiteness as futurity as a theoretical framework, I employed document analysis to analyze 54 statements in response to the tragic mass shooting in Atlanta in March of 2021 from university presidents of institutions from the Association of American Universities. The findings illuminate how presential rhetoric deployed a malleable history, urgency in the present, and an imagined equitable future. Further, the statements analyzed in this study implicated the three components of whiteness of futurity: whiteness as aspiration, whiteness as investment, and whiteness as malleable. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States experienced a rise in anti-Asian hate incidents (Yellow Horse et al., 2022). These racialized incidents were a product of racial resentment resulting from anti-Asian pandemic rhetoric widely publicized through politics and the media (e.g., Chinese virus; Teranishi et al., 2022). The dual onset of COVID-19 and anti-Asian racism has been described as a syndemic, or the interaction between two or more endemic diseases (Castro Samayoa, 2022). As more anti-Asian hate incidents were reported, educators, politicians, and community members came together to address both crises (see Coloma et al., 2021).

However, college and university leaders did not immediately link the pandemic to growing concerns of anti-Asian racism. With multiple competing issues to address during the COVID-19 crisis, pandemic communication from universities rarely addressed anti-Asian racialized violence and instead focused on other direct impacts (e.g., financial support for students; O'Shea et al., 2022). While anti-Asian animus was present on campus, incidents of anti-Asian hate and violence were also occurring off campus (Yellow Horse et al., 2022). The most publicized incident of anti-Asian violence occurred on March 16, 2021, in Atlanta, Georgia, when a white man targeted three spas, killing eight people, six of whom were Asian women. The national attention to this event made anti-Asian hate an urgent issue that needed to be addressed; accordingly, many college and university presidents responded in a public forum, proclaiming solidarity with Asian communities and condemning racialized violence (Soltis, 2024; Teranishi et al., 2022).

College and university presidents have influence within and outside of higher education (Brown, 2006). Their rhetoric in response to local, national, and global

racialized incidents has the ability to espouse the commitments of the university to delegitimize racism and racialized violence (Bowman & Gelber, 2021; Garcia et al., 2020). However, university rhetoric by itself cannot create substantive change without concrete action to actualize commitments to equity and justice (Squire, 2017). Indeed, many scholars have critiqued the function of these responses to catalyze structural change within institutions of higher education (e.g., Cole & Harper, 2017; also see Squire et al., 2019). Additionally, some scholars (e.g., Briscoe, 2024; Squire, 2017) analyzed the timeliness of responses, critiquing the time it takes for university leaders to issue a response after a racialized incident occurs as well as questioning why universities might not issue a response. However, the creation and distribution of a written public response covers only one dimension of temporality in relation to university rhetoric and racialized incidents.

Few scholars have directly considered how dominant temporalities manifest in the rhetoric used in responses to racialized violence. Dominant conceptions of time are often linear and rigid, associated with Western values, and prioritize efficiency and production (Shahjahan, 2015). Within the discursive spaces created by university speech, institutions operationalize dominant temporalities to support the broader university narrative. For example, colleges and universities recount their histories, either to embrace historical narratives to show longstanding solidarity with minoritized communities or deny them to show growth and progress (Patton, 2016). Additionally, the language used in statements frame racialized incidents as a discrete event in need of an immediate response, creating a sense of urgency for action but disconnecting from enduring institutional racism (Davis & Harris, 2016). The emphasis on an urgent response promises an imagined ideal future (Bunn & Bennett, 2020; Clegg, 2010) for students, staff, and faculty free from racial inequality, calling for individual responsibility to end racism.

Structured as a document analysis, this article explores the rhetoric in relation to temporality used in 54 statements responding to the tragic shooting in Atlanta, Georgia in 2021 from institutional members of the Association of American Universities (AAU). From the analysis, I argue university responses operated within a framework of whiteness as futurity, or in other words, worked to maintain whiteness as a dominant ideology in higher education. My findings outline how statements molded history to fit the modern university narrative, created a sense of urgency after a critical incident, and imagined a future free from racialized violence.

Literature Review

This section reviews pertinent literature on anti-Asian hate in the United States and the trend of rising anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, I contextualize university and presidential responses to racialized incidents, including critiques of diversity rhetoric. Finally, I outline the few studies focused on university COVID-19 pandemic communications to show how pandemic specific communication failed to address the racialized impact of the pandemic.

Anti-Asian Hate

Anti-Asian bias, discrimination, and hate are not new phenomena in the United States. Indeed, there has been a longstanding history of anti-Asian discrimination demonstrated in policy and societal racial resentment (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act or the incarceration of Japanese people during World War II; Man, 2020). Historical and

contemporary discrimination connects with the different stereotypes and myths of Asian people with the goal of protecting white interests (Man, 2020). For example, the model minority myth positions Asian people as universally successful, hiding disparities within the Asian diaspora (Museus, 2008). Further, the model minority myth works to protect white supremacy by reinforcing anti-Black myths of inferiority (Poon et al., 2016). Alternatively, the perpetual foreigner stereotype portrays Asian people as un-American, foreign-born, and diametrically opposed to American values (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). The rise in hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a heightened visibility of the perpetual foreigner stereotype (Daley et al., 2022). This myth perniciously connects infectious disease to Asian bodies, blaming Asian individuals for the ongoing negative impact of pandemics and outbreaks (Man, 2020).

Accordingly, the number of reported anti-Asian hate incidents increased drastically from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 10,905 hate incidents against Asian American and Pacific Islander persons reported from March 19, 2020 to December 31, 2021 (Yellow Horse et al., 2022). These incidents included verbal assault, physical assault, and harassment over social media (Costello et al., 2021). Moreover, reported incidents have disproportionately targeted Asian women (Yellow Horse et al., 2022). Often, these incidents made direct references to anti-Asian rhetoric and the pandemic (e.g., wearing protective masks; Ren & Feagin, 2021).

During the first year of the pandemic, colleges and universities did not necessarily have an increase of reported anti-Asian hate incidents. This may have been due to campus closures, the move to online instruction, and various competing pandemic-related needs (Coloma et al., 2021). Further, universities were simultaneously contending with addressing ongoing anti-Black racism and police violence (Anand & Hsu, 2020). Thus, university presidents had to determine which issues were the most pressing for their communities; issues that were not determined to be a campus crisis, such as rising concerns of anti-Asian racism, were not a priority for a public response. However, the tragic mass shooting in Atlanta on March 16, 2021, placed anti-Asian violence into the vision of university leaders, creating a sense of urgency around addressing anti-Asian hate (Teranishi et al., 2022). Indeed, many college and university leaders issued a public response to the shooting to express their solidarity with Asian communities on campus.

University Responses to Racialized Incidents

University communications about race and racism are often made as a reactionary response to discrete racialized incidents rather than addressing racism in general (Cole & Harper, 2017). The literature examining university rhetoric in response to local and national racialized incidents shows that university leaders are quick to address the specific incident, but often fall short of acknowledging systemic racism within their institution (e.g., Andrade & Lundberg, 2022; Cole & Harper, 2017; Davis & Harris, 2016; Garcia et al., 2020; George Mwangi et al., 2019; Soltis, 2024; Squire et al., 2019). Findings from these studies demonstrate how institutional leaders utilize vague language and rely on institutional values to display ongoing solidarity and support for the targeted community (e.g., Garcia et al., 2020). In an attempt to support students, staff, and faculty who were impacted by the racialized incident, university statements share existing resources (e.g., counseling services) rather than offering new resources to address the nuanced needs of the targeted community (Andrade & Lundberg, 2022).

Further, there is little follow up after statements to pursue actionable steps to actualize commitments communicated in the original statement (Ahmed, 2012).

Consequently, this results in non-performative speech (Ahmed, 2012), or in other words, the practice when university leaders share actions, commitments, and goals for racial equity without the intention or incentive to change (Squire et al., 2019). In addition, these promises are often made to appease activist movements and return to “business as usual” (Cho, 2018; Squire et al., 2019). Using the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), institutions deftly maneuver to showcase their commitment to equity in higher education and the appearance of action (Strunk et al., 2020). If actions are taken, they are often tied up in bureaucratic processes which stifles activists’ momentum and delays any substantial change (Cho, 2018).

While scholars critique university responses to racialized violence and communication during the pandemic, it is important to note that university responses to racialized incidents are often constructed by racialized labor (Ray, 2019). Members of the targeted community are conveniently asked to write, edit, or consult on public statements; simultaneously, staff and faculty of the targeted community are grieving and disproportionately supporting students from the targeted community. This phenomenon demonstrates how universities shape the agency of people of color through the racialization of time (Ray, 2019). Whether or not it is in their job description, staff and faculty of color are called on to be “unofficial diversity practitioners” solely based on their minoritized racial status (Ahmed, 2012; Squire, 2017). After a racialized incident, the university can determine how staff and faculty of color spend their time in addition to their regular work, such as serving on a diversity task force (Ray, 2019).

University COVID-19 Communications and Racialized Incidents

Few studies have examined the communications of universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding racialized impact of the pandemic. In their analysis of communications from public universities in California, Castro Samayoa and colleagues (2022) found minimal communications addressing racialized violence in connection to the pandemic. The communications that addressed racialized violence functioned to shield the university from anti-Asian hate incidents, promote institutional values, and protect institutional reputation. In a similar study, O’Shea and colleagues (2022) suggest that universities in the United States did not address racialized violence in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, university leaders were concerned with addressing direct impacts from the pandemic, such as allocation of resources to help students move off campus and public health guidance. When leaders addressed racialized violence stemming from the pandemic, their statements of support for Asian communities came after the tragic shooting in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2021 rather than addressing the growing concerns of anti-Asian racism during the prior year (Soltis, 2024). Soltis’ (2024) findings corroborate many other studies on university responses to racialized violence, suggesting statements from university leaders have homogenized across the higher education organizational field and operate as a commitment to change without dedicating material resources to actualize change.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study draws from how time and temporality manifest in higher education. First, I give a broad overview of how time is conceptualized in higher education (see Duncheon & Tierney, 2013). Following the

overview, I discuss in detail the primary framework guiding the research design, data analysis, and findings interpretation: Whiteness as futurity.

Conceptualizing Time in Higher Education

Time undergirds every function in higher education, yet the dominant temporal structures embedded in colleges and universities remain under-critiqued (Shahjahan, 2015). The neoliberal logics in U.S. higher education connects to rigid and linear conceptions of time, often associated with Western values and philosophies (Shahjahan, 2015). While time is mostly viewed as objective and measurable, scholars argue time is more than a calendar or clock—it is discursively constructed and shaped by social location and relationships (Adams, 2004). In other words, time is “gendered, classed and racialized and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences” (Bennett & Burke, 2018, p. 914).

This dominant construction of time is deeply entangled with whiteness and determines values within the university structure (Shahjahan, 2015)—what is on time, a waste of time, a good use of time, good time management, and more (Bennett & Burke, 2018). Further, individuals from minoritized communities are often expected to spend their time in specific ways (Ray, 2019). For example, professional staff of color may be expected to serve on committees and task forces as a “token” representative as a part of their official job duties. In addition to their job responsibilities, staff of color disproportionately support students of color (Luedke, 2017), filling a need the university does not provide while the university benefits from the labor of people of color (Cho, 2018; Lerma et al., 2020).

The emphasis on productivity and efficiency manifests through how an academic year is structured. Students, staff, and faculty are expected to produce (e.g., course work, programs and services, and/or research) within these timeframes with consequential outcomes for the future (e.g., degree completion, promotion, and/or tenure; Walker, 2009). However, activities that do not contribute to this narrow definition of productivity and achievement (such as supporting students of color outside of one’s professional role) can be deemed a waste of time. Thus, university policies, processes, and culture reproduce dominant values to compel present actions to achieve an “ideal future.”

Whiteness as Futurity

U.S. higher education is future-oriented, constantly (re)constructing and promising “ideal futures” for its students, staff, and faculty as motivation to perform in particular ways in the present (Bunn & Bennett, 2020). These future constructions are profoundly shaped by racism within institutions and across the higher education organizational field. To describe this process, Shahjahan and Edwards (2022) advance the whiteness as futurity framework to illuminate how whiteness manipulates global higher education imaginaries. Whiteness in this context creates a “superstructure that privileges White people, institutions, and cultural norms and orients social and political environments towards the benefit and protection of White life” (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022, p. 748). This framework is comprised of three tenets: whiteness as aspiration, whiteness as investment, and whiteness as malleable. *Whiteness as aspiration* dictates the futures of higher education that are legitimate, aligning with the interests of whiteness (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). Xu (2023) illustrates this concept by illuminating how the discourse of “world-class education” proliferated from Western

universities and are reproduced by international branch campuses in China. Thus, “world-class,” based on a Western conception of higher education, becomes the legitimate aspiration for colleges and universities globally (Xu, 2023).

Next, *whiteness as investment* compels non-white subjects (e.g., students of color) to invest in whiteness and causes harm to those who refuse to invest in whiteness (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). For example, U.S. higher education projects a “universal” university model based on white norms that delegitimize non-white ways of knowing and learning. Those within the institution may feel pressured to align their aspirations with whiteness through socialization and assimilation, thereby protecting whiteness’ dominance in the future. Finally, *whiteness as malleable* describes how the benefits of whiteness are portrayed as within reach when, in reality, non-white subjects can never fully benefit. Further, the malleable nature of whiteness adapts to local conditions to appease discontent from non-white subjects (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). For example, universities have adopted the language of diversity and inclusion and use this language to signal that students of color can fully participate in the university. However, diversity rhetoric is often disconnected from policies and practices in the university (Ray, 2019)—the university commits to inclusion through their rhetoric but does not create structures to support students of color at their university. Ultimately, the university can boast about its diverse and inclusive community while protecting the institutional status quo (Ahmed, 2012).

Whiteness as futurity is appropriate for this study because whiteness operates within discursive spaces in the university, reinforcing the aspiration, investment, and malleability of whiteness. For example, institutional history is conveniently recounted, either to demonstrate longstanding university values or denied to show progress and growth (Patton, 2016). Positioning the university as a bastion of progress, the deployment of dominant temporalities distracts from how whiteness shapes the present and the future (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). In this study, whiteness as futurity guides both the data analysis and findings interpretation, placing an emphasis on how temporalities within university responses to anti-Asian hate implicate whiteness as futurity.

Methodology

This section details document analysis as a methodology to analyze presidential statements issued in response to the Atlanta shooting in March of 2021. I then demarcate my data collection strategy and how I analyzed the final dataset. I conclude with how my positionality influenced my analysis.

Document Analysis

I used document analysis, which provides a systematic approach to select and interpret written documents as the primary source of data (Gross, 2018). Document analysis has the advantage of capturing archived university rhetoric at a critical point in time and includes both content and thematic analysis of the data (Bowen, 2009). While content analysis has been associated with large-scale quantitative analysis, Bowen (2009) argues qualitative content analysis allows for “a first-pass document review, in which meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data are identified” (p. 32), before revising codes and merging them into categories and themes.

This study’s research design is in line with other studies that analyzed university rhetoric in response to racialized incidents. For example, Davis and Harris (2016)

employed document analysis, guided by critical race theory, to analyze university responses to parties with racialized themes. Document analysis aided in how the authors bounded the timeframe for documents included in the study. Similarly, I bounded this study by responses to the shootings in Atlanta and created a strict inclusion criterion for documents produced and released by university presidents and chancellors of the AAU.

In line with a document analysis methodology, I investigate the following research question: (a) How do university statements in response to the shooting in Atlanta implicate the three tenets of whiteness as futurity?

Data Collection

I analyzed public statements made by college and university presidents and chancellors in response to the tragic shootings in Atlanta on March 16, 2021. I limited my scope to the 65 institutional members of the AAU because they are highly visible and influential in the higher education organizational field, both within the United States, as well as globally. Discourses produced by this group of institutions profoundly shape the higher education imaginary (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022); thus, analyzing statements from this subset of universities provides insight into how statements responding to anti-Asian violence implicate whiteness as futurity.

I collected public statements by navigating to university websites and accessing statement archives of the office of the president or chancellor. By navigating to official university archives, I could confirm the validity of the documents and ensure they were authentically produced by institutional leadership (Gross, 2018). I included statements that were signed by the president, chancellor, or their office, checking the signatories of each statement to confirm they met this inclusion criteria. I was unable to find statements from 11 institutions, resulting in a final dataset of 54 statements.

Data Analysis

There were three stages of the analysis. First, I read through the entire data set, noting my initial reactions to the statements and emerging trends. Next, I employed open coding to assign codes in evaluation of the content of the documents (Bowen, 2009; Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the process, I wrote analytic memos and constantly referred to my code definitions to ensure consistency (Saldaña, 2021). After initial coding, I employed thematic coding (Saldaña, 2021) in line with how whiteness manipulates the futurities of higher education (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). In this round of coding, I developed categories exploring how temporality was structured within each statement and its relationship to my conceptual framework of whiteness as futurity. For example, I identified how presidents and chancellors referred to their past, generating a category *history*. In the analysis, I observed how the recounting of university history implicated whiteness as malleable—in other words, I identified how statements positioned the university as inclusive of Asian people throughout history to portray an image of solidarity while ignoring the historical targeted discrimination of Asian people. Thus, the category of history and its connection to whiteness as malleable informed one of my thematic findings: History as malleable.

Researcher Positionality

When the pandemic started in 2020 through the tragic shootings in 2021, I worked as a student-facing higher education administrator at an AAU institution. As one of the few Asian staff on campus, I vividly remember the days after the shooting in

Atlanta. In the aftermath, I was meeting with and supporting Asian students on campus while simultaneously worrying about my own family and friends' safety across the country. Further, I remember my disappointment at the response from my institution's leadership. As a member of the targeted community, this was a challenging time to be a part of the university.

When I was engaged in this research project, my experiences and emotions from the Atlanta shooting resurfaced. While I understand my experiences give me a particular perspective for this research, I was cautious during the analysis of the data. I utilized reflexive practices such as journaling to help untangle my own feelings and memories from the meaning and patterns emerging from my analysis. It is impossible for me to set aside my experiences and feelings, but my reflexive practice gave me more clarity into both my lived experiences and the meaning derived from analyzing the collected documents.

Findings

In line with the purpose of this study and the theoretical underpinning of whiteness as futurity, I illuminate how presidential rhetoric deploys dominant temporalities to influence the imaginaries in higher education, sustaining whiteness as a dominant ideology. First, I discuss how presidential statements recounted history to reiterate university values and showcase progress and growth, including demonstrations of longstanding and continued support for Asian communities. Next, I describe how statements called for urgent action in the present to address the discrete incident of racialized violence. Finally, I explore how presidential rhetoric was used to imagine futures free from racism and racialized violence.

History as Malleable

In their responses, presidents and chancellors recounted the history of their institutions to fit their narrative about anti-Asian hate and support the needs of the university. This primarily happened in two distinct ways. First, statements shared anecdotes from their history to showcase and reaffirm the institutions' solidarity with the targeted community. For example, the University of Michigan's president shared about the first students of Chinese-descent enrolled in the university:

As a university community that welcomed our first Chinese students almost 130 years ago, we cherish the intellectual and social contributions of our students, faculty and staff of Asian descent. The University of Michigan would not be the diverse and excellent place it is today without generations of Asians and Asian Americans who have enhanced our community for more than a century.

Supporting whiteness as malleable, this statement juxtaposes their embrace of Chinese students against the current incidents of anti-Asian violence, using their history to position itself as a place of longstanding diversity, inclusion, and solidarity with Asian communities, in particular students of Chinese-descent. However, the anecdote relies on vague language and fails to provide details about context surrounding Chinese students on campus and the reception of these students by the campus community. Further, the university shows its own growth and development, placing Asian individuals and their "diversity" as a foundation of excellence in the university, adopting and invoking the rhetoric of DEI. In doing so, the University of Michigan reaffirms their commitment to inclusion separate from historical and contemporary anti-Asian racism within the university.

Second, when statements acknowledge the history of racism and anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, it is used as a way to contextualize the present incident of anti-Asian violence. For example, Brown University acknowledges general longstanding issues of racism against Asian individuals and communities:

We recognize that the challenges being confronted by Asian-identified members of our community unfortunately have a deep history. These acts of discrimination and violence are especially disturbing in the context of the complex and longstanding issues of mounting hostility against people who are or are perceived to be of Chinese descent, further fueled by harmful political rhetoric related to China and the racialization of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While institutions acknowledged that hate incidents do not happen in isolation and are rooted in historical and contemporary racism, the use of vague language rhetorically separates the institution from its own complicity in reproducing structural inequalities, once again showing the malleability of whiteness. Statements position racism as something outside of the university which plagues the country. Accordingly, the university can offer itself as a place for social justice and liberation. Positioning the university as a place of racial liberation without actualizing a commitment to antiracist work becomes the goal itself (Ahmed, 2012)—in other words, the proliferation of DEI rhetoric across the higher education organizational field reproduces an image of racial equity and educational excellence in the higher education imaginary while maintaining whiteness as aspiration.

An Urgent Call to the Present

Statements used present-oriented speech to spur a sense of urgency to the current situation. When addressing the shooting in Atlanta, university leaders stressed the need for immediate action from the community. For example, the president of Carnegie Mellon ended their statement with the following:

The need to combat hate is an increasingly urgent call to action. While the challenge will be great, we should not underestimate the incredible power we can harness when we come together with common purpose.

In another example, the Interim Chancellor of the University of Missouri compels personal responsibility in response to anti-Asian violence:

Know, too, that when you became a part of these institutions, you also took on a mantle of integrity. It is our responsibility — together, as a family — to steer our universities and our people through good and bad times with empathy, support and respect for all.

In response to a highly covered incident of national significance, presidents catalyzed individual and communal action to overcome the incident. Whiteness as malleable manifests through the urgent nature of these calls to action made after a critical violent incident rather than to address persistent structural racism. In other words, universities were able to ignore growing concerns of anti-Asian racism through the beginning of the pandemic as this was the first time many of these leaders addressed anti-Asian hate (Soltis, 2024). The pressure resulting from the shootings in Atlanta created conditions where it was advantageous for universities to urgently address anti-Asian racism. These urgent calls made commitments to equity and justice, reinforcing institutional values, but rarely included concrete action steps. Further, the calls placed responsibility on

individuals in the community, compelling students, staff, and faculty to invest in certain behaviors to promote an image of inclusion.

To guide what community members should do, statements included resources to both help educate the community about anti-Asian racism and support the targeted communities. For example, the Chancellor of the University of Illinois shared:

If you experience an incident of bias or discrimination in our community, please report it to the Bias Assessment and Response Team...Additionally, the Asian American Cultural Center will be hosting a workshop on how to intervene to stop anti-Asian American harassment and xenophobia.

Often the resources shared already existed prior to the incident, such as counseling services, bias reporting, or a multicultural office. If a new resource was created as a part of the response, it took the form of an isolated event (e.g., a listening session or workshop) or heavily involved in bureaucratic processes (e.g., a diversity task force). Further, many of the offered programmatic resources relied on racialized labor. In other words, Asian staff, faculty, or student groups were the organizers or presenters of the offered program. The types of resources shared aimed to quell discontent within campus communities and promised a better future if individuals accessed the offered resources.

Presidential Speech as Future-Making

Statements analyzed in this study constructed futures to imagine a campus, nation, and world without racism, xenophobia, and racialized violence. Often, this came at the end of statements, juxtaposing the present reality with an ideal future. For example, the president of Northwestern University concludes their statement by proclaiming:

Our world remains in a precarious state; each new day seemingly brings new variations on age-old expressions of intolerance and hatred. Yet we resolve to continue working toward building a society in which all people, from all backgrounds, are protected and valued. This, we know, is simply fundamental to our mission as a university.

In this statement, the president acknowledges the racialized violence currently happening but imagines a future without violence. However, through future-making, universities maneuver swiftly away from the present violence to offer a more palatable future. Rhetorically, this separates the university from the discrete incident of racialized violence while positioning the university as a place where an equitable future is actualized, thereby justifying the existence of the university itself.

Connecting this future to the fundamental mission of the university compels investment in university structures, policies, and processes that are designed to give the appearance of equity and inclusion but often are disconnected from the rhetoric deployed. For example, this statement calls for a society valuing all people, rather than specifically addressing the targeted communities. The framing of a better future for all people diminishes the focus on anti-Asian racism. Thus, universities can account for the discontent within Asian communities on campus but only take actions that align with the rhetoric of equality for all.

Additionally, presidential rhetoric had an urgent need to move forward from the incident of racialized violence. The president of Washington University in St. Louis takes

time to acknowledge the tragedy of the shootings but then urges the community to continue forward:

Friends and colleagues, while today we take time to mourn, tomorrow we must continue on our journey forward — together. While the path ahead might still be long, let us use this moment of grief to recommit ourselves to the work ahead and using this community to model for others what the journey toward greater understanding, equity, and inclusion can look like.

While acknowledging the present incident, statements largely deflected or moved past the pain, grief, and anger within the targeted community to focus on an imagined future. In line with a rigid and linear conception of temporality, university leaders were concerned with moving forward, discounting how grief and healing within a community are not linear processes. The promise of an equitable future aims to appease the targeted community while pushing to return to “business as usual.” Statements made new commitments or re-commitments to the targeted community and to the entire campus community, reinforcing whiteness as aspiration (i.e., the image of an equitable university). However, commitments were not accompanied with long-term plans of actions or material investment in Asian communities.

Discussion

This study aimed to illuminate how presidential rhetoric in response to anti-Asian violence invoked whiteness as futurity. My findings show how statements in response to anti-Asian violence used history to show present solidarity with the targeted community and progress towards social justice, created a sense of urgency to act in the present, and positioned a future orientation to imagine a world free from racialized violence. This section will discuss how the three themes from the findings implicate whiteness as aspiration, whiteness as investment, and whiteness as malleable.

Whiteness as Aspiration

Whiteness as aspiration describes how Western universities define the legitimate futures of higher education, dictating to what others should aspire (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). The goal of maintaining an image of a diverse and inclusive university was clear in the responses from AAU institutional members to anti-Asian violence. Adopting the language of DEI, presidential rhetoric references institutional values and inclusive histories to imagine a future where the campus, society, and world are free from racialized violence. DEI language has proliferated throughout the higher educational organizational field, embedded not only in statements addressing racialized incidents, but in university mission statements, values, strategic plans, and everyday marketing (Ahmed, 2012; Strunk et al., 2020). The “equitable” university has become a legitimate future of higher education institutions to maintain the image of an inclusive university and demonstrate educational excellence while simultaneously upholding the dominant ideology of whiteness (see Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022).

Accordingly, the imagined futures shared by university presidents embody the rhetoric and image of an equitable university. The promise of a more equitable future for all students and a world without racialized violence functions to quell discontent and activist movements (Cho, 2018). However, promises and commitments in these statements fail to prevent future racialized incidents (Ahmed, 2012). Whiteness as aspiration prioritizes the façade of inclusion— “world-class” universities only need to commit to inclusion through their imagined futures (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022).

Whether or not the imagined future is achieved has little to no consequence for white students, staff, and faculty. Thus, in the face of increasing concerns of racism and the aftermath of future racialized incidents, universities can refer back to their previous commitments to demonstrate an inclusive and equitable past and future (Ahmed, 2012).

Whiteness as Investment

Whiteness as investment creates conditions that force individuals and organizations to invest in whiteness (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). Invoking a present future (see Clegg, 2010) places responsibilities on individual actors, compelling them to engage in specific behaviors in order to actualize that future. For example, members of the university are expected to report acts of racism through a preestablished bias-reporting process. This emphasis on preexisting resources to support the campus community sends a message that the university can address racialized incidents and maintain an inclusive community if only individuals utilized the resources offered. In other words, the cause of racism itself is not the fault of the university but rather individuals who do not engage with programming, reporting, and other services—to prevent anti-Asian racism, anti-Asian incidents must be reported. Accordingly, universities can maintain whiteness as aspiration (i.e., the image of an inclusive university) through compelling whiteness as investment.

Additionally, new resources shared through statements relied on racialized labor. The university shapes the agency of people of color by dictating how they can use their time (Ray, 2019). To address anti-Asian racism and violence during the pandemic, Asian students, staff, and faculty became “unofficial diversity practitioners” (Ahmed, 2012; Squire, 2017) to host educational programs, listening spaces, candlelight vigils, and more. Asian staff and faculty may feel like they need to do “diversity work” due to their own lived experiences in the institution and observing how the university defers responsibility (Squire, 2017) to address the needs Asian students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, institutional leaders may have asked or required Asian staff and faculty to host programmatic efforts or join committees based on their minoritized racial status (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019). The reliance on Asian labor absolves the university from needing to address interpersonal and structural issues (Cole & Harper, 2017; Patton, 2016). Thus, the racialization of labor in the aftermath of the Atlanta shooting dictated how Asian individuals spent their time.

Whiteness as Malleable

Whiteness as malleable demonstrates how whiteness is positioned as “in reach” for non-white subjects and adapts to local conditions to appease discontent (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). My analysis confirms how university rhetoric uses an imagined future in this way, juxtaposing historical inclusion of Asian people, the present reality of racial violence, and a future post-race utopia. The strategic use of history showed progress for equity and social justice, positioning the university as a site of present and future liberation, rather than a site of ongoing violence (Stein, 2022). Referencing history that demonstrates inclusion, support, and excellence of Asian students proliferates an ahistorical picture of anti-Asian bias and discrimination in higher education (Museus, 2013). Thus, statements position whiteness as in proximity for Asian communities when in reality, Asian people in the academy can never fully benefit from white privilege.

The way statements constructed imagined futures showcases the malleability of whiteness. University leaders are expected to respond to racialized incidents both

locally and nationally (e.g., Davis & Harris, 2016; Garcia et al., 2020). While originally a practice to disrupt normalized racism, responses to racialized incidents have homogenized across the higher education organizational field, becoming a non-performative (Soltis, 2024; Squire et al., 2019). The result demonstrates how a formally disruptive practice has adapted to protect institutional status quos, promising that inclusion and equity is within reach for non-white subjects. Therefore, presidential future-making of a post-race utopia is an exercise in race-evasion, shirking complicity in the reproduction of racial inequities.

Implications and Conclusion

There are numerous implications that resulted from this study. Presidential speech in response to racialized violence has influence on the higher education organizational field and global imaginary. University leaders should reconsider the practice of releasing statements in response to racialized incidents and how the normalized form of statements implicate whiteness as futurity rather than supporting targeted communities. While this research examined a subset of university leaders, future research should consider how other constituents (e.g., student organizations or alumni groups) and leaders at other institutional types (e.g., community colleges or minority-serving institutions) address racialized violence. However, I do not suggest we abandon this practice altogether—university leaders need to delegitimize racialized incidents as diametrically opposed to the values of higher education institutions (see Bowman & Gelber, 2021). However, rhetoric denouncing racism alone does not bring about change (Ahmed, 2012). Consequently, university leaders need to consider the congruity between their commitments in written statements and policies and practices within the university.

When responding to racialized incidents, university leaders should consider how they can invest in the targeted community instead of compelling individuals to invest in whiteness. The sense of urgency conveyed by presidential rhetoric to address anti-Asian violence focused on individuals doing their part to “solve” racism. Focusing on individuals diffuses responsibility to address persistent racism (Ahmed, 2012) and consequently decouples commitments to equity from institutional structures (Squire et al., 2019). Similarly, offering preexisting resources such as counseling services and bias reporting processes does little to change the structure of the university and functions to appease community members and quell discontent (Cho, 2018). Thus, university leaders can give the perception of change while still dictating behaviors that invest in whiteness as futurity.

Instead, university leaders can actualize commitments made in their response statements by committing material resources to supporting Asian students, staff, and faculty on campus (see Choi et al., 2021). For example, in addition to sharing preexisting support resources, university leaders could commit financial resources and a strategic plan to hire and retain more Asian faculty and staff. Diversifying the faculty and staff could be achieved through the transparent rewriting of job descriptions, creation of positions in multicultural centers specifically to support Asian students, and the creation or expansion of ethnic studies programs with allocations for tenure-track faculty. Material investment into the targeted community is critical to proactively prevent the non-performativity of responses to racialized incidents (Ahmed, 2012). Future

research should examine how university leaders actualize and invest in commitments made in their response statements.

Finally, future-making needs to be a collaborative effort with the targeted community. Institutional leaders should proactively work with minoritized communities on campus to address embedded structural inequities instead of waiting for a critical racialized incident. In particular, Asian communities need to be centered as the spread of COVID-19 remains prevalent throughout the United States with sustained dialogue and partnership. Universities should resist the urge to move back to “business as usual,” conceptualizing the racialized incident within a linear temporality. Thus, to address lasting impacts of pandemic-related racism, university leaders should unsettle the linear conception of grief and healing from racialized violence—the disruption of linear temporalities requires an understanding of the impact of everyday anti-Asian racism and prioritization of flexibility in policies and processes to account for the various ways and temporalities in which individuals and communities heal. Accordingly, coalitions of minoritized communities can imagine a radically different future for justice and liberation in higher education.

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