Performing Postracialism

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This chapter considers some of the particular ways in which antiblackness takes shape institutionally at universities. By examining institutional responses to blackface as expressed by university administrators in our interviews with them, we were able to identify the discourses that organize these responses and that, more broadly, perpetuate antiblack structures. Among these discourses, I am particularly interested in what I will call the pedagogical imperative, which administrators present as the rationale for the tenor of their responses. Though the pedagogical imperative is advanced and enacted by university administrators and offices that claim to value “equity, diversity and inclusion,” and even by some offices that oversee university equity and diversity mandates, I argue that the pedagogical imperative is ultimately an outgrowth of what I contended in Chapter 5 is the university’s role as an educational institution that produces whiteness through antiblackness and coloniality. The commitment of such institutions is to produce ostensibly progressive, postracialist, white Canadian leaders from its students. This mandate returns emphatically in the service of students who have become involved in what the administration largely sees as innocuous forms of antiblackness such as blackface that, because of Black people’s protests, could derail their otherwise sure paths to leadership. These priorities necessarily involve constructing Black reactions to blackface as outrageous and requiring attenuation, resulting in the institutional disregard of Black members of the university and their interests in these circumstances. The chapter ends with a meditation on Black anger, and proceeds to imagine what institutional responses might look like if conceived through a commitment to take Black indignation seriously, and to eradicate Black suffering.
Presuming Ignorance

Chapter 5 argued that the Canadian university context fosters blackface, but that the university prefers to understand blackface incidents as coming from uncultivated new students who have not (yet) embraced the university’s values. This preferred view seeks to make the university innocent by displacing antiblackness onto the bodies of incoming individuals with inexplicable values who are to be understood as unlike the enlightened people who more properly characterize the university.

Nevertheless, having thus absolved the university, the administrative response is wont to extend the story of innocence further by making blackface perpetrators ignorant. This presumption that perpetrators are simply oblivious was central to how every administrator we interviewed, without exception, explained their institution’s response to blackface. For example, an administrator at University 2 says:

In retrospect we probably should have come out a little more strongly at the beginning to denounce this. On the other hand, we just felt that it was kids being stupid, that there wasn’t an underlying aspect of racism … I do believe they just didn’t think it was anything other than funny.

An administrator at University 4 makes the same presumption:

Me, I think it’s ignorance. That’s for sure. I think there is a lack of sensitivity also. … We are talking about young people who are eighteen, nineteen years old who on this point were particularly ignorant. So this was an opportunity to educate them.

What is striking here is the way in which both these administrators move seamlessly from what they would prefer to think about the blackface perpetrators towards asserting their certitude that what they wish to believe is, in fact, the case. This is an active task directing their psychic energies towards a particular reading. As the University 2 administrator continues to justify their university’s response, we learn more about the process of this methodical psychic work. When asked about their first reactions after a blackface incident, they said:

Well, first of all, I think you hope that when you have an incident like that it truly is based on ignorance – that the individuals involved really just didn’t stop to think about the impact it would have. And you, and you truly hope that this was not in fact racism – that they knew it was
The repetition of what they hope, indeed what they truly hope, what they make a deliberate effort to believe, the way it all eventually turns into a prayer, and the way this disposition is shared, together represent the layered process by which administrators doggedly will the perpetrators to be innocent. This process includes filling in details about the incident (for example, “no doubt they’d been drinking”) to support their presumptions before ever speaking to those involved.

These presumptions are related to the logic and vigour (or lack thereof) of the universities’ responses. As we see above, the University 2 administrator attributes an institutional response they admit was inadequate to the presumption of the perpetrators’ innocence, while the University 4 administrator indicates that this presumption directed them towards an “educational” response.

It is important to clarify that my goal here is not somehow the inverse of the administrators’ – that is, to insist on the perpetrators’ lack of innocence. While it is unlikely that the perpetrators had no idea whatsoever that their blackface humour was risqué and would have caused offence, it is also beside the point. We have already seen that antiblackness is deeply embedded in Canadian national narratives and profoundly constitutive of white humour and pleasure (Chapter 2) and that the university itself is implicated in the production of blackface (Chapter 5). Therefore, to participate in the project of simply assigning individual blame would be to participate in, and settle for, the tactics typical of the university, which divert attention from institutional, societal, and systemic antiblackness and militate against change at those levels. Instead, my goal is to highlight the discourses and structural logics that produces universities’ typical, unproductive, responses to blackface, and that renders more nuanced responses impossible. Where administrators so enthusiastically embrace the notion of idiosyncratic naivete located in random ignorant individuals, it is no surprise that the institutional response is driven by what I will call the pedagogical imperative.
The Pedagogical Imperative

The pedagogical imperative refers to the overdetermined ways in which the universities in this study, as educational institutions, claimed to be duty-bound in the wake of blackface incidents to respond with narrowly conceived educational efforts. This sense of obligation is clear from the words of a University 5 administrator:

This is a university. This is a teaching institution. And one of the reasons that the students are here is that they don’t know that [i.e., that blackface is provocative] already. They are here to learn, and we are here to provide an environment in which they can learn as safely as possible. (U5A1)

Similarly, a University 4 administrator explains: “For us, it was clear right off the bat: in the short term, it’s crisis management, but in the direction of education, not in the direction of punishment. So, on that we were very firm” (U4A2). A University 3 administrator says: “I am really mindful of [University 3’s] commitment to restorative justice and learning because I think when it becomes a penalistic, punitive, shaming then we further isolate and alienate our students who most need to learn” (U3A1).

These comments represent the administrators’ tone across the multiple sites of this study. The logic is extremely seductive. How else ought a university respond, if not to educate? However, as I shall argue below, this educational response does not stand on its own but rather is informed by the ways in which universities are positioned within the Canadian settler-colonial nation state and its relationship to Blackness. This context produces the ways in which (1) the pedagogical intervention comes to be seen as one focused on a few misguided individuals; (2) the needs of these individuals, including their ostensible safety (but from what?), become top priority to the disregard of the needs of other students, particularly Black students; and (3) other possible responses that might involve greater accountability – particularly those that make the university accountable – are constructed as punitive, unsafe (for the perpetrators), antithetical to the pedagogical imperative, and therefore to be ruled out. On this, the University 2 administrator tells us more:

There is a sense in which [we can say] that our society doesn’t punish people immediately. Like we do give people a chance to say, “God, I made a terrible mistake. I will never make it again, and don’t throw me out,” kind of thing. And I think that is certainly the kind of approach we would want to take. But we come to universities to be educated. It’s a part of what it’s all about. (U2A1)
This excerpt can only be read as a fantastic, revisionist account of Canadian society and its schools, or at least as a perspective firmly situated in dominant racial and class experiences. It is glaringly disconnected from the experiences of Black people (as well as of Indigenous, racialized, poor, and migrant people in all their intersections) who are constantly under surveillance, punished, and incarcerated without even necessarily having made a “mistake.” Therefore, in relief, it shows us the way in which an ethic of latitude and opportunity for reform comes to the fore when particular groups (by which I mean largely those who are white, middle class, and often, but not exclusively, male) offend, and particularly when those harmed by their offences are not bourgeois white people (by which I mean usually Black, Indigenous, and racialized people, but also often those who are women, sexual and gender minorities, and/or people with disabilities of all racial locations). The pedagogical imperative is thus laid bare as one constituted of this ethic. It seeks to give perpetrators an opportunity to “return” to innocence from racial offence. The University 3 administrator adds more about the urgency of this pedagogical imperative:

When it becomes a penalistic, punitive, shaming then we further isolate and alienate our students who most need to learn. So by empowering them to say, “Yes, we didn’t make a good choice, [it] wasn’t our intention” – which often in my experience [it] has not been their intention to have the impact that it has had – and to work with them to make sure they are better educated and more aware so that they can be better leaders and role models and further educate the people that they are connected with in their networks to avoid similar mistakes. So that has been the approach. (U3A1)

The pedagogical imperative, then, becomes a way of producing the white innocence that has already been presumed. Notably, it is not a mechanism for assigning individualized innocence contingent upon an examination of the particulars of the situation. Rather, it is the mechanism by which to operationalize a broad presumption of racial innocence, independent of the details but based primarily on the (often male) perpetrators’ whiteness.

Particularly troubling is the way in which, despite their behaviour – whether deliberate or naive – these white perpetrators are positioned as always already leaders whose paths to being recognized as such are at risk of being derailed by an ostensibly trivial incident. The pedagogical intervention, then, and its project of redeeming blackface perpetrators as innocent, responds to what is perceived as a pressing need to
reconfirm white students in their presupposed status as leaders. The interests of perpetrators become quickly prioritized, making them those “who most need to learn.” Then these interests are met through the pedagogical imperative, which students, after they have benefited from them, will be able to participate in by “further educating the people in their networks [i.e., other ontologically innocent white people] to avoid similar mistakes.” The pedagogical imperative therefore offers a process whereby the perpetrators are able to reclaim their birthright to social power through claiming innocence.

A similar approach was taken in the case of a London, Ontario, police constable who was discovered to have dressed in blackface many years earlier. The London police chief, analogous to university administrators, appeared in media on the constable’s behalf, announcing that she would be required to undergo “racial sensitivity training” but also reconfirming her leadership status and legitimacy as a police officer by stating that she had “in her nearly two years with the force … shown herself to be an excellent police officer and highly engaged in the community” (CBC News, 2018). In a public apology letter, read by the police chief on her behalf, she pledges to take “training on cultural sensitivity, racism, bias stereotypes and the negative impacts of the same” but also to “look for opportunities to participate in internal training of London Police Service members so that other members of the London Police Service may recognize the importance of such a powerful subject” (CBC News, 2018). In this case, as at the universities, the process of confirming innocence and reinstating leadership through the pedagogical imperative is so complete when it is over that the perpetrators become better leaders who can now also claim credentials to teach others about the problems with blackface, “cultural sensitivity, racism,” and so on. The pedagogical imperative allows perpetrators to smoothly transition from being uninformed to being enlightened, and their engagement with antiblackness becomes renarrated through the process as grounds for credible cosmopolitan leadership. Race offenders thereby become race experts in the postracialist state.

The pedagogical imperative, and how it is produced at the university, makes sense within the context of Canada, where national subjectivities take on a particular form. As Thobani (2007, p. 5) explains, in the national imagination the Canadian nation state is understood as possessing particular human qualities, which are then reflected back, in a process Thobani calls exaltation, onto the ideal national subject (always presumed white). Reciprocally, this white subject embodies these characteristics, which come of belonging to the nation. Thobani argues that these exalted human subjects are understood to be hard-working
builders of the nation, who are also “law-abiding … responsible … compassionate, caring, and committed to the values of diversity and multiculturalism” (p. 4) but whose benevolence is at risk of being taken advantage of by Indigenous people and racialized migrants. Institutions within the nation are instrumental in this process of exaltation and the hailing of the national subject (p. 8).

Though Thobani’s framework does not specifically account for the unique location of Black people in relation to Canada, it does make the university’s pedagogical responses to blackface legible. As an institution of the nation state with an educational mandate, the university, I suggest, regards its students as national subjects in the making. The university’s mandate, then, is to bring to full fruition the exalted qualities of these young diamonds in the rough, confirming them as the good, egalitarian subjects they must truly be, and who possess the innocence that comes with these claims. Further, within the context of racial capitalism in the settler state, the university also serves to produce and legitimize as leaders whose ostensible birthright it is to lead the nation, advance its interests, and to police the Indigenous, Black, and racialized others who might contest settler futurity and the racial, antiblack order.

These are the structures that bring the pedagogical imperative so forcefully into play in the wake of blackface incidents. The university sees blackface perpetrators as otherwise innocent (white) Canadian youth caught in a less-than-glamorous moment, and whose true character is threatened by Black people whose protests call into question their suitability as egalitarian, multiculturalist leaders. Yet since blackface is presumed to be nothing more than innocent, individualized youthful ignorance, this threat can easily be addressed through awareness-raising education, in a logic consistent with liberal individualist educational paradigms. Once awareness has been raised, the perpetrators will no longer be ignorant, will presumably not reoffend, and will now be back on track towards assuming their rightful places as products of the more enlightened university community and, more importantly, beyond that as leaders in/of the nation. One can therefore read the pedagogical imperative as a form of reparation and restoration for white perpetrators that propels them further into the privileges of leadership for which they are presumed to be ontologically poised. The pedagogical imperative is dedicated to making presumptive leaders into “better” leaders – “better” because they are assumed to now understand racism, but also have witnessed first-hand how to manage Black others. They are “better,” perversely, in and through their participation in antiblackness.
The Pedagogical Imperative as Disregard of Black People

The pedagogical imperative is only part of the broader ways in which the universities’ antiblack institutional structures serve the interests of whiteness, and therefore become preoccupied with the ostensible needs of white students after blackface incidents. At University 4, an administrator describes the climate at the university and in its student services office just after a blackface incident:

And then there is a bunch of students in distress, meaning that they are scared; they don’t understand anything anymore, and they don’t know what to do. And we have the people who are in student services who are in distress. “What should I do? What should we do? How do we help them? Will we need to have psychologists in?” (U4A1)

In this statement, the students in distress are not, as one might otherwise imagine, Black students who have had to face the violence of blackface. Rather, the student affairs office is overwrought with the needs of the white perpetrators of blackface. The challenge that perpetrators felt to their sense of impunity and entitlement when their very public performance of blackface was identified as antiblackness – the very dissonance that might lead to meaningful learning about antiblackness – is narrated as distress. The perpetrators’ distress then easily becomes the institution’s distress as it rushes to ensure that these white students are supported in managing personal discomfort and the threat to their reputations. The sense of urgency and frenzy with which the university and its services respond in support of the blackface perpetrators is palpable in the excerpt above.

A University 1 administrator describes a similar instance in which student services rushes to support a blackface perpetrator facing accusations of racism:

You know this person by this point was really upset and putting forward a lot of innocence about not knowing that this was inappropriate and that kind of thing. Because by that time the incident had taken off, and activists on campus had started huge social media campaigns against this person, and had outed them, and were running around campus with posters of them with their name on it. And so the respondent was terrified about what was taking place and felt that of course they were being hard done by – that kind of thing. Mind you, the way people found out about it was because [the perpetrator] had brazenly posted the picture on their own Facebook page. But it was getting out of hand from their perspective.
So ... we spoke to them about what blackface was and what it symbolized, and how it affected people. So that is typical for our office. It wasn't enough for example, for the activist community that was involved in dealing with it, and so they found their own means of dealing with it. But that's what we did in that particular case. (U1A3)

In this instance, the perpetrator repositioned themself as victim, and sought out the support of this student services office. The office obliged, directing its resources to serving and assuaging this person who had, in fact, perpetrated antiblackness. The evident corollary is that it did not meet the needs of Black students, who in this excerpt remain deeply unsatisfied with the university’s response.

That this office took on the needs of white students while failing to respond to the needs of Black students becomes more poignant when we consider that this particular office at University 1 has an explicit equity mandate and, like similar offices at many universities, nominally exists to address the needs of racialized and other students from marginalized groups. Yet, as part of the institutional structure of the university, it is unable to resist prioritizing white perpetrators’ needs after a racist incident, when one would suppose that its services should rather support racialized students harmed by the incident. Nonetheless, as this administrator tells us, this kind of response is typical of their office.

To be fair, this redirecting of equity services does not go unchallenged even within these offices. In some instances, the staff within these offices included people from historically oppressed groups – including Black and racialized people – who in their conversations with us were cautiously critical of the way this institutional dynamic structured their work. They recognized the ways in which these “restorative justice” measures were not at all that. Universities via their administrators generally claimed in our interviews to be supportive of Black students in the context of blackface. However, the ways in which they describe what actually happens on the ground suggest that whatever concern the university might claim to have about Black distress gets completely displaced by concerns about ostensible white distress. Ultimately, this

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1 All the offices in which the administrators we spoke to worked declare commitments to equity and diversity. This office at University 1 is only different to the extent that its name and mandate claim to be explicitly committed to equity.

2 In at least one instance, Black and racialized people in these offices were actually prohibited by their white supervisors from speaking with us.
translates into a disregard for Black people’s welfare, and a structurally produced indisposition to identify and respond to Black suffering. More importantly, it reveals the ways in which the liberal logics that undergird “equity” projects at universities default to antiblackness, and certainly do not envision Black freedom (Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019, p. 94). That Black people, given the university’s abdication of responsibility, have to take things into their own hands if they want to see anything done is not understood as compounding Black suffering. And should Black students’ interventions at this point take unfortunate directions (which the administrator implies may have happened at University 1, though I found no evidence of it in my research), this is often understood through the lenses of rule-breaking and aggression, rather than as a function of Black students’ distress and the inadequate support available to them.

But of course Black people are distressed by blackface, and this distress is exacerbated by the universities’ missing or inadequate responses. Jackie, a Black faculty member, describes what this looked like at University 2 after a blackface incident:

The Black students on campus … were fairly disturbed about it … The university administration was asked to respond. It was brought to their attention. I don’t believe any response was forthcoming … my memory is that the University itself never came out with a very clear and strong categorical statement rejecting blackface, talking about the need for inclusion, et cetera, et cetera … You really could have gotten a sense of the real despair and anger on the part of Black students and their allies … I don’t think the university spoke out or took the lead on this as you would imagine they should if they are advocating on behalf of students, faculty, and staff who have experienced or been injured by incidents of racism. (U2F1)

When we cross-referenced these remarks, we discovered that, indeed, the university never made a public statement condemning the blackface incident, nor did it express any commitment to foster an equitable climate for Black students. But this kind of statement appears to be what Black students across the sites in this study expected from their institutions. Miremba at University 1 has this expectation, and expresses disappointment in her university administration’s failure to come forward:

There’s not that environment where someone would go to the administration and say, okay, this and this happened. I feel like that space hasn’t been created by the administration. And even when [a racist incident] happens, I feel like there’s this idea that because we’re a minority it doesn’t warrant
Miremba feels her university makes no effort to be attentive to the concerns of Black students. For her, the university’s disregard of Black people is reflected in its refusal to make even nominal statements that express disapproval of blackface.

The reluctance to categorically and publicly denounce blackface in partial response to the demands of Black students is directly related to the duty the university feels to white perpetrators and the resulting pedagogical imperative. So, for example, when we asked one administrator to comment on their refusal to issue a statement, they told us:

This is a really awkward position for me to be in because I would like to have the message that these types of events do not line up with the values at our university. And we are really pleased to be working with the students engaged in learning to mitigate this happening in the future. But I don’t want to go on record to say all the reasons why these students screwed up, because I need them to work with me to make it better and I’m going to have more success at that if they don’t feel like I’m throwing them under the bus in public. (university number withheld to maintain confidentiality)

This administrator displays that they are most invested in, and most proud of, the pedagogical imperative – the fact that they are “working with the students engaged in learning” – and therefore that, for them, making a statement that condemns the incident (which of course need not mean condemning the perpetrators) cannot happen because it would ostensibly interfere with the pedagogical imperative. In the end, this university also never made a statement, though in the events surrounding this incident the perpetrators repeatedly pushed back in public to insist that what they had done was reasonable and should have been allowed to continue – a context of which the administrator was fully aware. With the reputation of the university at stake because of the complaints of vocal alumni, this administrator did, however, follow through with sanctions aimed at the offending students.

At University 2, an administrator similarly resists a public statement, saying:

So yes, we [administrators] agreed [in private meetings with Black people on campus] it was racist. So then the question is, “Okay, what do you do
by coming out and saying, ‘Well that was racist’ and whatever?’ The kids knew when they were told about it; they apologized profusely. They realized they really screwed up here and that indeed what they had done was racist. They got it. They understood that. So do you make it more than that, when the students themselves truly understood after they had been given quite a lot of talking to about why this was so inappropriate?

Here again, with a focus so squarely and exclusively upon what individual perpetrators are learning, the university disregards Black people’s calls for it to affirm its nominal commitment to fostering a campus climate that is equitable. For them, all the necessary work is done if the perpetrators (and apparently only the perpetrators) “get it.” To go further to make a public statement that would reach a broader audience and announce the disapproval of blackface would, that university claims in private, be overkill. Furthermore, in this instance, the apologies that the perpetrators are said to have made were apparently made to the administration behind closed doors, if at all. The university never required the perpetrators to apologize to Black people on campus, either in person or in writing, publicly or in private.

Most would agree that blackface is towards the lower end of the scale of the always egregious kinds of antiblack violence that Black people routinely experience at the university. As Donovan suggested to us in the previous chapter, it is a topic on which individual white persons can, at little cost to themselves or the status quo, make a good show of being anti-racist. I am therefore not positing these kinds of statements, despite students’ desires for them, as an adequate or sufficient response to blackface and antiblackness. Nevertheless, that it is as difficult as it is to get universities to make categorical statements denouncing blackface seems to gesture towards the fundamental ways that Canadian universities exclude Black people by default. It is a manifestation of the foundational contradiction for Canadian universities as educational institutions within an antiblack, settler-colonial nation state. How will they denounce antiblackness while they are charged with teaching white students to know Canada as innocent, and to know themselves as exalted, rational, egalitarian Canadian leaders in relief against Black, Indigenous, and other racialized persons?

**Attenuating Black Anger**

The university administration’s approach to Black people after blackface incidents is not limited to disregard. Indeed, above where administrators at Universities 1, 3, and 5 speak about frightened perpetrators and
providing “safe places to learn,” they take up the discourse of safety in its usual antiblack expressions, requiring that we attend to whose safety is being considered and at whose expense. In this instance, it is clear that Black people subjected to blackface are illegible to the university’s systems as those who might be in distress, and are not understood as those whose safety the university should guarantee. Rather, Black people are understood as potentially violent aggressors who cause distress and unsafety for innocent white perpetrators.

Ultimately, then, Black people or the presence of Black people, rather than antiblackness, becomes the problem that must be solved. This logic is evident in administrators’ understandings of where the problem with blackface starts. A University 2 administrator tells us:

When I was growing up, a long, long time ago, we had minstrel shows on TV. Like it was – and people loved it – on public television! You watched blackface singing and dancing. So if kids grow up in parts of this province where their families may also have lived through experiences like that without ever, ever understanding that that actually is racist ... We’re pretty sophisticated communities in universities, and we’re also in incredibly diverse areas. And it does lead to you having a deeper understanding of the impact of something on others, which doesn’t occur if you go to other parts of Canada. You do not see racialized groups walking on the sidewalks [there]. ... So if you have grown up where there may have been very, very few racialized students in your class ... it’s not surprising to me that indeed kids have never been exposed to the impact of their behaviour before. I’m sure in some communities in Canada if somebody dressed in blackface nobody would care, right? ... Here it matters, and part of our job is to explain why it matters.

Though this administrator now claims to understand that blackface is a problem, and that it should be discouraged in a “diverse area” like their university, their identification with a moment and a space where blackface was accepted as just harmless fun, juxtaposed with their understanding of where blackface “matters,” displays an underlying logic that makes the presence of Black and other racialized people the source of the problem. Since there are (presumably white) communities past and present where no one would find anything wrong with blackface, embedded antiblackness becomes innocent ignorance. The problem is not understood to be Canada’s default antiblackness across its expanse, nor is it understood to be that in the absence of Black people this antiblackness goes unchallenged. Blackface (only) becomes a problem “here” in a “diverse area” because Black people are “here.” If we
weren’t, apparently there would be no need for intervention. Therefore Black presence and Black responses to antiblackness are what produce racial conflict.

The onus is then apparently on Black people at the university to commiserate with blackface perpetrators who are presumed to be hailing from these white areas where antiblackness is normative, while other people learn at their expense. Apparently Black people should likewise be patient with the universities’ deficient responses that flow from rushing to protect, create safety for, and recuperate whiteness. Problems only arise where Black people are not willing to be “understanding” in this way. The University 2 administrator demonstrates this disposition where they say:

Our [Black] community, though, were not thrilled. They felt that we did not respond as promptly or as vigorously as we should have done and so we did get a fair number of complaints … And so as [an administrator], I had to endure – and I think that is probably the right word – a number of quite heated and difficult discussions with individuals who came to see us and discuss their deep concern…. In retrospect … we probably should have come out a little more strongly at the beginning to denounce this. On the other hand we just felt that it was kids being stupid, that there wasn’t an underlying aspect of racism.

This administrator communicates that they consider Black people themselves to be unreasonable by stressing that dealing with Black concerns was a burden to be “endured” (a choice of term they emphasized) rather than, say, a moral obligation flowing from an institutional commitment to equity. Black people are constructed as heated or angry – even violent. They cause fear, and therefore this anger must be attenuated – either by the Black people themselves, or by the administration.

An administrator at University 5 also represents this demand on Black people to tolerate antiblackness and attenuate their anger, as they reflect on the conversations on their campus after a blackface incident:

So I can be angry and outraged about someone’s behaviour or their actions or their discourse but if I approach them with that anger forward then I am encouraging them to harden their position. If I hold that anger and I assume that until I have evidence of the contrary that they are not malicious in what they are doing and I ask them, “Why are you doing that?” or “Here is my position on this. What is your position?” If I tell them there is a problem here and here is why I think it’s a problem and here is how I think you can be part of the solution, in the vast majority of cases I find,
and I think you will find, that people are on board with being part of the solution. ... So yes, that outrage ... motivates my approach to them but it can’t define my approach to them.

As this administrator presumes to place themself in Black people’s shoes, their message can be read as a call for a particular kind of civility – where being “civil” places deeply antiblack demands on the Black person to ignore the socially embedded antiblack foundations that make a blackface act possible in the first place, and therefore to withhold outrage in the interest of the pedagogical imperative. It also suggests that if change does not occur, it is because Black people have taken the wrong approach. The institution’s duty to change (if it is to claim to be equitable) is displaced onto Black people.

A version of this call for Black people to attenuate their anger that superficially appears more benevolent, but is equally pernicious, is evident where a University 1 administrator says:

I also support, and try to support, students to have the right to the feelings that they should have around this, and help them sort out how to manage those feelings in a productive way ... who can they talk to to vent about this, as opposed to what often happens, which is what we’re dealing with right now: I may just go on Facebook and talk about this, how awful it was, and how racist this person was. Then it becomes this huge, polarizing, very hurtful explosive thing on Facebook. Which they have a right to do that, but as adults here and trying to help them figure out ... how do you manage that impact in your feelings in a way that doesn’t make you even more unsafe with the choices that you make in terms of dealing with this. And there’s often times this feeling that the university needs to expel them from the university. We can’t expel someone for – You know, and it’s trying to manage messaging without sounding – we’re not minimizing this, but we also have to go through a process where we are giving people the opportunity to learn something from this in a meaningful way. (U1A5)

This administrator claims this response to be one that is protective of Black people. However, it is no less a call for Black people to attenuate their anger in the interest of white perpetrators’ education, and still understands Black people as calling for punitive action rather than for a response that considers their security – indeed their humanity – first, and that then, secondarily, might also be potentially pedagogical.

While as I will argue later, Black anger is in no need of justification under these circumstances, it is worth pointing out the simple fact that in no instance covered by this research were Black people calling for
punitive measures. Rather, in addition to calls they made for public statements from the university, concerning measures that might be focused on individuals, some Black students would have liked to see perpetrators made accountable for their behaviour and for learning in some way. This might be by making a public apology and/or speaking publicly about what they have learned since the incident (such as in a class, a public performance, or a student newspaper). However, most felt responses focused on a few individuals considered exceptional rather than on the university community as a whole were futile. Instead, they called for measures that, in fact, do not or only peripherally involve the perpetrators. Understanding that antiblackness is embedded in the institution and that blackface is in many ways produced by the institution, they called for educational opportunities for the entire university community, and/or they called for institutional change to address the more persistent and less episodic conditions of antiblackness in the university (such as addressing the under-representation of Black faculty, staff, and students and the marginalization of Black knowledge at the university). Together, these broader asks attempt to establish a community norm against blackface, to rupture the denial of antiblackness and systemic racism, and to hold the university accountable for its own antiblackness.

These measures that Black people in the study are calling for can be distinguished from initiatives, which have become more popular in the years since I started investigating blackface, that implement anti-blackface training in first-year orientation activities, in residence halls, or before Halloween. Much like the pedagogical interventions with perpetrators after an incident, these latter initiatives are still based on the construct of the ignorant incoming student who needs to be initiated into the otherwise egalitarian university, and they address blackface as though it can be considered apart from the university’s constitutive antiblackness.

The call to attenuate Black anger and the general disregard of Black people’s reactions to blackface are informed by the illegibility of Black concerns in the national context. This reaction to Black anger is consistent with the terms of the settler-colonial nation state and how Black people are presumed to be located within it. In the settler terms of the Canadian nation state and its exalted subjects, it is white people of British and French ancestry who are industrious, deserving, and benevolent. Under these terms Indigenous people are undeserving because they presumably did and do not know how to make the land productive, and so had nothing to do with making the bustling nation state what it is. Simultaneously, through the active erasure of the long Black presence
in Canada, Black people are always framed solely as recent immigrants (Walcott, 2003b, p. 43) who benefit from the largesse of the nation state and its people, and who are therefore takers and not contributors. If “the only good immigrant [is a] supplicant to the nation” (Thobani, 2007, p. 252), Black critiques of the nation state and its “true citizens” – particularly with respect to antiblackness – are understood as ungrateful, unreasonable, and always asking for more. Under these conditions, what is valued by the state, its institutions, and in dominant discourse is the attenuation of Black anger or indignation, if there is any room for it to exist in the first place. We see an example in the case of former Montreal Canadiens hockey player P.K. Subban. Subban has frequently been the subject of blackface incidents (CBC News, 2015; Petchesky, 2010; QMI Agency, 2014) as well as other expressions of racism. In an instance in which (American) hockey fans tweeted offensive comments containing racist epithets about Subban, a Canadian news reporter, speaking in concert with Subban’s teammates, writes:

“He handles it really well. He’s a professional. He understands that the best way to handle it is to ignore it and to understand that their opinions don’t really mean anything.” … Subban’s self-composure, at least in this context, shows the measure of the man. … “It says a lot about him as a person … The fact he’s able to just shake it off and go along with his life. It doesn’t really affect him too much, and it shouldn’t.” (DiManno, 2014)

The reporter admits that Subban had “every right to be angry” (and perhaps the forthrightness of this claim is not unrelated to the fact that the perpetrators in this case were Americans and not Canadians), but also that Subban himself was mostly silent on the matter, saying only, “I don’t know. It doesn’t even matter.” Whatever his motives in not speaking out – motives that it is reasonable to presume are self-protective – Subban’s attenuation of his anger is highly praised as the fitting response to antiblackness. The reporter concludes that “in Subban’s silence Friday there was a certain eloquence. Yet also, I think, an unspoken sorrow. What can he say?” Indeed, what can Subban say within these constraints that can be heard without risking his reputation as a model Canadian of Black migrant origins? He is lauded for choosing to suffer silently and to attenuate his anger.

The call for the attenuation of Black anger at blackface is not unusual in the context of unequal social relations or in education. Sara Ahmed (2012) reminds us that positioning Black and racialized people as angry in the context of the university serves as a defensive strategy against the accusation of racism by suggestion that we “talk about racism
because we are angry, rather than being angry because of racism” (p. 159). Additionally, in an article exploring the role of emotions in education, Michalinos Zembylas (2007) observes that despite the variety of historical approaches to anger in the West, they all view anger as fundamentally irrational, as dysfunctional, as uncivil, as always needing to be managed, even where anger might be considered justified (pp. 16–17). Drawing on a number of contemporary anger theorists, Zembylas reminds us that anger cannot be understood apart from the nexus of power relations in which it occurs. Zembylas identifies educational initiatives dependent upon calls to manage anger or express it “appropriately” as dominant moves to silence the oppressed in the face of their oppression (pp. 19–20). Thus, whether these calls are unapologetically racist (as with the administrator at University 2) or presumed benevolent (as with one of the administrators at University 1), framing Black anger as a problem needing to be managed is exposed as a pure expression of dominant power in the service of the status quo. The demands made upon Black people to attenuate their anger in the face of injustice are shot through with the politics of antiblackness that make Blackness always the foil against which civility and rationality are defined. This is entirely consistent with the educational mission of the settler-colonial university as discussed in Chapter 5.

Black Anger and Pedagogy

As we have seen from administrator responses above, the anger of those Black members of the university community who object to blackface is read as aggression – distress-causing, fearful, punitive, and as forestalling a particular pedagogy. Black people note the double bind this places them in, as in an instance (not directly related to blackface) in which students had met with administrators at the University of Toronto to demand it collect race-based data about its community. Drawing on one students’ reflections, a Toronto Star article reports:

Barriers remain, including tension between student groups and administrators. “We felt as if they were scared of us. That was the aura in the room,” said Khogali. “That’s problematic if we want to work to implement policies of equity that improve the entire quality of life for everyone in the institution.” (Reynolds, 2016)

Even in this instance where the administration agreed that the labour that Black students were engaging in was an integral intervention for the sake of equity across the board at the university, the students
left the table feeling as though they were seen as little more than aggressors.

But make no mistake: the Black people in this study were definitely angry about blackface, and the broader forms of antiblackness they face in their universities. I make no attempt to claim otherwise. Thus, my concern is with the ways in which university administrators, in their institutional roles, consider Black anger instead of white antiblackness to be the problem to be managed – a corollary to the ways in which they prioritize white innocence over Black distress when offering support. My objective in this final section of the chapter is to consider Black anger on Black terms, and beyond the routine antiblack terms with which it is regarded in the situations I have been describing. I take up the ways in which this Black anger is a pedagogy of its own, and a way to make Black life at university. However, unlike the pedagogical imperative, it does not seek to recuperate whiteness and reify a colonial order. Rather, it is a pedagogy that calls for radical transformation. I conclude by imagining, in the context of blackface, what might happen if universities’ institutional processes could give way to Black anger with a view towards a broader pedagogical project of justice and the eradication of Black suffering.

I open this consideration through Audre Lorde’s meditation on anger. Lorde speaks from her location as a Black lesbian, and so her insight into anger emerges out of a particular set of interlocking experiences with dehumanizing racialized, gendered, and sexualized power structures. Without losing sight of that specificity, we can also apply the principles more broadly to Black identities to the extent that Blackness as a whole is dehumanized and subject to wanton suffering.

In her 1993 chapter “The Uses of Anger” Lorde identifies, without romanticizing, the ways in which her anger as a Black woman has been a way of knowing: of knowing that which is deadly and threatens Black survival (p. 131), of knowing circumstances that would relegate us to the realms of the unhuman (p. 129), and, where necessary, of knowing who her potential allies might be (p. 127). Ultimately, Lorde understands Black anger that moves in this way as love for self and community (see also Zembylas, 2007, p. 23), as survival, and as a way to keep in view the concrete goal of ending Black suffering (p. 132; see also Dumas, 2018). Lorde’s clear point is that Black anger is part of sustaining Black life; it is abandoned at our own peril. This Black anger is politically salient for signalling and contesting injustice, where silence in the face of injustice should be what is considered pathological (p. 129; Zembylas, 2007, p. 25). Lorde asserts, “My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I’m going to be
sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity” (p. 132). Lorde thus identifies Black anger as pedagogical, and as a way of knowing. Black anger, with its associated pedagogy, is a vital component in a project of Black survival, where survival is not just about existing. Black anger envisions Black freedom.

When considered from this vantage point, the institutional negation of Black anger through the call for its attenuation is an injunction against Black freedom, a demand that we not transform the terms of our existence, and a reification of the terms of our unfreedom. These effects are intensified where the demand to attenuate Black anger occurs alongside a demand to prioritize a kind of white learning that reifies postracialist white innocence. Lorde (1993) refuses the ways in which Black anger is legitimized only if it can be considered to be “in the service of other people’s salvation or learning” (p. 132). This, of course, amounts to the kind of instrumentalization of Black being as resource to meet white needs that constitute slavery’s afterlife. In sum, the call to attenuate Black anger and the accompanying pedagogical imperative are antiblack violence!

In the face of such violence we are brought back to Fanon (1961) and the violence that decolonization requires as a response. To understand the kind of Black anger that shows up in the wake of blackface as gesturing towards Black freedom is to identify it as disruptive, though Lorde (1993) distinguishes the disruptiveness of Black anger from the destructive wrath that emanates from hatred (p. 130) and from institutional/colonial power that seeks to annihilate (p. 131). Indeed, such anger is ontologically disruptive of these antiblack colonial structures. Black anger is constitutive of, and constituted by, the disruption of antiblack violence, and it refuses the dehumanization of Black people. Ultimately, then, the kind of Black anger that we see in contexts of blackface is violent on Fanonian terms whereby this violence is that which is necessary to interrupt conditions of colonial domination. And unsurprisingly, this is seen as threatening and unsafe by those who support and are otherwise invested in colonial conditions. Applying Fanon to notions of education and pedagogy, Leonardo and Porter (2010) posit that in contemporary postracialist conditions, the white fear response to Black anger arises not from a fear of physical violence as much as from a fear that attending to Black anger will expose white supremacy as ongoing, embedded into the rhythms of the “normal” life that whites want to understand as egalitarian, and will cause them to discover their deep personal investments in it (p. 150). While I would not so quickly dismiss a white fantasy of physical Black violence, I agree where Leonardo and Porter define the transformative potential of the knowledge produced
by Black anger as “a humanizing form of violence … a pedagogy and politics of disruption that shifts the regime of knowledge about what is ultimately possible as well as desirable” (p. 140).

Where Black anger is accepted on its own terms, where it is not coerced into the service of whiteness but where the pursuit of Black freedom is sufficient, it is also the case that its pedagogical salience reaches beyond what Black people can come to know from it. In other words, there is opportunity for white perpetrators and the university (as community and institution) to learn – paradoxically, where white learning is not the goal. So what might it look like if a university were to be able to sit with the reality of Black anger and engage its pedagogy in the context of blackface?

Such an approach would reject the attenuation of Black anger. Understanding the call for attenuation as a manifestation of the university’s antiblack commitments, it would reject the accustomed appeals to innocence and for safe white learning. It would examine the affective economy under which Black anger with its liberatory potential becomes aggression while the pornotropic antiblack violence of blackface becomes innocent humour. Instead, an approach that takes Black anger seriously might permit perpetrators to face that anger, rather than shielding them from it. Attending to Black anger would allow perpetrators to come to realize their existence as racial beings as they discover that the very foundation of their humour and pleasure is antiblack. This learning might also be made available to the entire campus by way of categorical statements by the university denouncing blackface’s antiblackness in response to the conditions that Black anger makes evident. Instead of addressing blackface in ways that participate in exalting the Canadian national subject (Thobani, 2007), blackface could be read as a site where the claim of this exaltation unravels, and therefore as one site from which to begin the dismantling of accustomed paths in favour of new ones.

And to be clear, such an exchange would not be a problematic airing of black pain for cannibalistic white learning – a dynamic that I have challenged elsewhere (Howard, 2006). Rather, it would be an opportunity to consider a counter-storying of blackface, different from dominant societal interpretations. In my research, I have found that in the absence of a university response in the aftermath of blackface, these kinds of learning settings and teach-ins (with Black people as their primary audience) are normally organized by Black university communities rather than by university administration, and that they produce the most meaningful outcomes for all parties, including perpetrators (see, e.g., Kyei et al., 2009; Powell, 2009).
Zembylas (2007) proposes the value of embracing subaltern anger in producing a form of what he calls “witnessing” – “a collectivised engagement in learning to see differently” and then “a call to action ... as a result of learning to see differently” (p. 26). Seeing differently would mean unsettling the seductive normalized discourses of educational mission, conciliation, and pacification as well as the antiblack foundations upon which they stand, redirecting towards what the university’s pedagogical imperative ought really to be. Where Black anger is not considered something to endure and dismiss, Black anger considered in the context of institutional responses to blackface might be an opportunity for the university to understand its own foundational commitments to antiblackness, and how these are instantiated even through its structures that claim such names as “student services,” “equity,” and “human rights” by way of how it mobilizes its pedagogical mission. It should provoke contemplation of what might really be required to achieve Black freedom in the university, if that is indeed the goal. It should provoke an understanding of serving students that does not always already exclude Black people and make us who these “services” are protecting against. Engaging Black anger will make clear that change is much bigger than just stopping or covering up blackface, but extends to the ways that the university conceives and operationalizes its mission.

Ultimately, taking Black anger seriously puts the university in a place where it has a choice between maintaining its colonial character or engaging an educational agenda that seeks justice, decolonization, and Black freedom. Indeed, such a mode of engagement takes up Walcott and Abdillahi’s (2019, p. 91) provocation of a Black Test: one that evaluates university actions based on whether they make the conditions of Black life better. This, of course, constitutes a thorough upheaval of everything that the university is and has been to date, such that quite simply the university would become unrecognizable in beautiful new ways. Therefore proposing it here joins with other scholars’ call to a radical imagining of a Black future at the university (Dumas, 2018, p. 43). That the university as institution is not currently up to that task is entirely clear (Kelley, 2016b). Whether some university administrators, and indeed other members of the university community, might decide in favour of becoming co-conspirators with Black people and take up this charge to work within and against the university remains to be seen.