

*We stand in solidarity with the Black Student Alliance at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation [BSA+GSAPP] and wholeheartedly support the concerns and demands identified in On the Futility of Listening.*

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# UNLEARNING WHITENESS

*A Statement from the Black Faculty of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation*

We are in the midst of a seachange in attitudes towards race relations in the United States. This precipitous change was ignited by the callous murder of George Floyd, and the recent murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. The devaluation and dehumanization of black life emblematic of these murders has riveted the nation and world, and prompted a profound reconsideration of the symbols, spaces, and institutions that perpetuate racial inequality in American society. Statements and pledges of solidarity have abounded. There is a clarion call for real action to dismantle racist systems, and indeed some of those actions are in their nascent stages. The common thread that diminishes the lives of persons racialized as black and brown is white

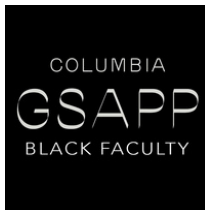


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supremacy, the belief in the superiority of whiteness and those advantaged to access its opportunities. This corrosive force operates systemically and structurally to the profound detriment of all members of society and our collective liberation (including the liberation of white people) is at stake.

GSAPP, as an institution and a community, has pledged its commitment to change, but we must first engage in the hard work of unlearning white supremacy. Fifty years ago there were radical actions undertaken by GSAPP students in architecture and planning inspired by the Black Power and Civil Rights movement. One of those trailblazers, educator/alumni/colleague Dr. Sharon Egretta Sutton has narrated in *When Ivory Towers were Black* how she and classmates forged institutional change, brought Black and Latinx students into the school's disciplines, and initiated community-based design and planning studios that worked with Harlem residents and organizations. And yet by the 1980s those radical pedagogies and curricular changes disappeared within GSAPP as the whiteness of the school's disciplines was reconstituted into new versions of old racist



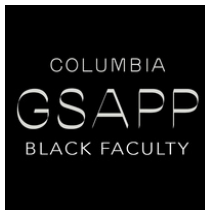
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paradigms, discourses, and practices. It is our belief that unless white supremacy is first, recognized and second, dismantled within this institution, then the goals professed and desired by many of the GSAPP community to eradicate anti-black racism will fail.

We believe that GSAPP should spend the coming academic year 2020-21 understanding anti-black racism through a deep analysis and investigation of whiteness and white supremacy. Faculty, students and staff should work toward understanding how it operates, its historical legacy, and how it is perpetuated in the school across all disciplines and within the culture of the school itself. To this end, we believe that it is not the job of Black faculty and students to explain anti-black racism as a surrogate for interrogating white supremacy. Race must be understood not as a natural occurrence but instead as a modern social construct, one that underpins the European humanism which serves as the very foundation of our respective disciplines extending from Vitruvius to the present.

As author Toni Morrison eloquently stated in a 1993



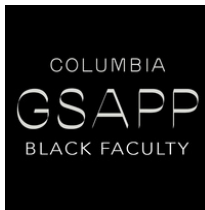
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interview, the practice of racism is a profound neurosis that no one examines for what it is—“it feels crazy, [because] it is crazy.” Hence, it’s important to ask these difficult questions about white supremacy in order to learn what it enables and what it destroys, so that we can become a more equitable and just academic community. Rather than quick-fix solutions, this reckoning will require hard work, committed leadership, and shared goals from all those who make up our school.

To undertake this unlearning process GSAPP shall:

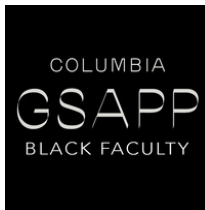
1. Conduct an inventory of the school’s current and past work on race and the built environment and how to make that work more visible and representative of the field and society by the beginning of the fall 2020 semester;
2. Complete an assessment of each program in terms of its complicity with systems of white supremacy —identifying and understanding the work that whiteness does;
3. Develop a set of resources and readings for faculty and students on whiteness and white



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- supremacy;
4. Develop pedagogical approaches and curricular content that no longer advance white supremacist values or practices;
5. Dedicate public programming to stimulate dialogue about whiteness and knowledge of its impact on our disciplines and the school's culture;
6. Allocate the necessary funds to initiate and sustain this effort, which should support those faculty and students engaged in this work, with the understanding that this must also be a school-wide undertaking; this will require support in the form of funding, human resources, decision-making power, and the time/space to achieve tangible outcomes;
7. Use GSAPP's influence and agency to engage and lead in the work beyond the school that is needed in the field and its practices and associations to unlearn and challenge whiteness and white supremacy;
8. Acknowledge and address GSAPP's role in the erasure, exclusion, and marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color's knowledge, work, and voices;



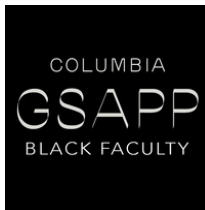
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9. Actively transform the culture of the school into a culture that promotes safe, authentic, transformative care, practices and dialogue while dismantling white supremacist, patriarchal and ableist power dynamics at all levels;
10. Work to break down the barriers between GSAPP and the community, especially Harlem;
11. Make public GSAPP's work on unlearning whiteness at the end of the coming academic year;

Furthermore, we demand that the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation set precise goals for becoming an anti-racist institution. This includes increasing black student enrollment, black faculty and staff, financial support for black students, and pedagogical and curricular changes to each of its programs.

In "Letter From a Region in My Mind" (1962), James Baldwin writes, "It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of



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any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult...Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves.” Yet, racism and white supremacy are not just consigned to America’s troubled history, we must also recognize whiteness as a global product of European and American colonialism and imperialism. As such, it is incumbent upon all GSAPP faculty and students within the global context of Columbia to do the work of unlearning white supremacy and anti-Black racism. Given that we teach, learn and work within an academic institution, in the heart of Harlem, this endeavor should be undertaken in the spirit of an intellectual proposition whose outcomes are not yet known. It will be a project that requires thought and creativity, individual reflection accompanied by collaborative action.

Amina Blacksher

Lance Freeman

Mario Gooden

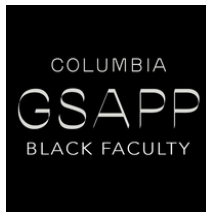
Jerome Haferd

Malo Hutson

Gordon Kipping

Justin Garrett Moore

Mabel O. Wilson



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