

Report on FHHS at the HSS Virtual Meeting, October 10, 2020
“Dismantling White Supremacism,” an HSS Virtual Forum Open Discussion

Over one hundred people joined an Open Discussion at the 2020 HSS Virtual Forum organized by board members of the Forum for the History of the Human Sciences: Laura Stark (Vanderbilt University,) Ayah Nurridin (Johns Hopkins University,) Dana Simmons (U.C. Riverside,) Debbie Weinstein (Brown University) and Jacy Young (Quest University). The objective of the session was to further our collaborative political education, with a focus on the ‘small spaces’, like academic departments, where many of us do our work. Organizers of the Open Discussion sought to leverage our perspectives as historians of the human sciences to explore cultures of White Supremacism as design problems, recognizing that the way many organizations are designed is inherently discriminatory. Allied with efforts to develop cultures of inclusion, this discussion posited that additional (complementary) tactics are necessary to dismantle cultures of White Supremacism, as characterized in Kenneth [Jones and Tema Okun’s “White Supremacy Culture” \(2001\)](#). We conceived of this discussion as an experiment in justice-oriented organization.

The Open Discussion agenda laid out three questions about White Supremacy culture in academia:

1. What are the spaces and processes of gatekeeping? Allied with the concern about who and what is being kept out of the gates, this question focuses on the spaces and practice of gatekeeping.
2. How would our organizations operate, look, and feel if they were to be otherwise? Taking cues from Historians of Science developing speculative methods, this question encourages speculation on what “doing better” concretely and creatively will mean.
3. What skills, resources, and systems of support are needed to redesign organizations? The discussion here may address the Principles and Protocols technique (described in [Adrienne Maree Brown’s *Emergent Strategy*](#)) and consider how to safeguard against burnout and withdrawal if organizational redesign for justice is to be a long-term and ongoing process.

Discussion focused around three main themes: naming things for what they are; doing the work; building and dismantling at the same time.

Naming things for what they are: Several participants emphasized the need to name white supremacy when we find it in our own spaces. A question arose concerning whether to frame the discussion in terms of ‘white supremacy’ or ‘white supremacy’. What work do these words do? On the one hand, ‘supremacy’ is a noun that indicates the enactment of power. On the other hand, ‘supremacy’ might appear academic or theoretical, whereas ‘white supremacy’ may be more legible as a referent for political activism. One contributor cautioned against using ‘solutions’ language in antiracist work. No solution is forthcoming, and ‘solutions talk’ can serve to limit our attention to the immediate moment. Further, participants pointed to the need to name our own exclusions and silences: Who is not in the room as this conversation is happening, given that it is being recorded? Who is speaking and not speaking, and why? Commentators

also urged that a stronger critical analysis of whiteness be a centerpiece of future Open Discussions.

Doing the work: Many participants urged us to focus on material conditions, making institutions inviting and sustainable for work and life. A mindset of scarcity refuses to imagine material change; we must counter with a mindset of abundance. As long as the response to racism in our institutions centers on diversity add-ons, rather than destabilizing power hierarchies, attempts to dismantle white supremacy will fail. Within academic institutions, participants focused attention on jobs, tenure, publication opportunities, fellowships and scholarships. Numbers and diverse representation do matter in that sense, and expanding such opportunities makes a difference. Participants also discussed redistributing material resources, such as graduate funding awards, and the rewards (such as prizes) that interest groups and committees distribute. In discussions of hiring and admission, we must interrupt the language of excellence when it is mobilized in opposition to representation and diversity. One participant shared experience working in a non-academic research organization: Even in a relatively non-hierarchical place, the research team is more likely to be white and the staff more likely to be people of color. The organization is working on locating, naming, and counteracting those hierarchies, by having many difficult conversations, developing antiracist reading groups for all (not just research faculty), and making sure that participants are paid for their time. One participant described intervening in a university naming committee: not just as a symbolic intervention, but also as a lever by which to reveal, publicize and challenge the historical complicity of our institutions with people who promoted white supremacy. Other participants highlighted their roles in local community and political organizations. When we are thinking about our role in dismantling white supremacism, we might try to enter and participate in these local spaces. Always ask: when is it important to leverage expertise to get people in power to respond, and when is it important just to show up and listen? Community organizations and residents often want to create their own oral histories and to have convenient, digitized access to archives. They don't have the time to travel to archives and sift through them. How can historians serve citizen history and citizen social science?

Building and dismantling, at the same time:

Representation - getting people into institutions and positions - is necessary. But participants suggested that it is important to think about how to make those places safe and welcoming so that people will want to enter and remain. Ask: where aren't people doing work because they don't feel comfortable? Anti-black, postcolonial violence is silencing and requires enormous amounts of additional invisible labor on the part of those experiencing this violence. We need to recognize white supremacism as an epistemological problem; for example, by recognizing the intellectual work being done by non-academic staff. With credit to Angelica Ross: if you address the needs of the most marginalized people in your society - e.g. trans women of color - you solve a lot of issues for everybody else. Supporting underrepresented students is a good place to start institutionally. Early career scholars are leading us. Senior scholars need to reorient to follow their lead, and offer labor and resources in support of their goals. We must cede space, listen more than speak, and link our learning to material conditions.

Notes and resources available online on at fhhs.org
Future events will build on this Open Discussion.