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Dark Bird

The Raven Society and White Nationalism

Jacob Bennett

Abstract

Is there a connection between White supremacy and university merit-based honorary societies? In this provocation, I describe my experience in one such honors society at a university that has graduated numerous White supremacists. I contend the history of the school creates a reality in which “merit-based” admissions to any school organization perpetuates White supremacy. In the society I joined, it was my goal to have members reflect on this argument by writing and reading a parody of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*. Mere months after my reading, White supremacists descended onto my university’s town and murdered a White activist while injuring dozens of others. Even after these events, deans at the graduate school I attended seemed unmoved to change the structures of the program to move toward equity. In this article, I ask why.

Introduction

In the winter of 2016, I received a cryptic note to meet at a chapel on my university’s campus at 7:30pm. It told me to knock three times on the door, and wait. It was signed, “Evermore.” Upon arrival, I noticed a group of other students milling about outside. Not being one to jump into things blindly, I decided to take a seat on a bench outside the chapel with a clear vantage point of the front door. One by one, the group began to leave, but another student sheepishly walked to the chapel door and knocked three times. As they stood waiting for a reply, I could

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not help but chuckle at what I felt was extreme pomp and circumstance. A cryptic note, knock three times, evermore. What was I doing?

After waiting with no reply, the student moved from the door and took up a spot close to where I was sitting to also look on at others hoping for entry. One by one, three knocks, no reply. Once the group reached around ten individuals, two people called out to gather outside a residential door close to the university lawn. The door was plexiglass, and behind it was a replica of the quarters from a past resident who enrolled for one term at the university: Edgar Allan Poe. The two leaders pushed back the plexiglass door and invited us all to step inside. Under the light of two soft candles, they welcomed us to the initiation of the Raven Society.

In this provocation, I will use the Raven Society to exemplify the ways White supremacy perpetuates on a university campus. I will show how “merit-based” societies normalize Whiteness through their established admission policies, and connect this sort of normalization to a White supremacist rally held the same town where the Raven Society was established. To fully realize reasons for some community members’ reactions I observed after this rally, the particular history of the university must be understood. I end by recommending ways to work toward structural change within institutions of higher learning to impede the perpetuation of White supremacy.

Merit, Monotony, and Missed Opportunity

Merit and Monotony

The Raven Society was established in 1904 by a student named William McCulley James who believed there was a need for a “merit-based society” within the university. Written in the society’s original constitution, the organization was established to, “bring together the best men in the various departments of the University for mutual acquaintance and for cooperation in their efforts to protect the honor and dignity of the University” (History of the Raven Society, 2018). During our initiation, we all agreed to honor the mission of the society and represent the university and academic achievement with faith and honor.

While not a secret society, the initiation process felt extremely *sub rosa*. After the initial ceremony surrounded by replicas of Poe’s personal belongings, we were shuffled into the rare collections library on campus to be greeted by alumni and other “Ravens” with cheers, heavy hors d’oerves and cocktails. I was excited, and happy to be a part of something that seemed so selective. I found some familiar faces from my teacher education graduate program and began to enjoy a beverage or two as we exchanged stories about our experiences with the cryptic note and ceremony. As I looked around at the society’s members and new inductees, I noticed one thing in particular about most of us: we all seemed to be White. While I cannot be certain being that I did not ask anyone how they identified racially, phenotype alone told me we all shared in a light complexion.

As the induction ceremony began to wane, I could not help but be struck by the overwhelming Whiteness I perceived. This was an academic honor society, meant to bring together “the best” from various departments throughout the university (of which there are 53) and there were no more than a handful of people of color in attendance. I began to wonder how I was selected. Was this based on “merit,” or something else? After some questioning, I found that students were nominated by their peers who were already in the society.

Each semester, Ravens from departments across the university gather to discuss the merits of all those nominated, and vote on a final set of inductees. Becoming familiar with this process made it easier to understand why I perceived the society to be so White. Looking to the previous quote provided on the society’s website, it was designed to bring together the “best men” from around the university. A little history places the overwhelming Whiteness in context.

The first female undergraduates were not admitted to the university until 1970. The first African American male, Gregory Swanson, was not admitted to a graduate program at the university until 1950. He was barred from living on campus, attending any school dances or joining social clubs, and withdrew from the university after his first year (Kreth & Bond, 2017). It is unclear when the first female of color was admitted. Alice Carlotta Jackson became the first African American female to apply to the school in 1935, although her application was denied (Strayhorn, 2006). With such a racial and gender-stratified history, the “merit system” of admission into the society through peer nomination seems to be the reason for my observations of its current state of racial homogeneity. I sought to highlight this reality in one of the first tasks new Ravens must complete.

Missed Opportunity

After paying society dues (another stratifying requirement), new admits are required to write a “parody” of Poe’s (1845) *The Raven*. A group of Raven Society board members are said to review each submission, and then vote on finalists to read their parodies aloud at the Raven Banquet, a black-tie event at the end of each school year. In an email to all new members, the society president explained the following in relation to the parody:

At the banquet, the writer of the best parody (as determined by crowd response) will receive a cash prize of \$500. . . remember your audience; comedic parodies tend to do well. Please note that the parody is a requirement of membership. (Personal Email, 11/18/16, emphasis in original)

I sat down at my computer and decided that rather than going the “comedic” route, this was my chance to have my fellow Ravens reflect on Whiteness. I took directly from Poe’s (1845) poem in terms of length and iambic pentameter, and typed the following written from the perspective of the raven:

I've been asked to share my experience, the way I saw it that night,
 This is not written in jest, not meant to lessen my plight.
 As the cliché goes, there are two sides to every tale,
 But consider how it might have been different, if I were not dark, but pale.

On that evening I implored, to find a place for my soul to shout,
 I drifted along the wind, in hopes of an ally with some clout.
 You see often my life was one of anguish, with no one an ear to lend,
 So on that cold and bleak December night, I pushed passed loneliness and sought out a friend.

In the past I was shunned, people sneered me in disgust,
 They hoped I left them be, often questioned my trust.
 They saw me as a messenger, one coming to lead them away,
 They never let me explain myself, never let me show them my way.

My brothers they've shot down, as they flew from above,
 Superstition gets the better, and they choose fear over love.
 Are we an omen, a sign of worry and despair?
 I hoped someone would listen, allow me to speak through crisp clean air.

So that night I went out, looking for that ally or friend,
 I felt I needed someone odd, who could empathize with a hand to lend.
 And there I saw it, on that crisp clear winter night,
 A door slightly ajar, a man, a bottle, and a soft orange light.

I wrapped once on the door, as to not burst in uninvited,
 My own experience has shown, how that can leave a person feeling slighted.
 He called out, "Sir or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore,
 But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came tapping on my cellar door."
 Hazah! Thought I, a man wise to my plight!
 The smell of liqueur seemed inviting, as it wafted through the crisp air of night.
 Look down! I began to say, and you'll see the visitor you expect,
 But before I could speak I noticed, his eyes sank in disrespect.

"Prophet" he shrilled, "thing of evil, if bird or devil,"
 In his voice I heard his fear, his apprehension on a drastic level.
 "Here we are again," is the thought I had in my mind,
 My appearance created an outcome, association with death as shrine.

Why must this be, this creation of effect?
 It seems he is just like all others, quick to judge, but not reflect.
 For my brothers hunted from the sky found this to be the truth,
 Each assailant was quick to judge, with or without the burden of proof.

An unfortunate amount of years this has been my family's plight,
 We've never been able to choose our label, but labeled based on what's deemed
 "right." As if the race began equal, and my choices are the same,
 Doves, swans, snowy owls, I don't ever hear them complain.

I wonder if I were them, and came wrapping on this man's door,
 Would he have had this same reaction, full of fear, abhor.

Would he have opened with a smile, ready to listen and chat,
 "Come in," he might have said, rather than screaming devil, treating me as a rat.
 So I sat, I stood still and watched his distress,
 He saw my shadow, and I could sense his duress.
 This is my life as a Raven, with my darkness creating no light,
 I wish he would stop and think about my experience, never a jovial invite.

"Nevermore!" I shouted, with gusto and force,
 "Nevermore!" I shouted, with a tinge of remorse.
 "Nevermore!" is all I could think to say,
 How would you feel if this was your life, each hour, each day?

I shouldn't have to pine to be that dove, that snowy owl or gull,
 My darkness should be my asset, my strength not my fall.
 So now I question, should I surround myself with others who look and see like me,
 Or should I continue to search for that ally, one who might not judge, and let me be me.

It is a two-way street, I do admit to that,
 Even though I expect respect, I as well have to give that back.
 But I came to that cellar door with just that in mind,
 And the outcome was the same, a quick judgment, so let's rewind.

My life may be different from yours, I hope that you can agree,
 But the solution is not to pretend, my color you can't see.
 My color is my strength, it provides me wisdom of experience,
 All I ask is you realize, how yours controls pomp and circumstance.

So we should all shout, from the rafters and the hills,
 Nevermore! Nevermore! We have to be conscious of our ills.

And that's why I sat, on the pallid bust above that man's door,
 Looking down upon him, my shadow stretched across the floor.

I was waiting for him to act, to stop shouting and become calm,
 And here still I wait, hoping for my solace before long.

I hoped those who read my poem would be emotionally moved by its painful truth regarding the normalization of Whiteness. I also hoped they might begin to consider our role as members of an honors society in the perpetuation of White supremacy on our campus.

To my surprise, my poem was selected to be read as one of the finalists at the annual banquet, which took place in a large gymnasium across the street from the University Alumni Hall. The event was touted as the largest in society history in terms of attendance. Prior to dinner, Ravens new and old were invited to an open-bar happy hour. Dinner was set to begin with the parody competition taking place during the latter portion of the event.

As the dinner ended, the society president arose in her formal attire to invite the parody finalists forward to read. The first finalists took the advice of the president and read their humorous compositions full of raunchy and sexual innuendos. It

seemed she was right in her recommendation in that the crowd was raucous in their response to each. As I stepped up to the mic, I realized after about two minutes that I lost the mostly inebriated crowd. The banquet chair stepped to me and said, “talk softer,” and I shouted, “hell no I’m gonna yell this shit!” As I read the entirety of the poem, I could hear people beginning to boo.

It seems the acoustics in the gymnasium created a very loud echo effect, and my words were all but impossible to discern. As I stepped down, I felt humiliated. I was sitting in the back of the cavernous room, and had to walk through a crowd of seemingly frustrated White faces. Suffice it to say, I did not win the \$500 prize. The next day, I was frustrated with the whole experience. Why did the president allow me to read my poem knowing that the venue was not the best for such a piece requiring critical reflection? I felt I missed my opportunity to have my fellow Ravens reflect on the ways Whiteness perpetuated supremacy both in our honors society and larger United States. I realized then that the piece was meant for a smaller group of intimate readers. I drafted an email to the president:

Wanted to thank you for having me as a finalist in the parody competition. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to speak with you in person. I enjoyed the banquet—but was really disappointed in my delivery of the parody—I wish my fellow Ravens could have actually understood what I was saying! I truly think it has an extremely poignant message for our current times. Maybe they’ll have a chance to read it in the future somehow. (Personal Email, 4/28/2017)

To which the president replied,

Thanks, yes, it is always a bit tough to deliver to a boisterous crowd, and the sound system was not ideal. We will likely be posting the parodies from finalists, I will keep you updated. Thanks very much for reading—the Council really appreciated your parody and its meaning! (Personal Email, 4/28/2017)

This was our last communication. The parodies were never publicly or privately displayed for Raven Society members.

Lack of Reflection, Abundance of Nazis

August 2016

Less than four months after the emails above were sent, White nationalists, Nazis, and other White supremacists descended onto the town where my graduate university is located and murdered Heather Hyer. Questions about Whiteness became centerpiece throughout the university and local community. Many White people at the university whom I heard speak after the events claimed the violence did not represent our town. To them, these were “outside agitators.” Hearing these reactions, I felt emboldened to circulate my poem. I sent it to my professional colleagues, friends, and neighbors. All felt it was a powerful piece, however, I knew that with them I was “preaching to the choir.” These people were just as upset about

the lack of awareness toward White supremacy as I was. No, I needed to reach a larger audience.

I sent the piece to a local newspaper and the university’s campus newspaper, both with the following email introduction the week after Heather Hyer was murdered:

Hello—I am interested in trying to have a piece published with the [your paper]: a parody of Poe’s “The Raven” poem I wrote last year for the Raven Society. My piece is written from the perspective of the raven—and I think is very poignant with the events going on this past weekend. I’ve attached it here just in case you would like to review it—if this is not the proper way to go about it—I apologize. Please let me know the next steps necessary if that is the case. (Personal Email, 8/17/2017)

I never received a response from the local newspaper, however, a member of the university’s paper replied:

I read your poem and I have to compliment you, it was extraordinarily well written. Unfortunately, it does not fit the stylistic standards for the Opinion section at [our paper]. That being said, I strongly encourage you to submit the poem elsewhere, because I think it definitely deserves to be shared with a wide audience. I will also ask around to see if there isn’t a better section for this poem to be published. Thank you for reaching out, we appreciate the time, effort and courage it takes to put yourself out there and submit a piece of work. (Personal Email, 8/17/2017)

I replied with a question about any ideas of where else I might try to send the piece as the only outlets I could think of were poetry journals, which I perceived to have a limited readership. I never heard back about that, or the offer to “ask around” internally to see if there was another section where the poem might be published. I perceived the silence of the first editor and the reply of the second to be further evidence that people in the town did not truly want to confront how Whiteness permeated.

While many of the White people I interacted with seemed to think the events of August 11th and 12th were organized by “outside agitators,” many people of color I spoke with disagreed. During the same meetings I heard White individuals cry foul that “our town” was not a place of White supremacy, people of color explained the town and university had always been one of two worlds: White and Black. Understanding the man who established the university sheds light on the ways these worlds had been parallel realities since the school’s inception.

Suspicious of a Founding Father

It must be understood that the university where the Raven Society was established has a history steeped in White supremacy. Such a history makes the homogeneity of “honors societies” such as the Ravens even more problematic. The university was established by a man who believed Black people inferior to Whites. He wrote,

. . . for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it, [264] therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a

distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Jefferson, 1787, p. 166)

He continued, “This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people” (p. 166).

The school’s campus was, and still to me is, fraught with racial tension. As I now leave to pursue other professional opportunities, I hope those in the Raven Society, larger university, and local community begin to engage with the pain Cheryl Matias argues is necessary to truly understand the ways Whiteness defines our U.S. society. Matias (2016) explores the ways White individuals often re-center the pain of White supremacy pressed on people of color back on themselves by reacting to conversations about race, racism and oppression through actions such as crying or becoming defensive. She calls this process White emotionality. I believe my poem could provide a path toward discussion of racialized oppression and possible mitigation of White emotionality.

I am not implying that possible reflection experienced after hearing or reading my poem could mitigate the argumentative tones taken by many of the White people I heard speak after the events of August 11th and 12th. But, reading it might provide some sort of support in understanding the ways Whiteness defines normality. Merely reading and discussing a poem, however, falls far short of the sort of change necessary to move the university and community toward equity.

Structural Change

After the White supremacist rallies, I was invited to sit on a committee as one of around a dozen “student leaders” to speak with the dean of my graduate school and discuss ways to create a “more inclusive environment” on campus (aka “grounds”). Over and over, I heard White administrators discuss their hopes of providing supports for all students so everyone felt “comfortable” coming to campus and being part of a larger community. In response, my fellow graduate students and I mentioned the need for more than mere discussions or places for comfort, but structural changes to support students on what can be a painful path toward criticality. We made this recommendation specifically based on those made by scholars in the field of higher education.

Hiring

Turner, Gonzalez, and Wood (2008) place the need for the hiring of more faculty of color in the national context by explaining, “hiring and retaining faculty of color are influenced by the legal landscape, notably national debates on affirmative action and its application” (p. 145). We hoped the events of August 11th and 12th would provide the justification needed to prove the value of undergoing these changes, even if perceptions from outsiders might be negative. In our first push

toward structural change, we recommended changes in hiring practices specifically related to the hiring of more faculty of color and critical scholars. We urged the dean to consider potential faculty whose research and teaching are centered on the different iterations of oppression in the United States. We also recommended changes in student admissions policies and programmatic curriculum reform.

Admissions and Curriculum

Antonio (2000) explains the recruitment of more faculty of color can contribute to better recruitment of students of color as well. We recommended changes in admissions to increase historically marginalized students in our classes. Also, rather than an emphasis on tests scores or family legacy at the school, we recommended changes to admission policy questions with the goal of understanding how potential students perceived concepts such as racism, marginalization and oppression. When students were admitted, we recommended providing more chances to engage in critical reflection through the co-development of sequential curricula. Specifically, we recommended changes in curriculum to support students in the development of criticality through sequentially-designed courses meant to spur not only discussion but provide strategies and skills for social action.

To each of our recommendations, the dean of the school of education replied that the logistical complexity of our school did not allow for such changes. He explained we offered many undergraduate “major” tracks, each with numerous prerequisite courses that would be almost impossible to align. He also explained the school offered over twenty graduate degrees, each having their own path toward graduation, again creating a complexity that did not allow for curriculum sequencing. And bluntly, the dean explained he would not tell professors what they needed to teach. Rather than go the structural-change route, the meetings adjourned with an agreement to begin a “movie night” during which a “multicultural” or other sort of film would be shown to students and faculty. The goal would be for everyone to come together as a “community” and hold discussions to address issues brought up during the film.

Leaving these meetings, I felt saddened, maddened, and overall extremely frustrated with the lack of true initiative toward change, even after Nazis paraded down the streets no more than one mile from where our student leader meetings were held. I did not know at the time, but prior to our meeting with the dean Sean Harper was invited to speak with the faculty and staff of the larger university. I learned that the dean who described the problems-of-complexity above was in attendance of his talk.

Dr. Harper has published numerous works regarding campus climate related to racialized oppression. He is often hired by university administrators to analyze and engage faculty, staff and students on reflections of ways Whiteness perpetuates their campus. Overall, his works have been cited over 10,000 times according to

the Google Scholar database. To put it mildly, he is a leading voice in the field of higher education when it comes to engaging members of college campuses in discussions and actions to end White supremacy.

The following was discussed by Harper (2017) when he attended our school's campus after the White supremacist rallies. At the beginning of his lecture, he explained his work shows that too little is taught and learned about race on college campuses across the country. He called out faculty and staff at our particular university, describing the fact that students often enter our college campus with racist views that are never "engaged, contested, or revised." He continued by explaining that these students go on to assume positions of authority after graduation, and based on this, called out faculty and staff for their complicity in perpetuating White supremacy.

What was also powerful about Harper's (2017) talk was how he defined White supremacy. While many White members of the community I interacted with seemed to believe White supremacy was synonymous with the "outside agitators" they believed created a false image of our town, Harper explained not only Nazis should be considered supremacists. He explained,

I asked if they were bothered by the white supremacy evidenced in the university's employment trends: people of color are mostly in custodial, grounds keeping and food service roles there, while the overwhelming majority of deans, faculty members and senior-level administrators are white. That is white supremacy, too, I tried to make them understand. (Harper, 8/21/2017)

He then concluded by recommending four strategies to stop White supremacy on our campus: (1) confront historical and present-day racism, (2) not graduate racists, (3) not allow alumni to be sustainers of racial inequity in our society, and (4) encourage White faculty members and administrators to play a major role in fighting White supremacy. To begin all of these changes, Harper (2017) recommended university members design a "high-accountability process of racializing its curriculum" by providing "race-focused out-of-class learning experiences for students and engage in departmental and campus-wide conversations about race" (Harper, 8/21/2017).

The recommendations made by Harper (2017) were not too dissimilar to those I made alongside my fellow graduate students. Even so, the deans at our school remained unmoved. What will it take for the sort of structural changes necessary to increase equity on the school's campus to be enacted?

Conclusion

The Raven Society is a microcosm of the larger university and community dynamic. "Merit-based" honors programs within the school and community seem often to be equated with racial and gendered homogeneity. Based on my observations during my four-years as a graduate student, the school and surrounding community are racially and economically segregated both socially and academically. Merely looking into

a classroom at the local high school and observing the races in attendance is often enough to determine if the course being taught is "remedial" or "advanced."

After my poem was accepted and then rejected by society members, I did my best to continue fighting against White supremacy in the society through the admissions process. Understanding admissions were not so much "merit-based" but based on social-connections, I recommended the admission of students of color from my graduate program and those I knew to hold critical perspectives about structural racism. These members were admitted, and have since recommended and admitted students with similar interests/backgrounds each semester. My hope is this pattern continues into the future, and is also adopted by members who are affiliated with the 52 other departments at the university. While I no longer pay dues to the Society, I still receive emails about their events and requests to make donations.

People in the town of Charlottesville have a lot to go through in order to become what many people within it think it is: inviting to all. The newly elected mayor Nikuyah Walker ran on the campaign slogan, "End the Illusion." To do so, much more is needed in terms of members of the university and local community going through personal pain to understand how White supremacy permeates. Those who belong to the majority White racial group have to move past discussions of race and oppression and toward an understanding of the links between structural oppression, Whiteness and social action. The true nature of this town and the university within it must be understood. It is a place that seems to have always been considered a "comfortable" place to live and work for those who are White, but an altogether different reality for those who are not.

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