

# White Ignorance in Global Education

FRANCINE MENASHY

*University of Toronto*

ZEENA ZAKHARIA

*University of Maryland, College Park*

*In this qualitative research essay, Francine Menashy and Zeena Zakharia advance Charles Mills’s concept of White ignorance for understanding racial power hierarchies in global education governance. They reveal how global education organizations “sanitize racial inequities and silence conversations on race” and how in global education racism has been largely considered a US-based problem, which denies the fact that White supremacy is a global system. The authors argue that White ignorance has inhibited structural change in global education policies and practices. And while the Black Lives Matter movement has called for a global reckoning with entrenched racism and White supremacy, limited attention has been paid to racial inequities in global education circles.*

*Keywords:* international education, postcolonialism, racial discrimination, global governance, Black Lives Matter

Several years ago, a global education organization commissioned us to draft a policy brief about education and marginalization. As common with such consultancies, we produced several iterations in response to the organization’s feedback. In an early draft we referred to “historically marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities or students with low socioeconomic status.” A staff member replied with this comment: “Best to avoid references to the controversial term of ‘race’ and keep with the more acceptable term of ‘ethnic’ minorities.”

We were asked to, quite literally, erase *race* from the document.

Our mutual astonishment at this request—to delete *race* from a policy brief on marginalization in education in order to avoid controversy—initiated a conversation between us on the near-absent attention paid to racism and White supremacy in the global education arena.<sup>1</sup> Since then, we have steadily investigated issues of race through our collaborative research in comparative

and international education and our professional activities in global education spaces.

In this study we explore and aim to advance the concept of *White ignorance* (Mills, 1997, 2007, 2015) for understanding the perpetuation of racial power hierarchies in global education governance—spaces of global-level policy making, financing, and advocacy in international education development. Research has shown that within global education governance, people and organizations from the Global North overwhelmingly dominate, holding most power over major decision-making on international educational finance, policy, and program implementation. In contrast, those situated in the Global South that receive foreign aid, technical advice, and programmatic activities remain in the least influential positions (Menashy, 2019; Naylor, 2011; Tikly, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Despite clear associations between these power inequities and White supremacy, racism and racial hierarchies have not entered into substantive discussion within global education governance. In our research, we have uncovered the ways global education organizations have instead addressed power hierarchies through euphemisms that sanitize racial inequities and silence conversations on race. Our research also shows that within global education bodies, racism has been largely considered a US problem, thereby denying White supremacy as a global system. This sanitizing and silencing of racism—or White ignorance—has inhibited structural change in global education policies and practices.

Long-running critiques of international development, levied by Global South activists and Black women in particular, have recently gained traction in mainstream media (Ali & Murphy, 2020; De Luce & Williams, 2020; Elks, 2020; *New York Times*, 2021), practitioner circles (Igoe, 2020; Osofisan, 2020), and foreign aid–related blogs in the Global North (Jackson, 2020; Price, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Spurred by heightened attention to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd in the US in May 2020, educational actors, organizations, and government agencies around the world have been called on to reckon with entrenched racism and White supremacy (AERA, 2020; Moncrieffe, 2020; Wong, 2020). And yet limited attention has been paid to racial inequities within global education governance. This near absence of meaningful consideration of racism, concurrent with widespread self-reflection in other spaces, presents a stark contrast that prompts our analysis.

In addition to uncovering racial erasure through our research, each of us has witnessed the phenomenon of White ignorance through various facets of our professional service, observing first-hand the reinscriptions of inequities in global education governance yet negligible attention paid to racism. These experiences include, for instance, our participation in expert panels, working groups, and policy forums. Our privilege as light-skinned persons of color and our facility in English and university training in the Global North have advanced our careers and enabled our entry into global education policy and advocacy circles. At the same time, we hold the capacity to examine these

experiences through the lens of our identities as scholars of color. And so this research stems from both scholarly and personal concerns.

In this article we look at the structure of global education governance and review the complex concept of race as it relates to international development, global education, and our own research. We also highlight the very limited explicit scholarship on race and White supremacy from the academic fields of international development studies and comparative and international education (CIE). We then identify some key threads of Charles Mills's concept of White ignorance and how we observe them manifesting in global education governance. To do so, we draw from 55 key informant interviews with global education actors, 227 organizational documents, and 40 global education organizational websites. These data expose White ignorance in global education governance and lend credence to our personal observations as participants in those spaces of White privilege.

### Understanding the Structure of Global Education Governance

Global governance organizations with educational mandates include both state and nonstate agencies with activities extending across countries predominantly located in the Global South. The largest global governance organizations include the World Bank, United Nations (UN) agencies, and certain bilateral donors and were established on such stated principles as charity, post-World War II reconstruction, and support for basic needs in countries experiencing high levels of poverty (Riddell, 2008).<sup>4</sup> These mandates have expanded substantively and now include support for a range of social services, including education (childhood to adulthood) via funding, policy making, project design and implementation, technical advising, and advocacy. Global nongovernmental organizations (NGOs; e.g., Oxfam International, Save the Children), companies (e.g., Microsoft, Pearson), and foundations (e.g., Open Society Foundation, Lego Foundation) have also become major contributors to education around the world (Menashy, 2019).

Global governance organizations have long faced accusations of exerting undue power over governments and actors in the Global South by demanding conditions on loans, dictating priorities and processes, and preventing Southern actors from participation in major decision-making (Pailey, 2020; Ramalingam, 2013; Samoff, 2013; Wilson, 2013). Further, the vast majority of global governance organizations are headquartered in the Global North (e.g., Geneva, New York, Paris, Washington, DC) and employ predominantly Northern-born or Northern-educated staff who enter into working relationships with Southern actors in countries on the receiving end of loans, policies, programming, and advising. Employees of global organizations also frequently travel on short-term assignments to countries to monitor activities or provide technical advice. Meanwhile, local Southern actors often serve as the implementers of the projects designed and funded by global organizations. And most organi-

zations have established country-level offices that commonly employ local staff in clerical positions, with Northern (sometimes termed “expatriate”) workers at the senior, director levels (Denney et al., 2018; Kapoor, 2005; Ramalingam, 2013).

This structural dynamic between the employees of global education organizations and local staff, implementers, and recipients—people from the Global North and Global South—exhibits clear and long-standing power hierarchies. What is more, given that global governance organizations work across multiple contexts, this power structure extends throughout the global education environment and manifests from country to country, reflecting ubiquitous global power asymmetries (Kothari, 2006; Menashy, 2019). These asymmetries reflect colonial and racial hierarchies.

### Contextualizing Race in International Development and Education

We acknowledge that race, as a social construct, holds different meanings and histories in different parts of the world (Adhikari, 2013; Da Costa, 2016; Duany, 1996; Moreno Figueroa & Saldívar Tanaka, 2016; Torres-Saillant, 2000). Notions of race as biologically determined have long been rejected, but this does not negate the tremendous impact of race as a constructed identity within societies (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). In international development, race serves as “a socio-historical construct, which operates simultaneously as an aspect of identity and as an organising principle in forging social structure” (White, 2002, 408).

Omi and Winant (2014) use “racial formations” to describe how meanings of race shift in response to historical moments, becoming hegemonic within wider contexts and structures (Sriprakash, Nally et al., 2020; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007; White, 2002). Because of this historical formation, we posit that conceptualizing race when discussing global education and international development must situate the concept within a history of colonialism.

Foundational postcolonial and anticolonial scholars produced a pioneering set of literature that describes how racism shaped colonial representations, relationships, knowledge hierarchies, and material conditions in ways that justify extraction and profit, establishing the current social order in which the assumed superiority of the Global North extends to ostensibly beneficent international relationships (Alatas, 1977; Amin, 1989; Chatterjee, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Memmi, 2013; Said, 1978; Dei & Kempf, 2006; Spivak, 1988). Race ties inextricably to the perceptions and constructions that evolved out of colonial relations, which have fed into today’s international development environment. Colonialism necessitated a conception of those within colonized nations as uncivilized and primitive, justifying their subjugation (Memmi, 2013).

This conception persists in the form of assumptions of inferiority about populations within the Global South but has evolved from justifying overt sub-

jugation to imposing policies and prescriptions in national economies and social sectors (Wilson, 2013, 2017). As colonialism constructed colonized peoples as inferior, it simultaneously constructed Whiteness as superior. And today, as a dialectical process, racial constructions include and are dependent on this superiority of Whiteness, including such characteristics as morality, rationality, and knowledge. In contrast, populations from the Global South are constructed as other and as lacking in such admirable traits (Fanon, 1952; Kothari, 2006; Memmi, 2013; Pailey, 2020; Said, 1978). These categorizations under colonialism justified rule and power of one group over the other, and this process of othering in turn solidified the dominance and uncontested power of White people.

Quijano and Ennis (2000) use “coloniality” to encapsulate how formations from colonialism have persisted into postcolonial global paradigms and power asymmetries. Scholars have referenced coloniality to argue the vital importance of considering how prior constructions of race now emerge as racialized hierarchies within international development. As Banerjee-Dube (2014) argues, coloniality

lays bare the asymmetrical relations of power that went into the making of knowledge and social relations from a Eurocentric perspective. And since ethno-racial, hierarchical relations of power . . . still constitute social relations and forms of knowledge, coloniality persists even if the historical process of colonialism has come to an end. (513)

The colonial era constructed a racial order, comprising power hierarchies that persist within economic and social structures today, including in global education and development (Allweiss, 2021; Christian, 2019).

In tracing how conceptions of race during the period of colonial rule were then sustained in postcolonial international development processes, or how “these forms of racial distinction travelled into international development” (Kothari, 2006, 10), scholars argue that racial formations influenced how actors from the Global North currently perceive, discuss, and treat peoples within the Global South (Pailey, 2020; White, 2002; Wilson, 2013).

Within the international development arena, racial distinctions emerge as hierarchies in terms of roles taken, including those who provide aid and assistance and those who receive and “benefit” from this support. The global education structure embodies a “foundational division [that] confirms unequal power relations” with actors and organizations from the Global North in undisputed positions of influence (Kothari, 2006, 14). “Other” and “White” remain prominent distinctions, only modified into more palatable categories of those in need of developing and those who address this need as developers (Kothari, 2006; Pailey 2020; Wilson, 2013). For instance, international development processes and policies often reflect assumptions concerning White superiority and privilege the knowledge of White actors who bestow “capacity”

and “technical expertise” on the recipients of aid. Such assumptions in turn devalue the knowledges and capabilities of “beneficiaries” of international development (Kothari, 2006; Pailey, 2020; Wilson, 2017).

Racial hierarchies, moreover, serve a global economic order through what scholars, originating with the work of Cedric Robinson (1983), describe as “racial capitalism.” Both national and global capitalism depend on unequal distribution and exploitative accumulation of wealth, “and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires” (Melamed, 2015, 77). International development systems and global education organizations and actors comprise an industry embedded in a global capitalist structure, through which those from the Global North benefit; practices within organizations serve to reward White people “while valorizing and normalizing whiteness” (Christian, 2019, 177). This valorizing of Whiteness emerges through a hierarchy that embraces notions of White superiority and expertise within international education development activities.

Racial hierarchy within international development is perpetuated through narratives that have been reframed and sanitized without ascribing the term *race* to categories that derive from racialized colonial groupings. International development agencies view race as “taboo” and take a “color-blind” approach, preferring the use of “race-neutral” language (Kothari, 2006; Patel, 2020; White, 2002; Wilson, 2017). Such sanitized substitutes include the terms *ethnicity* and *culture*, which elicit meanings that serve to distinguish groups of people and imply particular attributes relating to characteristics and capacities, much as constructed racial categories do (Christian, 2019; Lentin, 2005). This silencing and sanitizing also emerge in the context of global education governance.

Scholarship within the field of international development studies has also suffered from “almost total silence” on race (White, 2002, 407); empirical studies and theoretical engagement on racism and international development remain few (Duffield, 2006; Wilson, 2017). And global research from the fields of sociology and anthropology tend to adopt ethnicity or culture as identity groupings, whereas studies on race, and in turn racism, are less common (Christian, 2019).

Similar critiques have been levied against CIE research for neglecting issues of race despite long-standing debates on colonialism and North-South inequities. Research on racism has, of course, been robust and foundational in US-based educational scholarship for decades. Scholars focusing on settings in the Global North have applied the concept of White ignorance to understand White supremacy within education policy and practice (Bain, 2018; Beckles-Raymond, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Grinage, 2020). Yet critical scholarship in CIE has insufficiently engaged with this rich tradition, with scant literature explicitly acknowledging racism as a critical component to postcolonial inequities and enduring colonialities in international educational development (Allweiss, 2021; Sriprakash, Nally et al., 2020; Sriprakash, Tikly et al., 2020). A small number of scholars have recently

brought attention to the silence around race in CIE literature. In particular, an article by Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker (2020) that lays bare the erasure of race in CIE—and which inspired our study—exposes this silencing of race and “argue[s] that policy and research interventions in EID [education and international development] cannot be unhooked from political systems of racism or be seen in neutral ‘colour-blind’ terms” (680). By highlighting the relevance of Mills’s concept of White ignorance in examining spaces in global education, we seek to advance the interconnectivities between global analyses of White supremacy and US-informed antiracist scholarship.

### Global White Ignorance

In *The Racial Contract*, philosopher Charles Mills (1997) introduces an “epistemology of ignorance” which he describes as “a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities” involving “White misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race” (18–19). Mills (2007) describes this phenomenon as “White ignorance,” where *ignorance* applies to “both false belief and the absence of true belief” (16), enabled by White racial privilege.

Mills emphasizes how a cognitive orientation allows particular people to ignore or minimize the impacts of White supremacy and the role it plays within systemic racism. As Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) explains, Mills addresses “the process by which White subjects accept their racial status requires ignoring, rather than knowing, the truth about their racial subjectivity” (448). This ignorance allows the reproduction of structural racism in which White people are able to fully benefit from “racial hierarchies, ontologies, and economies” precisely because they do not understand the racist world in which they live (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007, 2). Furthermore, White ignorance hinges on “a general skepticism about nonwhite cognition,” assuming a lack of credibility in non-White capacities, knowledges, and perspectives (Mills, 2015, 222).

Mills (2007) stresses that White ignorance, while certainly perpetuated through individuals, relies on White supremacist structures. Mills (2015) also clarifies that racial categories are constructed, and we further acknowledge that such groupings can be essentialized and problematic (Loveman, 1999). As well, many race-associated concepts have been derived from context-specific experiences and so should not define what race might mean in other contexts (Marx, 1998). Focused on racism as a complex and historicized global system of domination, our work recognizes these nuances. We explore racist structures by identifying White ignorance in governance spaces and within an industry embedded in a global capitalist system, rather than in the actions of individuals.

Although his early writings on White ignorance were mainly applied to the US context, Mills’s (2015) later work explains that the concept ought to contribute to a wider understanding of racial inequities across global settings:

“Insofar as the modern world has been created by European colonialism and imperialism, and insofar as racist assumptions/frameworks/norms were central to the theories justifying white Western conquest and domination of that world, we would expect white ignorance to be global” (217).

With our analysis, we advance the concept of global White ignorance and contribute to a more robust theorizing of three of its foundational tenets we uncovered through our research on global education governance: racial erasure, the denial of White supremacy as a global system, and ignorance of racial social-structural factors.

## Methods and Data Sources

This inquiry draws from data that emerged from a three-year (2018–2021) vertical case study (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009) in which we examined the nature and impact of partnerships in education among global and country-level actors in response to the Syria refugee crisis. Tracing vertical and horizontal linkages and interactions across local, national, and global scales, the mixed methods research situated localized action and interpretation in Lebanon within broader social and political phenomena, bringing to light critiques of global governance structures that impact local practice. As well, the iterative and longitudinal aspects of the study captured the “transversal” axis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014) of multiscalar partnership processes over time, including changes to discourse, arrangements, and practices in global education as manifested in a large corpus of data.<sup>5</sup>

While the original study investigated participation in global education partnerships, we examine here a subset of coded data on racism in the sector that emerged as a prominent thematic area from our larger inquiry. These data derived from the transversal analysis—an iterative process that took account of current events like the intensification of the BLM movement and related impacts on the work and perspectives of global education actors. The timing of our data collection played a significant role in uncovering themes relating to race, which emerged as prominent during the latter part of our study. While targeting global education partnerships, we also focused on global hierarchies, power asymmetries, colonial legacies, and how each relates to race.

From 2020 to 2021, our data collection coincided with the onset of pivotal global events that directly affected many of the organizations and actors working within development and humanitarian sectors: the COVID-19 pandemic, an intensification of BLM protests in the United States, and an associated global reckoning on racism. Because of the unprecedented nature of these events, we decided to explore how actors in global education described and discussed shifts in partnership dynamics within the contexts of COVID-19 and BLM and how various global organizations responded in their public discourse. We acknowledge a tension between the US-centered nature of the BLM-related data collection and one of our overarching concerns: an overem-



phasis on the US context when considering racism. Although this BLM focus arose from an event and its initial repercussions within the US, we chose to analyze it as an inflection point because many organizations around the world, including major global governance agencies, voiced solidarity and extrapolated the BLM agenda to their own work.

We posed a new research question to guide our analysis: In what ways does White ignorance manifest in global education governance? We analyze evidence derived from three primary datasets: key informant interviews with global education actors (n=55); documents published by global education organizations (n=227); and global organization websites (n=40).

### *Key Informant Interviews*

From October 2018 to February 2021, we conducted fifty-five key informant interviews with actors who participated in global education spaces, meaning governance bodies that determine and design global education policies and mandates. These interviews occurred in two rounds, corresponding to the research period prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global swell in BLM protests (October 2018–February 2020) and after (October 2020–February 2021). Key informants included actors based in the Global North and Global South who represented organizations involved in global education partnerships, such as Education Cannot Wait, the Global Partnership for Education, International Education Funders Group, and the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies. Participants represented international and local NGOs, governments, foundations, international financial institutions, secretariats of global education partnerships, and UN agencies. We selected participants using purposive sampling, based on an established set of criteria, including type of organization, experience in global partnerships, and professional seniority. We developed an initial list of potential participants through our documentation of organizations engaged in global education partnerships, followed by a search for possible key informants based on published documents, websites, and event announcements. Each participant held a senior position, had an expertise in refugee education, and had long (at least five years') experience in the global education sector. We extended invitations to participate in the research via email and asked for assistance in connecting to other potential participants who had a strong understanding of partnerships in refugee education. At the end of each interview, we asked participants to recommend additional participants and used these recommendations to extend our list of possible participants. Since our initial study was not directly related to issues of race, we did not consider the racial identity of respondents when sampling participants. Although we did not ask participants to self-identify during interviews, during responses to questions related to BLM, five respondents self-identified as Black or persons of color.

Our many years working in the sector aided us in accessing participants. For instance, during recruitment, some respondents recognized our names and

affiliations due to our active participation in conferences and meetings, or they had met us at events. As researchers who also regularly engage in policy advising, we were able to capitalize on our privilege and our networks when recruiting participants.

Our interview questions elicited views on the nature and dynamics of global education partnerships, the participation of “local” Global South actors, and changes to partnerships and partnership practices since the onset of the pandemic and growing attention to the BLM movement in global circles. For example, in the first round of interviews, we asked questions about relationships between actors within partnerships and perceptions of effective partnership practices. In the second round, given the timing of data collection and our perception of BLM as a potential inflection point for many global organizations, we considered that current events may have spurred new or more defined views on race among the study participants. And so we not only revisited partnership themes but also asked additional questions about participants’ experiences in racial equity work within their organizations and partnerships and any shifts they observed in response to the BLM movement within global education governance.

We conducted the interviews in English and Arabic in person, over the phone, and virtually. Each lasted, on average, one hour. We audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated interviews into English when necessary. From this corpus, we inductively coded and analyzed responses relating to such emergent themes as marginalization, power, colonialism, White supremacy, race, and BLM.

### *Published Documents*

As part of the larger study, we collected and analyzed 227 documents published between 2011 and 2020 from twenty-four global organizations and their Middle East regional partners to better understand the broader policy context and how global and regional agencies conceptualize partnerships within their institutional publications. This data set included strategic plans, annual reports, and other key organizational documents published by global education organizations, multistakeholder agencies, organizations with regional scope, and partners.

Using the document search function, we searched the electronic versions of each of the 227 documents for any mention of race, using keywords like *race*, *racism*, and *racial* (*racialization/racialisation*) in both the main document text and in any footnotes or endnotes. We eliminated instances that involved an alternative usage of *race* not relevant to our search (e.g., “*race forward*,” “*win the race*,” “*road race*”). We logged all other mentions in an Excel spreadsheet that classified the 227 documents as either “0” (no reference to race in document) or “yes” (some reference to race in document). In a separate column we listed each mention, including the excerpt of text and page number.

The search resulted in a textual data set of 33 documents from 12 organizations for a total of 66 mentions of *race*, or a similar term. We performed a broad content analysis of this subset to elicit inductive codes (e.g., diversity, inequalities, persecution, stereotypes), which we then applied to the entire data set for further analysis.

### *Global Organization Websites*

We examined the websites of forty organizations involved in global education for any public statement or discussion on racism between June and December 2020, corresponding to a period of heightened attention to the BLM protests. Organizational websites included UN agencies, international NGOs, foundations, bilateral donor agencies, the World Bank, and global partnerships.

We employed three strategies when searching each website: (1) an electronic search using the site's search function for the key terms *George Floyd*, *Black Lives Matter/BLM*, *racism*, *race*, *racist*, *antiracism*, *diversity and inclusion/DEI*; (2) a manual search of the sections containing press releases, blogs, and news items for June–December 2020; and (3) Google searches using the organization's name and each key term. In some instances, the website search did not locate any relevant items, whereas a Google search did. This suggests that a statement or other relevant document may have been previously displayed more prominently on an organizational website but was subsequently archived or cached. This search found twenty-five organizations that had released statements or taken some action to acknowledge or address racism, BLM, or George Floyd between June and December 2020.

We asked the following questions about the web sources:

- Did the organization make a clear public statement, either specifically about George Floyd and BLM or about a current and pressing need to address racism?
- Did the organization use explicit language (*racism*, *White supremacy*, *anti-racism*, etc.) in its statement(s)?
- Did the organization outline specific action(s)? (For some organizations, this may have initially been a “no” but was then followed by a “yes” in the subsequent weeks/months, reflecting a progression.)
- Did the organization reaffirm an ongoing commitment, or did it note the need to “do more”/“go further”?
- Did the organization acknowledge racism (or related issues) within the sector at large?

We also examined the websites to categorize the type of action taken (e.g., solidarity statement, action plan). We then undertook a content analysis of the relevant web pages to identify features of actions or commitments mentioned (e.g., hiring, training, local participation, self-study), explicit terms used (e.g.,

*systemic racism, colonialism, White supremacy*), and broader goals (e.g., solidarity, the “need to do more”).

### *Analysis and Limitations*

We analyzed each of the three data sets independently as well as iteratively, applying inductive codes from one data set to others across the study to identify any convergences or silences. A final round of analysis involved the comprehensive application of Mills’s conceptualization of White ignorance, aligning particular arguments within his theory to the data to synthesize findings from the three data sets and to organize and foreground our write-up of findings.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study, which focused on global education actors involved specifically in the Syria refugee response. However, we believe this study provides a lens for understanding White ignorance in global education more generally, beyond refugee education, as our key informants were engaged in a vast range of educational interventions and countries. In addition, despite assurances of confidentiality and data protection in line with Institutional Review Board requirements, key informants may have been reluctant to critique their organizations or recognize their own roles in perpetuating racial inequities or White privilege. Furthermore, in our document and website analyses, it is possible that some organizations released antiracist or solidarity statements that are now archived or no longer accessible on their websites. Likewise, additional agencies may have communicated statements of solidarity in other forms (e.g., social media) that are no longer readily available. While some organizations released their action plans (and in some cases updates on progress), it is possible that other organizations are undergoing related action but have not shared this publicly. As such, our data represents a snapshot in time. Still, the findings we present are substantiated by various sources and types of data, which enables us to draw reliable conclusions.

Finally, we acknowledge that our frequent focus on BLM may have led our analysis to disproportionately emphasize anti-Blackness rather than racism more generally. We aimed to mitigate this by asking probing questions about coloniality and racism, beyond anti-Black racism, and also by broadening our analysis to ensure that we interrogated racism writ large.

## Evidence of White Ignorance in Global Education Governance

### *Racial Erasure*

In defining White ignorance, Mills (2015) explains that the histories and enduring impacts of racism have been often erased through “the retrospective whitening-out, the whitewashing, of the racial past in order to construct an alternative narrative that severs the present from any legacy of racial domination” (220). We view this erasure as manifesting through the adoption of euphemisms to sanitize issues that include racism. In our study of global education

organizations, for example, rhetoric which identified inequities between rich donor countries in the Global North and Global South countries that received educational financing discussed the need for “recipient ownership,” “localization,” and “participation of beneficiaries” or “community participation.” And organizational websites commonly made broad references to “discrimination” and “marginalization” when describing educational issues, but language that specified “race” or “racism” was notably rare.<sup>6</sup>

In our systematic review of 227 documents published by Northern-based agencies between 2011 and 2020, none discussed the racial lines between funders and recipients. Only 33 documents from 12 organizations, or less than 14 percent, contained any mention of race or racism at all (n=66 instances). When we eliminated those instances that represented organizational statements of nondiscrimination or segments of an organizational profile (e.g., “regardless of race, ethnicity, age”) (n=19), that noted a professional title or body (e.g., “UN 2013 Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance”) (n=5), and that noted the title of an international convention (e.g., International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination) (n=2), we were left with 40 mentions of race or racism in 20 documents published by 8 organizations—or 9 percent of documents examined. On closer examination, 18 of these documents involved cursory mentions alongside a series of other factors or attributions, such as noting the right to “equal access to education, regardless of race, ethnicity”; acknowledging “existing disparities based on sex, age, race, color”; or identifying social attitudes or cultural “stereotypes about gender, race, disability.” A mere two documents included a substantive discussion of race or racism in education, citing interpersonal and institutional racism; both were published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Similarly, when we asked respondents about issues of power inequities, the most common responses included euphemisms around inclusivity, participatory processes, and increased country ownership of education policies. For example, an international NGO representative described “inclusive methods so that decisions can be made in ways that are more participatory.” Some respondents agreed that inequities fell along racial lines but told us that the subject is essentially silenced, lamenting “race and power and how it remains unexamined” and how issues of race are “nowhere even on the agenda.” One leader of an international NGO explained that in policy development, discussions on race are deemed controversial and organizations are “wary of using terminology that might be offensive.” Some respondents described pushback on antiracism conversations because of people’s discomfort, such as situations where individuals were “talking like, ‘Oh, well. You know, I’m German, and because I’m tall and blonde, people have preexisting assumptions about me’ . . . What you’re doing is centering the needs and the fragility of the White

people in the room.” Erasure occurs in such circumstances because White supremacy and racism have been sidelined to address the needs of White people.

When the 2020 protests in support of the BLM movement led certain organizations to voice their solidarity, some respondents observed that other global education agencies were concerned about “the politicized nature of this movement” and so “there was a complete silencing of conversations.” Another described it as “just really challenging, and basically our antiracism stuff just fell flat organizationally.”

This inclination to silence discussions on race—deeming the subject politicized, controversial, or taboo—or a tendency to divert conversations on race to address the concerns of White people reflect racial erasure and an effort on the part of actors within global education governance to construct an alternative narrative separated from current and past racism, one through which White ignorance is perpetuated.

### *Denying White Supremacy as a Global System*

Mills’s (2015) work on White ignorance advocates for applying his theory beyond the United States due to a global

denial or downplaying of the extent of the violence and subordination of the previous epoch of formal Euro-domination, its structural and long-term shaping of systemic white advantage, and an accompanying white “innocence” about the role of racial exploitation in making the world what it is today, particularly its transcontinental distribution of “Northern” wealth and “Southern” poverty. (221)

Although some interviewees explained how, internally, BLM had spurred some reckoning with racism, these conversations predominantly occurred within those organizations headquartered in the United States. Overall, those respondents representing educational organizations based outside of the US portrayed racism as a distinctly US problem. For instance, when asked about antiracist work, a European-based respondent explained: “I think from a US perspective, I think there’s a lot of stuff happening, but I think it’s happening because of events in the US . . . It’s within the US perspective.” Other representatives of global education organizations with offices both inside and outside the US observed that “we are a bit more aware of it here in the US because of the Black Lives Matter movement. But I would say in terms of the global organization, we haven’t launched any sort of global effort on this at all.” One respondent similarly described how, “in the United States in particular, we’ve seen this happening very, very, very close to us . . . unfortunately, in terms of the [global education] work, I have not seen enough of that or hardly any to be quite honest.” And another referenced BLM as “very American, very much focused on the Black American experience.”

Indeed, our analysis of organizational documents did not identify a single mention of White supremacy or racism as a global system. Mentions of racial discrimination, stereotyping, or bias within organizational documents linked to particular social attitudes or cultural norms (e.g., “racial and religious intolerance”). Or, alternatively, they linked to the need to teach children “tolerance” or “awareness” and to promote “respect for diversity and inclusion” within learning spaces. Some respondents acknowledged the global systemic nature of White supremacy but did not reference any actionable changes under way to address these issues:

There’s a way that it plays out in the United States, but there’s a way that it plays out also in other parts of the world, very much tied with a decolonization framework. Frankly, for the field of development and for international education, it is long overdue to have this discussion.

Mills (2015) argues that racism ought to be analyzed as a “system of domination” perpetuated through colonialism, which in more recent years has been observed as a “sanitization of the past, an acknowledgement that this domination was *racial* and itself constitutive of a transnational *political* system became impermissible” (222). A taboo around racism persists within global education via White ignorance’s erasures and a geographic deflection that relegates racial inequities to the context of the United States.

#### *Neglect of Racial Social-Structural Factors*

For Mills (2007), White ignorance emerges as a refusal on the part of White people to acknowledge the systemic foundations of racism and act to combat it, despite that White supremacy perpetuates through “social-structural causation” (21). Addressing racism globally, therefore, must attend to the structural roots of inequities.

None of the 227 published documents we analyzed provided substantive discussion of structural discrimination. While we identified several mentions of inequalities in “educational access” and “learning achievement” based on race and other attributions (ethnicity, gender, etc.), only two documents drew some connection to institutional or structural issues, citing, for example, “the potential for the education system to exacerbate tensions and conflict through, for example, existing policies, curriculum, and textbook content or exclusion of marginalized groups” (UNESCO & GPE, 2016, 7), or presenting the perspective of interculturalism, noting that

emphasizing the cultural dimension poses a risk of ignoring the real causes of discrimination against immigrant groups, which may include institutional racism. By contrast, interculturalism helps students learn not only about other cultures but about structural barriers in host countries that perpetuate inequality. (UNESCO, 2018, 84)

While it is possible that global education organizations present deeper engagement with racial structural factors in other dedicated publications, our analysis suggests that this connection is not readily made in published documents.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that global education antiracist activities have been largely superficial, reactionary, and characterized by solidarity statements with limited action, thus preserving power hierarchies and structural inequities. For example, our review of 40 global education organizations' websites found that 25 had released public statements in the summer or fall of 2020 in response to the BLM protests that articulated solidarity—a need to “stand together”—with BLM, with 11 explicitly acknowledging that they needed to “do more” to address racism in the sector. While statements cited George Floyd, racism, antiracism, and White supremacy, only 7 explicitly named systemic/structural racism or colonialism within the sector. For example, the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2020) released its “Statement on Anti-Racism and Racial Equity,” which asserted:

We recognize and acknowledge that we are a part of a global humanitarian system that, while holding good intentions for the world's most vulnerable, is implicitly colonial in nature. Because of this, the INEE Secretariat acknowledges the ways in which we reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy culture and institutional racism through some of our structures and actions.

Among the statements that committed to actionable change, most focused on internal changes like organizational hiring and promotion practices, communications, “listening campaigns,” internal audits, awareness activities, and staff training. Others noted plans to hire staff or create committees to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Still others committed funds, such as the Open Society Foundation's (2020) announcement to put \$220 million into its Building Power in Black Communities initiative, which focused on communities in the United States.

When we asked about actions taken in response to BLM, respondents primarily referenced internal organizational practices. For example, a representative of an international NGO headquartered in the US described how “every two weeks we have racism awareness discussions of the basic education team, we've been reading articles and discussing them. Taking bias surveys, listening to podcasts and just talking about what's been happening.” Another similarly explained how employees “started to come together, watch webinars on antiracism in development . . . have conversations about what we can do on a daily basis, and then also we started reading, like having a book club, and that started gaining more traction across different stakeholders in the foundation.” Such organizational antiracism activities, while new in response to BLM, target the individual and interpersonal level rather than structural factors.

In interviews, few representatives of these organizations could identify any structural changes proposed to address racism. For instance, a respondent



from an international NGO said, “So I have to say I’ve been extremely disappointed with our sector engaging in this. [UN organizations] might’ve kind of done it a little bit on their external comms front.” A foundation representative voiced, “I think it’s a lot of surface stuff.” Another said, bluntly, “I think this is all bullshit.”

Although some global education bodies have aimed to increase representation of people of color and from the Global South, respondents claimed that such measures amounted to mere token diversity—“it can take a very tokenistic, paternalistic lens.” As one stated, “We walk a fine line of tokenism, I have to say.” Tokenistic representation further shows an absence of attention to the deep, structural change necessary to shift White supremacist systems.

Activists have been calling for a decolonization of international development, lamenting inadequate structural responses to racism (Cornish, 2019; Monga, 2020; Zvobgo & Loken, 2020). Global education governance spaces reflect this absence of structural change, with very few explicitly acknowledging racial inequities within the global education arena. As Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker (2020) argue, “The current silence about racism within education and international development (EID) is being produced at a time which is seeing a flourishing of activism and scholarship in other fields to interrogate racism and educational inequality” (677). As one respondent explained: “I really do feel like the [global education] sector’s in a moment of reckoning. And I think a lot of people have taken on the rhetoric . . . but they’re not ready to actually make the changes necessary.”

## Discussion

Our analysis reveals three key ways White ignorance manifests in global education governance. First, the data exposes racial erasure; the document review shows the frequent use of euphemisms and very limited discussion of race within global education organizational publications and the interviews further reveal racial erasure through respondent observations and perspectives. Second, participants expressed how global education governance denies White supremacy as a global system, relegating racism and racial inequities to problems primarily within the United States. And third, our analysis shows that few organizations have sought to address racial social-structural factors, despite making public statements in support of BLM. Together, this evidence demonstrates how actors and organizations embody and perpetuate a willful ignorance of racist structures within global education and how this ignorance minimizes the prevalence and impact of White supremacy.

Mills (2007) cites several factors that contribute to White ignorance, including “material group interest,” and argues that “the dynamic role of *white group interests* needs to be recognized and acknowledged as a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance” (34). While the nature of our

research cannot claim causation, our data suggest that material interests have been significant in upholding and sustaining White supremacist structures and that they act as a barrier to dismantling racism in global education.

As an industry, international development is made up of a complex web of organizations and professionals—policy makers, technical experts, field staff, consultants—who engage in thousands of projects, contracts, and education “missions” each year throughout the Global South (Ramalingam, 2013). Scholars argue that via this industry White supremacy is sustained as a system of domination (Christian, 2019; Wilson, 2013, 2017). Concern for material group interest supports particular elements of White ignorance, including, as Mills (2015) describes, a skepticism around the cognitive abilities of persons from the Global South, where predominantly White people from the Global North are presented as the experts and authorities. As researchers have noted, individuals from the Global North currently play pivotal roles in international development and global policy formation and activities with assumed credibility due to White superiority that persists because of coloniality (Kothari, 2006; Menashy, 2019; Takayama et al., 2017). Some of our interviews support this claim.

For example, in referring to his own Whiteness, one respondent explained how, “the main process for accountability in international development . . . is to say, ‘Don’t worry, there’s somebody who looks like me in that place watching to make sure it’s okay.’” Another noted that change could only occur by “reducing the head count of [White] people like me sitting in the Global North in an office in London or Washington or Oslo or wherever.” But to relinquish such high-ranking positions would necessitate self-sacrifices, forgoing income and potential career advancement with broader implications for large groups of people in power. As one respondent asked, “A lot of people have careers and lives and mortgages attached to this type of thing, and how easy is that going to be given up?”

Given White supremacy’s embeddedness within a racial capitalist system, addressing it on a structural level would require substantive reform of a vast industry’s financing mechanisms, including which actors or organizations control resources (Melamed, 2015; Sriprakash, Nally, et al., 2020). One interviewee reflected on how

people have put millions, billions, of dollars into this industry. Still, in July, you had organizations waking up to the fact that we live in an inherently, an incessantly racist society, world . . . It’s going to come down to, like it always does, what are the implications of the shifts that need to be made based on dollars and cents?

Respondents voiced that financing mechanisms that sustain the industry’s structure and determine who benefits from it would prove difficult to change: “I suppose the money connects all of this together . . . It depends on organiza-

tions like the donor agencies that fund us, and so forth, just how committed they're going to be to this."

We posit that the evidence of White ignorance that emerged from our research reflects much broader and more entrenched racialized norms and processes, extending beyond individuals, organizations, and global governance bodies to transnational economic structures, including an industry that perpetuates it by protecting the material interests of powerful groups. Further research might address the industry itself and, more specifically, its potential for serving material group interests.

## Conclusion

Applying an analysis of White ignorance to the context of global education suggests various practical consequences. Upholding White supremacy within international educational development perpetuates the notion of actors from the Global North as the experts and authorities and, in turn, reduces active local community participation within decision-making (Parpart, 1995). Yet studies have shown that local participation in international development projects contributes to better outcomes, particularly given greater understandings of context and needs, as well as more trust in local stakeholders (DA Global, 2021). It follows that upholding the roles of White, Northern experts reduces the effectiveness of interventions meant to promote development, as such activities ought to be conceptualized by Southern actors and grounded in their lives. At the global governance level, White ignorance similarly upholds assumptions around the authority of Northern actors, whereas the input of non-White, non-Northern voices might allow for more nuanced viewpoints and reduce a focus on priorities driven by Northern interests (DA Global, 2021; Parpart, 1995). And as an overarching impact, White ignorance in global education maintains a hierarchy rooted in coloniality, leaving those situated in the Global South relegated to subjugated positions, reflecting a clear ethical consequence relating to equity, power, and oppression.

Education research in the United States has moved well beyond mere recognition of racial inequities, with abundant scholarship examining various aspects of race and education in great depth. And many policy makers in the US have acknowledged racial injustices, spurring new conversations, debates, critiques, and sometimes structural changes to address racism within schools and systems. However, a silence on race permeates global education scholarship and policy discourse. Without addressing global White ignorance, education scholars fail to interrogate a core element to structural global inequities, and policy and advocacy leaders serve to reinscribe power hierarchies at play within the colonial education development industry. Global educational inequities and power asymmetries cannot be remedied without examining the intersecting issues of racism, White supremacy, and coloniality. If race contin-

ues to be silenced due to controversy or is deemed a uniquely US problem, inequities in global education governance—and, by extension, practice—will endure. Our study shows the need for further research on the intersections between racial capitalism and material group interests. We posit that findings from studies on how the international development industry contributes to sustaining White ignorance could be taken up to activate transformative change. We share our research in part to illustrate the value in applying the concept of White ignorance in both research and in practice.

Activists have posited that structural change to the international development industry is possible but must begin with organizations and actors offering public recognition and acknowledgment of White supremacy while committing to tackling institutional racism within both organizations and the wider development industry, including concrete action steps (Charity So White, 2021). We therefore advocate for boldly naming and confronting racism in global education governance spaces, encoding racial inequities in published reports, and committing to actionable steps beyond public statements and token diversity, acknowledging that difficult structural changes require people and organizations to relinquish power and resources.

We encourage global education actors to consider their own part in embodying and reproducing this ignorance. We also urge global education institutions to unpack their roles in reproducing this ignorance in their policies and practices and CIE scholars to investigate racism and White ignorance in their studies of inequities. As recent calls have been made for deeper reflection and new research on global education and racism (Nordtveit, 2021), we remain hopeful that these meaningful changes may already be under way. We further hope that this study spurs meaningful conversations between the US and international educational scholarship. As Mills argues in his work, interrogating White supremacy, and the White ignorance that serves it, should not be bound by geopolitical borders given the global system in which it survives.

*On September 20, 2021, as we were in the process of analyzing our findings through the lens of his philosophy, Charles W. Mills died at the age of seventy. We hope this research contributes to the vast and meaningful scholarship inspired by him and his profound body of work.*

## Notes

1. We capitalize racial categories intentionally, following Nguyễn and Pendleton (2020) and APA (2020).
2. The terms *Global North* and *Global South* refer to geopolitical relations of power linked to colonial processes through which inequalities in living standards, resources, and life expectancies are maintained (Dados & Connell, 2012).
3. See for example Agaba and Anonymous (2018) on racism in the aid sector; Bruce-Raeburn (2019) on racism in international development; Cornish (2019) on Degan Ali; and social media movements like <https://nowwhitesaviors.org> and #CharitySoWhite.

4. The largest bilateral donors include high-income country agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly the Department for International Development).
5. These data include 113 semi-structured interviews, more than 250 organizational documents and 40 organizational websites, a network analysis of 440 different organizations working on Syria refugee education in Lebanon, and more than 30 site visits and observations of partnership activities.
6. Among the forty organizational websites we examined, Wellspring Foundation directly named racial justice as a priority area on its main website, and the UN and its various agencies included many past and ongoing efforts related to racism. The mention of race/racism appears on organizational websites in response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

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### *Acknowledgments*

We thank Langan Courtney for her excellent research assistance. We are grateful to Monisha Bajaj, Lesley Bartlett, and Arathi Sriprakash for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All errors are entirely our own. This research was funded by Dubai Cares under the Evidence for Education in Emergencies Research Envelope.