

timely reminder that conservative backlash against race-conscious curricula is far from new. For those carrying the banner of “antiracist” education, Woodson and the Black teachers in *Fugitive Pedagogy* may offer valuable lessons about where we go from here.

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Matthew Johnson. *Undermining Racial Justice: How One University Embraced Inclusion and Inequality*

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My book, *Integrating the Forty Acres: The Fifty-Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas* (University of Georgia Press, 2006), looks at the ways in which administrators and the Board of Regents at the University of Texas at Austin deliberately worked to keep African American students from enrolling at the university. After the US Supreme Court ordered the admission of African American students in its unanimous 1950 decision in *Sweatt v. Painter*, leaders at the University of Texas then focused their efforts on making sure full integration never happened by keeping African American students from fully participating in the university’s academic, athletic, and social life.

What happened at the University of Michigan (UM), however, was much different. In his groundbreaking book, *Undermining Racial Justice: How One University Embraced Inclusion and Inequality*, Matthew Johnson does an excellent job examining how, over the last sixty years, “campus leaders embraced racial inclusion only so far as it could coexist with [their] long-standing values and priorities” (p. 1). According to Johnson, while “racial inclusion initiatives” helped bring “unprecedented access to a new generation of black students,” they also “reinforced and normalized practices and values that preserved racial disparities” (p. 1). In his introduction, Johnson lays out the argument that he sustains so well throughout the book: that “institutional leaders incorporated black student dissent selectively into the University of Michigan’s policies, practices, and values.” This way, Johnson argues, UM administrators would prevent Black student activism from “disrupting the institutional priorities that campus leaders deemed more important than racial justice” (p. 2).

Unlike at the University of Texas, where campus administrators unapologetically and methodically worked to maintain campus segregation, UM administrators used what Johnson calls “co-optation” to placate Black student activists in the 1960s and

1970s. Johnson argues that there were essentially four ways that university officials “developed their own repertoires to co-opt activism.” First, as Black student activists attempted to get university administrators to see the racial problems on campus as problems as “systematic of institutional racism,” UM administrators instead used a “discourse of racial innocence to justify racial disparities and a poor racial climate.” In other words, while appearing to have the “best interests of black students at heart,” UM administrators told activists that they could not “expect officials to overcome all the obstacles” that caused the racial animus and racial disparities seen on and off the Ann Arbor campus (p. 2).

Second, White UM administrators created “an inclusion bureaucracy” in order to “channel activism into institutional offices and control the outcomes of dissent.” Beginning in the late 1960s, UM administrators created “an unprecedented number of positions” and filled many of these jobs with Black officials. Their goal? To convince Black students to abandon their campus protests and to “work for change” alongside these Black officials. Third, in order to maintain control over how the University of Michigan would define and implement inclusion policies, UM administrators “selectively used institutional knowledge about black students when crafting racial inclusion policies.” Thus, to justify the policies and priorities they wanted, UM administrators sought out the people who could support what they wanted. The fourth and last part of their co-optation strategy was discipline. With the threat of expulsion and criminal prosecution always looming in the minds of protesters, UM administrators could worry less “about dissent” and therefore could yield more control over “racial inclusion” (p. 3).

What I found so fascinating about Johnson’s book is how well he proves a statement he mentions in his introduction: that *Undermining Racial Justice* is not about “good intentions gone bad.” “This is a book,” Johnson writes, “about how people who created and maintained racial disparities still believed they had good intentions” (p. 4). This can be seen in chapter 5, “Affirmative Action for Whom?” Johnson superbly examines the role of two university officials who “crafted and pitched new affirmative action policies which ultimately led to the racial retrenchment of the late 1970s and early 1980s” (p. 145). As Johnson argues, Cliff Sjogren (director of admissions) and George Goodman (director of UM’s Opportunity Program) both believed that the University of Michigan had a “responsibility to address racial inequality through affirmative action admissions” (p. 145). However, their decision to look for Black applicants outside the city of Detroit and eventually the state of Michigan led to a large number of middle-class students, which left Black working-class students with fewer opportunities to enroll at UM.

Although UM officials never “exclusively recruited black students from working-class backgrounds,” these students historically reaped most of the benefits of the school’s Opportunity Program when it was created in the 1960s (p. 162). By 1983, after five full classes of Black students were “recruited and admitted under the new admissions and financial aid policies,” the number of middle-class Black students increased dramatically while the number of working-class students fell precipitously. Johnson explains, “As campus leaders perceived new threats to the future institutional status of the University of Michigan in the mid-1970s, officials created new inclusion practices that they argued would preserve UM’s elite reputation” (p. 163). Their idea

was that middle-class Black students would be less attracted to the Black campus movement, and thus administrators would no longer fear organized protests. This, in turn, gave administrators “more power to shape the meaning and character of inclusion,” and they could continue creating policies that kept the numbers of Black students low while telling others that they were “trying” (p. 163).

Because co-optation, as Johnson argues, is a “long-term process,” it is no wonder that critical race theory (CRT) is under attack as I write this review in August 2021. *Undermining Racial Justice* is an especially important book now that so many (mostly southern) state legislatures have banned the teaching of CRT, which argues that racism is “not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice but also something embedded in legal systems and policies.” Amid this all-out assault on CRT, Johnson’s book shows us how administrators at an elite school like the University of Michigan used co-optation and other legal nuances to first resist and then co-opt the demands that so many Black activists in the 1960s and 1970s fought for on that campus: to create anti-racist policies that would confront and then dismantle White supremacy. As Johnson writes, we must understand the policies and the people who created them if we are to ever understand that “inequality is a choice” and that we can “demand choices that lead to equality” (p. 258). We must remain vigilant, and *Undermining Racial Justice* will help us fight back.