

# **Buried Many Things: How Racialized Organizations Achieve Racial Ignorance**

**Diana Graizbord and Natalia Pires de Vasconcelos**

## **Short Abstract:**

How do organizations produce and maintain racial ignorance (Mills 1997; 2007)? Building on interdisciplinary scholarship on agnotology and knowledge in organizations, and drawing on archival materials, media reports, organizational documents, secondary sources, and ethnographic observation of the “discovery” and subsequent reburial of the remains of enslaved and formerly enslaved people under Baldwin Hall, a building on the campus of the University of Georgia, we identify four strategies through which racialized organizations achieve racial ignorance: *omission*, *equivocation*, *repudiation*, and *procedural juggling*. By omission, we mean knowledge practices that actively leave particular people, places, and political possibilities out of official organizational accounts and narratives. Equivocation refers to the strategic deployment of vague or polysemous language to shore up uncertainty about facts and the historical record, thus raising doubts about what is known or could have been known. Repudiation refers to the active refusal and rejection of non-sanctioned organizational knowledge. It entails the denial of voices, sources, and types of knowledge, even within the organization, that disrupt official accounts and ways of knowing. Procedural juggling occurs when organizational actors juggle the norms and procedures that govern what they do, including how they conduct inquiry, produce public communication, or make decisions, with discretion. We argue that, together, these tactics produce racial ignorance in ways that deny humanity and meaning to those adversely racialized while protecting the reputation and racialized character of the organization.

## **Extended Abstract**

On December 2nd, 2014, the University of Georgia’s President Jere Morehead, along with several University and state officials, took part in the groundbreaking ceremony for a long-planned \$8.7 million building renovation and expansion of Baldwin Hall, a modest building erected in 1938, which is home to the UGA Public Administration, Sociology, Criminology, and Anthropology departments. Almost a year later, on November 17th, 2015, construction was halted when workers, tearing up the blacktop pavement of a parking lot adjacent to the back of the building, unearthed human remains that would later be identified as parts of a human skull and jaw. Shortly after, the construction project was paused while additional exhumations were conducted. In all, 105 gravesites were identified, though only a small sample was exhumed since many were partially or fully buried under the building’s foundation.

In a news brief announcing the “discovery”, university officials reported that although Baldwin Hall sat atop the site of a community cemetery, university planners believed all human remains had already been removed and transferred elsewhere for reburial during a previous round of construction decades before. In that same brief, officials also announced their plans for reburial and asserted the University’s jurisdiction over the remains given their presumed identity. They wrote, “UGA officials are working with the State Archaeologist’s Office to determine the

most appropriate location for burial. Based on a visual inspection by the consultant hired to assist the university in this matter...., the remains are believed to be of people of European descent.”<sup>1</sup> A series of osteological studies and DNA analysis conducted by Southeastern Archeological Services, Inc., a consulting firm the University hired to work with UGA’s own physical anthropologists, later revealed maternal African American ancestry for twenty-eight out of the thirty individuals from whom DNA could be recovered. In a subsequent communiqué, the University’s public relations team admitted that, “[w]hile early onsite examination led archaeologists initially to think that the individuals were most likely of European descent, the DNA results revealed that the vast majority of the remains sufficient for analysis were of African-Americans.”<sup>2</sup>

Neither the “discovery” of human remains nor the racial identities of those buried beneath Baldwin Hall were a surprise to community members, local amateur historians, nor some members of the University’s faculty. The building sits on a portion of Old Athens Cemetery, a free and mostly unregulated yet strictly segregated public cemetery that began operating in 1800, was officially closed in 1852 but continued to operate until 1900. One part of the cemetery, the white section, is today a fenced-in historical landmark that abuts Baldwin Hall. The land downhill from the white cemetery, which sat under the parking lot and building, was known to be the cemetery’s Black section. In a 2016 interview, historian Claudio Staunt, then head of the UGA History department noted, “I don’t know what the architects and engineers knew when they started this addition to Baldwin Hall. What I do know is that it doesn’t take a lot of work to figure out that there were African Americans buried there. There are lots of historical records and oral histories. There’s plenty of material available that would tell us that there are African Americans in that cemetery, and that’s aside from the DNA evidence that we later recovered.”<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding, once the “discovery” was announced, activists, some faculty members, and students were angered that gravesites had been disrupted and human remains exhumed, prodded, and tested without the consent or consultation of community members. Those claiming to be direct or indirect descendants of those buried under Baldwin Hall demanded that the university turn over the remains or, at the very least, allow them to participate in relevant decision-making and especially the plans for reburial. The University of Georgia rebuffed these efforts, sending bones off for testing without consultation and ultimately reentering the remains in another local cemetery, with no input from community or even university experts. Shortly after, the construction project resumed, the renovation was completed, and the portion of the cemetery where the remains had been found was paved over.

\*\*\*

As Charles Mills (1997; 2007) has argued, “racial ignorance” is not simply an absence of knowledge but a systemic way of knowing that sustains racial domination. As a structural phenomenon and epistemic condition that is actively produced and collectively maintained, racial ignorance shapes what is seen as true, false, or even worth knowing. Some forms of racial

---

<sup>1</sup> UGA News. 2015. “Remains found on Baldwin Hall construction site; work temporarily suspended”. *UGA News*. Dec 11. <https://news.uga.edu/remains-found-baldwin-hall-site/>

<sup>2</sup> UGA News. 2017. “UGA to reinter remains of individuals discovered in Baldwin Hall construction”. *UGA News*. March 8. <https://news.uga.edu/uga-reinter-remains-discovered-baldwin-hall-construction/>

<sup>3</sup> Lavine, J. 2020. *Below Baldwin*, Produced by Enlighten Media Productions, Video. October 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwOeTfGqANQ>.

ignorance involve deliberate distortion or denial of historical and contemporary racial injustices (e.g., denying the legacy of colonialism or slavery's ongoing effects). Other forms emerge passively through epistemic inertia, where dominant groups fail to seek out or engage with knowledge that challenges their worldview. Whether deliberate or seemingly more passive, racial ignorance is politically productive in protecting white racial privilege, defending white supremacy, and reproducing inequality.

Scholarship in the social sciences has productively parsed how racial ignorance is produced through daily acts of ignoring and sedimented through rigid ideological positions or policy perspectives. Indeed, as Linsey McGoe (2020; 2019) argues, the literature on ignorance has focused on micro and macro ignorance. Studies of decision-making and confirmation bias, individuals' "will to ignore," or how actors deal with inconvenient information and to what effect contribute to our understanding of micro-ignorance. At the same time, parallel scholarship has focused on how ignorance becomes baked into policy or institutions, solidifying as a socio-political structure (McGoe, 2020). Taken together, these studies illuminate how racial ignorance is sustained through cognitive structures and practices of unknowing that protect the legitimacy and supremacy of white dominance (Mills 1997). This research also suggests, yet leaves undertheorized, an important question that we tackle in this paper: namely, how *organizations* produce and maintain racial ignorance.

Building on interdisciplinary studies of agnotology and knowledge in organizations, and drawing on archival materials, media reports, organizational documents, secondary sources, materials assembled as part of a related documentary, and ethnographic observation, we examine this case of repeated unearthing and reburial, the "discovery" of remains at the University of Georgia and its aftermath, to theorize how and to what effects racialized organizations (Ray 2019) produce and maintain racial ignorance (Mills 1997; 2007). We identify four strategies through which racialized organizations achieve racial ignorance: *omission*, *equivocation*, *repudiation*, and *procedural juggling*.

### *Omission*

We call *omission* knowledge-practices that actively leave accounts of particular people, places, and political possibilities out of official organizational accounts and ways of knowing. Omission can, in turn, be defensive and offensive (Mueller 2017). Omission may result in part from what Thorbjørn Knudsen calls "category-related blindness," or "categories used in observation which create a self-imposed blindness to potentially destructive information." Thus, omission can be an inevitable side effect of (racialized) knowledge: directing attention in one direction may render an organization unwilling to see in another. But omission should not be understood as merely a side effect. Indeed, organizational omission may also be driven by political interests and achieved through organizational practices. Following Amanda R. Cheong (2023), we argue that omission is "active political and symbolic work being done" often by the administrative and organizational practices of not registering, not documenting, not counting, and "otherwise not recognizing."

As a long-term epistemic strategy, omission can have multiple epistemic objects. We identify, for example, an omission of racialized spaces and people. Through omission, Black spaces are forgotten or drawn out of organizational history, planning documents, or spatial memory. Through omission, adversely racialized people may also be miscategorized or even forgotten, making the adversely racialized not part of the organization's life. As we show, in both these cases, the effects of omission are not only mis or non-recognition, though these effects are

important in their own right, but also stripping Black bodies of humanity by omitting life. In our case, omission turns people into material artifacts. Moreover, while omission adversely affects the omitted, it can be politically beneficial for the organization, indeed, as the “withholding or contraction of recognition to obviate responsibility for or obligations to unwanted populations” (Cheong 2023: 380).

### *Equivocation*

When organizational actors deploy vague or polysemous language to shore up uncertainty about facts and the historical record, they are engaging in equivocation. Primarily a defensive strategy (Mueller 2017), organizations engage in equivocation to produce deniability by mobilizing scientific and historical uncertainty (sometimes produced by omission in the first place) and thereby avoid committing the organization to a path, a set of facts, or a historical timeline. Similar to what Jennifer Best argues in her examination of ambiguity in organizations, we see equivocation as the strategic use of ambiguities “by those in the best position to take advantage of that interpretative power” (Best 2012: 93).

As a strategy of racial ignorance, equivocation raises doubts about what is known or could have been known in ways that protect the organization: it elevates a sense of uncertainty and casts doubt on rules, scientific facts, or historical accounts related in ways to produce protected interpretations that support racialized organizations and Whiteness. Moreover, equivocation allows organizational actors to avoid committing the organization to a path, to a set of facts, or to a historical timeline that works against the organizations’ interest. Thus, even more than omission, equivocation is a strategy tied to preserving the reputation of racialized organizations, creating plausible narratives that can excuse action and inaction. In our case, we identify equivocation when organizational actors cast doubt on previous records that documented the use of land under Baldwin Hall as a cemetery for Black people or that documented grave sites and human remains encountered during previous excavations for the construction of Baldwin Hall in 1937/1938 and 1942. We also identify equivocation when organizations move from considering certain knowledge “facts” only to later treating these as “simply rumors”.

### *Repudiation*

By repudiation, we mean an active refusal and rejection of non-sanctioned organizational knowledge. When organizational actors engage in repudiations, they deny voices, sources, and types of knowledge, even within the organization, that disrupt official accounts and render specific facts knowable in ways that affect the reputation of organizations. Repudiation includes efforts to create irrelevance (Kutsch and Hall 2010) or cast knowledge as atypical or useless (Jalonen 2024) to the matter as defined by organizational actors. As a denial and dismissal of knowledge (Rayner 2012), repudiation, like all practices of ignorance, creates knowledge. In shutting doors and accounts, others are opened, and a particular, official organizational narrative is produced. Repudiation creates an account and protects it from counter-narratives. Though contestation exists, contestants and their knowledge are relegated to non-organizational spaces or delegitimized, creating further possibilities for omission.

The shutting out of community members, despite the common tangent to have “descendants decide,” is a form of repudiation. As we show, repudiation in our case also extended to a rejection of a history of slavery and, in particular, the concrete and constitutional role that enslaved people played in the foundation of the university. This refusal to engage with this fact, and the efforts to render the violent history of slavery as irrelevant to the Baldwin Hall

case played out in the engagement of organizational actors with 1) Black community members, many whom are direct descendants of locally enslaved people; as well as with 2) organizational actors including faculty and students who mobilized historical accounts that linked the Baldwin Hall cemetery to slavery.

### *Procedural juggling*

Formal organizations have norms and procedures that govern what they do, including how they conduct inquiries, produce public communication, deal with crises, and make decisions. These norms and procedures set what organizations need to do, but they also leave open spaces of discretion and interpretive agency. When organizational actors act with discretion yet make appeals to procedure, they are engaging in procedural juggling. At times, procedural juggling strategically shifts jurisdictional boundaries, creating at each turn new kinds of knowledge and ignorance (Lara-Millan 2021)

Organizational actors who are acting with discretion but while claiming to be acting “by the book,” under the strict guidance of the codes and laws, may be engaging in procedural juggling. This is especially the case when they claim that their actions, and the knowledge that results from these, are the “only” legal or normative way to proceed. We see this, for example, when organizational actors create racial ignorance through how the administrative authorities exchange bodies (Lara-Millan 2021) by naming them differently and, hence, invoking different parts of the Code of Georgia and other aspects of their jurisdictions. We also identify procedural juggling when organizations make claims to acting legally, all the while moving in a gray area. When they do so, organizations may claim there is no room for interpretation, discretion, or other ways of acting within the law. They present the choices made as the only courses of action that meet legality; they are imperative and unequivocal, and all organizations involved are well-versed in legality; they operate within it and through it, showcasing the legal procedure as the only possible way to “discover” the graves and bodies.

\*\*\*

Our paper makes at least three contributions. First, the paper provides an account of and theoretical insights that advance our understanding of how ignorance relates to personhood and membership in society. Some important exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Cheong 2023), much of the scholarship on citizenship and subjectivity has been focused on categorization and knowledge-making. Yet, omission and other tactics of ignorance also result in adverse racialization, dehumanization, and denial of personhood and the capacity for meaning-making, an observation made first by W.E.B DuBois, in among other places, “The Forethought”, the essay from which we take our title (DuBois 2018). Second, by centering organizations in the production of racial ignorance, we contribute to understanding their survival. Our starting point in this paper is that as racialized organizations produce and maintain racial dominance, they produce racial knowledge *and* ignorance. By examining how organizations achieve racial ignorance, we shed light on their daily practices and reputational politics (Carpenter 2010). Third, the paper contributes a detailed historical case study to the literature on slavery and higher education (e.g., Harris, Campbell and Brophy 2019). In particular, we illustrate how the constitutive knowledge practices of higher educational organizations, from research, teaching, archiving, testing, documenting, and measuring can and do coexist with the practice of racial omission, equivocation, repudiation, and procedural juggling.

## Works Cited

- Best, J. 2012. Bureaucratic ambiguity. *Economy and Society* 41(1), 84-106.
- Carpenter, D. 2010. *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA*. Princeton University Press.
- Cheong, A. R. 2023. Theorizing Omission: State Strategies for Withholding Official Recognition of Personhood. *Sociological Theory*, 41(4), 377-402.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1990. "The Forethought." Pp. 5-6, in W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Vintage Books/Library of America.
- Harris, L. M., Campbell, J. T., & Brophy, A. L. (Eds.). 2019. *Slavery and the university: Histories and legacies*. University of Georgia Press.
- Jalonen, Harri. 2024. "Ignorance in organizations: a systematic literature review" *Management Review Quarterly*, 74: 909–50.
- Kutsch, E., & Hall, M. 2010. Deliberate ignorance in project risk management. *International journal of project management*, 28(3), 245-255.
- Lara-Millán, A. 2021. *Redistributing the poor: Jails, hospitals, and the crisis of law and fiscal austerity*. Oxford University Press.
- McGoey, L. 2019. *The unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- McGoey, L. 2020. Micro-ignorance and macro-ignorance in the social sciences. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 87(1), 197-217.
- Mills C. W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mills, C. W. 2007. "White ignorance". Pp. 13-38, in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan & Nancy Tuan Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mueller, J. C. 2017. Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance. *Social Problems*, 64(2), 219–332.
- Ray, V. 2019. A Theory of Racialized Organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 26–53.
- Rayner, S. 2012. Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses. *Economy and Society*, 41(1), 107–125.

