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## “It’s Not Enough to Just Insert a Few People of Color:” An Intersectional Analysis of Failed Leadership in Netflix’s *The Chair* Series

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### ABSTRACT

Leadership roles in higher education are still held predominately by white male leaders while women of color, especially, struggle to be recognized, hired, and/or appointed as leaders. In popular culture, though there have been films and television series that focus on student life on campus, there have been few representations of life as a leader in higher education. A new six-episode Netflix series, *The Chair*, about the first woman of color department chair at a liberal arts college examines issues of sexism and racism but doesn’t allow for a harsh enough critique of the insidious ways the institution continues to repress women, especially women of color. I engage in an intersectional analysis of the series’ representations of a department chair and argue that, while masquerading as a transformative representation, the series actually reifies the ideology of the academy (namely white supremacy and heteropatriarchy) and illustrates the ways progressive change is resisted by institutional powerbrokers holding upper-level managerial roles in the college.

Leadership roles in higher education are still held predominately by white male leaders while women of color, especially, struggle to be recognized, hired, and/or appointed as leaders (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017a, 2017b; McChesney, 2017). In popular culture, though there have been films that focus on student life on campus, such as *Drumline*, *Pitch Perfect*, *School Daze*, and television series like *A Different World*, *Community*, and *Grown-ish*, there have been few representations of life as a leader in higher education. A new six-episode Netflix series, *The Chair*, about the first woman of color department chair at a liberal arts college, created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman, premiered on August 20, 2021. Wyman earned a Ph.D. from Harvard in 2017 and had been writing a pilot script. Peet, researching her idea for a series about workplace culture in an old English department, connected with Wyman. The two share creator credit and collaborated on the series together (Herman, 2021). Sandra Oh plays Ji-Yoon Kim, a Korean American woman who becomes the first woman of color department chair of a failing English department at (fictional) Pembroke College. The series examines the issues of sexism and racism and the ways white women and women of color

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have negotiated their roles at the College, but it doesn't allow for a harsh enough critique of the insidious ways the institution continues to repress women, especially women of color.

Ji-Yoon Kim seems to believe that the institution will become more equitable as more women, especially women of color, gain *entrée* and are promoted. For Ji-Yoon, progress is determined based on numbers (i.e., How many women faculty have been promoted? How many people of color were hired?). This stance appears congruent with the second-wave white feminist movement, whereby feminists worked to break down barriers in fields traditionally underrepresented (Tobias, 1998). This stance was a necessary one at the time and there was a hope that if more women entered predominately male fields, circumstances would change. Fitting or forcing women in the workplace, however, does not force the institution to change. What happens to the women who break the glass ceiling? Do they still face an inhospitable work environment? Are they still not taken seriously? Are they sexually harassed on the job? In this stance, the institution can remain inhospitable. It can continue to invalidate and dehumanize white women and women of color. And, it can continue to protect white men and all of their privileges as long as some white women and women of color are allowed in. In this article, I engage in an intersectional analysis (Edwards & Esposito, 2020) of the series' representations of a department chair and argue that, while masquerading as a transformative representation, the series actually reifies the ideology of the academy (namely white supremacy and heteropatriarchy) and illustrates the ways progressive change is resisted by institutional powerbrokers holding upper-level managerial roles in the college. In the next section, I provide a summary of the six-part series.

### Summary of the series

The English department of Pembroke University (seemingly a liberal arts institution) is facing declining enrollments. Its faculty is majority white, majority male, and majority old(er). Ji-Yoon, a middle-aged full professor, was recently appointed as chairperson of the English department. The series starts with Ji-Yoon eagerly walking across campus to her new office. She sits in the chair behind her desk, the chair breaks, and she falls to the floor. We later learn toward the end of the series that the broken chair is a metaphor for the breaking of Ji-Yoon as the series concludes with the department faculty voting "no confidence" in her leadership. Much of the series focuses on Ji-Yoon's quest to save her failing department as the tuition-driven Dean Paul Larson (played by David Morse), commands her to boost enrollments and get rid of the "dinosaurs" who are using the same lecture notes from 30 years ago and, as such, are not attracting large class sizes anymore. Ji-Yoon's additional storylines involve her mothering of an adopted Latina daughter, Ju-Hee "Ju-Ju," played by Everly Carganilla as well as her romantic involvement with a recently widowed, boozy, and reckless, white, male professor Bill Dobson (played by Jay Duplass).

In addition to Ji-Yoon, there is one other woman of color, a junior faculty member the series focuses on named Yazmin "Yaz" McKay (played by Nana Mensah) as well as one senior white woman, an associate professor named Joan Hambling (played by Holland Taylor). Yaz is young, Black, and untenured. She works hard to connect with

her students meeting them where they are, using teaching tools they appreciate (like culturally responsive pedagogy), and making learning fun. She teaches the classic canon but puts a new spin on it. Instead of focusing on the dead white men as writers, she engages students in, for example, explorations of the women who supported them and she tries to humanize the authors for students using social media and other contemporary ways to engage.

Her storyline centers on the quest for tenure as Ji-Yoon puts Elliot (played by Bob Balaban), an older white male faculty member (who incidentally served as department chair for six years) in charge of Yaz's tenure case. As viewers, though we aren't privy to what Yaz writes about, we do learn her scholarship utilizes the frameworks of critical race theory and feminist theory. Critical race theory emerged out of critical legal studies work that was articulating the importance of understanding the ways race and racism legitimate oppressive structures in the legal system (Crenshaw, 2002). Critical race theory has been expanded and applied in areas outside of the legal system. Feminist theory is wide-ranging but ultimately articulates equality for women in all spheres (hooks, 2000). Both theories recognize embodiment and experiential knowledge as central to understanding oppression.

As head of the promotion and tenure committee, Elliott writes a letter to the external reviewers he will select to evaluate Yaz's work. Though Ji-Yoon reminds him of the importance of including scholars who understand "feminist scholarship and critical race theory," it is clear that Elliot believes Yaz's work should be evaluated "objectively." In this case and throughout academia, objectively often means that someone's work will be evaluated solely through the white male gaze. Both feminist scholarship and critical race theory (CRT) reject the notion of objectivity (Ahmed, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1990; Bernal, 1998; Collins, 1990/2000; Edwards & Esposito, 2020; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Matsuda, 1991), so Elliot's insistence on objectivity illustrates he doesn't understand the importance of Ji-Yoon's request. Ji-Yoon, if she honestly was interested in more than performative "support" of Yaz, should have pushed back here and demanded that feminist and CRT scholars be included as reviewers. If Ji-Yoon had engaged in any readings of feminist or critical race theory, she would know that these traditions question what knowledges are valued in academia and why. They are often at odds with the ideas colonial science and its knowledge production have named as "gold standards"—especially around notions of objectivity.

While the series notes that it is about a woman of color department chair, it disappointingly relies on narrow understandings of race and gender equity and illustrates the limitations of performative allyship. The notion of performative allyship is central to understandings of anti-racist behavior. A performative ally is one who expresses solidarity with marginalized people but does not engage in the hard work of redefining power and privilege. It is primarily based on talk and not actions and may be seen as shallow and/or self-serving support for social justices causes (Freya, 2022).

As a scholar, Ji-Yoon could have made well-supported arguments about the limits of objectivity and how its ideological roots are situated within limited understandings of power and domination (Haraway, 1988). Ji-Yoon could also have explained that the culturally situated theories that Yaz uses in her scholarship needed to be reviewed by scholars who will not dismiss them outright as "subjective." Instead, Ji-Yoon seemed to

believe that Yaz's work was so well written and that she was such an amazing pedagogue that reviewers would have to see it too. The fact that scholars have to be judged by the same standards now despite how much more we know about race, gender, and power in academia is troubling, but it occurs everyday in the academy (Harris & González, 2012). A good example of this is Joan, the aging white woman professor depicted in the series.

Joan's age is never revealed but she was the first woman hired in the department and has been teaching for over 30 years. She also reveals that she learned 30 years ago that she made 20,000 dollars less than the male faculty of her same rank but that she never pursued a discrimination case because she didn't want to be "that woman." Joan openly talks of her sexual escapades as a younger faculty member but, in the post-Me-Too era, it is clear that she had been harassed throughout her career and that older male faculty still comment on her body. Her storyline centers on her Title IX fight. Her office was inexplicably moved to the basement while male faculty of lower ranks were able to keep their same offices. In addition to this fight, Joan works with an Information Technology employee to figure out which student said in his student evaluation, "Professor Hambling is who I think about when I'm trying not to cum in my girlfriend." Many of the evaluation comments by students focused on her aging looks instead of her teaching and still had a sexualized component to them.

Much of Ji-Yoon's focus is on her love interest, Bill Dobson. I assume viewers are supposed to feel sorry for Bill. His wife died last year and his daughter went off to college leaving him an empty nester. He plays the part of a tortured white male genius who is increasingly incompetent and unraveling in his professional and personal life. He takes advantage of his teaching assistant, Lila (played by Mallory Low) and expects that she plays the role of his personal assistant (texting him reminders about class, having copies made, and helping him set up for class) yet has not read her dissertation which she presumably submitted to him months prior. During the first class we see him teach, Bill makes a Nazi salute in reference to his lecture on fascism and absurdism. There is honestly no conceivable context for why he does it (although presumably he was trying to illustrate something about 20th-century modernism). Yet this incident leads to a major campus confrontation over what counts as hate speech and/or anti-Semitism and students protest with signs and chants like "No Nazis at Pembroke."

Clearly inappropriate as a teaching tool, the Nazi salute (filmed by multiple students on their cell phones) is turned into a meme. It circulates widely and students become angry and call for Professor Dobson's firing. With his full white male tenured privilege on display, Bill refuses to listen to the Dean or the Public Relations employee who encourage him to immediately apologize to students. Instead, Bill handles it ineffectively his way and this causes even more problems for Ji-Yoon who ultimately supports or makes excuses for his incompetence at every turn. From the student perspective, Professor Dobson is a neo-Nazi and the institution is condoning his actions. He proceeds to make jokes about what's happening as well as show little empathy for students who are hurt by the gesture. Now that I have covered the main plots of the series, I move into a discussion of methods.

## Intersectional analysis as method

I used intersectional analysis to examine *The Chair* series with a particular focus on how women of color are represented and how their relation to the institution is entangled within a history of white male privilege and outright racism and sexism. Intersectionality is a theory that articulates systems of domination (Collins, 1990/2000). It asserts that oppression/privilege does not occur along single markers of identities like race and gender but that, instead, our experiences are mediated by the intersections of our identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Our intersecting and simultaneous identities are then enmeshed within larger systems of domination within society (Crenshaw, 2011) and together form a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990/2000). Though Crenshaw was the first feminist to coin the term intersectionality, we can trace its roots as far back as the 19th century in Maria Stewart’s writings (1995/1831) where she articulated the centrality of race, class, and gender in the experiences of Black women. Black women throughout history like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper advanced similar ideas (Cooper, 2017). Other women of color feminists like Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015/1983) articulated the importance of understanding race class, gender, and sexuality and their ideas are important in the evolution of intersectionality. In its current form, intersectionality as a theory can be used to better understand the complexities of systemic oppression and the ways it manifests in everyday lives. In this instance, intersectionality can be utilized as a tool of analysis for interrogating a seemingly harmless form of entertainment, a Netflix series, to better understand what it could teach us about the world. As defined by Edwards and Esposito (2020):

An intersectional analysis of popular culture texts investigates the knowledge projects inherent to the preferences, styles, and signs an artifact transmits. The intention in such a project is to reveal how popular culture relates to sociological structures. We assert that this work is essential in the 21st century, when so much of how we understand the world is mediated by the transmission of culture (p. 17).

An analysis of a knowledge project means articulating how representations and social structures intersect. In this understanding, popular culture texts as cultural representations are discursive practices that have material consequences on how people live (Esposito, 2009). In fact, as Edwards and Esposito (2020) articulate, “We are literally in a cultural and historical moment when popular culture contributes to symbolic and material violence against minoritized peoples” (p. 20). While there are multiple ways to analyze popular culture data including content analysis (Berelson, 1952), grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1967), and semiotics (De Saussure, 1966), intersectionality specifically addresses the relationship of identities, such as race, class, and gender to “structural, disciplinary, cultural, and/or interpersonal relations of power” (Edwards & Esposito, 2020, p. 41).

There is no easy how-to guide on conducting an intersectional analysis of popular culture texts. However, I tried to remain committed to three perspectives which included rejecting additive approaches, addressing multiple categories of difference to power, and advancing social justice (Edwards & Esposito, 2020). My intention was to analyze the series (with a particular emphasis on leadership) in relationship to power, especially around notions of race, gender, and age. To do so, I watched the series three times. During the third time, I consistently paused the television and completed notes

and a script of what was occurring. These multiple viewings provided me an intimate look into the dialogue and visuals of the series. This was an attempt to figure out some of the more nuanced interactions that occurred on the screen. I then took these notes and coded them using descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2016).

My theoretical frame was, of course, intersectionality, and, thus, I focused on identity and ways that identity, power, and privilege were enacted. Most of my codes dealt with instances of racism, sexism, and ageism as well as references to race and gender. In keeping with an intersectional analysis that accounts for material consequences of oppression, these codes were framed around an understanding that all our institutions, including higher education, are still steeped within white supremacist heteropatriarchy. After coding, I wrote memos to myself teasing out larger ideas and their relations to the intersectional frame. The themes I constructed after coding relates to Ji-Yoon's perspective on diversity (adding more women of color is the solution to inequity) as well as the ways in which the college, as an institution, can be an inhospitable place for women faculty (and leaders) of color. In this paper, I illustrate that *The Chair* series is a great example of the ways in which higher education institutions perpetuate inequities by allowing white men to continue their power and dominance within the walls of the institution.

As I judged Ji-Yoon's leadership on screen, I felt bad for her because I know all too well what it is like being a woman of color department chair in a predominately white and male space. I will discuss my own positionality in the next section. But it is important to note that I engaged in a critique of Ji-Yoon's leadership with an understanding that she was set up to fail. Higher education institutions still serve most effectively the people they were originally designed to educate: white men. As a researcher intimately connected to this field of study, I discuss, below, my own embodiment as a woman department chair of color in this particular historical moment.

### **Embodied researcher**

Because I am a Latina academic department chairperson, a number of friends and family have asked me: "Is being a Chair really like that?" Many look to popular culture as an educative site (Esposito & Love, 2008; Happel-Parkins & Esposito, 2015; Kellner, 1995), a place to learn how to see the world through the way it gets represented to us. This means that representations, especially of minoritized peoples, matter more than ever. Additionally, intersectional analysis of popular culture is an embodied process (Edwards & Esposito, 2020) because, as viewers and consumers, we do not engage passively. There can never be just a passive viewing/consuming of a popular culture artifact because our consumption is always in conversation with "the artifact itself, its producers, ourselves, the audience, the society in which it was situated during its production, and the society in which it is consumed" (p. 31). This means that our bodies and the ways our identities are situated in larger social structures matter in any analysis of popular culture. Part of being an intersectional researcher is understanding yourself as an embodied researcher.

I have served as a department chair in a research one institution for almost four years. I am the first Latina department chair in my department and the College. I serve



21 full-time faculty, 15 part-time instructors, and over 200 students. The department has a mix of tenure track and clinical faculty members, and we primarily serve graduate students. I have been Chair during the time of a global COVID-19 pandemic as well as witness to the social unrest unfolding around the Black Lives Matter movement protests of police brutalities and the murder of George Floyd, among others.

In many ways, the health and safety of faculty and students, the learning curve for some in online pedagogy, as well as the work of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts have necessarily taken precedence over the usual concerns of publish or perish for tenure track faculty and navigating high teaching loads with service work in the larger field for clinical faculty. Recently, the faculty, like the rest of the world, have been engaged in acts of daily survival. It is with this lens that I see and evaluate faculty. For some, it was difficult to conduct research while the world was locked down, while others flourished during this time. Sometimes this was due to resources and access (i.e., whose research could still be conducted online vs. face to face). Given the gendered component of the pandemic, when schools closed and/or reverted to online learning, many faculty mothers faced decreased work time as they became the primary caretakers and teachers of school-aged children. And most all faculty and students had to confront, in some way, the racial reckoning that occurred in this country. Would white people continue to be part of the problem or would they begin to take part in solutions? Would people of color find coconspirators, performative allies, or opponents in a quest for justice? Dismantling systemic racism would not happen in one summer due to continued protests. However, I facilitated and continue to facilitate small(er) acts of racial learning and unlearning, dialogues, and more overall faculty reflection regarding how certain policies and systems in place disproportionately affect people of color.

My efforts as department chair during a global health pandemic were impacted by my own daughter's declining health during this time. As much of the country remained locked in their homes for safety reasons, my daughter and I saw, firsthand, the craziness and chaos that the pandemic had rendered on the health system. Shuttling from doctor's office to hospital, my then-16-year-old daughter and I braved virus exposure in search of positive health outcomes for her. On the home front, my spouse had been labeled an "essential worker" and he went out, each day, to a job that didn't value his life as much as they did a dollar. Thus, as faculty complained to me about online teaching or struggling to balance family life with professional obligations given that clear boundaries no longer existed, I dealt with my own stress and struggle to navigate the murky waters. Learning to lead during this challenging time meant accepting ambiguity as fact and understanding that each day would bring with it a new problem that needed to be solved as well-being able to help sustain overwhelmed faculty, staff, and students who wanted to give up, but who, thankfully, did not.

In summer 2020, as a department chair witnessing a long overdue racial reckoning in this country, I helped facilitate discussions of Anneliese Singh's *The Racial Healing Handbook* with faculty and staff members in the department. We engaged together (virtually) over a period of six weeks, and I learned so much about faculty and staff member's childhoods, racial understandings, and ways they navigated the world. I was also appointed to my university's Racial Taskforce and worked, often biweekly, for the next few months on an understanding of what the university needed to move forward



in the spirit of racial justice and equity. The Taskforce developed a comprehensive action plan and the Provost and President immediately engaged in the work of bringing some of it to fruition. While my time as chair has been difficult, I often wonder what it would have been like without the global and national issues that have shaped my leadership role so drastically. Perhaps the faculty have been so forgiving and understanding precisely because I have had to juggle the chaos of COVID-19 and its ramifications for higher education. But I wonder as I sit in the critique of Ji-Yoon if faculty and students would call me a performative ally or if they would recognize some attempts/initiatives as transformative leadership?

### **Leadership in all of it complexities: *The Chair* as problem solver**

The series represents Ji-Yoon being pulled in multiple directions. Faculty want her support against the administration and against students, while students want her support against faculty and the administration, and the administration wants her support period. These struggles are only part of her professional life, and she must still balance these with her personal obligations. In Ji-Yoon's personal life, we see adopted daughter Ju-Ju vie for attention as Ji-Yoon tries to balance her love life (Bill) and her relationship with her father. Though it appears as if Ji-Yoon personally is fighting against the traditional university which privileges white men above all else, upon close examination through an intersectional lens, it is clear her actions reify the ways white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are entrenched in academia. That is, Ji-Yoon determines the progress of an institution toward equity based on how many women and women of color may get promoted (as evidenced by her drive to get Yaz tenured without an interrogation of the overall climate Yaz faces). Ji-Yoon's vision of leadership clouded what many of the women who needed her support (Yaz, Joan, Lila) actually wanted—an advocate that would show up when needed. In fact, in Joan's situation, every office she went to for help first asked if she had talked to her department chair. The chair was viewed as the problem-solver, yet, Ji-Yoon was so busy solving Bill's problems that she was unable to advocate for Joan. While Ji-Yoon pleaded with Yaz to just wait for the day she was tenured and promoted, Yaz envisioned her life post-tenure. Being the first tenured Black woman in the English department was not enough to keep her in a place that did not value her work. Yaz needed Ji-Yoon to advocate for better conditions for her and that did not happen.

### **Leadership in all of it complexities: Can chairs change the institution?**

I found Henry Giroux's notion of ideology useful to understand the representation of campus life on *The Chair*. Giroux claims that to understand ideologies, we must analyze the ways in which schools (like Pembroke) produce and sustain them. He argues further that:

This means analyzing the way in which domination is concealed at the institutional level. It suggests looking at the way a dominant ideology is inscribed in the form and content of classroom material, the organization of the school, the daily classroom social relationships, the principles that structure the selection and organization of the curriculum, and the discourse and practices of even those who appear to have penetrated the ideology's logic.

If we were to use this notion of ideology to interrogate further, it would be clear that Ji-Yoon, despite being the first woman of color Chair of the English department at Pembroke, reifies the ideological structure of the university. Despite seeming to actively work against ideology as the first woman of color chair, Ji-Yoon's actions reify white supremacy and patriarchy. As Harris and González (2012) argued, "the culture of academia, ultimately, is impervious to change because its power structure is designed to reproduce itself" (p. 7). No matter how hard Ji-Yoon worked to dismantle the structures of the academy, her work would only cement their power. This is because the work of changing institutions requires people of color AND our white allies (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). We cannot do this work alone.

Inconceivably, Ji-Yoon puts more time into assisting Bill than she does Joan or Yaz or Lila and, eventually, puts her career on the line when the Dean tells her that her romantic involvement with Bill will be her downfall. There doesn't seem to be a rational reason for why Ji-Yoon risks everything for Bill, even letting her daughter, Ju-Ju, down again and again. As Ji-Yoon navigates the increasing demands on her time, she often pushes Ju-Ju's needs aside and asks her father and, later, Bill to step into the parent role. We see this when Ji-Yoon's father attends a class presentation despite Ju-Ju begging her mother to attend and it was Bill who helped Ju-Ju prepare and practice the presentation. Even when the school shares some disturbing artwork Ju-Ju created and suggests that she see a psychologist, Ji-Yoon did not prioritize that situation. Her inconceivable defense of Bill on campus, against all rationale thought, does not even align with the previous storyline about Ji-Yoon's romantic interests. She let a man she loved go because he took a job elsewhere. Although she tried to secure a position at the same institution, what she was offered was a downgrade that would have negatively affected her career. Thus, Ji-Yoon chose herself and put her career first instead of giving up what she built for love. Thus, it is difficult to accept that Ji-Yoon would operate in this manner for Bill if she wouldn't do so for the man she loved previously.

### **Leadership in all of its complexities: An endless tug of war**

In some sense, Ji-Yoon fails all the women of color and the white woman she sees as allies to help a white man who doesn't even deserve the benefit of the doubt. It is unclear the message the series intends to communicate. Is romantic love worth risking everything (including your relationship with your daughter) for? Is men's pain more palatable than women's? Should white men be forgiven for racist transgressions even if they don't seem contrite? Although Ji-Yoon fashions herself as a champion of women's rights, especially women of color, none of her actions align with her words. Somehow, I don't think this was the intentional message of the series. However, as viewers, we are privy to the incredible stress Ji-Yoon faces as she navigates competing demands in a seemingly endless tug of war between faculty, students, and administration, as well as her personal life.

Chairs are supposed to simultaneously advocate for faculty and students while at the same time making sure institutional policies and practices are upheld which often puts them in a complicated position (Tucker, 1981). And, yes, there are some issues that are so compelling and time sensitive that all of a chair's time and energy must be used to

address it. However, Ji-Yoon consistently privileges Bill's needs as well as her own version of what she thinks faculty need and want despite both Yaz and Joan specifically articulating what they need and want. We see Ji-Yoon confront Bill's arrogance and lack of contriteness regarding the Nazi salute when she yells at him, "This is not about whether you're a Nazi. This is about whether you're one of those men who, when something like this happens, thinks he can dust himself off and walk away without any fucking sense of consequence." But, in the end, we ultimately watch as Ji-Yoon puts her career in leadership on the line by claiming that she cannot be impartial at Bill's hearing. She recognizes the impossibilities of impartiality in this instance when Bill's job is on the line but doesn't advocate in the same way for Yaz when it comes to her tenure reviewers.

Toward the end of the series, Bill announces that he turned down a settlement the university offered him and will be fighting to get his job back. The faculty of the English department voted "no confidence" in Ji-Yoon, a failure of epic proportions, so she was replaced as Chair. Yaz takes a job at Yale that includes "expedited tenure, an endowed professorship, and a shit ton of money." While it is clear that Ji-Yoon failed Yaz personally and professionally, Ji-Yoon ultimately failed her because she worked within the limits of the university when it came to Yaz but risked forcing change to help Bill. A Black female student noted to Ji-Yoon something that she didn't seem to realize in her quest to "aid" Yaz's tenure bid, "It's not enough to just insert a few people of color." No, it is not enough.

### **"It's not enough to just insert a few people of color"**

*The Chair* illustrates how, when a few people of color are inserted into an otherwise unyielding institution, the people who pay the price are the people of color. Yaz tries to engage in this discussion with Ji-Yoon as she reminds her that so many institutions of higher learning got rich off the unpaid or poorly paid labor of Black, Asian, and Latinx people. While Ji-Yoon exclaims to Yaz in protest of her leaving, "You will be the first tenured Black women in the department!" In response, Yaz shakes her head, "That's why I'm leaving." Yaz and Ji-Yoon think of progress differently. It seems as if Ji-Yoon wants to make herself smaller to fit in the institution while Yaz wants the institution to actually make real room for her.

Ultimately, Ji-Yoon's approach to leadership and equity reified white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in academia. This was made clear through the series exploration of the "old guard" (older white faculty, mostly male) vs. the new guard (Yaz, Lila, young women of color) who push for immediate and clear-cut change. The tensions between the old guard and the new guard are explored in a variety of ways. In Ji-Yoon's first faculty meeting, the old guard is the old(er) white male faculty sitting around the table who clearly outnumber the white female faculty. Interestingly, there appear no men of color around the table, and only Ji-Yoon and Yaz as women of color. As Ji-Yoon walks into the room, an old white male professor says, "Our first lady chair." He might mean this as a compliment, a statement of fact that she is a woman or a micro-aggression but his outdated, sexist language is immediately corrected by Yaz. She tells him the correct term to use is "woman" instead of "lady."

The old guard is represented by the faculty who don't want to change with the times. Their lecture notes are 30 years old, and lecturing is still their main form of pedagogy aligned with the sage on stage notion of teaching. Students are passive recipients of knowledge. On the other hand, Yaz, as the new guard, engages her students in constructivist learning and Socratic discussions. She lectures less and listens more. She pushes students to ask questions instead of quietly taking notes as if she was the only person whose knowledge mattered in the classroom. To help rescue Elliott's low enrolled class, Ji-Yoon combines his class with Yaz's. Yaz immediately says, "He's gonna think I'm his TA."

On their first day of co-teaching, Elliott stands in front of the class and asks Yaz to handout papers. He introduces her, "That is Professor McKay who has graciously agreed to join our class." He appears not to realize that the majority of the students in the room signed up for a class with Professor McKay and not with him. The tensions between the old and new guard play out in a variety of ways between Yaz and Elliott. As they discuss co-teaching, Elliott rejects Yaz's approach to incorporating Twitter into an assignment. She maintains the pedagogical approach as a way to connect with students while Elliott calls it "low hanging fruit." The tensions between Yaz (new guard) and Elliot (old guard) come to a head when Yaz confronts him about the tenure letter he left behind in the copier. Their disagreement circles back to Elliott's low student enrollments. He tells Yaz that he doesn't pander to his students. She charges back, "No one wants what you're selling." Elliott tells Yaz, "I'm not a salesperson." Yaz responds, "You're not a professor either because you don't have any students." The undercurrent of this argument appears to be the institution's reliance on neoliberalism, which is discussed in the next section.

### **The neoliberal academy and the pull of diversity**

Neoliberalism, based on the idea of a free-market economy and minimal state regulation, has had a grave impact on practices and policies within higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000; Steger & Roy, 2010). Neoliberalism presupposes that knowledge is a commodity and universities must figure out how to make the exchange of money for knowledge as cost-effective as possible (Lucal, 2015). One of the most insidious ways this has been done across the board is to increase course limits. What was once a seminar that allowed for student discussion and interaction as well as comprehensive feedback becomes a large(r) lecture hall where more bodies can cram in for relatively the same cost (Preston & Aslett, 2014). Yet, who is making sure knowledge as a commodity has been transferred correctly? This no longer becomes the purview of faculty as, instead, accreditation boards and institutional effectiveness committees make judgments as to how well the knowledge transfer has occurred (Tuchman, 2011). In the spirit of neoliberalism then, academic institutions become run like corporate businesses which result in the downsizing of tenure track positions as these "academic corporations" seek contingent, often part-time faculty with very little protections, to replace tenure track faculty who, through tenure, have both job security and academic freedom (Clawson & Page, 2011). Of course, this is only an undercurrent of the series since Ji-Yoon is facing declining enrollments and budget cuts, but it is a real pressure that ends up affecting how faculty teach and how students learn.

The other tension we see play out is between maintaining the status quo of the old guard vs. an increasingly more diverse student body who desire newer faculty who represent them and their interests. In discussing the fact that Pembroke uses the same picture of Ji-Yoon in their brochures to showcase the diversity, Ji-Yoon says, “We need more women of color.” The dean responds, “As soon as one of them retires, gets kicked out, or dies” and the camera pans the room to old white faculty. The Dean’s statement makes it clear that there is no room for women of color UNTIL the white male faculty give up their seats. Once they cede their positions, only then will there be room for women of color. The dean is acknowledging that no space will be made on the faculty for women of color especially not at the expense of current white male faculty who are presented as being so old (one appears to have dementia and struggles to take medicine) they have little left to offer students. The institution is represented as not willing to engage in conversations about incompetence in a blind effort to allow tenured white male faculty to continue to do little to move the institution forward. It was Yaz whose classes filled and it was Yaz who was shown actively engaging with students and helping to construct their learning in ways that compelled them to want to know more. The dean was willing to put the institution on the backs of women of color like Yaz and Ji-Yoon who would, by necessity, have to work harder than Elliott and his comrades ever did (Matthew, 2016).

The dean was also willing to purposefully not recognize nor care about the blatant incompetence evidenced by these faculty. Instead, he wanted Ji-Yoon to do something about them. But, the fact remained that Ji-Yoon could do little to change them as they had been allowed for years to get away with this poor work ethic and out-of-date pedagogy. Plus, the issue was complicated by their tenure (Kafka, 2021) and Ji-Yoon did not have the authority to intervene or strip them of their tenure. When the Dean tells her they must wait for white faculty to die or retire before more faculty of color can be hired, Ji-Yoon accepts that as a logical fact and is willing to wait. This idea of waiting for tenured faculty (the majority of whom are white) to die or retire first before diversifying the profession is problematic (Kafka, 2021) and yet a common place understanding in many institutions. This is one of the ways the institution remains so racist and sexist- the people who could fight actively against it often do not because they are lulled into a sense of better things to come if we just wait quietly.

Another example of the institution condoning white men’s incompetence or lackluster abilities, often at the expense of women of color, is what occurred around the Pembroke’s Distinguished Lecture. Ji-Yoon announced that Yaz would give the Distinguished Lecture. It is presumed that this lecture is a way to encourage alumni to donate money to the university to build its endowment. Apparently, it had always been the Chair’s responsibility to name the lecturer. This year, under Ji-Yoon’s leadership, the rules have changed and the Dean’s wife has already promised the Distinguished Lecture to David Duchovony, an actor and published author because they “want star power.” Although Ji-Yoon is upset at this, the Dean encourages her to read Duchovony’s book. Duchovony has an unfinished dissertation on 1950s literary theory, an example of another member of the “old guard.” Ji-Yoon meets with Duchovony and tries to explain the ways in which race and gender critique have superseded classic literary theory. Duchovony seems uninterested in Ji-Yoon’s explanations and, given his “star power,” is allowed by the Dean to give the lecture.

## Conclusion

I have argued that an intersectional analysis recognizes there are material consequences to representations and that the consequences are both political/systemic as well as personal. All viewers/consumers of popular culture have a choice to make regarding whether a text might advance social justice or cause further oppression and harm (Edwards & Esposito, 2020). Given that *The Chair* is one of the few popular culture representations of department chair life and campus culture, its power is particularly notable, and we need to analyze it with this in mind. What are the consequences of *The Chair's* representation of Ji-Yoon's failed leadership and how the university, as an institution, seems to continue to progress on the backs of women of color with very little consequence?

This series is particularly dangerous because it masquerades as transgressive. The series represents a much-needed viewpoint, that of a woman of color leader in higher education. Such representations of women of color leaders are rare if they exist at all. Given that one of the ways we learn about ourselves is through how we are represented in popular culture, it is important that this representation exists. However, it doesn't mean that any representation is a good one. When Ji-Yoon's actions and choices are laid bare, it becomes clear that she actively participates in her own oppression. Is this the message we want to send to audiences unfamiliar with academic culture and life or even audiences who may be familiar but who might not be critical regarding power? Ji-Yoon's reliance on the belief that we just need to get more women of color "in the door" of academia allows the culture behind that door to remain toxic and destructive for those already marginalized by sheer lack of presence.

Ji-Yoon's performative support of Yaz, especially, is commonplace on college campuses. As most of the world watched, horrified, as police slowly tortured and ultimately murdered George Floyd, a racial reckoning of sorts occurred. Many white people came to a sudden realization that things might be as bad as their Black and Brown friends and colleagues had been saying. Given the public nature of the murder as well as the public outcry because of so many deaths at once in 2020 (including Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery), many universities and private businesses released statements condemning the treatment of George Floyd and expressing "support" for racial justice and equity (Johnson & Justice, 2022). Many businesses opted to donate money to racial justice causes and some universities created committees to work on a more equitable university culture. Yet, all this outpouring was soon called out for what it was: performative allyship. Many universities and businesses were quick to support diversity and justice efforts but slow to effect real change. Performative allyship doesn't interrupt systemic racism or sexism and does little to change the real barriers to equity. It is often mere lip service—a company, community, or university's belief in undefined "equity." True equity means dismantling systems that have been in place since this country's genocide and massacre of indigenous peoples. And, because some of the systems in question that need dismantling include the legal system and the education system, universities are often prevented from engaging in true systemic change from laws and policies that exist to uphold the status quo. Thus, leaders, like Ji-Yoon, who profess a belief in equality



and who seem marginally interested in making sure women of color succeed have little support to make sure this happens.

For Ji-Yoon to truly engage in anti-racist support of Yaz, for example, she should have immediately conveyed to Elliott that the theoretical frameworks Yaz uses for her research, in particular critical race theory and feminist theory, clearly espouse the importance of embodied and subjective knowledge. How can a scholar who uses CRT or feminist theory be held accountable for theories that actively contradict the ones present in their work? In other words, why should the notion of “objectivity” be utilized to evaluate Yaz’s work when she clearly and loudly proclaims (by her use of CRT and feminist theory) that objectivity is a fallacy? Yet, Ji-Yoon was limited by the legal and policy ramifications of how tenure is “given.” There are procedures and systems in place that universities follow. While Ji-Yoon was willing to question the notion of “objectivity” in terms of Bill’s hearing (and risk losing her job as Chair), she was not willing to risk everything to question the notion of objectivity as it related to Yaz’s evaluation for tenure. The struggle around Yaz’s tenure bid happens in universities across the world. People of color’s cultural and epistemological knowledge differ too drastically from the academy which was founded on and continues to be informed by white European men’s knowledge. If we are truly going to make room for women of color in the academy, we need to start by questioning why we continue to use practices that don’t affirm our work and our value. *The Chair* is an example of failed performative allyship by a woman of color who had good intentions but who was only willing to risk her job to reify white supremacy and patriarchy for a white man.

Throughout my career as a scholar of media and popular culture, I have taken the stance that there is no “bad” representation. I have argued previously that, certainly, there are representations that rely on particular tropes or stereotypes but, as viewers, the power lays with us to interpret and make meaning of representations as we see fit. We are free, in Stuart Hall’s words, to “resist” representations (1997). However, as negative representations continue to create a cumulative text (Weber & Mitchell, 1995) about people of color in general and women of color in particular which contribute to racial stereotypes/tropes and material consequences, I stray further and further from this stance. We need to continually engage with representations to lay bare their connections to systems of power. This is particularly important for work on marginalized groups as well as groups like department chairs who often do not have many media representations of themselves. If there could be one take away from this paper it is that representations have material consequences on our lives and, thus, we should be continually critiquing them, with an intersectional lens, both in and out of the academy.

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