

# Racism and Colonialism: University of Illinois Fires Palestinian Scholar for “Uncivilized” Tweets About Israeli Assault on Gaza

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Global Research, September 13, 2014

[Electronic Intifada](#) 9 September 2014

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The University of Illinois board of trustees has a history of not taking seriously charges of racism from indigenous peoples, including those regarding the university's former mascot. (Image source: [Flickr](#))

Since the news broke a few weeks ago that [Steven Salaita's](#) tenured appointment at the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#) (UIUC) was rejected by Chancellor [Phyllis Wise](#) and, though without a formal vote, by the board of trustees, a great deal of disappointment and outrage has been expressed in social media and in letters to the university.

Some have expressed concern that the university's decision is [unconstitutional and illegal](#), because it violates Salaita's First Amendment rights. Others have argued that the firing [contravenes the principle of academic freedom](#), as well as those of [shared governance and unit autonomy](#) within the university. Finally, many have understood this affair as part of a broader silencing of those [critical of Israel's assault on Gaza](#), suggesting that Salaita is being targeted for [political views that are unpopular among the university's trustees and donors](#).

While all of these have been crucial interventions, very little attention has been paid thus far to the role of systemic racism and colonialism in the Salaita affair.

## Systemic racism

This silence with respect to the role of racism and colonialism in this affair might be regarded as somewhat odd, considering that this affair surrounds a highly unusual and drastic action taken by the university against a Palestinian-American scholar and an American Indian Studies program. Somehow these details about the targets of this action are being treated as merely incidental by those academics who are now [concluding that they, too, could have been Steven Salaita](#).

If any of us could be Salaita, then racism and colonialism must not have had anything to do with this affair. But perhaps we need to think a bit harder about this conclusion.

First, let's be clear. Systemic racism and colonialism extend far beyond (and in fact do not require) any conscious, willful intent to be racist or a colonizer (although they often do); rather, they simply need to produce outcomes that reinforce an entrenched historical

pattern in which people of color and/or the colonized are disproportionately marginalized or harmed.

As such, these systemic injustices can be produced through any number of actions that are nominally colorblind and/or contain only unrecognized biases. Furthermore, because systemic racism is primarily a trait of a social system, rather than of individuals, it can actually be perpetuated by people of color, including Chancellor Wise and others on the University of Illinois' board of trustees. In fact, systemic racism often benefits from and seeks out the inclusion of "multicultural diversity" because it helps to deflect attention and blame from ongoing racist outcomes.

With that in mind, there are many questions we should be asking about the role of systemic racism and colonialism in this affair. First, what effect has it had on this case that Salaita is a Palestinian-American and a person of color? As in all cases of systemic injustice, it is extremely difficult to draw any straight causal connections, as these cases are usually determined by several compounding factors at once.

Mere coincidence?

Nonetheless, might it not be more than a mere coincidence that the board of trustees has taken this extremely rare, if not unprecedented, action in a case involving a scholar of color? It could hardly be denied that racism, white supremacy and colonialism shape which research, and which researchers, are considered valuable and which are considered dispensable in the academy. The concerns of those who make up the university are more likely to be recognized as "the" important concerns.

Furthermore, research that is highly critical of prevailing power structures, which is perhaps more likely to be produced by scholars of color, is routinely judged too radical, too biased, too unobjective, to bring on board. This will obviously be true to an even greater extent when one belongs to a group actively being targeted by these power structures, with which the modern university is enmeshed, and when the knowledge one is producing actively confronts and threatens those structures.

Let's be frank — the kinds of judgments made by the chancellor and trustees about Salaita's unsuitability happen all the time in academic hiring, but usually at the level of the department screening processes, when the stakes and public scrutiny are much lower or non-existent. Such judgments both reflect and reinforce not only the role of the modern university within structures of power, but also to the underrepresentation of people of color in the academy.

We know very well that white privilege, including that which comes from integration into white academic and administrative networks, often provides white scholars with a higher degree of protection against such actions, as they are more likely to be regarded as likeable and collegial, and to be afforded greater benefit of the doubt with respect to their qualifications, objectivity and competence. This doesn't make white scholars immune to the type of actions taken in this case — far from it — but it does tend to provide them with a stronger buffer.

In short, the board may not be consciously targeting Salaita because he is a person of color, but race may still be affecting the type of scholar against whom the board would, and would not, be willing to take such a drastic measure.

## “Civility”

Let’s also consider the language of “civility” in this affair. The justifications given for Salaita’s termination repeatedly point to the “incivility” of Salaita’s tweets. Of course, the concepts of civility and civilization have a longstanding connection with racism and colonialism in this country, with racialized and colonized peoples regularly portrayed as uncivilized brutes in need of a civilizing mission by their colonial masters and racial superiors. In this case, the board need not have actively thought of Salaita as a savage (although there is some indication that they did); it is enough that racism and colonialism have shaped our society’s standards of civility and in turn our assumptions, habits, biases and judgments about what constitutes “civil” behavior (and who tends to exhibit it).

Again, white privilege often confers greater leeway in this regard with respect to tone, comportment and decorum. But white supremacy also affects which issues are deemed worthy of outrage and “incivility” and which are not — which issues allow for “demeaning and disrespectful words” to be used, and which do not. White privilege is then further distributed to those who only get upset about the “right” things — those who, for example, only become outraged at the massacre of the right kinds of bodies.

It is quite clear that in our society the content and styles of speech (as well as the kinds of speakers) that are likely to be regarded as uncivil(ized) are disproportionately those of indigenous peoples and people of color. Again, this is especially the case when one belongs to a group against whom the United States is actively and publicly involved in carrying out immense colonial violence. Further, the language of incivility is even more likely to be deployed against indigenous women and women of color, for whom misogynistic discourses of women’s emotionality, hysteria and lack of reason come into play to challenge their ability to participate in civil public debate.

## Paternalism

Finally, it cannot be regarded as merely coincidental that this highly unusual termination has been directed toward an appointment in the American Indian Studies program. The university’s largely unprecedented step of violating the autonomy of the hiring unit — comprised of those who actually possess the scholarly expertise to make academic appointments — is paternalistic and treats the hiring unit as incompetent in their decisionmaking.

Could this affair not be regarded as yet another instance of the historical pattern of colonial paternalism against indigenous peoples on this land? Is this history not shaping what kind of department the board would be willing to second guess, undermine and override in this way? The long history of colonial interactions between the United States and indigenous peoples continues to structure our society’s habits, assumptions, biases, judgments and institutions, such that indigenous peoples are more often, more easily and more reflexively treated as incapable of making their own decisions, and in greater need of guidance and tutelage.

It is the white man’s — and today an increasingly multicultural elite’s — burden to carry out this civilizing mission. As Jacki Thompson Rand [has written](#), the UIUC administration’s actions in the Salaita affair are “painfully reminiscent of colonial practices” and have “put our colleagues on a reservation where they must ask for permission to step outside its boundaries in matters of program administration, expression of opinion and affiliation.”

The systemic colonial character of this intervention becomes even clearer against the backdrop of the University of Illinois' [ongoing mascot and team name controversy](#), especially the Illinois board of trustees' longstanding reticence to take seriously charges of racism from indigenous peoples, and to deal with this controversy in a robust and comprehensive manner.

The board's [recent open letter](#) in response to the Salaita affair provides further evidence, as the board aligns the university's mission with the American nation-building project — and we all know how this nation-building project has dealt with indigenous peoples who have been viewed as “getting in the way.”

We need to ask some different questions about the Salaita affair, beyond those we have been asking about free speech, academic freedom and Palestine/Israel. Intertwined with all of these issues (and intersecting with related issues of racism and colonialism in Palestine) is the presence of entrenched, systemic racism and colonialism in the United States that not only shapes our society's judgments, practices and institutional outcomes, but also enables extraordinary and heavy-handed expressions of power to be carried out more easily and reflexively against indigenous peoples and people of color.

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