

COMMUNICATING
RESPONSIBLE DIVERSITY,
EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Public Relations for Social Responsibility

Affirming DEI Commitment with Action

EDITED BY
Donnalyn Pompper



Public Relations for Social Responsibility

Communicating Responsible Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Series Editor: Donnalyn Pompper

This *Communicating Responsible Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* series brings together leading scholars of public relations, communication management, (corporate) social responsibility, sustainability, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Together, we offer critique and map new arenas for discovery in an effort to advance a collective goal of eliminating bias/discrimination from organizations and other public spaces. Simultaneously, we amplify the virtues of equity and respect among humans and for all species.

Despite nearly two decades of public relations theory building and formal study about the importance of DEI, the number of public relations practitioners who are not male or Caucasian/White has not grown in meaningful ways and research directions seem to have hit a wall. Examining public relations as a “responsibility” provides new avenues for critiquing ways power operates in and through public relations work. This series adds a much-needed contribution to global understanding of intersections among DEI with social responsibility to enable public relations practitioners and organizations (corporations and nonprofits) to take lip service to the next level. To be authentic, DEI must be a component of social responsibility and sustainability. And the public relations practitioner, as insider-activist and ethics guardian, is the logical point person to infuse DEI thinking in policies, decision-making, and everyday life throughout organizations.

Public Relations for Social Responsibility: Affirming DEI Commitment with Action

EDITED BY

DONNALYN POMPPER

University of Oregon, USA



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About the Editor

Donnalyn Pompper (PhD, Media & Communication, Temple University), APR, is Professor and Endowed Chair in Public Relations at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, where she teaches courses in and researches public relations, corporate social responsibility/sustainability, and social identity. Overall, her research provides routes for enabling people, globally, to achieve their maximum potential at work, to embrace their intersecting social identity dimensions (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender) and to critically examine these issues across mass media representations. Pompper is an internationally recognized scholar who most recently published *Community Building and Early Public Relations: Pioneer Women's Role on and after the Oregon Trail* (2021, Routledge) and edited *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Ethical Public Relations: Strengthening Synergies with Human Resources* (2018, Emerald Publishing).

Pompper has won two national book awards: the 2015 *PRIDE Book Award for Innovation, Development, and Educational Achievement in Public Relations* from the Public Relations Division of the National Communication Association for *Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Public Relations: Negotiating Multiple Complex Challenges* (2015, Routledge); and the 2014 *Top Book Award* from the Organizational Communication Division of the National Communication Association for *Practical and Theoretical Implications of Successfully Doing Difference in Organizations* (2014, Emerald Publishing). In addition, Pompper has published extensively in peer-reviewed academic journals including *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, *Mass Communication and Society*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, *The Howard Journal of Communications*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and many others. She is an editorial board member for four top public relations research journals and six other academic journals.

Pompper holds the Accredited Public Relations credential from Public Relations Society of America. Prior to joining the academy, she worked as a public relations manager and journalist who brings 25 years of practical experience to the classroom and her research. She worked in public affairs management at Campbell's Soup Company, marketing public relations management at Tasty Baking Company where she created the public relations department, and as an account

manager at Lewis, Gilman & Kynett (Philadelphia's then-largest public relations/advertising firm). Pompper also worked as a daily newspaper freelance reporter at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Courier-Post*, as well as news editor at a weekly New Jersey newspaper chain.

dpompper@aol.com

Shiloh, New Jersey, USA

September 2, 2020

About the Contributors

Eric Kwame Adae, PhD, is an assistant professor of public relations at Drake University. He is from Ghana in West Africa, where he earned undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Ghana. He earned his doctorate degree in media and communication studies from the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication.

Elinam Amevor is a doctoral student at the University of Oregon. He holds a BA in Communication Studies from Ghana Institute of Journalism, and an MPhil in Communication and Media Studies from the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

Zifei Fay Chen, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on corporate social responsibility, social media strategies, startup and entrepreneurial public relations, and crisis communication and management.

Layire Diop is a doctoral student at the University of Oregon. He earned a bachelor's and master's degrees from Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal, and an MS from Drexel University, where he attended on a Fulbright Scholarship.

Tugce Ertem Eray, PhD, is a doctoral student at the University of Oregon and completed her first PhD at Istanbul University. She earned a Bachelor of Science in political science and international relations from Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul.

Oludotun Kayode Fashakin, PhD, works as an external lecturer at Aarhus University, Denmark. His work extends institutional approaches to public relations professional projects and drive for legitimacy in country-specific contexts.

Lorena Gomez-Barris is the director of administration at the Kenneth Rainin Foundation where she is responsible for the strategic direction of the organization's administrative systems and helps lead their DEI work. With more than 20 years of nonprofit experience, she drives external and internal communications efforts.

Susan Grantham, PhD, is a professor at the University of Hartford. Her published articles and conference presentations primarily have focused on environmental and health communication, corporate social responsibility reporting, and text network analysis methodology.

Ann D. Summerall Jabro, PhD, is university professor of communication and organizational leadership. She is recognized for her teaching and research excellence. Her applied research contributions enhance pedagogical effectiveness in experiential and problem-based learning environments, negotiation and conflict resolution in organizational settings, and risk and crisis management acumen in both traditional and social media environments.

Constance E. Kampf, PhD, is an associate professor at the Department of Management, Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her work focuses on connecting IS technology, social media, organizational contexts, innovation, knowledge management and project management with rhetoric and communication.

Katie Kresic is a communications professional from Long Island, NY, specializing in public relations, strategic planning, and social media. She graduated from Quinnipiac University with a Master of Science in Public Relations and a Specialization in Social Media.

Alexander V. Laskin, PhD, is a professor at Quinnipiac University, director of graduate studies, and consultant. He has authored over 50 publications focused on investor relations, international communications, and emerging technologies.

Nneka Logan, PhD, is associate professor in the School of Communication at Virginia Tech. Her research and teaching focus on public relations, organizational communication, corporate social responsibility, race, and diversity.

Katie M. Masler holds an MS degree in public relations from Quinnipiac University. Her areas of interest are community relations and social responsibility.

Debra Merskin, PhD, is professor of media studies in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon. Her research and teaching focus on intersectional race- and gender-based theories and examine exclusion or stereotyping by media of marginalized human beings as well as animals other than humans.

Samantha Nadel received her MA in nonprofit management from University Oregon after graduating from Georgetown with a BA in psychology.

Moronke Oshin-Martin, D.Mgt, is assistant professor of communication at the City University of NY and has taught at Seton Hall University. She has worked as a journalist and served as spokesperson and communications consultant for numerous public and private organizations.

Antoaneta M. Vanc, PhD, is associate professor of strategic communication at Quinnipiac University. Her research focuses primarily on corporate social responsibility, international public relations, public diplomacy, sports diplomacy, and corporate diplomacy.

Edward T. Vieira, Jr., PhD, is professor of marketing and statistics at Simmons University. He is the author of statistics and public relations textbooks, as well as 40 peer-reviewed research publications, and 35 conference papers.

Michelle T. Violanti, PhD, associate professor at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, teaches theory, leadership and followership, cocultural communication, and research methods.

Richard D. Waters, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Public and Nonprofit Administration in the School of Management at the University of San Francisco where he teaches strategic communication and research design courses. His research focuses on nonprofit communication, particularly the fundraising process and major gift negotiations.

Franziska Weder is Associate Professor for Communication & Organization at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria; on leave) and Senior Lecturer at the University of Queensland (Australia), teaching and researching strategic communication, sustainability communication and Corporate Social Responsibility.

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List of Contributors

<i>Eric Kwame Adae</i>	Drake University, USA
<i>Elinam Amevor</i>	University of Oregon, USA
<i>Zifei Fay Chen</i>	University of San Francisco, USA
<i>Layire Diop</i>	University of Oregon, USA
<i>Tugce Ertem Eray</i>	University of Oregon, USA
<i>Oludotun Kayode Fashakin</i>	Aarhus University, Denmark
<i>Lorena Gomez-Barris</i>	Kenneth Rainin Foundation, USA
<i>Susan Grantham</i>	University of Hartford, USA
<i>Ann D. Summerall Jabro</i>	Robert Morris University, USA
<i>Constance E. Kampf</i>	Aarhus University, Denmark
<i>Katie Kresic</i>	Corbin Advisors, USA
<i>Alexander V. Laskin</i>	Quinnipiac University, USA
<i>Nneka Logan</i>	Virginia Tech, USA
<i>Katie M. Masler</i>	Communications professional, USA
<i>Debra Merskin</i>	University of Oregon, USA
<i>Samantha Nadel</i>	Communications professional, USA
<i>Moronke Oshin-Martin</i>	City University of New York, USA
<i>Donnalyn Pompper</i>	University of Oregon, USA
<i>Antoaneta M. Vanc</i>	Quinnipiac University, USA
<i>Edward T. Vieira, Jr.</i>	Simmons University, USA
<i>Michelle Violanti</i>	University of Tennessee, USA
<i>Richard D. Waters</i>	University of San Francisco, USA
<i>Franzisca Weder</i>	The University of Queensland, Australia; University of Klagenfurt, Austria

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Preface

This edited collection of internationally recognized authors sets the tone for the new *Intersections of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion with Public Relations as Social Responsibility* series by Emerald Publishing. It is the first book series to examine intersections of public relations (PR), corporate social responsibility (CSR), and diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI). Importantly, authors draw from numerous theory streams and formal research methods to support ongoing theory building and ideas for practical application that are needed to bring deeper understanding to key intersections as they play out in PR practice and theory building.

This group of leading scholars of PR, communication management, social responsibility, sustainability, and DEI offer critique and map new arenas for discovery. Our overall goal is to eliminate bias/discrimination from organizations and other public spaces and to amplify the virtues of equality and respect across all species. The set of authors represented in this edited collection are shaped by worldviews of their homes in Austria, Denmark, Ghana, Senegal, Turkey, and the United States.

The timing for this first book in the series is particularly relevant. Globally, macroaggressions and hate crimes persist, as violence against immigrants, girls, women, African Americans, Muslims, Jews, and the LGBTQ community members has risen significantly in the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). Despite decades of PR theory building and formal study about the importance of DEI, the number of PR practitioners who are not male or Caucasian/White have not grown in meaningful ways and research directions seem to have hit a wall. Examining PR as a “responsibility” provides new avenues for critiquing ways power operates in and through PR work. This book series will add a much-needed contribution to global understanding of intersections among DEI with social responsibility and sustainability to enable PR practitioners and organizations (corporations *and* nonprofits) to take lip service to the next level. To be authentic, DEI must be a component of social responsibility and sustainability. The PR practitioner, as insider-activist and ethics guardian, is the logical point person to infuse DEI thinking in policies, decision-making, and everyday life throughout organizations and across stakeholder communities.

How This Book Is Organized

Public Relations for Social Responsibility: Affirming DEI Commitment with Action features three units of 13 chapters. **Unit I: Legal and Economic Frameworks Thwarting Authentic Social Responsibility and DEI**, **Unit II: Unique Social Responsibility Style of Women and People of Color Managing Organizations**, and **Unit III: Expanding Social Responsibility Critique to Include New Kinds of Stakeholders When Considering DEI**.

In Unit I, three chapters address shortcomings of *business as usual* in the United States. This unit offers critique and tangible examples of ways that legal structures and capitalism support hegemony which prevents an authentic embrace of DEI and action. Nneka Logan recommends reversal of decades of organizational homophily and acknowledging benefits gained from a history of discrimination against people of color. Moronke Oshin-Martin underscores exceptional shortcomings of effectively dealing with COVID-19 crises in the summer of 2020, especially as these impact communities of color. Susan Grantham and Edward T. Vieira, Jr. put the pharmaceutical industry's social responsibility reports under the microscope to recommend a path forward for improving communication strategies regarding DEI commitment.

Unit II offers successful outcomes of social responsibility and PR interplay as evidenced by social identity dimension intersections among organizational leadership, as well as critique of failed DEI efforts. First up, my research with Tugce Ertem-Eray, Eric Adae, Elinam Amevor, Layire Diop, and Samantha Nadel uncovered a small handful of Fortune 500 companies that have achieved 50-50% gender equity on their board of directors and we critique the practice of ethnic tokenism when too few people of color serve on multiple boards. Michelle T. Violanti addresses some of the many shortcomings associated with lacking DEI in organizations, especially workplace bullying and (irr)esponsible leadership. Eric Kwame Adae examines philosophical influences on CEO activism in Ghana in western Africa.

Unit III breaks entirely new ground by reconceptualizing social responsibility beyond stakeholder groups traditionally addressed by PR theorists. Debra Mer-skin writes about the importance of considering animals as stakeholders. Constance E. Kampf and Oludotun Kayode Fashakin offer artificial intelligence (AI) as a new framework for considering ethics and DEI.

Finally, Unit IV offers new paths for helping PR practitioners move forward to authentically navigate organizations toward authentic DEI. To begin, Richard Waters, Zifei Fay Chen, and Lorena Gomez-Barris invite practitioners to reconsider traditional campaign management tools by offering a new mindset. Alexander V. Laskin and Katie Kresic recommend *inclusion* as a CSR component and brand connection strategy. Antoaneta M. Vanc and Katie M. Masler use social anchor theory to explore community relations among professional sports organizations. Ann D. Jabro offers a case study about developing a community advisory council for emergency planning in a socioeconomically challenged area. Finally, Franzisca Weder advocates for the transformative potential of PR for social change.

Meeting Short-Term Goals and Objectives of the Series

This edited collected addresses a primary goal of the new series, *Intersections of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion with Public Relations as Social Responsibility*, by following up on the commitment of 200 CEOs who declared that “shareholder value” is no longer their primary concern, but that it is “[i]nvesting in employees, delivering value to customers, dealing ethically with suppliers and supporting outside communities” (Fitzgerald, 2019). The Business Roundtable issued this new definition of the “purpose of a corporation” and in a public “statement on the purpose of a corporation” included this language: “We foster diversity and inclusion, dignity and respect” (Fitzgerald, 2019). Given this directive at the forefront of global business goals, case studies of successes and critique of failures offer source material for this series.

This first installment in the series also explores industry-identified trends related to social responsibility and explores ways to link these to organizations’ DEI commitments – by offering critique of barriers to making legal protections against discrimination (where they exist) a reality globally.

Sincere Gratitude

I am grateful to many who supported this project, including external reviewers who gave of their time when there was too little of it to go around. I appreciate Endowed Chair in Public Relations funding that enables me to purchase books and travel to conferences, so I especially thank the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon. Big thank-you to graduate students who participated in my corporate social responsibility course, showing overwhelming enthusiasm and hunger for knowledge in this area when I first arrived in Oregon. Last, but by no means least, I offer sincere thanks to Niall Kennedy, senior publisher, and Sophie Barr, content editor, at Emerald Group Publishing Limited – as well as the Emerald production staff and anonymous reviewers.

Donnalyn Pompper, Editor
*Intersections of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion with Public
Relations as Social Responsibility Series*

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Unit I

Legal and Economic Frameworks

Thwarting Authentic Social

Responsibility and DEI

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Chapter 1

Breaking Down Barriers of the Past and Moving Toward Authentic DEI Adoption

Nneka Logan

Abstract

This chapter squarely attributes DEI responsibility to powerful corporations that have historically benefitted from a history of discrimination against people of color and recommends a path forward that embraces DEI-PR-CSR intersections by placing DEI within a CSR office rather than in HR.

Keywords: Race; history; corporations; economics; infrastructure; privilege

Introduction

This chapter explores barriers to the authentic adoption of diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) in corporate America and argues that achieving authentic DEI is a primary responsibility that corporations have yet to fully fulfill. Furthermore, I contend that DEI should be embedded within corporate social responsibility (CSR) and communication should lead DEI and CSR efforts to facilitate their authentic adoption in America's corporate organizations. Since the 1990s, DEI efforts and CSR have evolved from being rather novel, progressive corporate initiatives to almost hegemonic, corporate commonsense. Despite the prevalence of such programs today, problems such as racism, microaggressions, and discrimination persist in many corporate settings. This paradox raises an important question: Why are diversity and CSR efforts so pervasive and yet so ineffective at addressing, or redressing, matters of discrimination in the workplace – particularly in the context of race? While all forms of identity are important, as well as the intersectional nature of social identity (Vardeman & Sebesta, 2020), race is the primary focus of this chapter because of its unique relation to the evolution of the corporate form and because race continues to be a significant determinant of social status and relations in society as well as in its institutions such as corporations.

On the one hand, there is consensus that “today’s organizations understand the important role diversity and inclusion (D&I) plays in organizational success – how it positively contributes to organizational culture, marketplace competitiveness, and social responsibility” (Mundy, 2015, p. 2). But on the other hand, while “D&I efforts contributed to increasing the number of women in executive ranks and people of color at all levels” (Wills, 2020, p. 2), many would agree much more needs to be done to achieve equity for people who historically have been the recipients of discrimination in the workplace (Roddy, 2020). A *Fortune* magazine article put the matter into further context:

Despite years of diversity programs and pious pledges by corporate America, the ranks of African-American chief executives running a *Fortune* 500 company remain maddeningly very slim: There are only five black CEOs on the 2020 list. In all there have only been 18 black CEOs on the *Fortune* 500 lists since 1999. The peak was six in 2012. (Wahba, 2020, para. 1)

Currently, there are no black women in CEO roles.

This chapter problematizes why DEI and CSR efforts are pervasive but not optimally effective in achieving racial equity in the workplace – by exploring the history of the corporation, particularly its racialized roots, which I argue are located in the legal and economic discourses that empower the modern corporate form as a constitutionally protected *legal person*. The chapter also maintains that corporate personhood serves as a foundation of corporate power (Ritz, 2007) as it also explains how the corporate person contributed to racially discriminatory practices throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in ways that continue to serve as barriers for the authentic adoption of DEI in the twenty-first century.

I argue that corporations were discursively constructed as sites of privilege and exclusion, inculcating and reproducing the durable perception that only certain people belong there. Or perhaps more precisely that different *types* of people belong there, but in different capacities – capacities that primarily were determined by one’s race, gender, and/or sexuality. For example, black people “belonged” as the help – custodians, cooks, security, and so on. White women belonged as secretaries and in other support roles, and cisgender white men belonged as managers and future leaders.

The durability of such perceptions is evidenced not only in the demographic makeup of corporate America today but also in the statistics that characterize it as a space of discrimination on multiple levels and illuminate the ongoing need for more effective DEI. For example, 1.8 million discrimination lawsuits were filed between 1997 and 2018 (Paychex Wor, 2019). In addition, “About four-in-ten working women (42%) in the United States say they have faced discrimination on the job because of their gender” (Parker & Funk, 2017), and last year nearly 24,000 people reported cases of racial discrimination to the EEOC (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Black employees have found nooses on the job, been referred to as “monkey” (Jameel & Yerardi, 2019), and asked to cut or change their natural hairstyles such as locks, braids, and afros – or face sanction (Griffin, 2019;

McGregor, 2019). Moreover, “Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home or know of a Black woman sent home from the workplace because of her hair” (Dove, n.d., para. 3) because black women who choose not to wear their hair in Eurocentric styles are frequent targets of discrimination (Koval & Rosette, 2020).

Racial Discrimination Today Has Enduring Historic Roots

Racial discrimination in today’s workplace emanates from racial discrimination in the past. This chapter focuses on how the racialized history of the corporation serves as one barrier to equitable change while the processes of racial discrimination that corporations have engaged in since their inception serve as another barrier that must be broken down. Together, corporate history and ongoing processes of discrimination have created conditions where DEI efforts are viewed as unwelcome impositions to many people in corporate America’s mainstream instead of as necessary improvements (Thomas & Plaut, 2008).

Historically, almost all programs that aimed to create equity in society or in the workplace, particularly racial equity, have been met with resistance – from yesteryear’s Reconstruction to contemporary diversity efforts (Blackmon, 2009; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Thus, resistance to DEI is understandable. I argue that barriers to the authentic adoption of DEI can potentially be broken down if DEI is situated as part of a corporation’s CSR and if there are communication practitioners willing to serve as insider activists (Pompper, 2015), who lead corporations to confront individual (Janssen, 2013) and collective (Logan, 2019, 2021) histories of discrimination. The hope is that a deeper awareness of how racial discrimination was embedded into the corporate form would inspire a greater appreciation for the legacy of discrimination that still persists in our workplaces, coupled with a willingness to create equitable change.

This long-overdue action can materialize only if communicators are aware of the racialized history of the corporation, are troubled by the processes of exclusion it has perpetuated, and are willing to leverage their own privilege for positive change. This chapter investigates these dynamics by exploring relevant scholarship on the corporation, race, DEI, CSR, and public relations. It offers suggestions for breaking down the barriers constructed throughout our history. Though the chapter focuses on the US context, its implications are globally relevant given the reach of multinational corporations and the fact that social identity difference serves as a barrier to inclusion and equity around the world.

History of the Corporation as a Site of Exclusion

When many people think of the history of the corporation, they think of the Industrial Revolution, massive factories and the growth of big business propelled by great businessmen who fueled America’s rise to economic dominance (Marchand, 1998). The development of public relations is similarly framed, often highlighting the contributions of men like Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays who rose to fame and fortune through their work for corporate clients (Ewen, 1996; Hiebert, 2017). According to Tedlow (2001), from its earliest days,

...[t]he corporate form proved a key device for the mobilization and channeling of the scarce capital of the young republic into remunerative ventures.... The corporation was the tool to maneuver the quest for private gain toward the betterment of all. (p. 4)

At the turn of the nineteenth century, a burgeoning corporate America served as a forceful engine for capitalism in the United States, operating under the presumption that what was good for corporations was good for the entire nation (Logan, 2014). Corporations were imagined to be apolitical sites of economic production, focused on achieving business objectives (Friedman, 1970) (Fig. 1.1).

Reflecting on the socioeconomic circumstances that gave rise to corporate America is the foundation for eradicating racism in organizations today. Bowman (1996) wrote,

The American business corporation is largely an indigenous creation. It has come to embody the sort of practical genius that Americans are famous for – a capacity to exploit new opportunities and to adapt to changing exigencies even while assiduously planning the next venture. (p. 1)

At the same time, Bowman (1996) also recognized that the corporation has never been simply an economic device and is an organization characterized by



Fig. 1.1. The History of the Corporation and Birth of the Industrial Revolution is Commonly Fueled by Images of Massive Factories and Growth of the Railroad Industry Led by Great Businessmen Who Fueled America's Rise to Economic Dominance. *Source:* Luciano De polo.

political tumult since its inception. The modern corporation emerged from a controversial Supreme Court decision in *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886), which essentially equated the personhood of corporations with that of human beings. The decision was controversial because it used the Fourteenth Amendment to fortify the legal personhood of corporations, even though the Amendment was originally designed to affirm and protect the full personhood of formerly enslaved black people, in a post-Civil War America (e.g., [Aljalian, 1999](#); [Bowman, 1996](#)). Moreover, corporate persons – characterized by their whiteness as white people were the people primarily able to attain the combination of knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to create corporations – contributed to the exploitation and oppression of black persons by participating in forced labor, which was essentially another form of slavery ([Blackmon, 2009](#)). With the Fourteenth Amendment, corporate persons secured an array of constitutional rights expanding their wealth and power, such as First Amendment rights that protect corporate money as free speech ([Ritz, 2007](#)). A brief glance at the history of the corporation illuminates its racialized roots through its appropriation of a racialized discourse in the Fourteenth Amendment.

In a postemancipation America, the corporate person blossomed beautifully while black people continued to suffer throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in labor contexts. For example, some southern states enacted laws allowing former masters to force their former slaves to work, keep all wages if a black person quit employment on their own volition, and refer to all nonwhite workers as “servants” ([Greene, 1995](#)). Additionally,

Freedmen were assaulted and murdered for attempting to leave plantations, disputing contract settlements, not laboring in the manner desired by their employers, attempting to buy or rent land, and resisting whipping. (qtd. in [Greene, 1995](#), p. 296)

Making matters worse, the federal government’s retreat from Reconstruction facilitated the rise of Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a collection of state and local statutes that were designed to return black people to a slavery-like existence. These laws denied blacks the right to vote, receive an education, hold jobs, and attain equal opportunities across the entire spectrum of social life ([History.com, 2018](#)).

While sharecropping, menial labor, and forced labor characterized much of the employment “opportunities” for blacks in the south, the North was no panacea with blacks largely denied access to labor unions, equal employment opportunities, and fair treatment (e.g., [Harris, 1995](#)) since unions across trades excluded black workers and often entirely barred them from gainful employment in certain fields. [Crenshaw \(1995\)](#) explained that

...[i]mmigrant labor unions were particularly adamant about keeping out black workers; indeed, it was precisely in order to assimilate into the American mainstream that immigrant laborers adopted these exclusionary policies. (p. 114)

Unsurprisingly, racist labor practices resulted in a racialized labor structure that situated white people at the top, while inculcating the idea that blacks and other people of color did not belong in corporate America – at least not in professional positions. These historical conditions laid the foundation for the racialized landscape of corporate America that is reflected in its communicative component of public relations. Much public relations research published between 2005 and 2016 exploring relations of inclusion and exclusion found that some individuals in public relations are privileged over others, such as men over women or white women over women of color (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

The 1960s US civil rights movement ushered in positive social changes, such as equal opportunity legislation and Affirmative Action policy. These efforts were intended to “begin the essential work of rethinking rights, power, equality, race and property from the perspective of those whose access to each of these has been limited by their oppression” (Harris, 1995, p. 288). Affirmative Action was not met with sufficient support and encountered substantial resistance because

...by and large...the very same whites who administered explicit policies of segregation and racial domination kept their jobs as decision makers in employment offices of companies, schools, lending offices, banks and so on. (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xvi)

Implementing the new policies was a challenge as many administrators refused to change with the times. Those committed to maintaining a status quo that privileged racial whiteness gained support from the successive administrations of Presidents of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton who all undermined Affirmative Action (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998), further contributing to the racialization of twentieth- and twenty-first-century workplaces. Thus, since slavery times, a racialized labor structure which situated white people at the top in management and leadership roles – particularly white males – while regulating people of color to the bottom prevailed, producing a white leader prototype (Logan, 2011) that serves as a barrier to more equitable inclusion of people of color in corporate America and inhibits their ascension up the corporate ladder.

DEI: A Matter of Resistance and Persistence

It is helpful to offer some basic definitions as a foundation to understanding connections among public relations, DEI, and CSR. Three operationalizations capture the essential aspects of the DEI terrain (Cooperative Extension, n.d., para. 1–3):

- **Diversity** is the presence of differences that may include race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective. Populations that have been – and remain – underrepresented among practitioners in the field and marginalized in the broader society.