“The only racism left is that against White people”

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he election of President Obama ushered in a paradoxical public response regarding the relevance of racism in contemporary society. First, many commentators argued that a black President meant that the US had entered a “post-racial era” (Bush and Feagin 2011). That is, for racial minorities, these commentators believed there were no longer systemic barriers in place that prevent upward mobility for racial minorities. Second, and in tension with the first development, white people on the aggregate believe that contemporary anti-white discrimination is more prevalent than anti-black discrimination (Norton and Sommers 2011). These two frameworks create a cohesive, dominant message that racism is no longer an issue unless it is targeting white people (Bush and Feagin 2011).

The racial dynamics of the larger society frequently play out on the college campus, and this creates a complicated dynamic for Latina/o students. The college years are a formative time of racial/ethnic identity development, but a hostile campus climate can create a toxic environment in which growth may occur (Cabrera and Hurtado 2015). For example, the persistent message that racism is no longer an issue juxtaposed against the lived realities of being racially targeted can create what Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) refer to as “Am I Going Crazy?” syndrome. This conceptual article interprets the campus racial climate (Hurtado et al. 2012) from the perspective of Latina/o students who are, to borrow

1. Throughout this article, I use the term “Latina/o” to refer to the pan-ethnic identity, which encapsulates students with Latin-American origins. It is more specific than the government-created “Hispanic,” is broader than terms like “Chicana/o,” and the use of the “a/o” avoids sexist language usage. I am not yet on board using the “x” ending, but am still deliberating.
from Lee (2005), “up against Whiteness.” It then moves to interrogating white privilege in higher education as well as white responsibility for creating more racially inclusive campus environments. The article moves on to explore culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris 2012) as a means of supporting Latina/o undergraduates as they continue to experience campus marginalization via the normalization of whiteness. It concludes with some considerations regarding how to frame race-conscious higher education practice in a postracial context that equates race-consciousness with “reverse racism” (Bush and Feagin 2011; McKinney 2003).

**CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE AND WHITENESS**

*Racial climate* describes the dynamic interplay of multiple components of a college campus that collectively serve to either support or inhibit student development. The different components consist of:

- an institutional legacy of inclusion/exclusion;
- compositional diversity;
- psychological dimension;
- behavioral dimension; and
- organizational dimension (Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005, 15–19).

An *institutional legacy of inclusion/exclusion* refers not only to history, but also to the ways in which institutions have responded to these legacies. A recent example of this is the University of Texas, Austin, removal of a statue of Confederacy President Jefferson Davis.2 *Compositional diversity* refers to the proportion of students of color on campus, previously designated “structural diversity.” The *behavioral dimension* encompasses the quantity and quality of cross-racial interactions on campus, while the *psychological dimension* involves perceptions of how inclusive or exclusive students believe the campus to be. The *organizational dimension* encompasses the ways in which diversity is (or is not) embedded in structures, policies, curricula, and decision-making processes of the institution.

The creation and application of campus racial climate initiatives and policies were intended as a means of creating more meaningful racial inclusion within institutions of higher education above and beyond simple numeric diversity (Hurtado et al. 1998; Milem, Chang, and Antonio, 2005). When the focus shifts to racially privileged, white students, the waters

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become murkier because the very markers of racial inclusion can be seen as examples of racial exclusion (i.e., “reverse discrimination”) (Cabrera 2014b; Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin 2016). For example, race-conscious recruitment and admissions policies are frequently framed as discriminatory against white people (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Cabrera 2014a). This belief is so strong and consistent, it was a primary rationale for attacks on affirmative action starting with Regents v. Bakke (1978), and running through Hopwood (1996), Grutter (2003), Gratz (2003), and the current Supreme Court case around Fisher. All of these cases are predicated upon one claim: if the plaintiffs were not white, they would have gained admission. While it is almost impossible for them to substantiate these claims, their cases highlight how increasing multiculturalism heightens perceptions of “reverse discrimination.” Orozco (2011) takes this formulation one step further, and argues that white innocence exists only in the presence of minority aggression. Essentially, the empirical reality of white privilege is discursively flipped on its head first by establishing white innocence, then by insulating this innocence by diverting attention to perceptions of “reverse discrimination.”

This is common beyond issues of affirmative action. For example, Mexican American Studies in Tucson has recently been reframed as the “hate Whitey” curriculum (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, and Marx 2014; Cammarota and Romero 2014). Campus cultural centers are consistently asked to be more “open” and “inclusive,” which implicitly means open to white students (Patton 2010). Even the presence of cultural centers can provoke leading and myopic questions such as, “Why don’t we have a White Student Union?” (Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin 2016). Thus, markers of racial inclusivity are frequently framed as racially oppressing white students. Within this hotly contested area, the question arises: What is to be done?

**Primary Responsibility: Whiteness and the Racially Privileged**

Within institutions of higher education, there are frequent discussions of white privilege (e.g., McIntosh 1989), but rarely do these discussions move to the topic of the responsibility associated with unwarranted privileges. Instead of disrupting racial privilege, the focus tends to be on supporting

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3. For example, a common refrain that establishes white innocence (on an individual level) is, “I am not a racist, so why should I have to pay for the sins of my ancestors?” (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Pierce 2012).
minoritized⁴ groups, which can have unintended, negative consequences and implications. For example, when issues of educational marginalization arise for Latina/o students, a common interpretive focus lies on how to foster resiliency strategies among the targeted group (e.g., Arellano and Padilla 1996; Cabrera and Padilla 2004; O’Connor 2002). By resiliency, I mean that despite structured inequality, minoritized individuals experience educational success through a combination of individual drive and institutional support (O’Connor 2002). While I support the application of more “asset-based” analyses instead of “deficit-based” ones (Yosso 2005), there are two problems with focusing on resiliency. First, by placing minoritized individuals at the center of the analysis, it alleviates responsibility for the initial creation of inequality. That is, resiliency is only necessary to the extent that Latina/o students are marginalized, and the underlying question becomes: What were the structures, discourses, and social practices that created this marginalization in the first place?

Second, a relatively unexplored issue in education research is the concept of John Henryism (Bennett et al. 2004). John Henry was a railroad worker who challenged a machine to a rock-breaking race. Even though he won in an incredible feat of human will, he collapsed and died. His story has become a conceptual metaphor for the unintended negative consequences of resiliency. If students are embedded in toxic environments, they may be fostering resiliency at the cost of the physical, mental, and/or emotional health (Bennett et al. 2004). While the college environment and the campus racial climate may not be as toxic as the K-12 in many urban contexts (Duncan-Andrade 2009), there are a number of issues associated with it. For example, in the college environment students of color face microaggressions⁵ from their peers on a regular basis, and constantly having to navigate this racially taxing interpersonal environment can lead to racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007). Additionally, state-level anti-Latina/o policies such as Arizona’s SB1070⁶ can serve to further student racial stress and marginalization on a campus level (Mendez and Cabrera 2015).

⁴ By minoritized, I mean a racial minority group (i.e., non-white), but also one that is racially marginalized. Minoritized focuses on actions and systems that support the process of racial oppression. I prefer this term to “minority,” as it focuses on a process of marginalization as opposed to simply a numerical description.

⁵ Microaggressions are “subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal” (Yosso et al. 2009, 660).

⁶ SB1070 is also colloquially known as the “show me your papers” law. It required police officers during routine traffic stops to ask for proof of citizenship if they suspected the driver to be undocumented.
Thus, I center this analysis of Latina/o student campus marginalization on white responsibility for addressing racial conditions. There is a strong tendency in higher education scholarship and practice to use diversity as a code word for students of color. To the extent that there is a racial issue on campus, it is important to bring the voices of the marginalized to the forefront. That said, to limit the scope of the analysis to only people of color inadvertently misses the root cause of the problem. For example, every microaggression has a microaggressee and a microaggressor. We understand the experience of the former very well, but tend not hold the latter to account for their actions. Therefore, I am compelled by Applebaum’s (2010, 53–90) conception that racial issues entail both white complicity and responsibility.

So, where is white complicity and responsibility within this formulation? First and foremost, it is the responsibility of white students, faculty, staff, and administrators to educate themselves about issues of race (Applebaum 2010; Cabrera 2012). While a number of important racial lessons can be gleaned by white people through cross-racial interactions, it is also emotionally and mentally taxing to make Latina/o students educate their white peers and can create problematic power dynamics when Latina/os are required to educate professors (Cabrera and Hurtado 2015; Leonardo and Porter 2010).

Whiteness is so engrained in the institutional structure of higher education (Gusa 2010; Harper and Hurtado 2007) that specific means of disrupting this normative structure are too many and too varied to list here. Instead, I will continue this discussion on a conceptual level, discussing core foci regarding the challenging of whiteness in higher education: a necessary prerequisite to fostering racial inclusion for Latina/o students. To this end, I focus on both the promise and limitations of white privilege pedagogy. White privilege refers to the unmeritocratic advantages that white people enjoy because they exist in a society where structured racism continues to create inequitable opportunity along the color line (Kendall 2006). Having white students, faculty, staff, and administrators begin to unpack the numerous ways that their advantages create disadvantages for students of color in general, and Latina/o students in particular, can help people understand how racial inequality is maintained in the absence of overt racial animus (i.e., “Racism without Racists,” Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Engaging in white privilege pedagogy is not merely shifting perceptual realities and making white people aware of racism. It also requires a shift in many uninterrogated assumptions that many privileged people hold about interpersonal interactions. For example, demanding calm when discussing issues of racism is a manifestation of white privilege (O’Brien 2004). That
is, the pain of racism is real, deep, profound, and dehumanizing. To say that people of color must “take the emotion out” when discussing racism only serves to cater to those unaffected by its adverse effects. Thus, white privilege pedagogy requires white people to frequently reconsider how they listen to people of color on the subject of racism. This also entails rejecting demands for social comfort as a prerequisite to engaging in racial dialogues (Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin, 2016; Leonardo and Porter 2010). When issues of racism are discussed, they can frequently make white people feel uncomfortable either because they are experiencing a new painful reality of which they were previously unaware (Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin 2016; Mills 1997) or because they feel targeted and blamed for issues of racism (Leonardo and Porter 2010; McKinney 2003). Whatever the rationale, the demand by racially privileged individuals for social comfort in cross-racial dialogues serves only to recreate white privilege because talking about racism is generally uncomfortable. To engage only when comfortable means that racially privileged individuals will engage only if they do not have to face these ugly, painful, and uncomfortable realities (i.e., they will talk about racism only if they do not have to actually engage racism).

Ultimately, white privilege pedagogy is meant to illuminate to racially privileged individuals the insidious nature of racism, while concurrently rejecting the counterproductive racial politics of “reverse racism” discourse (Kendall 2006; McKinney 2003). There are some scholars who critique the limitations of this approach. For example, Lensmire et al. (2013) highlighted the ways in which white privilege pedagogy in practice was limited because it functioned as a space for white people to confess their racial privileges, but with no connection to their social responsibility or social action. Leonardo (2004) has also criticized white privilege pedagogy for individualizing racism instead of directly linking the localized privileges of whiteness to the systemic reality of contemporary white supremacy. These are valid and important critiques that can be taken account of as future leaders develop and implement white privilege pedagogy, and it is therefore not necessary to throw the proverbial baby out with the racial bathwater.

Despite the limitations of white privilege pedagogy, there is an incredible amount of potential because a great deal of contemporary racism is both manifest and recreated in white space, behind closed doors (Cabrera 2014b; Picca and Feagin 2007). Within these white spaces, white people have unique access to what Picca and Feagin (2007, 91–143) refer to as “backstage performance,” or racism that is performed for other white people in the absence of people of color. These behaviors and ideologies then creep
into the larger campus environment, creating a foundation for the marginalization of students of color. To the extent that there are racial issues on college campuses, white people bear primary responsibility for addressing them as they are concurrently the ones privileged by the current system of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Omi & Winant 1994). All too often, discussions of campus inclusion focus only on Latina/o student marginalization with no critical interrogation of white racial privilege. Attention can and should be paid to Latina/o students as well, but it takes a dramatically different form.


The needs of Latina/o college students are so diverse that it would be foolhardy to attempt to list the specific ways they can be met. Instead, I offer some conceptual principles that can help guide campus practice. First, I begin with a tension. Yes, Latina/o students experience campus marginalization, but no, this does not mean they are “in need.” I am guided by the multitude of scholars who reject deficit frameworks to understand the experiences of Latina/o students in particular (Yosso 2005) and students of color in general (Hurtado et al. 2012; Ladson-Billings 1995). By deficit framework, I mean framing the issue of minority underrepresentation as an issue of “cultural deficiencies” of minoritized communities with no consideration given the structural conditions that foster this inequality. Rather, the analysis focuses on the engrained assets of Latina/o students, and how to build upon them to best serve the needs of these minoritized students.

These additive approaches have been called “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings 1995). By culturally relevant pedagogy, I mean pedagogies that “reposition the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of working-class communities—specifically poor communities of color—as resources and assets to honor, explore and extend” (Paris and Alim 2014, 87). These pedagogical practices were engaged as a means of minoritized students developing repertoires in the dominant forms (i.e., white) of cultural expression, language, and knowledge. Paris (2012) has extended this concept in two critically important ways. First, he argues that instead of culturally relevant pedagogy, we need culturally sustaining pedagogy. That is, that the knowledge and cultural practices of minoritized students should be valued in and of itself, and pedagogical practices need to ensure that they maintain their cultural orientation while learning the dominant one. Second, Paris and Alim (2014) lovingly critiqued culturally relevant pedagogies for being insufficiently critical of the oppressive practices fre-
quently embedded within the subcultures of youth of color. For example, hip-hop music can be a linguistically creative form of youthful expression and at the same time a manifestation of misogyny.

While these debates and theorizing about culturally sustaining pedagogies are largely rooted in K-12 education, a number of their areas are applicable to higher education scholarship. For example, a consistent theme in higher education scholarship is the presence of white space within predominantly white institutions of higher education (Harper and Hurtado 2007). By white space, I mean campus environments where whiteness is the cultural norm at the expense of the cultures of racial minorities. Gusa (2010) refers to this as the white institutional presence, and it creates an institutional pressure to give up one’s native culture and assimilate into the dominant white paradigm. Instead, the institutional culture needs to change to not only engage but also to sustain Latina/o student native culture (broadly defined). This can occur in a number of ways, but consistent with the climate literature two key issues contextualize these approaches: 1) There is no magic silver bullet for creating campus inclusion, and 2) Local initiatives are only effective at changing institutional culture if they are coordinated (Hurtado et al. 1998; Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005).

Therefore, integrating culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris 2012) and the campus racial climate (Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005) to support Latina/o students involves the following. First, it is necessary for PWIs (predominantly white institutions) to increase their enrollment of Latina/o students. It is very difficult to sustain one’s native culture if there is no critical mass of same-race/ethnicity students on campus (Cabrera and Hurtado 2015; Garces and Jayakumar 2014; Gonzalez 2002). In addition, the institution needs to create space for increased quantity and quality of cross-racial interactions. A very promising approach involves intergroup dialogue, but it requires both a social justice focus and extremely skilled facilitators to be effective (Zuñiga et al. 2007). Additionally, institutions must be willing to address their historical legacies of inclusion and exclusion. This is frequently applied to issues of college access, but it can also mean within-institution segregation. For example, the traditional Greek system is both dominated by white students (also upper-middle-class ones), and also a site of racial-themed parties (Garcia et al. 2011; Syrett 2009). Disrupting this white space can be important in concurrently disrupting the pressures that Latina/o students frequently face at PWIs to either hide or give up their native culture.

From an organizational perspective, offering ethnic studies programs has been shown to be a very promising curricular intervention that can also
support the goals of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris 2012; Sleeter 2011). Not only can ethnic studies promote increased educational achievement, but also sense of self and opportunities for self-exploration via seeing oneself in the curriculum (Hu-DeHart 1993; Sleeter 2011; Takaki 1993). Additionally, there needs to be space allocated for Latina/o students to further engage this cultural sustenance and self-exploration. This can take the form of Latina/o themed cultural centers, living and learning communities, or both (Patton 2010). Essentially, it becomes critically important within PWIs for space to exist where the cultural norm is not whiteness (Gusa 2010). Finally, Latina/o faculty can play a critically important role in supporting and sustaining Latina/o students (Anaya and Cole 2001; Santos and Reigadas 2002). However, diversifying the faculty does not happen by chance. Rather, it needs to be built into the organizational rewards and accountability structure of an institution (Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005).

Again, these initiatives, programs, and curricula are only required to the extent that Latina/o cultural identity is not valued within the larger institutional context. That said, they are all important for Latina/o students maintaining and further developing their cultural sense of self during the critically important undergraduate years—hence the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Additionally, culturally sustaining pedagogy reframes the rationale behind these campus initiatives. A great deal of the diversity in higher education work is rooted in the “diversity rationale,” which argues that fostering more inclusive campus environments improves educational outcomes for all students (Milem, Chang, Antonio 2005). That is, diversity from a legal standpoint represents a compelling educational interest only to the extent that it benefits white students (James 2014). Instead, culturally sustaining pedagogy argues that offering culturally specific means of supporting minoritized students represents a justifiable end in and of itself (Paris and Alim 2014).

A key development that culturally sustaining pedagogy offers over more traditional culturally relevant approaches is that it offers an opportunity for a loving critique of Latina/o students. That is, it supports Latina/o students in their educational/cultural endeavors, but requires educators to critique their students when their students are engaging in oppressive behaviors (Paris 2012; Paris and Alim 2014). For example, in 2014 there was a Mexican-themed party at a University of Arizona sorority (Fernandez October 27, 2014). A number of Latina/o students were visibly upset by this blatant campus racism; however, several young Latino men decided to lodge their complaint against the sorority in misogynistic terms. The perspective of culturally sustaining pedagogy takes a two-fold focus on
this issue. On the one hand, it supports the Latina/o students as they challenge campus racism. On the other, it requires a critique of the students’ misogyny so that, to borrow from Freire (2000), that in their quest for liberation that the oppressed do not become the oppressor.

Thus, culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a great deal of promise, moving ahead when applied to Latina/o college students. It offers a method of engagement that supports marginalized students without tolerating the recreation of other forms of oppression. It is a race- and culturally conscious approach to higher education practice, which will concurrently make it controversial in postracial times where race-consciousness is framed as “reverse racism” (Bush and Feagin 2011). Thus, those engaging in this approach need to be prepared and willing to proactively frame the need for race-conscious social policies in the popular discourse.

The Final Step: Proactive Framing and Support of Latina/o Students in a Postracial Age

While an era of postracialism has put race-conscious and culturally specific college programming on the defensive, it is not a new phenomenon. Regardless, it creates a strong tension. On the one hand, race-neutral approaches to higher-education racial inequality tend to be ineffective. On the other, race- and culturally specific approaches frequently face attacks from those who see them as marginalizing white students. Thus, this work is not only about finding effective higher education strategies to support Latina/o students, but also about finding ways to proactively defend them. This requires effectively framing educational practice, and to explore how to do this I rely on the work of Lakoff (2008). Lakoff argues that a key reason political conservatives have, in recent memory, beaten liberals has to do with framing. He highlights three key components. First, the argument must have an explicitly articulated moral center. Second, the framers need to articulate what they are for as opposed to what they are against. Finally, the framing needs to be proactive instead of reactive.

The example of affirmative action is illustrative of framing. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the liberal defense of affirmative action was “mend it, don’t end it,” while conservatives argued that consideration of race was racist, in particular, racist against white people (Crosby 2004). In this instance, the liberal frame holds no moral center, is reactive in its framing, and paints the issue in the negative (“don’t end it”). Conversely, the conservative position has a strong moral center (i.e., racism is evil). It is proactive and positive in its framing (i.e., end racial discrimination now by eliminating affirmative action). This is only one example of dozens in
modern political memory that highlights these differences in framing along political and ideological lines, and those offering culturally sustaining pedagogies to Latina/o college students need to be prepared to proactively defend these practices in the court of public opinion.

Lopez (2014) highlights why this work is critically important. He meticulously documents what he refers to as “dog whistle politics,” whereby coded racism manipulated by savvy politicians appeals to the unconscious racism of white people in society and even makes them vote against their own economic interests. He explores issues such as Willie Horton, the rise of the Tea Party, undocumented immigration, and anti-Obama sentiment, finding a consistent theme. In a post-Civil Rights era, overt appeals to racism are largely ignored and demeaned, but underground racism is not only accepted but in many instances integral to political strategies. Lopez (2014, 178) elaborates on the strategy:

Rather, dog whistle appeals remain inaudible to most, instead resonating with their unconscious racial anxieties and eliciting support only so long as they remain hidden. It seems that dog whistle politicians manipulate these background views and emotions, but succeed with most whites only so long as the racial appeals stay below conscious recognition.

There are two critically important components to this issue that Lopez articulates. First, and similar to Lakoff, conservative politicians have been extremely effective at garnering support by appealing to the unconscious racism of the voting populace. However, the underground nature of these appeals is also their weakness. Lopez further demonstrates that the more racist appeals are openly derided for being racist, the less effective racist appeals are because this moves the discussion out of an unconscious realm. Lopez (2014, 227) continues:

Those who discuss racism are accused of being the real racists—again, as if pulling a fire alarm means one set the fire, or dialing 911 means one committed the crime. Refusing to be silenced, to defeat dog whistle racism and restore government to the side of the middle class will require as many of us as possible to go ahead and sound that alarm.

Thus, those creating and enacting Latina/o-specific programming are likely going to be accused of racism under the guise of colorblindness or post-racialism (Bush and Feagin 2011). However, the more these people are able to proactively label these coded appeals as racism, the less effect they will have. For example, the more proactively PWIs can be in defending the existence of Latina/o-specific cultural centers, the less effective appeals for
a “White Student Center” will be. Additionally, the more proactive PWIs are at highlighting and critiquing the racism embedded in appeals for a “White Student Center,” the less they will have to defend the existence of their Latina/o-specific cultural centers. The critical importance of this framing is that it allows practitioners to do the work. It can create a discursive shield against racist attacks, which means practitioners will ultimately be able to better serve Latina/o students in the process.

**CONCLUSION**

Massive battles are afoot within increasingly multicultural higher education, and demography is not destiny. That is, as the proportion of students of color increases, there is no guarantee that their needs will be met. To accomplish this, scholars, administrators, and practitioners need a multipronged strategy. They need to understand the unique educational needs of this population. They then have to creatively foster targeted ways of addressing these needs in a racially and culturally specific mechanism. They need to be willing to disrupt and challenge white racism within the ivory tower. Finally, they have to be willing to proactively defend these programs against myopic and racist attacks from people engaging in postracial discourse. Universal approaches have largely failed to effectively support Latina/o students, and targeted approaches are framed as either being divisive or even racist. Given these choices, many feel it is better to remain quiet and try to focus on the work at the expense of the public discourse. To this end, I offer the words of Audre Lorde in “A Litany for Survival” (1978, 31–32):

> and when we speak we are afraid  
> our words will not be heard  
> nor welcomed  
> but when we are silent  
> we are still afraid  
>  
> So it is better to speak  
> remembering  
> we were never meant to survive

Even though those supporting Latina/o students may be afraid to speak, the fear is still there during periods of silence. Thus, it is better to speak understanding that Latina/o-specific initiatives were never meant to survive postracialism. This is precisely why this additional facet of the work is so critically important.
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