Introduction to the Special Issue Defending Ethnic Studies in Arizona: Obama, the Rise of the Hard Right, Arizona and Texas and the Attack on Racialized Communities Studies

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Obama, the Rise of the Hard Right,
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Unfortunately, lurking behind this process in melding the melting pot was that beige colored crayon in the hands of reactionary whites, smoldering beneath the surface of our national conscience. The tipping point came with the election of an African-American president. Mr. Obama’s presidency illuminated and unleashed the hatred and racism that we thought was fixed, but merely had been sublimated. Not since the days of Selma and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, have we witnessed such vitriolic energy being directed towards minorities.

James Pkrehbiel, “America, We Won’t Go Back to the Beige Colored Crayon!”

Introduction

As the epigram by educator James Pkrehbiel suggests, these are volatile times, dangerous times. Fascism comes stealthily on the proverbial cat’s paws. Arizona’s and Texas's recent anti-ethnic studies enactments have a long and sordid history; they represent the culmination of Eurocentric, nativist and racist initiatives begun decades ago, though their roots go back nearly two hundred years. Arizona House Bill 2281 represents rightwing responses to the current national socioeconomic crisis and the state’s failing economy. According to Duane Campbell, a progressive political economist, “with little else to offer the unemployed, scapegoating immigrants has become a substitute in Arizona for having a real solution to solving the economic needs of its residents.” Collectively, HB 2281 and the Texas State Board of Education revisions are also reactions to changing local demographics, surging Mexican American immigration, especially its potential transformation of the states’ electoral politics, and President Barack Obama’s 2008 electoral victory.¹

Arizona, the most conservative state has become the country’s sociopolitical weathervane. The landside of right-wing laws passed during its Forty-Ninth legislative session presaged the revanchist Republican avalanche that flowed across the country in the midterm elections. In the spring of 2010, the
Arizona Legislature enacted several retrograde laws. Included among the draconian legislation passed by the Grand Canyon state are the well-known SB 1170 and House Bill 2281, its anti-immigrant and anti-ethnic studies acts. However, these are just the most infamous of the backward bills passed during Arizona’s 49th legislative session. Befitting its state slogan, two other pieces of legislation plunged its citizens further into the abyss. The House approved a “birther bill” requiring political parties to present proof of U.S. birth for their 2012 presidential candidates. Further the bill would empower the secretary of state to not register any candidate he or she reasonably doubted met the state’s requirements to run for the presidency. It also passed SB 1108/HB 2347, which permits the carrying of a concealed weapon without a Concealed Weapons Permit.

Spearheaded by Arizona’s hard core, the resurgence of the U.S. right has been startling. Racial antipathy and colorblind ideology are the animating factors that unite and mobilize the conservative movement. The rhetoric and initiatives of the Tea Party is fueling an increasingly overtly racist political culture. The economic recession, fear of a dark majority, and the election of the country’s first African American President has engendered the renewed racist climate. Obama’s allegedly liberal political orientation is nearly as important as his race to his rightwing opponents. The emergence of the corporately funded Tea Party has fueled much of the shift to the hard right. Race and racism are at the core of the Tea Party movement. Christopher Parker, a University of Washington assistant professor of political science observed, “The tea party is not just about politics and size of government. The data suggests it may also be about race.” A survey by the University of Washington ‘s Center for Survey Research on “race and politics” discovered white individuals that believe the federal government has done too much for African Americans are 36 percent more likely “to support the tea party than those who are not.” The survey also revealed that among the Tea Party’s membership and supporters less than half considered Blacks hardworking (35%), intelligent (45%), or trustworthy (41%). Whites’ views of Latina/os
were similar. Fifty percent believed Latina/os were hardworking, but only 39 percent of whites found them intelligent and even fewer, 37 percent believed them trustworthy.4

Another national survey conducted by the University of Chicago’s Mobilization Change and Political & Civic Engagement Center discovered sharp differences on a host of social, economic, and political issues by racial group. Authored by Jamila Celestine-Michener, “Racial Attitudes in 2008 Election and Beyond,” found that 69 percent of Blacks and 51 percent of Latina/os consider racism “a major problem” while 71 percent of whites and 68 percent of Asian Americans do not. Revealingly, 32 percent of whites believe population increases in the U.S’s darker groups “weakens” the country; not surprisingly, only ten percent of Latina/os and 6 percent of Blacks and Asians thought so. Regarding attitudes toward racism and inequality, Celestine-Michener concluded Obama’s election has done “little to alter the stark racial divides that seem to remain a fixture in the American political landscape.” Indeed, one could, as Pkrehbiel does, argue that his election unleashed the onslaught of white rage currently engulfing the country.5

Amazingly, just two years prior, the multiracial U.S. people celebrated Obama’s historic election as the 44th President of the United States of America. As the surveys of racial attitudes cited above reveal, not everyone celebrated his victory. A significant percentage of white Americans viewed President Obama’s election in dystopian terms. They believe the dark rabble had seized “their” country. Angry white nationalists, led by the Tea Party have mobilized to “take back their country.” Much of the anger generated by Obama’s election resulted from the dread many whites feel toward the electoral coalition that propelled him into the White House. The right fears a dark and progressive country. Ironically Obama, a moderate pragmatic liberal symbolizes the right’s deepest fears. They are frightened by what they believe Obama portends, the loss of a white majority, the loss of white supremacy. The right does not so much fear Obama as they fear that he is the prelude to something far darker and more progressive.
Construction of a Progressive Multiracial Electoral Coalition

Driven in part by the severe economic downturn, rapacious racial policies, and changing racialized ethnic demographics, President Obama consolidated an electoral coalition of progressive social forces. He garnered unparalleled percentages of African American, Latino/a, and Asian American voters, which he combined with FDR’s old New Deal coalition—the labor movement, the intelligentsia, youth, and women—to craft a devastating victory, 365 to 173 electoral votes. Black political unity anchored Obama’s victorious progressive multiracial coalition. The number of African American voters rose nearly 3 million, from 13,452,000 in 2004 to 16,416,000 in 2008, or by 22 percent as African Americans increased their percentage of the total electorate, from 11 to 13 percent. Obama received an unprecedented 96 percent of the Black vote!5

Obama also made historic advances in attracting Asian American and Latina/o voters to the Democratic Party. The election confirmed the shift of Asian Americans from the Republican to the Democratic Party. In 1992, the first election in which the Roper Center tracked Asian American voters only 31 percent voted Democratic. Obama received 63 percent of the Asian American vote, up from the 56 and 55 percent in 2004 and 2000.7 The Latino/a vote was crucial to Obama’s victory in the key battleground states of Florida, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada. Nationally, the Latina/o electorate increased by 16 percent, from 9,784,000 to 11,365,000. They constituted 9 percent of the electorate, of which 67 percent opted for Obama. He reversed Latina/o voters drift toward the Republican Party; in 2004, Latina/o support plummeted to 53 percent, down from 62 percent in 2000. Perhaps more importantly, and indicative of the future, 76 percent of young Latina/os voted for Obama.8
Young voters, those under 30 and first-time voters broke for Obama even more decisively than did any category other than African Americans and Latina/os. Two-thirds of voters under-thirty and 72 percent of first-time voters supported Obama. The percentage of young voters in the entire electorate barely increased, rising from 17 percent in 2004 to 18 percent or from 20,790,000 in 2004 to 22,730,000 in 2008. However, an impressive 52-53 percent of eligible young voters turned out. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, historically no age gap existed in electoral politics, as young people, voted the same as older citizens. Between 1976 and 2004, the gap between younger and older voters was “only 1.8 percentage points.”9 Yet, Obama won the youth vote by more than a 2-1 to one margin. Meanwhile first-time voters increased from 102,728,000 to 106,072,000 but remained at 11 percent of the electorate.10

Union membership mattered in the 2008 Presidential election. Largely due to a well-orchestrated anti-racist mobilization, organized labor voted decisively for Obama, 67 to 30 percent. According to David Moberg of In These Times, “Obama won by 23 points among white non-college graduates who belong to a union, even as he lost by 18 points among all white non-college voters.”11 Finally, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, a significant gender gap of seven percent enabled Obama’s victory. Race, however, greatly influenced the gender gap, especially in the key battleground states. In the critical battleground states of Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Nevada, North Carolina, and Virginia, Obama only won a plurality of white women’s vote in two states, Pennsylvania (51 to 48) and Nevada (49 to 48). By percentage of vote, African American women and men, and Latina women were Obama’s staunchest supporters.12

The white right are more frightened by the progressive multiracial electoral coalition that swept him into the presidency and the Democrats into control of both houses of Congress, than by Obama himself. White nationalists fear President Obama’s sweeping victory foreshadows the end of white
supremacy. At 53.3 percent, by 2009, oppressed racialized groups comprise a majority of Texas’s population; Latina/os compose nearly 37 percent and African Americans 12 percent. In Arizona, oppressed racialized groups composed 42.7 percent in 2009, with Latina/os comprising nearly 31 percent, American Indians nearly 5 percent and African Americans 4.4 percent. Fearing their states’ changing demography portended the end of white supremacy, white nationalists targeted immigration and education, specifically the country’s 40-year old fragile effort to transform education from an exercise in Eurocentric propaganda into the genuine production and dissemination of progressive multiracial knowledge. Just as during the overthrow of Reconstruction and the Nadir, the most racist state, Mississippi led the revanchist onslaught on the country’s initial thrust toward multiracial democracy, so, Arizona, the most racist contemporary state is leading the current assault, followed closely by Texas.13

The Beige Crayon: A Metaphor for Whiteness as Normality

The attack on Racialized Communities Studies (RCS) represents a return to what Pkrehbiel has termed the “the beige crayon.” The epigram by Pkrehbiel alludes to the anti-Obama, anti-black and anti-people of color attitudes at the core of the right’s resurgence. It also suggests the right’s desire to blunt the tide of progressive anti-racist education and the incorporation of subjugated knowledge about oppressed racialized groups into the U.S. elementary, secondary, and higher education curricula. That “beige crayon” is the “hidden curriculum” that indoctrinates U.S. students to believe whiteness is normal and that blackness, brownness, redness, and yellowness are deviant and inferior. As the 1970s-era Black student that colored his self-portrait with the beige crayon replied when Pkrehbiel questioned his odd coloring choice, “That’s the way the picture is supposed to be.” Behind the right’s patriotic mask lies the face of white nationalism, nativism, and white supremacy. They want to return to the beige crayon, they want to redraw a world traced from the outlines of a Eurocentric depiction in which the subjugated
knowledge of oppressed racialized groups remains excluded from the picture. The destruction or further marginalization of RCS has now become a major goal of the right.\textsuperscript{14}

With RCS now more than 40-years old, it is unlikely that the right can eliminate it as 2281 desires. However, in the context of a budget crisis gripping U.S. education, the resurgent right can further slow its glacial advance across elementary and secondary education and force the re-incorporation of retrograde conceptualizations as the new Texas State Board of Education Standards prescribe. Though most states adopted legislation similar to Illinois which requires public schools to “include in [their] curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of black history” and teachers are expected to “understand cultural and community diversity through a well-grounded framework and understand how to learn about and incorporate students’ experiences, cultures, and community resources into instruction.” Nevertheless, in most school districts in Illinois and throughout the U.S. school administrators have barely implemented even these meager concessions to multicultural knowledge. HB 2281, Arizona’s anti-ethnic studies act and the new Texas State Board of Education Standards would move school districts further away from infusing multicultural knowledge. Collectively they threaten to plunge the country further down the abyss of conservative Eurocentric pseudo-knowledge.\textsuperscript{15}

Here the power of Texas takes ascendancy from its more conservative partner. Because Texas is the second largest textbook market in the country, with 4.8 million students, and the SBOE adopts textbooks for all Texas school districts, its revised standards will resonate far beyond its borders. As Latina Democratic board member Mary Helen Berlanga observed, “They are rewriting history, not only of Texas but of the United States and the world.” Further asserting their rightwing agenda to reduce history to indoctrination in U.S. patriotism and white nationalism, in early September, the Texas SBOE passed a resolution demanding publishers eliminate the “pro-Islamic/anti-Christian bias” in history textbooks.\textsuperscript{16}
This special issue of The Black Scholar represents one form of the fightback against this new assault on RCS. The authors challenge the rightward push of Arizona and Texas and defend Racialized Communities Studies and academic freedom. Augustine Romero, Jr., one of the creators of the Tucson Unified School District’s Mexican American/Raza Studies program (MAS) and its Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) discusses the history of the program, describes its core features, illuminates its successes, contextualizes State Superintendent Tom Horne’s attacks, and outlines MAS’s resistance to HB2281.

In “At War with the State in Order to Save the Lives of Our Children: The Battle to Save Ethnic Studies in Arizona,” he asks the surprisingly provocative question, “What would you expect a state to do with a successful academic program?” Over the last seven years, on the state’s senior examination, the 1,100 students enrolled in MAS were “three times more likely to pass the Reading section; four times more likely to pass the Writing section, and Two and a Half times more likely to pass the Math section than their peers not in our program.” Across the country, many educators and a few politicians consider the achievement gap one of the most important issues facing the country. Nevertheless, MAS which “virtually eliminated” expulsions and suspensions of its Mexican American students, reversed the disparities in graduation rates between them and Anglo students, and sent its students to college at rates higher than the national average has become the poster child for “reverse racism” and is slated for dismantlement. Romero provides answers to this disturbing question, troubling answers, but answers nonetheless. He locates opposition to his program in the agenda of the Republican hard right and specifically in the aggressive neoconservative ideology of State Superintendent Tom Horne.

The right’s opposition to MAS, as evidenced by Horne’s comments is rooted in the very reasons the program was so successful. Romero explains its success as a product of the critical pedagogy through which it constructed the program. Using what he calls “Critically Compassionate Intellectualism,” MAS helped student’s develop a “literacy” of their lived experiences, built on the student’s “cultural assets,” and
to construct a “strong sense of identity.” These attributes of MAS led students to analyze their lives and the conditions of their communities, and most importantly the nature of their education. The development of a critical consciousness among Arizona’s superfluous Mexican American population placed MAS squarely in opposition to the state’s “hidden curriculum” of individualism, white nationalism, white supremacy, and capitalism.

Julian Kunnie, former Director of Africana Studies at the University of Arizona, served on the Advisory Board of African American Studies at TUSD, and on the Multicultural Oversight Committee of TUSD. In “Apartheid in Arizona?: HB 2281 and Arizona’s Denial of Human Rights of Peoples of Color,” Kunnie elaborates on the sociohistorical context discussed by Romero. And like him, he interrogates HB 2281’s antecedents, explores “its implications for education,” and proposes strategies to contest this backward measure. Kunnie deepens the historical analysis by more sharply linking HB 2281 to the U.S.’s and Arizona’s colonial legacies and in doing so he provides a broader multiracial and international framework in which to understand HB 2281. He highlights the legislation’s effort to deny and suppress teaching about the U.S.’s and Arizona’s colonial heritages. He also stresses its potential violation of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights. Kunnie is not alone in this assessment. According to six UN experts, Arizona reveals, “A disturbing pattern of legislative activity hostile to ethnic minorities and immigrants has been established with the adoption of an immigration law that may allow for police action targeting individuals on the basis of their perceived ethnic origin, and a law that suppresses school programs featuring the histories and cultures of ethnic minorities.”17 Finally, Kunnie, like Romero suggests strategies for resisting the right’s current foray. First he cautions that “Eurocentric capital and its imitators” will not just disappear or surrender, but will have to be defeated. Finally, he calls for the creation of “constructive coalitions and alliances with all other oppressed and colonized people and allies of such peoples within the United States and around the world.”
In “But Some of Us Are Wise: Academic Illegitimacy and the Affective Value of Ethnic Studies”
cultural critic Lisa Cacho deconstructs several texts—Horne’s 2007 Open Letter to Tucson’s citizens, HB 2281, and Fobes.com’s commentator Malik Kaylan’s defense of HB 2281 to challenge the racist neoliberal logics at the heart of their conservative positions. Cacho is especially interested in contesting the rationale that RCS must conform to mainstream concepts of objectivity and neutrality and eliminate emotions, to gain legitimacy as an academic discipline. She contends the opponents of RCS also rely on emotion, even as they promote the “false assumption” that “objects or signs” encapsulate “the feelings they seem to evoke” and the simplistic notion that if you abolish the object or sign the feelings you associate with it will also disappear. Her point is that emotions represent “affective economies” which can be mobilized to perform specific work. In this case, to mobilize fear and intolerance against multiracial diversity and multicultural knowledge, the right has coded “Ethnic Studies” as hate, resentment, etc. Cacho explains how HB 2281, Horne’s open letter, and Kaylan’s editorial remove individuals and social systems--capitalism or what the Texas SBOE calls “the free enterprise”--from blame for slavery, genocide, imperialism, and colonialism, or as she puts it detaches racism “from history, institutions, legislation, the economy, and all the racialized structures that govern our lives.” Nevertheless, these rightwing propagandists manage to attach to RCS a host of negative emotions, “reverse racism,” “politicalization of history,” “anger,” and “anti-American terrorism.” Cacho, however, strongly cautions RCS scholars not to adopt the allegedly anti-emotional logics of neoliberals like Horne and Kaylan. The stakes are high. To gain pseudo-legitimacy, should RCS scholars conform to the conservatives’ false concept of detached, dispassionate teaching and scholarship? Or should we forcefully acknowledge our belief in “ways of knowing” that transcend Eurocentric epistemologies. Should we proudly proclaim that we seek to spark strong feelings of identification with and empathy for the oppressed and desire to ignite powerful emotional opposition to oppression among our students and in our communities? Cacho bravely answers in the affirmative, she declares, “I, for one,
believe that learning about social injustice should evoke strong feelings. I would be more than concerned if teaching racialized and gendered violence was met only with boredom, indifference, or detached curiosity as if being disproportionately targeted for death, deportation, incarceration, and medical experimentation due to one’s racial and/or gendered background was simply an intriguing research question.”

American Indian scholar D. Anthony Clark and counseling psychologist Tamilya D. Reed in “A Future We Wish to See: Racialized Communities Studies after White Racial Anxiety and Resentment” continue the interrogation of conservative politicians’ “manipulation” of white’s “feelings of insecurity” began by Cacho. However, they are perhaps more concerned with explicating the processes by which HB 2281 seeks to expand the “iron fist of discipline and control – to intimidate intellectual projects which seek to theorize, critique . . . a racialized, white supremacist system of privilege for capital and the notion of free enterprise.” For Clark and Reed, education is part of what Louis Althusser called the state ideological apparatuses, those institutions that operate largely in the realm of ideas and indoctrination. They of course extricate the repressive aspects of perhaps the leading ideological institution.

Working from an intellectual project grounded in American Indian Studies, Clark and Reed argue that the TUSD’s Native American Studies Department was excluded from the purview of HB 2281 because it is largely engaged in student affairs rather than a radical anti-colonial intellectual project. They call for the creation of a program “focused on indigenous peoples-state and market relations of power,” for a “decolonizing and deracializing” project that emphasizes inter-group power relations. Important to their argument is a challenge to the conservatives’ individualist narrative. Quoting preeminent Indian scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., Clark and Reed note that African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans were incorporated into the U.S. political economy, polity, society, and popular and intellectual cultures as groups, not as individuals. As Clark and Reed allude, this inconvenient fact troubles the individualist capitalist “consumer-citizen” logic animating HB 2281 and the Texas SBOE new social studies standards.
By highlighting an important similarity between the differently oppressed and distinct racialized peoples in the U.S., Clark and Reed point toward the ONLY astute response—for RCS scholar activists to collectively theorize a common program of resistance through what they describe as a “modified treaty-covenant process.” Three practices and attendant discourses are at the core of such a program, they argue. First, RCS scholar activists must use their teaching, scholarship, professional organizations, and journals to mount a campaign to repudiate colorblind racial ideology, and its “blame the victim” frame. Second, they encourage RCS scholar activists to challenge the prevailing neoliberal logic by contrasting the idealist concept of the individual consumer-citizen with the reality of hierarchically ordered social groups, especially racialized communities. Ultimately, they call for the “distinct peoples” organized in RCS to begin to collaborate on a liberatory agenda that mobilizes the resources of the academy to challenge the ideological dominance of white supremacy and capitalism.

Historian Anne Winkler-Morey sharpens the interrogation of the conservatives’ “individualist ideology” began by Kunnie, Cacho, and Clark and Reed. Analyzing, the individualist ideology at the core of the neoliberal assault on knowledge, particularly the new multicultural interpretations articulated by post-1960s social movement historians, she focuses our attention on Texas and its State Board of Education’s revised guidelines for indoctrination. She like Kunnie, Cacho, and Clark and Reed allude to the false individualism articulated by the white right. Though contradictory and uneven, beneath the individualist discourse lies a white nationalist corporatist ideology that visualizes the U.S. as an organic white nation. Winkler-Morey powerfully argues the importance of racialized communities studies in challenging the right’s political agenda to excise the social and rewrite U.S. history to conform to a nativist and white supremacist pro-capitalist consensus narrative. For Winkler-Morey, RCS is central to building resistance to the right but to do so, she argues it must become more critical. In fact, she calls for the creation of “Critical Ethnic Studies,” an activist intellectual project which would “Focus on inequality and a critique of U.S. institutions
past and present, that perpetuate it.” Critical Racialized Communities Studies (CRCS), if you will, would highlight the role of systems—structures, institutions, and cultures—in generating and maintaining oppression and would encourage human agency to challenge systems of oppression and construct counter institutions. It would emphasize knowledge and understanding of race and racial oppression as constitutive of the U.S., and “inextricably” connected to class and gender. Finally, she argues that CRCS is an activist intellectual project. Appropriately, Winkler-Morey concludes by promoting “Ethnic Studies Week October 1-7” as week of struggle against the Arizona and Texas assaults on racialized communities studies.

This is a dangerous moment; as Winkler-Morey observes we are at a “critical juncture.” We can see the hideous authoritarian shape of fascism in the rise of the Tea Party and the explicitly anti-black and anti-brown white nationalists forces on its fringes. This defining moment necessitates that scholar activists in Critical Racialized Communities Studies respond both through the mechanisms of our profession—highlighting the critical in our teaching and scholarship—and as active agents of social change—organizing demonstrations and working to win the “war on history.” It is imperative that we struggle against a return to the beige crayon and to abolish the “hidden curriculum” of white nationalism, white supremacy, and capitalist individualism that it represents. Defending MAS should be the first order of business. It is as Romero states “the first domino.” Scholar activists in CRCS must struggle to ensure not only that the social studies standards and textbooks do not conform to HB 2281 and the Texas SBOE in their communities and states but rather that programs like MAS flourish throughout the country.


7. Herman and Lorraine Minniti, “The Demographics of Voters in America's 2008 General Election,”

8. Herman and Lorraine Minniti, “The Demographics of Voters in America's 2008 General Election,”

10. Ibid.


