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Racial Arrested Development: A Critical Whiteness Analysis of the Campus Ecology

Nolan L. Cabrera Jesse S. Watson Jeremy D. Franklin

This paper analyzes the campus ecology (Renn, 2003, 2004) literature from the perspective of Critical Whiteness specifically problematizing perceptions of safety and inclusion on the college campus. Relying upon Sullivan's (2006) ontological expansiveness, Mills's (1997) epistemology of ignorance, and Leonardo and Porter's (2010) Fanonian interpretation of racial safety, we argue that there is too high a premium placed on social comfort during the undergraduate experience which actually leaves White students at predominantly White institutions in perpetual states of racial arrested development. We conclude that intentional, targeted racial dissonance is necessary for both White students to develop their racial selves while concurrently being aware of the ugly realities of contemporary racism.

W. E. B. DuBois (1903/1997) famously wrote, “[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. 45). Much has changed since DuBois offered these prophetic words, and the contemporary system of racial stratification is markedly different than the one he critiqued (Omi & Winant, 1994). Despite a great deal of progress, race continues to structure society in the 21st century even though many people mistakenly thought that President Obama’s election would usher in an era of “post-racialism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

Given its contested and changing meaning, what is race? Frequently, race is described in terms of skin color and some other physical features (e.g., hair texture; Johnston, 2014). This focus on the body is important, but it also is limited as a number of scholars have begun to examine the ways race shapes physical space.

The title of Lipsitz’s (2011) book, *How Racism Takes Place*, is frequently interpreted to be synonymous with “how racism operates.” However, Lipsitz’s (2007, 2011) spatial analysis highlights how a number of environments are ostensibly White*, and the physical geography of a locale can actually have a predatory effect on People of Color. Therefore, an alternative interpretation of the title emerges: how racism forcibly creates White ownership (takes) of physical space (place). While Lipsitz’s analysis primarily focused on the environment of the city, a similar analysis could be applied to the college campus. Scholars have begun to explore White dominance of campus environments via the concepts of *White spaces* (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), *White Institutional Presence* (WIP), (Gusa, 2010), or how space is raced (Mitchell, Wood, & Witherspoon, 2010). WIP is defined as the ways that Whiteness is embedded in the epistemological, ideological, and cultural fabric of institutions of higher education, which serves to marginalize the views and experiences

* In this article we capitalize *White* to be consistent with reference to other racial/ethnic groups. When quoting or paraphrasing an author, we revert to his/her/their usage.

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of Students of Color (Gusa, 2010). Often, Students of Color describe their collegiate raced space as unwelcoming, psychologically damaging, and not an ideal place to learn (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010).

This vein of scholarship represents a minority of the analyses of the college campus environment. More common uses of an ecological perspective analyze the interaction between individual student development and the different components of the campus environment (e.g., Banning, 1993, 1997; Banning & Kuk, 2005; Renn, 2003, 2004). Analyses using campus ecology are not as frequently utilized as, for example, applying an *Input-Environment-Outcome* (I-E-O) framework (Astin, 1993). However, ecology is very important in the canon of student affairs scholarship. As Evans et al. (2010) argue, “Although there is little mention of the campus ecology approach itself in the current literature, the importance of considering the impact of the environment on student development is stressed in many current theories” (p. 13). Ecology is a theoretical foundation of higher education scholarship that is not specifically an ecological analysis (e.g., Hurtado et al. 2012). In addition, there is an entire chapter on campus ecology and student development in the frequently used textbook for practitioners *Student Development in College* (Evans et al., 2010).

While much of the campus ecology literature mentions issues of racial diversity, inclusion/exclusion, and sometimes oppression (e.g., Banning, 1992; Banning & Luna, 1992; Gerst & Fonken, 1995; Renn, 2004; Renn & Arnold, 2003), little is discussed regarding the dialectical opposite of marginalization—White privilege. White privilege and racial power are often not directly addressed in higher education literature and particularly in the campus ecology literature. As a result,

White privilege and power are not critiqued which allows them to flourish because they are embedded in color-blind ideologies that guide university policy (Gusa, 2010).

Within this context, we present an overview of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). Second, this article summarizes the intellectual lineage and recurrent themes of campus ecology literature. Finally, we reinterpret campus ecology scholarship using a CWS perspective (Leonardo & Porter 2010; Mills, 1997; Sullivan, 2006) to identify unexplored gaps in the empirical, theoretical, and practice bases of campus ecology when the subject is Whiteness. As a result, this paper interrogates some of the assumptions of campus ecology literature that many practitioners employ and scholars rely upon, and highlights how unaccounted for Whiteness only serves to recreate this system of racial privilege and domination. We conclude by offering suggestions to take account of and overcome these important limitations.

CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES

CWS approaches to scholarship interrogate the means by which Whiteness is hegemonically constructed, reified as normal, while remaining socially dominant (Feagin, 2010; Gillborn, 2005; Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; McIntosh, 2001; Sullivan, 2006). Thus, CWS attempts to unmask the seemingly invisible privileges of Whites and demonstrate that the privileges are real. In the context of this paper, privileges are living and learning in a welcoming and safe environment that is not always afforded to Students of Color. Gillborn (2005) argues that racism is so systemically ingrained in contemporary society that “race-neutral” approaches to educational reform actually serve to recreate White supremacy. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues, in a similar vein, that White supremacy is so ingrained in context of the

contemporary United States that professions of “colorblindness” (what he refers to as *color-blind ideology*) are actually manifestations of racism that serve to mask the underlying power dynamics that continually stratify society along the color line.

While there are many veins of Critical Whiteness, we will rely upon three inter-related concepts:

1. Epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997),
2. Ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2006),
3. A Fanonian reinterpretation of safety (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

The first concept is related to colorblindness and the perception that racism is only of minimal importance in contemporary society. This White denial of systemic racism is so prevalent that Whites in the United States currently believe that “reverse discrimination”[†] is a larger problem than racism against Blacks (Norton & Sommers, 2011). This massive disconnect between White racial perception and racial reality is why Mills (1997) refers to Whiteness as an inverted epistemology or an “epistemology of ignorance.”

The second concept, ontological expansiveness, refers to White entitlement over space, broadly defined. As Sullivan (2006) argues, “white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, or otherwise—are or should be available to them to move in and out as they wish” (p. 10). Ontological expansiveness in the context of the college campus is situated in a belief that the entire campus should be open and accessible to all students. Pragmatically, this entitlement

is something that Students of Color cannot assume as they are frequently the targets of racial harassment in ostensibly White campus subenvironments (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gusa, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Villalpando, 2003).

Finally, we rely upon Leonardo and Porter’s (2010) reinterpretation of the concept of safety. Specific to structured dialogues across racial difference, Leonardo and Porter (2010) offer, “One of the main premises of safe-space discourse is that it provides a format for people of color and whites to come together and discuss issues of race in a matter that is not dangerous as well as inclusive” (p. 147). The authors problematize this notion relying upon a Fanonian interpretation of violence further arguing that:

[M]any individuals from marginalized groups become both offended and agitated when engaging in apparently safe spaces. In their naiveté, many white students and educators fail to appreciate the fact—a lived experience—that race dialogue is almost never safe for people of color in mixed-racial company. (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 147)

The authors argue the notion of a safe space is largely a misnomer because even within inner-group dialogues, “it often means that white individuals can be made to feel safe. Thus, a space of safety is circumvented, and instead a space of oppressive color-blindness is established” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 147). Leonardo and Porter instead argue that color-blindness is a form of racism (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and to implicitly apply this as a standard for engaging in intergroup dialogue only serves to prioritize White comfort over the racial safety of Students of

[†] “Reverse discrimination” refers to discrimination against White people similar to traditional forms of racism against People of Color. We use the terminology in quotation marks both stay true to the way the term is used, while also acknowledging that it is largely a myth that is not reflective of contemporary racial realities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Color. This leads to the larger question: What does this mean in terms of campus ecology scholarship and practice? Before we can engage this question, we first offer a conceptual overview of this vein of scholarship.

CAMPUS ECOLOGY

The framework of campus ecology is largely rooted in psychologically-based analyses of human development that concurrently take account of individuals, environmental characteristics, and the interaction between them. Its intellectual lineage tends to derive from Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1994) ecological systems theory (J. Banning, personal communication, February 1, 2012). Within this section, we provide a brief overview of the ecological systems theory, and then highlight how this framework has been applied in higher education research.

Bronfenbrenner and the Ecology of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1977, 1979, 1994, 1995) ecological systems theory was a dramatic departure from classical psychology research conducted in highly-controlled environments. Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1977) argued that psychology labs did not offer sufficient opportunities to analyze the individual/environment interaction and how these affect human development. Bronfenbrenner (1994) identified five interworking, interrelated systems of a person's environment that influence their development as a child. The five systems or layers (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) range from the most immediate environment of an individual to the most macro environment, which includes larger society and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Not only did Bronfenbrenner's model account for the individual in certain environments, but also the interactions that occur within

each of the five subsystems where fluctuations in one layer cause ripple effects throughout the system. Although Bronfenbrenner (1976) originally developed the theory to understand the complex relationship among infants, families, society, and child development, recent work has used the ecological systems theory to analyze the ecology of the college campus (e.g., Renn, 2004).

Banning and Kaiser (1974) made one of the first attempts to apply an ecological framework to issues in higher education; however, the approach became more firmly established in the 1990s (e.g., Banning & Bartels, 1997; Gerst & Fonken, 1995). Renn (2003, 2004) continued to develop and refine the campus ecology approach in her analysis of multiracial student development, although the bulk of the analyses stem from Banning and his colleagues. Additional analyses have utilized campus ecology literature to explain how campuses are or are not supportive for students in various situations such as when students experience a death (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008) to suicide prevention programs on campuses (Drum & Denmark, 2012).

These analyses, while couched in ecological frameworks, tended to focus on student perceptions of the campus environment. Within these analyses, the campus systems (e.g., microsystem or mesosystem) were analyzed as sending messages that students interpret (Banning & Luna, 1992; Renn, 2004). Kuh (2011) argued that campus culture, climate, and ecology are often used interchangeably when discussing college environments, but ecology is much broader in that it is inclusive of culture and climate. Thematically, Banning (1992) argued that the environment transmits messages to students of: exclusivity, threat, superiority/dominance, stereotypes, exploitation, and insensitivity (p. 2). Banning and Bartels (1997) argued that the environment of an institution

sends four key messages to students at an institution: belonging, safety, equality, and societal roles (p. 2). We argue that many of these overlap conceptually, and therefore, we simplify our thematic foci to the following: (a) inclusion, (b) safety, and (c) the importance of non-verbal messages.

Inclusion

A prevalent theme throughout campus ecology and higher education literature is the importance of the inclusion of all students within a given college environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Campus ecology literature distinguishes safety and inclusion as distinct yet interrelated concepts in that the failure to address campus safety can lead to feelings of exclusion for students (Strange & Banning, 2001). Strange and Banning (2001) outlined three components of inclusion related to campus ecology: physical, organizational, and perceptual. The first dimension, physical, emphasizes the campus design and space (e.g., climate, architecture, density of students, and the usage of space). Not only does the physical architecture of an institution send messages to students regarding inclusion/exclusion, but so does the allocation of space as well as the composition of students occupying those spaces.

Organizational features comprise the second dimension of campus inclusion in terms of size and mission of the institution. The physical capacity of an environment to sustain the needed resources of a population impacts feelings of inclusion for students. When campus services do not match the needs of students, the students may feel excluded or unwelcome (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Hurtado et al. (1998) underscored the importance of inclusion on campuses that have a legacy of excluding Students of Color. The history and policies of campuses that excluded Students of Color continue to

impact campuses today with hostile cultures that are vestiges of the past.

The final dimension encompasses how students interpret the physical and organizational dimensions of the campus environment. Strange and Banning (2001) gave examples of how students interpreted acts with non-inclusive messages differently such as when a window of a Jewish synagogue was deliberately broken or an LGBT resource center was defaced with homophobic remarks. Many of the campus climate frameworks, beginning with Hurtado et al. (1998), speak to the importance of the perception of the physical environment whether it be objects such as statues, paintings, mascots, names of dorms, or structural diversity in terms of the number of Students of Color or faculty of color on a college campus (Hurtado et al., 1998; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Hurtado et al., 2012).

Further developing the concept of inclusion, Renn (2003) examined the racial identity development among mixed-race students. Within her sample, there was a strong relationship between race-based student organizations and the ability of students to explore/develop their racial identities. However, monoracial peer groups were also sometimes perceived as promoting campus segregation, creating a perception of exclusion. Closely related to the notion of inclusion is the idea that the campus should function as a safe space for all students.

Safety

Safety (or lack thereof) in an ecological perspective is communicated in much the same way as inclusion/exclusion (Banning, 1993, 1997; Banning & Bartels, 1997; Strange & Banning, 2001). Banning and Bartels (1997) argued that when messages from the physical environment such as graffiti, campus-sponsored advertisements that exploit women, or poorly lit areas of campus become

dehumanizing and/or threatening, they fall within the concept of safety (instead of just inclusion/exclusion). Within this context, the physical environment communicates messages that threaten students. Students are no longer excluded from full participation in the campus environment (i.e., inclusion), but also come under some type of potential harm.

Messages communicated with graffiti or poorly lit spaces take on an additional degree of importance because the purveyor of the threat is unknown. If the threat is anonymous, it becomes omnipresent as it could come from anywhere. Thus, safety from an ecological perspective becomes even more important because there is the potential to stifle threats before they reach the target or at least immediately eliminate the visibility of the threat (e.g., immediate graffiti removal). There is a certain intuitive nature to the issue of safety: How is it possible for students to learn, live, and develop if they do not feel safe in their physical environment? The short answer is, they cannot (Tierney, 2000). Regardless, the messages embedded in the physical environment continually send signals to students as to whether the campus is inclusive/exclusive and safe/unsafe (Hurtado et al., 2012; Rund, 2002).

Nonverbal Messages

According to campus ecology analyses, the architecture of an institution sends messages to students regarding the underlying, unspoken values and culture of a specific college or university (Banning, 1992). As Strange and Banning (2001) argued, there is an “important link between function and symbol in the physical environment [which] is nonverbal communication” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 16). This component of campus ecology places an emphasis on the interaction between an individual and the environment, specifically investigating the messages that are transmitted

to students via the physical infrastructure of their college or university. Perceptions of campus environments and the non-verbal messages are often viewed through cultural lenses that can lead to different interpretations (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

Frequently, messages are communicated unintentionally, but the architecture of contemporary institutions of higher education continues to be a relic of an exclusionary past. As Bennett and Benton (2001) argued, “Some leaders of United States’ higher education felt the physical structure of the institution needed to reflect the intellectual activities that occurred within it” (p. 161). At the time that a majority of the campuses were designed and created, White males were primarily in positions of power, thus represented their experiences through the design of campus artifacts. For example, many buildings on college campuses (e.g., Yale) were built by slaves and often named after slave owners. Not only are White values imbedded in the culture of institutions (Museus & Jayakuma, 2012), but also the physical infrastructure.

The campus ecology literature highlighted the influence of nonverbal communications and perceptions based upon the physical environment, and the scholarship on racial microaggressions did the same (Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Just as the covert racial slights (microaggressions), (Yosso et al., 2009) take place in day-to-day occurrences, images and information from the campus can affect how Students of Color experience this environment in terms of racial inclusivity or exclusivity (Banning & Luna, 1992; Banning & Bartels, 1997).

The campus ecology focused on the interaction between the individual and his/her environment is a substantial development over the traditional analyses in higher education scholarship where the student is the unit of analysis (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005). However, when we take a CWS approach, many tensions arise in applying the campus ecology to the development of White students' racial selves. Using epistemology of ignorance, ontological expansiveness, and a Fanonian interpretation of safety, we reinterpret and critically analyze components of campus ecology analyses: inclusion, safety, and non-verbal messages.

WHITENESS, RACE-CONSCIOUS PROGRAMMING, AND PERCEIVED V. ACTUAL INCLUSION

The same message about campus inclusiveness is frequently interpreted differently by White students and Students of Color (Rankin & Reason, 2005). In a time where race-consciousness is mistakenly equated with racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010), race-conscious campus programming can be seen by White students as "reverse racism" (Cabrera, 2014a, 2014c); Howard-Hamilton, Hinton, & Hughes, 2010). Frequently, race-conscious campus programming such as ethnic-themed houses or cultural centers are critiqued for being exclusionary, promoting racial balkanization, and engaging in "reverse racism" (e.g., Chang, 2002; Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003; D'Souza, 1991; Howard-Hamilton et al., 2010; Horowitz, 2007). Applying ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2006) unveils the ways in which Whiteness conflates perceptions of exclusion with actual exclusion.

First, White students not only have participated in race-conscious social programming, but there has been documented growth among these students stemming from multicultural experiences. For example, Ngai (2011) interviewed "border crossers," or students who engaged in campus programming that did not reflect their racial background (e.g., a White woman participating in the Thai Club). She found:

Through their involvement, these students developed friendships and established relationships from which they gained significant exposure to different cultural experiences and different perspectives on the world. Indeed, the more comfortable and supported border crossers felt within these spaces, the more accepting they were of other viewpoints . . . (p. 312)

In a similar vein, Cabrera (2012) found that White students participating in a multicultural residence hall discussed social justice on a regular basis that allowed them to both engage their own racial privileges while exploring methods of disrupting racism. Sometimes efforts to be inclusive of White students led to a situation where they become the majority in multicultural spaces. As Patton (2010) highlighted in her analysis of an institute dedicated to learning about Black culture, "the majority of [Malcolm X Institute] members are non-African American students who are interested in learning about Black culture . . . [however, Black participants] expressed concern about getting more Black students involved" (pp. 71–72). Thus, White perceptions of exclusion are largely based on discomfort with race-conscious programming.

Second, and related to the first issue, an area where student participation for Students of Color is often reported to be restricted based on race is the fraternity and sorority systems (Park, 2008; Pike, 2002; Syrett, 2009). While there is great diversity within these systems, we are specifically focusing on "traditional" housed fraternities and sororities as opposed to multicultural ones or those where affiliation is academically based. We specifically analyze these student organizations because, "Looked at broadly, fraternities have always been about class status, about the establishment and maintenance of what Pierre Bourdieu called 'social capital' . . . The same can be said for fraternities' racial make up" (Syrett, 2009,

p. 4). The relative racial homogeneity of these organizations has the unintended, but not unexpected, consequence of becoming the sites of “ghetto” and “south of the border” parties (Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, & Giraldo, 2011; Sidanius, Van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). Within these spaces, groups comprised largely of White students don costumes based upon racial stereotypes (e.g., Latina/o gangbangers), and they generally do not have to consider how these actions are racist (Cabrera, 2014b, 2014c; Garcia et al., 2011).

This should not be interpreted to mean *all* housed Greek organizations host these parties. Rather, it is predictable that these tend to be the sites of racial-themed parties given their historical and contemporary patterns of racial segregation (Garcia et al., 2011; Syrett, 2009). This further signals to students of color, especially the culturally-appropriated group, that they are not welcome (Garcia et al., 2011), and represents a different component of ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2006). In this instance, ontological expansiveness relates to the ability of students to appropriate cultures which are not their own. This expansiveness is contextualized within a racially homogenous environment where students are not challenged to check their racial privileges. In this instance, White privilege means the ability to live in racially homogenous space while being able to ignore the racism of these parties.

Third, race-conscious student programming disrupts some of the White space (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and the WIP (Gusa, 2010). To the extent that this disruption leads to professions of “reverse discrimination” (Cabrera, 2014a, 2014c), ontological expansiveness allows White students to conflate an erosion of unwarranted racial privileges with racism. These perceptions of inclusion/exclusion contextualized within ontological expansiveness highlight an underexplored area in the campus ecology literature. Traditionally,

campus ecology analyses argue that fostering social comfort and inclusion is necessary to create functional and just campus environments (Banning, 1997; Strange & Banning, 2001). However, attempting to cater to perceptions of exclusivity from racially-privileged students will only serve to support existing racial inequality as it will further allow racism to take place (i.e., creating White ownership over common space, Lipsitz, 2011). By inverting the analysis, the need for the perception of inclusion is not universally applicable or necessary to attain true equity and inclusion. When it comes to disrupting racial privilege, the opposite is necessary: social discomfort and pushback against ontological expansiveness. We will advance a similar argument regarding White perceptions of campus safety.

Whiteness, Microaggressions, and Perceptions of Safety

A predominant theme in campus ecology literature as well as student affairs in general is creating safe living/learning environments (Banning & Bartels, 1997). When discussing safety, we need to be clear about what we are discussing. There is a difference between having a campus that is sufficiently well lit at night to minimize the physical threats students may experience versus creating a “safe space” for students to dialogue across difference (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). For this analysis, we will focus on the latter example, as the importance of this perceived safety takes on a new meaning when analyzed through a Critical Whiteness lens focusing on White/Student of Color interactions. Within this context, racially privileged students are frequently oblivious how, to borrow from Mari Matsuda et al. (1993), their “words wound.” Within the context of cross-racial interactions on the college campus, these wounds largely stem from microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso,

2000; Sue, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009).

According to Sue (2010), microaggressions are, “. . . the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 5). The fact that microaggressions are largely unconscious and frequent makes them even more insidious for Students of Color than overtly racist comments and actions (Yosso et al., 2009). This is, in part, because the target’s defenses are down and the racial slights, which constitute a form of linguistic violence, are unexpected (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2010). This can lead to self-doubt as to whether or not specific incidents are even racial in what Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) refer to as the Student of Color narrative, “Am I going crazy?” In addition, microaggressions have a cumulative impact (Pierce, 1995). Through no overt racial animus, Students of Color are constantly the targets of linguistic racial violence in the college environment which not only depresses academic achievement, but can also adversely affect health (Sue, 2010).

Thus, a safe space for White students is frequently a hostile, and sometimes linguistically violent environment, for Students of Color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). This context problematizes the idea of safe spaces and perceptions of campus safety. The demand, especially in cross-racial interactions, for White students to feel safe and comfortable frequently leads to micro- and macroaggressions being enacted upon Students of Color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Thus, the concept of safety cannot be universally applied when contextualized within a frame of Critical Whiteness and systemic racism. Perceptually, one group, White students or Students of Color, is likely to feel unsafe in cross-racial discussions,

but, as Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue, “Minority fears are quite different from white apprehensions concerning public race talk” (p. 150). The former is rooted in a lived reality regarding the insidious nature of contemporary racism. The latter is rooted in a strong aversion to being seen as racist (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Thus, the former requires direct attempts at creating safe spaces for racial grievances to be aired. The latter requires a certain amount of racial dissonance/discomfort/lack of safety to be awakened to these ugly realities. These differential requirements for social comfort/dissonance also apply to how students perceive the physical infrastructure of a college campus.

Whiteness, Native Mascots, and Perceptions of Non-Verbal Messages

Approaches to the campus ecology and non-verbal messages tend to highlight the messages marginalized groups receive from the campus environment (e.g., Banning & Kuk, 2005), and key campus artifacts include university mascots. A difficulty with this situation is that the same mascot that marginalizes can also be a source of pride. This tension surfaced when a Native American intermural basketball team highlighted the absurdity of American Indian mascots by making theirs a White man. The subsequent controversy is interesting from the perspective of the campus ecology as there were strong, contentious debates regarding the meaning of mascots, and these arguments highlighted all three of the previously outlined concepts of CWS: epistemology of ignorance, Fanonian safety, and ontological expansiveness.

In 2002, a group of students at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) were upset that nearby Eaton High School had the *Fightin’ Reds* as their official mascot. The students thought this was a form of racism (Johansen, 2010), and they decided to satirically name their university intramural

basketball team the *Fighting Whites* (later known as the *Fighting Whities*; Klyde-Silverstein, 2012). They printed t-shirts that pictured a 1950s era smiling White male in a suit and tie with slicked back hair saying the phrase, “Every thang’s gonna be all white!!!” (Klyde-Silverstein, 2012). The intention of the *Fighting Whities* was to highlight the inappropriateness of using Native mascots via satire (Johansen, 2010; Klyde-Silverstein, 2012). This message was frequently lost as a discourse of “reverse discrimination” permeated the conversation (Johansen, 2010).

Johansen (2010) argued there was a biting hypocrisy in the public discourse surrounding this controversy as, “The defenders of the Fighting Reds did not take kindly to the notion of basking unwillingly in the reflected glory of the Fighting Whites” (Johansen, 2010, p. 166). He elaborated, “School officials have been unresponsive to the protests of local Native American activists. John Nuspl, the school district superintendent, has said the Indian logo is not offensive but that the Fighting Whites are insulting” (Johansen, 2010, p. 166). Without a hint of irony, the stance of school district officials was that the only offensive caricature was the *Fighting Whities*. There was also a major public backlash within Eaton as community members vigorously fought to keep their mascot while concurrently attacking the *Fighting Whities* (Johansen, 2010).

The *Fighting Whities* controversy highlights the three of the components of CWS we apply in this article. First, ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2006) fosters the mentality of White entitlement over communal space, and this can include university mascots. This cultural appropriation is not equally afforded to all students because, when Native American students try to appropriate the ostensibly White, there is strong push back (Johansen, 2010). Second, Native mascots can be seen as a form of symbolic violence

due to institutionalizing a racist depiction of a minority group (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Due to the power allocated to White people that stems from systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), the same case cannot be argued when analyzing the *Fighting Whities* image and therefore, no moral equivalency exists between the two. Finally, the image of the *Fighting Whities* and the concurrent attack on the *Fightin’ Reds* appeared to disrupt the White epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997). When faced with the idea that a Native mascot might be racist, many involved in the controversy instead chose to focus on the “offensiveness” of the *Fighting Whities* image (Johansen, 2010). Rather than begin understanding the history of colonialism and contemporary racism enacted upon Native communities, the preferred course of action was engaging in a discourse of “reverse racism” as a method of maintaining the epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997).

RACIAL ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT OR WORKING THROUGH WHITENESS?

Critical Whiteness, Identity Development, and Ecology Theory

The importance placed on creating perceptions of racial inclusion, safety, and comfort within the campus ecology scholarship has direct implications for White student racial identity development. As Helms (1990) argues, “In order to develop a healthy White identity, defined in part as a nonracist identity, virtually every White person in the United States must overcome one or more aspects of racism” (p. 49). Whether or not it is possible for White people to actually be *nonracist* is open for debate. Regardless, Helms’s argument highlights how even well-intentioned White people have to overcome a great deal of racism in their lives, or what Sullivan (2006) refers

to as the “unconscious habits of whiteness.” Cabrera (2012) argues that for White students to develop their racial selves, they must work through their Whiteness where being a racial-justice ally is a process engaged in as opposed to an end achieved (Helms, 1990). This is consistent with Waters (2010) conception of *allyship*, broadly defined, as a social practice instead of an identity.

A consistent theme across this literature is the need for White people to move from colorblind to racially cognizant as a critical first step in working through Whiteness (Cabrera, 2012; Reason & Evans, 2007). This first step frequently relies on a push from an entity (person/experience/locale) outside of a White individual because, as Broido and Reason (2005) argue, “initial involvement in ally behavior was not self-initiated” (p. 13). This is, in part, due to the social comfort derived from having a White epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997). If ignorance is bliss, then a White epistemology of ignorance leads to racial bliss. Why would anyone proactively disrupt his/her own sense of social comfort? Many do not, even if this means turning a blind eye to the lived realities of contemporary racism and being indifferent to social oppression. Instead, Cornel West provocatively asks, “Who wants to be well adjusted to injustice? What kind of people do we want to be?” (2006, p. 20). We therefore argue that student affairs professionals should support students becoming *maladjusted* when it comes to the subject of racial injustice.

Currently, the campus ecology framework is unable to do this for two reasons. First, the bulk of the campus ecology analyses limited their analytical foci to individual student/campus environment interactions and perceptions. While these are important, the macrosystem (Brofenbrenner, 1976, 1977, 1979) of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) is largely unexplored. This is

not specific to racial analyses, but rather, there is generally little accounting for larger social-political events/structures within the campus ecology literature. Therefore, future ecological analyses need to take better account of structures of oppression such as racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 1997). While campus ecology implies a primary focus on the student/college environment interaction, these interactions are also informed by structures of inequality (Hurtado et al., 2012). Therefore, scholars conducting this research need to place White supremacy within the macrosystem of their analysis, White privilege within the mesosystem, and grapple with the empirical tension of listening to White student narratives while understanding that they are likely unaware of either (Cabrera, 2016; Mills, 1997).

Second, analyses of campus ecology inadequately utilize the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Within this theory, people generally strive for cognitive consistency, and moments of inconsistency produce moments of disequilibrium that need to be addressed so that consonance (i.e. agreement) can return. With respect to racism, there is frequently a tension between maintaining a positive sense of self (i.e., a nonracist view of self) and the realities of racism structuring society (Unzueta et al., 2010; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008; Unzueta et al., 2008). Multicultural education can function as a form of cognitive dissonance for White students. Instead of awakening White students to the realities of oppression and White privilege, they frequently deal with their dissonance by portraying themselves as the true victims of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2010a, 2014c; Norton & Sommers, 2010). While this trend is troubling, there is also possibility because within disequilibrium is the opportunity for student growth (Evans et al., 2010); however, this potential is largely unrealized with respect to racism.

Within institutions of higher education, privileges of Whiteness frequently allow White students to ignore the discomfort/pain of racism on their campus (Rankin & Reason, 2005). This cross-interrogation of campus ecology literature with CWS led us to the following conclusion: While social comfort may serve as a type of racial bliss, avoidance of racial agitation only serves to reinforce the normality of White space (Cabrera, 2014c; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Gusa, 2010). This has two key consequences. First, it serves to further marginalize Students of Color on campus by reifying ontological expansiveness, entitlement to “safe space,” and epistemologies of ignorance (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gusa, 2010; Mills, 1997; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sullivan, 2006). Second, it limits White students’ abilities to develop their racial selves, keeping them in a state of racial-arrested development which continues to reproduce the existing racial hierarchy (Broido & Reason, 2005; Cabrera, 2014c; Reason & Evans, 2007).

Campus images are not neutral, but students’ interpretation of these cultural symbols frequently varies by their relationship to systemic racial power. Turner and Myers (2000) add, “[P]rivilege exists for those who need not concern themselves with the painful sense of ‘otherness’ on a daily basis, and can remain blissfully ignorant of what that experience is” (p. 228). When this epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997) is disrupted as in the case of the *Fighting Whities*, the backlash is strong, pronounced, and visible (Johansen, 2010). Ultimately, the same artifact (e.g., *Fighting Whitie* image) can be satirical for some students and offensive to others. To the extent that the satire disrupted the normality of Whiteness, the social *discomfort* was warranted, and this challenges traditional campus ecology literature where promoting comfort for all students is equally important (e.g., Banning, 1993, 1997; Banning & Kuk, 2005).

The Practice of Disrupting Whiteness

This analysis therefore pushes on the ways we conceptualize and apply ecological frameworks within student affairs research and practice. It means we cannot treat everyone’s perceptions equally. Instead, beliefs about inclusivity and safety need to be contextualized by an individual’s relation to systemic power, privilege, and marginality. As Applebaum (2008) argues, “taking experience as unmediated and as an authoritative source of knowledge can sometimes obscure the acknowledgement of structural injustice” (p. 406). This is not to imply that White students are wrong and Students of Color are correct in their respective views of the campus. Rather, it calls on researchers and practitioners to exercise a great degree of analytical sensitivity—finding a balance between students’ perceptions of their experiences and the realities of systemic racism which contextualize these views.

This analysis has a number of implications for practice. Returning to the concept of safe space, we do not therefore argue that intergroup dialogues should be eliminated. Rather, we are critical of establishing perceived safety as a prerequisite to engaging in these dialogues. Instead, we argue that facilitators need to set ground rules that (a) establish the environment as a space for an open exchange of ideas, (b) leave no room for racism (and sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc.), and (c) acknowledge that periods and feelings of frustration are normal as they are unlearning socialized racism. This appears to be a contradiction: How can an environment be open and restricted? It intentionally is one that facilitators should openly engage before beginning the discussions. If the facilitator prefers to use the term “safe space,” then he or she needs to be prepared to unpack what this term does *not* mean, in particular the entitlement to social comfort (Leonardo &

Porter, 2010). In fact, facilitators need to make explicitly clear that the dialogues are going to make people feel uncomfortable. Pedagogically, it sometimes helps to reframe discomfort as “growing pains,” to avoid the misinterpretations of “safety.”

Scholars have been struggling for years with the issue of what to do with Whiteness in college classrooms, and part of this involves the same struggles over perceived safety. For example, Applebaum (2008) ensured that her college classroom was not dominated by White voices, and in doing so, her White students adopted a discourse of victimization by asking, “Doesn’t my experience count too?” When the subject is race in the college classroom, White students can shut down, proactively disengage (or not learn), and simply be silent, especially when the instructor is a Person of Color (Applebaum, 2008; Harlow, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Marx & Pennington, 2003). When White students do feel safe (i.e., lack racial discomfort), they frequently engage in the same forms of symbolic violence Leonardo and Porter (2010) cautioned against in intergroup dialogues (O’Brien, 2004). To this end, classroom instructors can also utilize the pedagogical practices previously outlined regarding the intergroup dialogues. Again, professors and instructors need to problematize notions of safety, and explicitly state that discomfort (i.e., growing pains) will likely occur while taking the class.

It is critical for professors and student affairs practitioners to ensure that moments of dissonance become transformative learning experiences, and this is especially important for White students in the initial stages of intercultural maturity because racial agitation has the potential to exacerbate racial tensions (Cabrera, 2014a, 2014b; Waters, 2010). This requires facilitators to address the three domains of cultural maturity concurrently: Cognitive, Intrapersonal, and Interpersonal (King &

Baxter Magolda, 2005). In the initial phases of this framework, White students are generally naive about the existence of racial inequality (cognitive), have little awareness of their own racial privileges (intrapersonal), and do not recognize the effects of racism on Students of Color (interpersonal). Each one of these dimensions represents a learning opportunity for students to both critically analyze society and themselves. As Waters (2010) argues, “The connection between increasing cognitive development and increasing interpersonal development allows students to see themselves as members of a system larger than themselves” (p. 6). Thus, facilitators need to be prepared to address all three dimensions within their professional practice, understanding that they are mutually reinforcing.

CONCLUSION

Much of the campus ecology literature focuses on fostering social comfort via the creation of inclusive and safe campus environments. On its surface, this is not a problematic premise. However, when applied to Whiteness we argue that intentional, targeted agitation that leads to White racial dissonance is necessary to disrupt racially privileged students out of their blissful epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997). Agitation tends to have a negative connotation, but W.E.B. Du Bois instead argued, “Agitation is a necessary evil to tell of the ills of the suffering. Without it many a nation has been lulled into a false security and preened itself with virtues it did not possess” (1971, p. 4). The promotion of White racial comfort glosses over racial realities that are omnipresent for many Students of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2014a; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Therefore, a certain degree of agitation is needed to awaken White students to issues of racism and push them from racial apathy toward racial cognizance (Reason & Evans, 2007). Therefore, we call for

an assertive pedagogy of racial agitation.

Agitation can come in many forms from various campus constituents. Professors and instructors at any level of education can integrate CWS and race-related literature into their curriculum. In the case of cross-racial dialogues, facilitators need to be well informed about how Whiteness can be reinforced and perpetuated in classroom discussion and how to challenge/reframe such discussions. For student affairs professionals, agitation can come in the form of challenging Whiteness and privilege in campus programming, and even challenging White students to self-reflect on their unconscious racial biases. The key is to integrate critical conversations into all of the programming and not relegate it to

a single “diversity” requirement. In many cases, Whiteness is forgotten in scholarship and practice because it is invisibly ingrained in the very fabric of institutions of higher education (Cabrera, 2009; Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The challenge therefore becomes making the invisible visible, while creating campus structures that foster targeted and intentional racial *discomfort* for White students as a means of promoting both individual growth and racial justice.

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