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Cabrera, N. L. (2018). *White guys on campus: Racism, White immunity, and the myth of “post-racial” higher education*. Rutgers University Press.

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Since the 2016 election, there has been an inordinate amount of media coverage on white¹ economic anxiety, Trump voters and their motives, and the somehow isolated yet collective perception that white¹ Americans are being left behind and disadvantaged in the current social and political climate. America’s paper of record, the *New York Times*, has spilled more ink profiling white Americans who voted for Trump and regret it than on the voters emphatically in opposition. J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) was launched to bestseller status amid renewed calls to understand white, working-class America, and Vance himself was lionized as an arbiter of “real” America’s unheard struggles. This general sense that white Americans are not getting enough attention is reflected in the uncredited quote at the start of *White Guys on Campus*: “when you’re accustomed to privilege, equity feels like oppression” (p. xii).



¹ I intentionally do not capitalize white or whiteness per Harris & Patton (2019). Guided by the works of Lindsay Pérez Huber (2010), I capitalize Asian, Black, and other racially minoritized groups as a form of linguistic

empowerment. I do not capitalize “white” to challenge hegemonic grammatical norms and “reject the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term ‘white’” (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 93).

Nolan Cabrera, a scholar of critical whiteness studies and higher education at the University of Arizona, humorously translates national conversations on racism, white immunity, and the myth of a post-racial American campus. From his perspective as a faculty member of color living under hegemonic whiteness, Cabrera unpacks decades of critical whiteness studies and provides encyclopedic coverage of how white supremacy has mutated and morphed, which has been documented elsewhere in more theory-driven work (Cabrera, 2018). In this renaissance of white fragility, *White Guys on Campus* presents a critical picture of the problem of white guys on campus and advances an unapologetic approach to responding to this problem. In particular, Cabrera recommends that people of color working to uncover whiteness and working towards antiracism be protective of their own well-being.

White Guys on Campus is undergirded by the concept of demographobia, the irrational fear of demographic population shifts (Chang, 2014). In Chapters 1-3, Cabrera explores how the polite American preference for more subtle racism cultivated in the 1960s has fallen away as white supremacists become more brazen while simultaneously attacking any challenge to their hatred as “reverse racism.” The participants in *White Guys on Campus* go so far as to claim that the “only discrimination left is that against white men” (p. 40). One clear strength of the book is that Cabrera is willing and unapologetic to call this delusion out as a sincere fiction in his analysis (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). By deconstructing the concept of “reverse racism” and demonstrating that it has no empirical basis, Cabrera repositions the conversation about whiteness on campus from discussing white privilege to discussing white immunity. Cabrera takes Occam’s razor, which suggests that the easiest solution to a problem is often the correct one, to narratives of struggling and working and uncovers the source of white

immunity: the white male desire to preserve a positive self-image. Cabrera’s commitment to a straightforward and pointed analysis of whiteness may be uncomfortable to some (white) readers, but that is the point.

In Chapters 4-6, Cabrera explores racial joke telling, campus discourse surrounding affirmative action, and white entitlement to physical space—even spaces like Black student union meetings and Chicano centers coded as nonwhite. His analysis of these three sites of campus racism reveals the “invented delusional world” that the white guys on campus inhabit (p. 108; Mills, 2007). The white belief that racism is predominantly enacted by people of color is well-founded in the literature. *White Guys on Campus* solidifies this through funny-but-in-a-sad-way accounts of white guys being “excluded from campus,” (p. 94) being disadvantaged by perceived-yet-unreal affirmative action quotas, and concerns about political correctness culture leading to institutional changes. From interviewees who felt “excluded” because they weren’t welcome by the Black Student Union to others who were concerned about the overt racialization of so-called objective topics like math leading to a “Chicano Math Department” (p. 90), Cabrera’s vignettes are vivid depictions of where whiteness is manifest on college campuses.

Cabrera himself admits that *White Guys on Campus* may come off as negative or pessimistic, but in Chapter 7 he offers hopeful accounts of white guys working through whiteness (Cabrera, 2012). These white guys can identify racism, see themselves as complicit, and take tangible steps to disrupt racism. These accounts open the reader to imagining “higher dreams” (p. 143; Freire, 2000) of an anti-oppressive future where white people are cognizant of their whiteness, working alongside people of color, and encouraging the racial development and alliance with other white people. For readers of color, the anecdotes and participant quotes he incorporates may be jarring. He suggests

that readers of color protect themselves by relying on their communities, limiting harmful interactions with white people in varying stages of racial development, and encouraging those “working through whiteness” to take on more of the work. He mentions that this is particularly important for people of color doing whiteness work. As a white person currently engaging in whiteness research, I hope this future is not far off. One of the main takeaways of *White Guys on Campus* is that white people need to be facilitating their own racial development and pushing their friends, families, and peers to do the same. As a participant in one of my own studies said, “people of color didn’t start this shit, so they shouldn’t be expected to fix it.”

In his conclusion, Cabrera offers recommendations for this future, but not without qualification. The white guys on campus that Cabrera talks to ground their experiences in fiction, ignore history, and are more invested in preserving their positive self-image than anything else. He is blunt, noting that he is not “particularly interested in the narratives of White men in and of themselves” (p.144). He posits that the individual development white folks experience when working through whiteness is simply the

“cherry on top of the (anti-racist) sundae” (p. 147). This is consistent with his recommendations that people of color protect their own well-being when engaging in critical whiteness work and that white people should take more initiative within the subfield.

Cabrera ends by arguing that universities behave a lot like the wizarding world of Harry Potter: they hope that in failing to speak its name, whiteness (Voldemort) might simply be defeated by time. Continuing the Harry Potter metaphor, white supremacy has horcruxes to destroy and they need to be discussed to be targeted. Cabrera argues that institutions cannot be neutral, they must articulate racial justice as an institutional value, and work toward the proactive and transformational goals described by Chang (2002). Institutions can do this by expanding access and support for underrepresented students, disrupting social practices maintaining whiteness as default, and facilitating white people (students, faculty, and staff) to work through their whiteness. Cabrera provides a final word of caution to scholars, practitioners, and people of color living under hegemonic whiteness: practice appropriate self-care, as whiteness has a lot of defenders.

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