

# UCLA

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Book Review: White Guys on Campus: Racism, White Immunity, and the Myth of "Post-Racial" Higher Education

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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.

Given our current volatile, xenophobic, and racist sociopolitical context, Nolan Cabrera’s *White Guys on Campus: Racism, White Immunity, and the Myth of “Post-Racial” Higher Education* paints a powerful picture of just how enduring racist ideologies are for white men and how insidious they are in our higher education institutions.

In one of the first monographs in higher education which takes a radical approach to examine whiteness utilizing a critical whiteness framework, Cabrera (2018) exemplifies how white<sup>1</sup> guys were more upset about the imagined racism against them than the *actual racism* enacted upon People of Color.<sup>2</sup> Cabrera’s data comes from questionnaires and interviews of 40 white undergraduate men from two institutions, Southwestern University (SWU) and Western University (WU), both of which are large public institutions located in the U.S. Southwest and West Coast. Situating his study within the context of higher education, Cabrera illustrates how these institutions and the individuals within them uphold systemic racism and, at times, contribute to systemic change. He also makes a compelling case to examine the racial lives of undergraduate white men, which is to better understand how whiteness is normalized, something that is currently severely understudied in higher education literature.

Chapter 1 provides us with some historical context around issues of race in the university context and an in-depth discussion of why *white racial immunity* (p. 12) is in fact a better term to use to understand the racialized lives of white men than the term white privilege. In Chapter 2, Cabrera explains how white men’s racial insulation, via growing up in predominantly white racial environments, contributed significantly to their white denial and racial ignorance. Chapter 3 illustrates the insidious belief white men had of “reverse racism” via political correctness on campus and through race-conscious policies like affirmative action. Chapter 4 highlights the most common form of racism exhibited by white undergraduate men—racial joking in racially homogenous white environments—while simultaneously downplaying their inherent racism. Chapter 5 highlights the way institutional context (at SWU and WU) played an important role in white men’s beliefs around affirmative action. At SWU, where affirmative action existed, participants opposed the concept on the level of principle, while at WU, where

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<sup>1</sup> As stated by Pérez Huber (2010), “I do not capitalize “white” to challenge hegemonic grammatical norms and to “reject the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term ‘white’” (p. 93).

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, I capitalize People of Color “as a grammatical move towards empowerment and racial justice” (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 93).

affirmative action was legally banned, participants strongly opposed and felt victimized by it. Chapter 6 explores participants' experiences with how space was racialized, arguing that white guys felt excluded or marginalized from spaces normed for Students of Color on campus, even though on a broader ideological level they simultaneously believed we all (read, white) have open access to social and cultural spaces on campus. Chapter 7 explores a small sub-set of white guys whose racial environments, experiences, and ideologies began to help them work through their whiteness. Lastly, Chapter 8 concludes by discussing what lessons have been taken away from these findings at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

One of the key strengths of Cabrera's text, which makes it accessible and at times, even humorous, is his use of comedians, political commentators/tv personalities, contemporary events, song titles, and other creative works to break down concepts like white immunity, white supremacy, and the challenging of racism. For instance, when discussing white immunity<sup>3</sup>, a concept which better explains white privilege due to its focus on the disparate treatment and life chances of People of Color, he references Paul Mooney's stand-up routine, "it's the complexion of the protection for the collection."

In addition, by connecting white men's individual racialized lives to a structural understanding of systemic racism on the college campus, Cabrera (2018) addresses an important gap in the white racial identity literature. He does this by highlighting how some of his participants not only stayed the same in regard to their racial beliefs and development during their time in college, but some even "racially regressed" (p. 106). This significantly complicates how we currently understand racial identity development for whites and highlights the way white men who spent most of their time in white sub-environments on the college campus found themselves to be targets of "reverse racism." Given what Cabrera finds and his theorizing around "racial arrested development," he makes a compelling case for why institutions of higher education must proactively create spaces of cognitive racial dissonance for white students; that is to help them reach potential growth for their racial development.

While Cabrera acknowledges that he focuses on "white and male immunity to maintain analytical focus" (p. 14) and does not look at many other social identities the white guys carry, future studies could further unpack and explore "multiple masculinities" of white men who do hold some form of a marginalized social identity, as well as if and how that contributes to their upholding and or challenging of whiteness. *White Guys on Campus* is a text I highly recommend for scholars of race and critical whiteness studies, higher education practitioners, and anyone seeking to understand, challenge, and critique whiteness and white

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see Cabrera's (2017) article, "White Immunity: Working through Some of the Pedagogical Pitfalls of 'Privilege.'"

supremacy and how it operates in higher education institutions and more broadly in our current sociopolitical context.

## References

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