

# Unsettling the “White University”- Undermining Color-blindness through Critical Race Theory and Testimonio

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## **Abstract**

*This article interconnects critical theories of race that not only help to conceptualize and make sense of a color-blind ideology, but also aim to unsettle the philosophies and practices that uphold and maintain it within the university setting. In particular, I unpack three philosophical tenets of white supremacy that work in tandem to uphold color-blindness: an epistemology of ignorance, hegemonic whiteness, and neoliberal racism. Once analyzed, I discuss how color-blindness is intimately connected to both overt and covert acts of racial microaggressions on university campuses. As a way to resist and undermine both color-blindness and racial microaggression in academia, I draw on critical race theory and testimonio, as they engage with personal narratives, looking introspectively, talking about lived experiences, and validating individual knowledges. Within this context, testimonio has the potential to provide a liberatory and praxis-inspired framework that focuses specifically on unsettling and challenging an ideology of whiteness both within and beyond the university.*

**Keywords:** *white supremacy, color-blindness, critical race theory, testimonio*

## **Introduction**

Universities are shaped by racist pasts, but also serve as sites of resistance in fomenting socially just and emancipatory futures. Teaching, learning, and “un-

learning” have the potential to challenge hegemonic forms of knowledge production, as well as epistemologies that normalize ideologies of whiteness. However, because discourses of color-blindness and individualism are entrenched within the university structure and the fabric of society, carefully considered critical race frameworks must be deployed so that students can better understand how to connect their university learning with important forms of social action and resistance.

Although argued twenty years ago, McIntyre’s (2002) statement still resonates: “Students are accustomed to a culture of niceness that often suffocates critique in many classrooms and institutions of higher learning [...] it is a significant barrier to developing a discourse that critically explores the various dimensions of whiteness” (p. 44). Within this superficial context, students are not asked to actively consider their own culpability (both intentionally or unintentionally) with maintaining and upholding white supremacy and racial domination. Jayakumar and Adamian also (2017) note,

By absolving whites as beneficiaries of racism, colorblind frames notably shield whites from acknowledging institutional racism and white privilege. In adhering to the false notion that we live in a colorblind society, whites are protected from feeling discomfort, shame, or personal responsibility for the realities of racism (p. 915).

Through this glossing over of the subversive ways that white supremacy works, racial awareness within the university context is accommodated instead of working to challenge structures of power that have the potential to alter the larger system of racism and racial ideology (Burke, 2017).

Indeed, emergent social movements across global universities have shown that engaging with critical theory and self-reflexivity may contribute to

transformative teaching, learning, and aiming towards social change. However, it is imperative to move beyond the one-dimensional teaching and learning that sees racism and white supremacy in simple binaries of “racist/not-racist,” as this limits meaningful and nuanced understandings of whiteness and power. As such, it is vital to engage in critical investigations into the links between the philosophical and theoretical understandings of color-blindness, white supremacy, and the potentialities that may come from deploying critical theories that aim for praxis, educational transformation and resistance.

The objective of this article is to interconnect critical theories of race that not only help to conceptualize and expose the many facets of color-blind ideology, but to unsettle the philosophies and practices that uphold and maintain it within the university setting. As a theoretical provocation of existing scholarship on race and white supremacy, this article is underpinned by educating for critical consciousness (Freire, 1974) as well as a phenomenological engagement and praxis (Ahmed, 2012) that aim to both interpret the world differently and transform it.

With this in mind, I draw upon and unpack three philosophical tenets of white supremacy that work in tandem to uphold color-blindness: an epistemology of ignorance, hegemonic whiteness, and neoliberal racism. Once analyzed, I discuss how color-blindness is intimately connected to both overt and covert acts of racial microaggressions on university campuses (Doane, 2003; Yosso, 2006; Yosso et al, 2010). Although sometimes overt, it is the more understated microaggressions that can be the most difficult to undermine, as they are masked and explained away through color-blind rhetoric.

As a form of educational resistance and praxis, I look to critical race theory, which has the potential to speak back and undermine an ideology of color-

blindness, ultimately aiming to challenge racial microaggressions within and beyond the university. Finally, I draw on the methodology of *testimonio*, (Cruz, 2006, 2012; Huber & Cueva, 2012; Partnoy, 2003) which engages with personal narratives, looking introspectively, talking about lived experiences, and validating individual knowledges. *Testimonio* provides participants a space to reveal and reflect upon their educational experiences as mediated by race, immigration status, class, and gender. Within this context, *testimonio* provides a liberatory and methodological tool that focuses specifically on unsettling and challenging the white<sup>i</sup> university. Although this article draws heavily from scholarship and experiences within a north American context, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks may be deployed as lenses in which to analyze universities and academic spaces around the world.

### **Conceptualizing an Ideology of Color-blindness**

A color-blind ideology within the university can be conceptualized through an interconnecting of an epistemology of ignorance, hegemonic whiteness, and neoliberal racism; all subversive systems that play into the myth of ‘not seeing color,’ ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘equality for all.’ These philosophies reinforce the power and normalization of an ideology of whiteness, doubling down on individual achievement and merit, whilst assuming that the playing field is levelled. The power of color-blindness is that it obscures the fact that institutional and structural racism are entrenched within all aspects of university education (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, Burke, 2017; Lipsitz, 2019; Rollock, 2018). Within a color-blind framework, race shouldn’t matter, as it seemingly reinforces an individual approach to race relations (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Warikoo & Novais, 2015).

As an ideology, color-blindness works to minimize whiteness and highlight an ‘other’ (Black, Indigenous and People of Color-BIPOC)<sup>ii</sup>. The term color-blindness has pivoted away from proclaiming that one does “not see color,” to

arguing that its purpose is to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to succeed and be judged on “who they are” and “what they do,” as opposed to receiving preferential treatment based on racial ascription or identification. The power of a color-blind ideology is that it reinforces an argument suggesting that *opportunity* is actually color-blind and that one can claim not to *see* race, whilst explaining racial inequality without even mentioning racism. In essence, color-blindness itself functions as a form of racism, as its ideology minimizes (and ignores) both covert and overt acts of racism that allows it persist (Beaman and Petts, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2003 2015; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, Lipsitz, 2019). Doane (2017) further notes that color-blindness provides an ideological tool kit that can be used to defend white supremacy by denying the existence of racism and presenting “nonracist” counterarguments to policy proposals. It also claims to redress racial inequalities and promote racial justice through fairness and equality. Through this one-dimensional understanding of color-blindness, the consequences are not only more insidious, but also more dangerous.

Additionally, color-blindness downplays overt and covert racist practices by assuming that it is specifically focused on a racialized other. Within this underdeveloped interpretation, there is an abdication of responsibility from whites in seeing their own racial ascription, as within a color-blind ideology, race then becomes meaningless for everyone. Color-blindness is racist in that it ‘others’ and normalizes whiteness. However, it is not racist in and of itself. As Doane (2017) argues, color-blind racism exists because it serves to obfuscate reality, whilst supporting and upholding systems of white supremacy.

Beaman and Petts (2020) argue that by providing color-blind explanations for clear racial inequalities, individuals can maintain a level of ignorance for how race is structured, produced, constructed, and ultimately reinforcing power and privilege structures. The perpetuation of racial ideologies and practices depend

on an agreed upon refusal to know so that racial privilege is maintained. In fact, color-blindness continues to manifest as a dominant and hegemonic racial ideology, as both individuals and society can claim that race is inconsequential in their interactions with others as well as for broader outcomes within society. Importantly, racial ideologies are only racist inasmuch as they maintain racialized social systems.

What follows is a discussion of an epistemology of ignorance, hegemonic whiteness, and neoliberal racism, as their interconnected philosophies and practices result in the maintenance and perpetuation of a color-blind ideology within institutions of higher education.

### **Epistemology of Ignorance**

An epistemology of ignorance, or white ignorance, functions to mystify the consequences of unjust systems that systematically marginalized groups endure so that those who benefit from the system do not need to consider their complicity in perpetuating them (Applebaum, 2019; Mills, 1997). White ignorance is maintained by social structures and institutions that sustain epistemic injustice on both a structural and individual level. As a form of epistemic exploitation, white ignorance not only puts the onus on the marginalized to explain their oppression, but it also manifests by refusing to believe the marginalized (Applebaum, 2019; Berenstain, 2016; Norris, 2019). Ignorance, in this sense, serves to maintain racial privilege in ways that are hidden so it doesn't expose what it is actually doing. Although often perpetuated unintentionally, upon close inspection it becomes clear that by ignoring the power of “knowing,” members of the dominant group have a vested interest in “not knowing” (de Saxe, 2021). This point is best articulated by Applebaum (2019) who states, “the refusal to know allows the systematically privileged to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” (p. 34).

This misinterpretation and maintenance of ignorance upholds the status quo by stratifying, privileging, and denoting whiteness as invisible (Morrison, 1992, Leonardo, 2015).

In as much, an epistemology of ignorance does not produce cognitive dissonance for those with power and privilege because it is rooted in a hegemonic understanding of a world steeped in normalizing whiteness. This is why individual reforms cannot in and of themselves lead to epistemic justice unless they coincide and interconnect with structural and institutional transformation. Additionally, Orozco (2016) argues that individual whites may claim innocence (and ignorance) from engaging in personal participation in equity initiatives such as housing, school integration, etc. Consequently, the very systems in which many whites purport to work on changing and transforming are actually upheld by and maintained by their innocence. Applebaum (2015) highlights this paradox of white innocence and proclamations of benevolence. She states,

In what might seem like a paradox, white benevolence is an important site to interrogate the type of problem that white complicity is. White benevolence not only comes with implicit requisite demands but might also function to silence those upon whom benevolence is bestowed. Because benevolence is considered “good,” the one who bestows the benevolence has in effect secured his/her innocence and does not have to questions his/her implication of injustice (p.3).

Further, Jayakumar and Adamian (2016) note that even within white students’ ability to understand and align with racially progressive and theoretically nuanced understandings of structural racism and whiteness, as well as counternarratives that challenge racial hierarchy, they still disconnect from a critical analysis of their own positionality, experiences and/or actions. White students too often have the privilege to flee the discomfort of “difficult

knowledge” that challenges their moral integrity, as then they would be asked to consider their role in the reproduction of white supremacy (Applebaum, 2015). Thus, it is vital to unpack structural whiteness within the university context so that students can aim for a wider and more nuanced lens in which to consider their own complicity, as well as how an ideology and normalization of whiteness trickles down to many aspects of the university culture such as course options, syllabi, hiring decisions and student demographics (just to name a few). These understandings often lead students to experience cognitive dissonance, often challenging the “good white/not racist” persona they believe to embody. It is too easy for students to not listen. This type of critical learning has the potential to move whites into a space of white racial consciousness that asks them to unpack how they make sense of their own racial selves and their earned/unearned status.

An ideology of color-blindness also preserves and protects an epistemology of ignorance in subversive and insidious ways. Burke (2017) articulates this point well:

When we study individuals, we must consider *how* they make meaning of the worlds that surround them, and also the ways that activity based on that meaning may work in the service of larger oppressive or liberatory practices, where material consequences are produced (p. 859).

Conversely, succumbing to color-blind thinking supports white student positive self-image, upholding their personal sense of success and status and protecting them from feeling underserving of their privileges. Burke (2017) notes that even within progressive circles, many are grappling with the ideas of color-blindness- that race should not matter- alongside the reality that it actually does. Within



this worldview, whites have the capacity to live anonymously, to go unmarked and unnamed. Whiteness then, becomes normalized and hegemonic.

### **Hegemonic Whiteness**

White supremacy functions because hegemonic whiteness relies on the collective social force (as opposed to individual whites) that shapes the lives of whites as well as the lives of racial minorities. Yancy (2012) speaks to this notion by asking to whom is whiteness invisible? He returns white people to the problem of whiteness by shouting “Look a White!” This proclamation is an intentional flipping of the script of Fanon’s experience of a young white boy ‘seeing’ him and shouting, “Look, a Negro!” (Fanon, 1967). Fanon feels the impact of the collective white gaze. In this situation, he becomes a dreaded object, a thing of fear, a frightening and ominous presence. This pointing is the power of racial gesturing and an expression that calls forth an entire white racist worldview. By ignoring racist practices and structures through a color-blind ideology, the status of whites as racial actors is undermined, whilst simultaneously suggesting that “having race” is only for racialized others (BIPOC).

The world of whiteness is implicit as a default version of living comfortably in society (Matias & Mackey, 2016; Mills, 1997, 2015). As Lewis (2004) argues, whiteness includes an interworking of practices and meanings that occupy and reinforce the dominant position in a particular racial formation. The insidious nature of hegemonic whiteness is that it successfully occupies the empty (yet loaded) space of “normality” in everyday structures. Importantly, whiteness is seen as a ‘clear’ but opaque social construction that elevates the status of people considered white at any given point in history (Leonardo, 2015). Within this default status and version of what is “normal,” whiteness is the lens through which other bodies are viewed as ‘of color’ and thus, racialized. Lewis further

iterates “whites social location (i.e., their status as racial actors as part of the racial hierarchy) is always present whether or not it is ever actively taken up or becomes self-consciously salient (p. 628). The power of hegemonic whiteness is that it normalizes the process of whites viewing and othering BIPOC, as opposed to asking whites to see how they understand their own racial selves and their unearned status (Seidl and Handcock, 2011).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) further argues that whiteness is the visible uniform of the dominant racial group. Whites (as a dominant group) can live and “do race” without even actually being self-conscious or aware of it. When white people say they don’t have race, what they are actually demonstrating is a hegemonic notion of understanding whiteness, ultimately reinforcing its existence solely in juxtaposition to blackness. As just one example, the slogan All Lives Matter in contrast to Black Lives Matter doubles down on the inability to see well-documented and stark disparities in the criminal justice system and over-policing of Black lives. By simply suggesting that Black lives matter, the fear and vitriol espoused by whites demonstrate the threat they feel when illuminating the exposure of color-blindness. Lewis (2004) explains this well by noting that “the ‘blackness’ of blacks is more often an object of focus than the ‘whiteness’ of whites.”

Subversively, hegemonic whiteness does not ask how whites understand their whiteness and privileges that may lead directly to their unearned status and “successes,” particularly within the context of education. As a result, the university both maintains and sustains a colorblind ideology through neoliberal racism by conceptualizing education through a white lens and framework (Darder, 2012; Gusa, 2010; Kidman, 2019). What follows, is a discussion of neoliberal racism and its role in perpetuating a color-blind ideology within and beyond academia.

## **Neoliberal Racism**

A neoliberal ideology within education reinforces the individual relationship with the economy believing that the market can solve all problems and social relations. Education from a neoliberal approach puts a premium on individuality, competition and self-meritocracy as captured by the “pull oneself up by the bootstraps” metaphor. These goals reinforce the seemingly neutral characteristics of individualism and standardization, framing them as inherently part of the education process, as opposed to something that must be questioned and challenged (de Saxe, 2016). Neoliberalism pays little to no attention to societal inequities and multiple forms of marginalization and oppression, as meritocracy is seen and framed as fair and democratic.

Neoliberal racism is just one way in which a color-blind ideology thrives within the university, as within this context, the social structures and policies that are directly related to a color-blind ideology are ignored in lieu of individual acts of racism and exclusion. A racist neoliberal ideology seeks to colonize, suppress, and reinforce the fear that any form of critical thinking within the university might uncover racism, as well as challenge the status quo of complacency, individualism, and inequity (author, 2021; Bargh, 2007; Darder, 2012). A neoliberal ideology places blame directly on the individual when it comes to defining “success” and “failure.” Picower and Mayorga (2015) note that there is a connective tissue that is continually being forged between ideologies, intentions, and the formation of policies and practices. This must be understood as an amalgamation of insidious practices and ways of thinking about the world that directly interconnects and dehumanizes elements of race, class, gender, sexuality, among other identifiers.

Neoliberalism upholds the university as a colonizing structure by pushing back on “diversity politics” and radical voices from the margins; cultural, racialised,

economic, gendered, and sexual borderlands (de Saxe, 2021). Even when the university structures purport to ‘decolonize,’ they in reality work to reinforce their problematic histories into the contemporary everyday. Bargh (2007) further argues, “neoliberalism demonstrates a translation of many older colonial beliefs, once expressed explicitly, now expressed implicitly, into language and practices which are far more covert about their civilizing mission” (p.13). The hegemonic and colonizing structures of the university prioritize self-meritocracy by denying the workings of racism and privilege in favor of discourses of merit and blame.

Within a neoliberal ideology, the university fails to provide students an opportunity where they can learn to think critically, engage with others, and work to challenge institutional whiteness and color-blindness. In fact, too many students leave university unprepared to make transformative contributions and resist policies and practices that reinforce stark inequities in society because they have been trained to stay within the confines of what counts as “knowledge” (Apple and Buras, 2006; Giroux, 2001; 2012). Even more troubling, the academy presents itself as being beyond the perpetuation of racial inequality, ignoring the connection between hostile campus environments and the maintenance of a color-blind ideology. Edwards (2017) argues that when those in power deny the existence of their own prejudice and invalidate the experiences of the marginalized, they are in fact demonstrating a color-blind racial ideology. The tenets that uphold a color-blind ideology (epistemology of ignorance, hegemonic whiteness, and neoliberal racism) perpetuate a philosophy of evasion and denial of their impact on individuals. Their impact manifests through racial microaggressions, that although often subtle, are subversive as their intent is to keep those at the racial margins in their place.

## **Racial Microaggressions**

Although not always overt, many institutions of higher education uphold white supremacy by perpetuating an environment that marginalizes and isolates many BIPOC academics and students to the point that they feel not only unwelcome, but dehumanized (Kidman, 2019). The reality of the university is that it paradoxically demonstrates a desire to not “see color” whilst simultaneously aiming to “diversify” academia. Ahmed (2012) articulates this well through the following statement:

Diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations*. Changing perceptions of whiteness can be how an institution can reproduce whiteness, as that which exists but is no longer perceived.

Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury (2018) build on this discussion in their text, *“Are You Supposed to Be in Here?” Racial Microaggressions and Knowledge Production in Higher Education*. In their examination of racial microaggressions, Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury reinforce the interconnectivity between white supremacist racist structures and racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are always in iteration with institutional and macro white supremacy, and are too often normalized by the same systems that claim to challenge them. (Applebaum, 2019; Orozco & Jaime Diaz, 2016). Given the characteristics that make up racial microaggressions, it is not hard to see their connection with a color-blind ideology.

Racial microaggressions are a direct result of the academy upholding and maintaining color-blindness within both the philosophies and practices of university education. They are innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic, but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. Yosso et.al (2010) argue that in and of itself, a microaggression may

seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence. Sue et. al (2008) further note that the subtle nature of individual microaggressions can result in a dismissal of the microaggression, often framing them as non-existent, a miscommunication, and even an overreaction. This downplay and denial of their existence reinforces the practice of epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016; Norris, 2019)

What then, can be done in order to disrupt, challenge and unsettle color-blindness and racial microaggressions within the white university? Scholars of race and whiteness look to critical theory and critical reflexivity as tools for liberation that can expose and undermine the oppressive structures that maintain and uphold white supremacy.

### **Critical Race Theory and Praxis**

As a conceptual and methodological tool of resistance, critical race theory has the potential to unsettle and challenge color-blindness and racial microaggressions that uphold and maintain the white university and education writ large. Critical race theory is a framework that directly exposes an ideology of whiteness through disrupting the educational canon and mainstream academic knowledge, as well as by questioning hegemonic understandings of oppression (de Saxe, 2016). Critical race theory provides a lens in which to center and learn about diverse modes of resistance and transformation.

There is an intimate relationship between education and the cognitive dissonance that often occurs when engaging with content that asks one to challenge a “common sense” (read color-blindness and an ideology of whiteness) understanding of the world in which we live. It is precisely through a domain of critical theory and its connection to praxis, that one can interweave

the theoretical and critical content with the resistance work that aims to interrogate and challenge an ideology of whiteness and white supremacy within and beyond the university. When drawing on critical theory as a form of liberation, hooks (1994) notes that theory by itself is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfils this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. To effectively move forward with praxis, critical theory must be seen as an extension of practice, as theories do not exist solely for analyzing the experiences of others, they coexist within us and through us (Au, 2012; Saavedra and Pérez, 2012). Critical race theory offers such a framework and tool, as one of its main tenets is to make the abstract more concrete through humanizing experiences that expose the consequences of white supremacy on human lives.

Critical Race Theory (CRT henceforth), articulated by Derrek Bell in the 1970's, challenges dominant standards of meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality and equality. Bell argues that white supremacy and the subordination of Black and People of color were/are created and maintained through education, law, policies, etc. As an analytical tool of resistance, CRT foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research and teaching process, as well as challenges the traditional research paradigms, forms of knowledge, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of colour (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Bell further adds that structural and institutional racism are preserved through the practices and philosophies of whiteness. Ladson-Billings (2009) echoes Bell by reminding us that racism *still* matters. She argues for the primacy of centering race in understanding many of the social relations that define life. Because CRT uses race as an analytic tool for understanding education, it complicates the differences between equity and equality (ie; neoliberal racism and hegemonic whiteness). It further exposes the taken-for-granted elements of color-blindness, where whiteness is positioned as

normative and everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition.

Critical race theory has the potential to create a space for liberatory and transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) note that by using and drawing on interdisciplinary knowledge bases of Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, Sociology, History, Humanities, and the Law to better understand the experiences of students of color, CRT has the potential to flip the deficit narratives by viewing personal experiences as sources of strength. Critical race theory draws on narratives and counternarratives that challenges a hegemonic definition of “truth,” as well as traditional ideas of meritocracy, objectivity, and individualism. By drawing on storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives, the aim of CRT is to interrogate master narratives and hegemonic ways of thinking about oppression and marginalisation.

As just one example of counternarratives within a framework of critical race theory, I draw on the methodological tool of *testimonio*, which engages with praxis to connect action and reflection for transformation (Huerta Charles, 1997). *Testimonio* actively challenges essentialism, hegemony, and homogenization of experiences within education by recognizing that each experience is valid and is not representative of all members of particular groups. One of the most important characteristics of *testimonio* as a tool of resistance, is that it holds the Freirean promise of conscientization to hope, faith, and autonomy (1974, 1998).



### *Testimonio*<sup>iii</sup>

My stories are an attempt to recreate the instances where I collide with hegemonic ideological constructs. As an autoethnographer, my role serves to unpack the repercussions on my educational identity all along the pipeline. Exploring the development of particular identities may help inform research in understating how Latinas/os and other marginalized students of color experience educational institutions in order to acquire more specific knowledge of their academic successes and failures (Chavez, 2012, p. 335).

As a methodological tool of/for resistance, *testimonio*<sup>iv</sup> emphasizes looking introspectively, talking about lived experiences, and validating individual knowledges; all tenets of critical race theory. *Testimonio* aims to disrupt the educational canon and mainstream academic knowledge, question hegemonic understandings of oppression, as well as engage with diverse methods and forms of resistance. From these endeavors come documents, memories, and oral histories that can be used to recast and challenge pervasive theories, policies, and explanations about educational failure as a problem, not of individuals but of systemic institutionalized practices of oppression and white supremacy (Reyes and Rodrigues, 2012). The traditional structures and dominant paradigms of education are called into question and the ones commonly at the margins move to the front. These stories turn upside-down the very nature of the hegemony of our educational institutions.

Within a counter-hegemonic framework, *testimonio* relies on engaging with reflexive historicity, lived experience and hidden structures, dialogic engagement with the margins, and embodiment and interdependence. Yudice (1991) asserts, *testimonio* rejects broad and master narratives, instead providing personal testimonies where the speaker does not speak for or represent a community, but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is

simultaneously personal and collective. *Testimonio* is different from the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing, oral history narration, prose, or spoken word, as its intentional and political (Reyes and Rodriguez, 2012). What distinguishes *testimonio* from other forms of narrative, counter-stories, etcetera, is that the focus is most importantly *not* about “T”ruth. In fact, Partnoy (2003) notes, the central feature of *testimonio* is neither its truth-value nor its literariness, (or lack thereof) but its ability to engender and regenerate a discourse of solidarity.

*Testimonio* provides a space to disrupt and challenge “mainstream” or “official” knowledge (Apple, 1995; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). Pérez Huber (2009) argue that there is an apartheid of knowledge in academia that privileges “official knowledge” that is based on racist, sexist and Eurocentric epistemologies. Challenging the hegemony of knowledge within the academy, *testimonio* acknowledges and draws from the diverse experiences and bodies of knowledge that exist outside of academia and within Black, Indigenous and Communities of Color. Cruz (2006) honors this point, stating that Women of Color must begin within themselves, their families, and their experiences in order to define or examine their production of knowledges. Within this framework, one can disrupt the canon of color-blindness and an ideology of whiteness, whilst working towards a movement of divergent thinking.

One of the most critical components of deploying *testimonio* as both a methodological and political tool, is that it can be contextualized in a way that demands both the narrator and the reader understand its power and liberating potential as a form of resistance and a talking back practice within education (Cruz, 2012). Chávez (2012) reinforces this notion:

*Testimonio* is a way to reinterpret the events we choose to depict regarding our lived experiences. Thus, while stories are many times fragmented bits and pieces of our own collective memory, these instances serve to deepen our understanding of the ways in which social relations are embedded within existing hegemonic structures—in this case, educational institutions (p. 345).

*Testimonio* empowers the speaker or writer whilst weaving the author of the *testimonio* and the reader into a relationship that moves towards challenging hegemonic forms of thinking. *Testimonio* encourages the readers to participate and become agents of change, forging alliances with those who are at the margins (Partnoy, 2003). There must be an awareness of the relationship the *testimonio* creates between the narrator and the reader. In the case of those who are offering and sharing their stories of their educational experiences, the audience must not read these stories passively. As Cruz (2012) argues,

*Testimonio* demands rapt listening and its inherent intersubjectivity when we have learned to do the kind of radical listening demanded by a testimonialist, turning all of us who are willing to participate as listener, storyteller, or researcher into witnesses whether we come from a place of political solidarity or even from places of conflict” (p.463).

The *testimonio* resituates the customary manner in which stories are shared. Within this dialogical space, *testimonio* reminds us that we are simultaneously with and within the world. It engages with a dialectical conception of consciousness, as it reinforces the interconnectivity between our educational institutions and society writ large. The symbiosis between these two spaces is fluid in nature, evolving, and constantly moving together. We are both in the education community, and in the world, simultaneously. *Testimonio* is a place where personal truths regarding the inequities and injustices in education can come to the forefront of resistance, reinforcing the potential for collective action

and activism. hooks (1989) reminds us that, “it is only as allies with those who are exploited and oppressed, working in struggles for liberation, that individuals who are not victimized demonstrate their allegiance, their political commitment, their determination to resist, to break with the structures of domination that offer them personal privilege (p.109). Through this act of testifying and witnessing, color-blindness within the university can be disrupted, challenged, and interrogated.

Significantly, *testimonio* has the potential to bridge the gap between the theoretical and abstract content of the university and the realities of the world within our classrooms and schools. It is this interconnectivity that praxis becomes foregrounded, as critical theory can be understood as both liberatory and action-oriented. As Huerta-Charles (2007) shares, “testimonies help me show my students how complex concepts, such as hegemony, subalternity, domination, oppression, and praxis itself, illuminate and happen in our daily actions at our schools and in our personal lives” (p.257-258). Reflexive practice is privileged as the site where we can learn how to turn critical thought into emancipatory action. This entails a reflexivity where we learn to attend to the politics of what we do and do not do at a practical level (Lather, 1991). Thus, *testimonio*, as a methodological tool of resistance, has the potential to disrupt the cannon of color-blindness and an ideology of whiteness, whilst moving towards a space of divergent thinking and educational transformation.

My own interpretation of who can deploy *testimonio* within the university community coincides with the objective of *testimonio*, which is ultimately about providing an outlet for affirmative epistemological explorations (Reyes and Rodriguez (2012). *Testimonio* should not homogenize, essentialize, or dictate who can or cannot write one. There is no explicit or definitive criteria for writing and/or sharing one’s own *testimonio*, other than personal experiences of

subjugation and marginalization within the context of education. As with other forms of counternarratives and counter-stories, personal experiences carve out a space to humanize and make sense of oppressions that seem abstract to the listener and witness to the *testimonio*. Within the context of the university, the purpose of sharing one's own *testimonio*, or drawing on someone else's, is to humanize and speak back to what is often delegitimized and ignored.

*Testimonio* is just one avenue in which to rupture a culture of epistemic exploitation that upholds and maintains the color-blind university.

### **Moving Forward**

Though university settings are typically structured in such a way that perpetuates the invisibility of whiteness and white supremacy, they can also be conceptualized as a site of resistance if education is understood as the practice of true human freedom (hooks, 1994). Significantly, there must be a shared awareness that talking about the many facets of white supremacy in a surfaced manner too often results in centering whiteness or focusing on the invisibility of the privilege and power. Additionally, the paradox of the “good/benevolent white” persona is often glossed over rather than interrogated and deconstructed. These are, of course, not an excusal of individual actions, but instead, an awareness of the multiple ways in which white supremacy manifests. The processes of learning and unlearning color-blindness and whiteness should not be confined to a binary academia/activist framework, but instead, located at the intersections of identity, physical, and intellectual spaces throughout society, including within the university (de Saxe, 2021). Resisting color-blindness and an ideology of whiteness require a comprehensive understanding of the explicit and implicit ways that unexamined whiteness reinforces the inherent oppression and marginalization found within our educational institutions and communities.

With this in mind, I look to Matias and Mackey, (2016) who call for a pedagogization of critical whiteness studies. Falling in-line with the practice of critical self-reflexivity and praxis as it relates to understanding the many facets of race and white supremacy, a pedagogy of critical whiteness becomes an active framework which “deconstructs the material, physical, emotional, and political power of whiteness. Used in conjunction with other critical theories of race, critical whiteness studies provide a *yin* to the *yang* studies of race” (p.35). For many white university students, talking about whiteness and white supremacy is often accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, as such discussions are often solely focused on historical acts, individual behaviors, and disconnected experiences. Notably, Maddison (as cited within Norris, 2019) argues for the importance of distinguishing healthy white guilt from unhealthy white guilt, as the former can lead to action and transformation, while the latter often results in paralysis. It is vital that educators and their students collectively create a space for engaging with the discomfort that often occurs within counter-hegemonic teaching and learning. Through this, students can consider and meditate upon content that often seems intangible.

One of the foundational principles of engaging in proactive and nuanced conversations around race and whiteness within the university is what Watson (2018) discusses in her article, *Staying in the Conversation*. Watson argues for creating a classroom environment that welcomes honesty, disagreement, and respect, underscoring the importance of rapt listening, giving of self, and being fully present within teaching and learning communities. Building on the notion of healthy vs. unhealthy guilty, Watson leans into the importance of critical self-reflexivity and safe classroom spaces. She states, “by ‘safe,’ I don’t mean a place where folks won’t get offended, or angry, or feel pain. I mean safe enough to feel all of these emotions and more, but still want to come back because the learning is that good and productive (p.43). In essence, the classroom

environment should allow students an opportunity to complicate and unsettle ideas and experiences that can prove challenging and confrontational, yet powerful and provocative.

Matias and Mackey emphasize that a true commitment to racial justice cannot be fully actualized by choosing to ignore how the exertions of whiteness create a violent condition for survival. The daily manifestations of white supremacy reinforce and uphold racial power and privilege, which can only be maintained through the suppression, violence, and marginalization of people of color (de Saxe, 2021). Berry (2010) highlights this point well:

As a critical race feminist, I understand that one's racial/ethnic appearance does not dictate a singular story about who they are. Critical Race Feminism (CRF) is a multidisciplinary theory that addresses the intersections of race and gender while acknowledging the multiplicative and multi-dimensionality of being and praxis for women of color. While advocates of CRF are concerned with theory, praxis is central to this theory; theory and praxis must be a collaboration (p.25).

Power works through knowing and unknowing to maintain systems of social injustice. Arguably, drawing on critical theories of race and whiteness, as well as engaging with *testimonio* as a methodology of resistance, are not something that just “materializes” or occurs in a happenstance manner. In situating critical race theory and *testimonio* as conceptual and theoretical frameworks, students have an opportunity to complicate the dichotomy of ‘theory’ and ‘practice,’ as well as the “racist/not-racist” binary which are commonly reproduced in university contexts (Freire, 1974). However, students and academics must have a shared understanding for how to engage with critical theories and diverse modes of resistance in ways that have the potential to speak back and work to undermine the oppressive forces that characterize the white university. There is

an intimate interconnectivity between education, dialectics, and the cognitive dissonance that often occurs when engaging with content that asks one to challenge a ‘common sense’ understanding of the world in which we live. It is precisely through a domain of praxis that we are asked to interweave the theoretical and critical content with the resistance work that aims to rupture an ideology of whiteness and white supremacy both within and beyond the university.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The term “white” in this article is used throughout to denote a racial identity, and “whiteness” to refer to an ideology that stratifies humans and embodies racial power (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). “University” is broadly used to describe higher education settings. My intention is not to homogenize universities, but to critique universities that fail to challenge whiteness. I recognize and build on the work done in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and traditionally white institutions (TWIs) that challenge whiteness and white supremacy.

<sup>ii</sup> In this context I use BIPOC to acknowledge the racial and ethnic diversity within marginalized communities.

<sup>iii</sup> Parts of this section are adapted from (de Saxe, 2016)

<sup>iv</sup> One of the most well-known examples of *testimonio* is *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). Through her experiences in Guatemala, Menchú’s *testimonio* demonstrates a first person narrative that represents how she saw and understood her own world and life, whilst also detailing the oppression and horrific events that she personally witnessed.

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