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# But We Didn't Mean It Like That: A Critical Race Analysis of Campus Responses to Racial Incidents

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct the nature of campus responses to racial incidents. Through a critical race theory lens, we scrutinize the language used to address three racial incidents on three campuses. We aim to not only deconstruct responses but also provide concrete suggestions for constructing responses that reach beyond surface-level statements and address the root problem of systemically implicit racism within these incidents.

## Keywords

critical race theory, racial incidents, higher education

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Racial incidents on college campuses have occurred in a variety of ways for a number of years with documentation of these instances dating back to the civil rights era (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Perry, 2002; Schmidt, 2008; Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). Records of such incidents increased in the 1990s, particularly after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) mandated that hate crimes concerning race, ethnicity, creed, and sexual orientation be reported (Jackson & Heckman, 2002). However, due to the varying nature of racial incidents, it is difficult to quantify their prevalence from both historical and contemporary standpoints. Furthermore, it is probable to assume that numerous racial incidents on campus do not get reported or documented due to the normalized, pervasive nature of racism and discrimination in education (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Although several studies (Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009; Yosso, 2005) have been conducted on various student populations who experience campus racial incidents, few have inquired into the campus response to such events. For the purpose of this study, we define “campus response” as statements released by those allegedly responsible for the racial incident (e.g., student organizations, outside parties) in addition to the campus spokesperson (e.g., provost, media relations director). Although responses go beyond that of released statements (e.g., punishments for offending organizations, social media discussions), we focus on the aforementioned formal statements from campus constituents for this study. Gaining insight to campus responses is imperative for policy development and implementation, especially as the rate and visibility of racial incidents continues to grow significantly on campuses today.

In this paper, we critically analyze campus responses to racial incidents and offer suggestions for how the campus generally, and student affairs administrators specifically, can more effectively respond to and address such events. After briefly discussing how we define a racial incident, a review of campus climates, racial incidents, and campus responses are examined. We then discuss the framework for this research, critical race theory (CRT), which provides the lens through which we deconstruct and critique three campus responses to separate racial incidents. Next, the method of document analysis is reviewed, after which we situate the themes that emerged in a CRT framework. The paper culminates with recommendations for future practice and research.

## Literature Review

Definitions of racial incidents are discussed before contextualizing the term specifically for this study. An examination of broader racial contexts like institutional racism and campus climate is imperative to understanding environmental factors permitting a recurrence of racial incidents on college campuses today. Finally, a review and critique of how campus constituents currently respond to racial incidents provide the foundation for our argument that this topic is both timely and in need of further study.

### Racial Incidents: Types and Definitions

In the initial search for studies on campus racial incidents, a number of other words and phrases surfaced to describe these events, including hate crime, ethnoviolence (Perry, 2002), and microaggressions. Stronger words like hate crime and ethnoviolence are used to describe more overt racial incidents such as inappropriately themed parties and culturally insensitive displays, such as nooses and blackface. According to Perry (2002), “ethnoviolence—often referred

to as ‘hate crime’—is much more than the act of mean-spirited bigots” (p. 3). Ethnoviolence is the result of systemic and socially constructed norms that allow dominant cultures to engage in actions that are exploitive, violent, and intimidating toward marginalized groups (Perry, 2002). Ehrlich (1994) defines campus ethnviolence as a result of the tension between different student groups that escalates to levels where safety becomes a concern. Constructed by the FBI, hate crimes have the following definition:

A hate crime is a criminal offense committed against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, ethnic origin, or sexual orientation. (Hate Crime – Overview, n.d.)

Terms like microaggressions are used to describe the less obvious, but more pervasive, everyday acts of racism that are largely ignored and not reported (Pierce, 1969; Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) conceptualized institutional microaggressions as “those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color” (p. 673). These microaggressions represent the systemically and structurally embedded practices at universities that work to marginalize nondominant populations. An example is the lack of urgency to intentionally address deeply rooted issues of racism when racial incidents occur and instead placing emphasis on restoring a positive image of the institution in the media. The concept of microaggressions from an institutional standpoint is thus integral to discussions of racial incidents and how campuses respond to such events. As institutional microaggressions become more entrenched within the campus climate, a foundation is laid for more explicit racial

incidents to occur. However, if colleges and universities can recognize microaggressive behavior and actions as pervasive rather than isolated events, then effective discussions for how to best prevent the recurrence of racial incidents may take place. Racial incidents, therefore, is an umbrella term under which institutional microaggressions, hate crimes, and ethnviolence fall. For this paper, a campus racial incident is contextualized through the investigation of inappropriately themed social gatherings encompassing microaggressive behaviors that lead to ethnviolence. Now that our conceptualization of campus racial incidents has been presented, we next review the literature on campus racial climate and racial incidents on campus.

### Campus Racial Climate

As previously mentioned, numerous studies examine the notion of racial climate and its effects regarding feelings of exclusivity for underrepresented students (Boysen, Vogel, Cope, & Hubbard, 2009; Castagno & Lee, 2007; Fenske & Gordon, 1998; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; Hutchinson, Raymond, & Black, 2008; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, Oseguera, 2008; Rankin, 2003). Hurtado et al. (1999) posited that a welcoming campus climate is cultivated through several factors beyond the numerical representation of people of color, including psychological climate, behavioral dimensions, and institutional research, policies, and practices. Negative campus climates for people of color are a symptom of the larger issue of institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Harper, 2012; Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Cultivated through a number of biased policies and practices leading to disparate outcomes for people of color, the institutional habitus (McDonough, 1997) of colleges and universities is systemic in nature and often maintains privilege for dominant populations( i.e., White faculty,

administrators, and students). Institutional microaggressions are one concrete way in which institutional racism manifests for marginalized populations. Another is that of de facto segregated spaces on campus, which often lead to feelings of and experiences with exclusion for nondominant communities. In such spaces that are predominantly White, there is also an increased potential for racially insensitive activity to occur. One example is in fraternity and sorority life on campuses, which is often centered on traditionally White organizations, unless they are specific to certain minorities (e.g., African American and Latina fraternities and sororities). Recent media portrayals of a number of racially insensitive parties hosted by fraternity/sorority organizations on campus (Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, & Giraldo, 2011) illustrate a need to further study the culture of these organizations that is permissive of such incidents to prevalently occur.

Racial climate contextualized through microaggressions toward African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latina/o students is well covered in extant literature (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Sue et al., 2009; Yosso et al., 2009). Common threads of microaggressive experiences across underrepresented students include racial jokes, minimizing admission to the university as a result of affirmative action initiatives, and a denial of racism influencing the outcome of an event, such as dismissive interactions in the classroom. Although current literature includes a rigorous examination of campus climate as it relates to individual experiences for students of color, fewer studies have focused on the influence of climate in racial incidents occurring on a macro scale, such as culturally insensitive theme parties and activities on social media (Garcia et al., 2011; Nelville, Hunt, & Chapa, 2010; Tynes & Marko, 2010).

### Responses to Racial Incidents on Campus

In a review of the literature on campus racial climates post-1992, Harper and Hurtado (2007) identified nine themes that surfaced from research at five predominately White institutions (PWIs). One theme, titled “The Consciousness—Powerless Paradox among Racial/Ethnic Minority Staff,” describes how administrators feel voiceless when racial incidents surface on campus. This feeling of powerlessness is exacerbated by a “fear of being seen as troublemakers who were always calling attention to racism” (p. 19). Perhaps the reasoning behind the consciousness–powerless paradox rests in the fact that chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) may not always work to develop a policy or procedures on how to handle racial incidents because “they felt they had addressed the incidents successfully” (Glenn, 2008, p. 136). The lack of a systematic approach to handling racial incidents is problematic because it results in treating these incidents as isolated and rare rather than pervasive and normal (Perry, 2002). Furthermore, failing to have a proactive approach to addressing issues of inequity allows the common defense of claiming innocence, or not understanding that such acts would be offensive, to prevail.

Consistent with Glenn’s (2008) finding that campus officials saw no need to implement a systemic response to these types of hate crimes, the president of a Pacific Northwest institution publicly stated that “short-term plans that colleges generally devise in response to some racial crisis tend to just sit on the shelf and it is just wasted effort” (Schmidt, 2008, p. A18). This blatant admission demonstrates the lack of urgency surrounding the response to and future prevention of campus racial incidents. Without systemic interventions that do not collect dust on shelves, we will continue treating racial incidents in a reactionary fashion

thereby disallowing the deconstruction of a climate with racist undertones.

Given the recent spate of racial incidents occurring both on college campuses and in the national landscape (e.g., multiple deaths of unarmed Black men and women and White fraternity brothers reciting chants about hanging Black men), efforts to deconstruct the current climate of racism is strongly needed. By critically analyzing three documented racial incidents on three different campuses, we add to our collective knowledge of how to best address these events.

### Theoretical Framework

CRT is used to frame this research in an effort to expose the systemic and pervasive nature of racism in higher education. CRT allows for a focus on the systems of oppression that are embedded in higher education that give rise to ethnoviolence, as well as the (in)ability of campus leaders and perpetrators of this violence to address these acts of racism. Within this research, CRT is used to challenge and critique incrementalism, interest convergence, dominant ideology, and other mechanisms that uphold White supremacy and maintain the prevalence of racism and ethnoviolence on the college campus.

CRT stemmed from civil rights lawyers' growing awareness "that dominant conceptions of race, racism, and equality were increasingly incapable of providing any meaningful quantum of racial justice" (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 3) for people of color. CRT was used initially to critique the American legal system's role in upholding White supremacy (Delgado, 1984). CRT has more recently been applied as a lens to analyze and critique the systemic racial inequities found in the U.S. educational pipeline (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

As CRT has traveled to new disciplines, scholars (see Brayboy, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) have problematized aspects of the framework, specifically its inability to account for the racial realities of students of color who are not Black. To address the racialized concerns of students that fall outside of a Black/White binary, theoretical additions to CRT, such as Latino Critical Race Studies (LatCrit), American Indian Critical Race Studies (TribalCrit), and Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) were conceptualized. These theoretical additions call attention to how indigenous, Latino/a, Asian, and other populations must negotiate race and racism in relation to other identity-specific experiences, such as ethnicity and immigration status (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) and colonization and imperialism (Brayboy, 2005). Employing all of these theories is beyond the scope of this paper. However, because CRT works toward a social justice agenda for all minoritized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), we maintain that it is an appropriate framework to root out White supremacist structures that cause and normalize ethnoviolence for all students of color on campus.

As educational scholars have begun to utilize CRT and its offshoots as a framework to critique institutionalized racism in higher education, core tenets of the theory have emerged (Lynn & Adams, 2002), but CRT scholars do not subscribe to just one set of tenets. For the purposes of this research, three tenets are foregrounded including racism as endemic to society, a challenge to dominant ideology, and the reality of interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These CRT tenets are briefly outlined in the following paragraph.

First, CRT realizes that race and racism are widespread throughout society and therefore deeply embedded in U.S. systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Higher edu-

cation is one such system in which racism is institutionalized and deeply entrenched. The endemic nature of racism normalizes its occurrence, making it hard to recognize, let alone remedy. This is one of the reasons as to why several acts of ethnoviolence go unreported (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Said another way, ethnoviolence is endemic to and institutionalized within the college campus, which causes this racism to seem like a normal occurrence that is difficult to recognize and/or address.

Second, CRT challenges dominant ideology, such as colorblindness, a belief in post-raciality, and meritocracy, all of which serve to reconstruct and maintain White supremacy. It is with this tenet that we expose the White supremacist structures and actions that are hidden but common in the institutional culture of PWIs. Oftentimes, these structures are hidden by dominant ideologies. For instance, when an act of ethnoviolence occurs, perpetrators of the act may claim that, because they do not see color, they acted out of ignorance and/or the act was not racist. Challenging dominant ideology exposes how discourse and initiatives that purport to address and include do the exact opposite in that they serve a majoritarian agenda and (re)create a system that is incapable of making tangible advances toward a healthy campus climate.

A third tenet, interest convergence, claims that gains in racial equity will be advanced only when it benefits White people in some manner (Bell, 1980). White leaders, who often occupy the spaces and positions with the most power on campus, will tolerate advances for students, faculty, and/or staff of color as long as the changes are not too drastic and do not cause a major disruption of the status quo (Bell, 2004; Castagno & Lee, 2007; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). CRT serves as the foundation through which we deconstruct the nature of campus

responses to racial incidents. Through this critical lens, we scrutinize the language used to address three campus racial incidents. Through a CRT lens, we aim to not only deconstruct responses to campus racial incidents but also provide concrete suggestions for constructing responses that reach beyond surface-level statements and address the root problem of systemically implicit racism within these incidents.

## Method

Utilizing document analysis and CRT, we examined three racial incidents that occurred between February 2012 and October 2012. The racial incidents examined were selected because they all (a) ignited debate and media coverage at a campus and national level; (b) occurred within a one-year period of one another; and (c) were similarly characterized as racial incidents in the form of inappropriately themed parties, which allowed for consistency throughout analysis. A brief summary of each racial incident follows.

First, in the winter of 2012, Delta Delta Delta and Lambda Chi Alpha hosted a “cowboys and Indians” theme party at the University of Denver (DU; Simpson, 2012; Sukin, 2012). Three days later, members of the Native Student Alliance (NSA) brought their concerns with the party and ensuing Facebook pictures to the attention of a senior-level administrator of color working in the campus multicultural center. In response to NSA’s outcry, the two fraternity and sorority organizations wrote an apology letter that was read in a public campus space a little over one month after the racial incident. We refer to this data source as “the apology letter.” The second data source from DU comes from the provost’s letter addressing the campus incident and public apology from the fraternity and sorority organizations. We refer to this data source as “the follow-up letter.”



Next, at the University of Texas, Austin (UT Austin), in the fall of 2012, Zeta Tau Alpha and Delta Delta Delta organized a fiesta-themed party during which several students donned Mexican sombreros and ponchos that perpetuated inaccurate stereotypes regarding Latina/o culture (Maly, 2012). For example, one student wore a shirt with the words “illegal immigrant” written across the front, while another student dressed as a border patrol agent. A fraternity, Alpha Tau Omega, at the same institution planned and promoted a similar gathering before canceling it amid controversy from the initial party hosted by the sororities. Two sources were examined for this incident: the apology letters from the sororities and fraternity and the acknowledgment statement from the associate director of campus diversity and strategic initiatives.

Finally, Chi Omega sponsored a party at Penn State University from which several pictures were circulated on the Internet via social media outlets (Beatty, 2012; Zap, 2012). Similar to the fiesta-themed party at UT Austin, sorority members were dressed in sombreros and painted mustaches on their faces. One held a sign that read, “will mow lawn for beer + weed,” while another sign read, “I don’t cut grass, I smoke it.” Sources for this racially themed party include the apology letter from the sorority president and the follow-up letter from the director of public information.

The data sources are a compilation of written pieces for each inappropriately themed party on all three campuses:

- Apology letter/statement from the fraternity and sorority organizations (five total);
- The follow-up letter/statement from the campus spokesperson (e.g., provost, director for public information, etc.) (three total);
- Newspaper articles from the institu-

tional student papers (one from each institution; three total).

### Data Analysis

We employed document analysis to analyze documents from three racially charged incidents occurring in 2012. Document analysis is often utilized as a means of triangulating qualitative research (Yin, 2009). To critically examine and deconstruct how students and administrators responded to campus incidents utilizing the 11 data sources, the researchers analyzed documents for the ability to portray concrete steps taken by university constituents to address the incident. Questions asked by the researchers throughout the analysis process included:

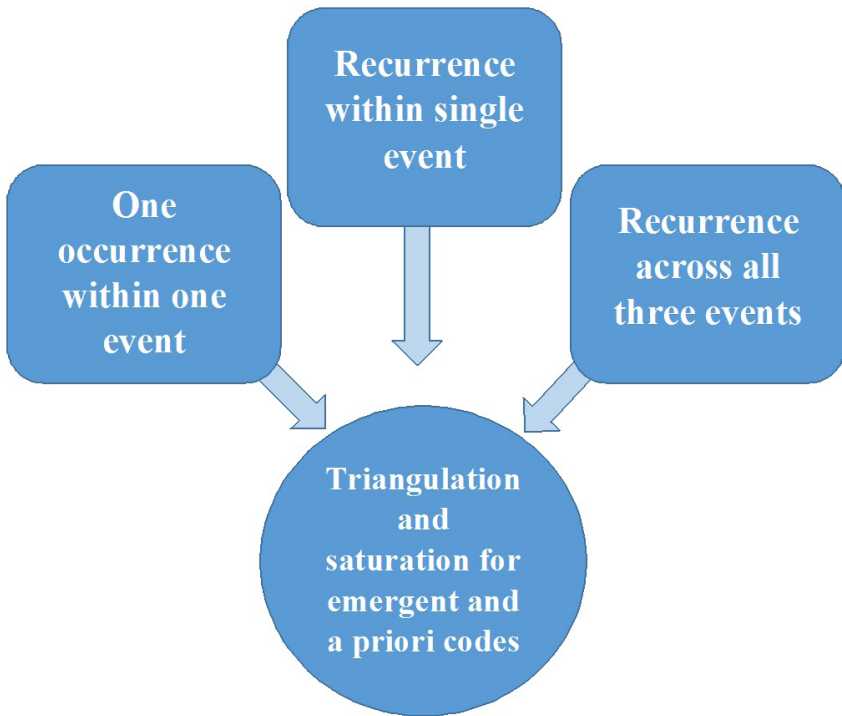
- Do the documented responses present the racial incident as an opportunity for the campus community?
- Do the documented responses deny the possibility of racism influencing the racial incidents? and
- Do the documented responses place emphasis on future concrete action to be taken with those students involved with the racial incident?

In addition to the application of emergent, or “open coding,” (Saldana, 2013), all documents were coded with a priori labels paralleling the tenets of CRT (e.g., racism as endemic, interest convergence, etc.) with themes surfacing through saturation and triangulation (Creswell, 2007) across the three incidents. Figure 1 demonstrates how codes moved to themes based upon frequency and triangulation across documents.

### Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

Addressing our positionality is critical because both researchers identify as women of color and both also attended DU when





the cowboys and Indians party occurred. We also position ourselves in the study to make visible and better understand the ways in which our lived experiences influence our approaches to research broadly and our analysis of this data specifically. The lead author identifies as an African American woman who is grounded in critical epistemologies that address racial inequities in postsecondary contexts. As a former student who attended three PWIs and experienced multiple campus racial incidents, it is important that her research agenda critically explores and addresses underlying organizational factors that perpetuate racism on college campuses. The second author is a Black-identified, multiracial woman who has also attended and worked at PWIs throughout her educational career as both a student and faculty member. She has lived and observed racially charged incidents on the college campus and the inability (and unwillingness) of campus constituents to (systemically) address these incidents. Her research aims to critique and expose

systems of oppression that are embedded and normalized within the college campus, leading to inequities for racially minoritized students, faculty, and administrators.

Using CRT as a guide, each researcher wrote memos in an effort to strike the balance of critical analysis without preinterpretation of the documented responses. Extensive memo writing and bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) assisted the process of allowing the themes to emerge primarily from the data rather than the researchers' thoughts and experiences with racial incidents. Memoing throughout the analysis worked to provide a thread from our findings that linked directly back to the data, while bracketing allowed for journaling and the space to record thoughts, feelings, and reactions throughout the entire research process. Memo writing and bracketing are both ways in which to bolster the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research (Creswell, 2007).

## Results

Written responses from the offending organizations and campus spokespersons are principally defined by neutral and generalized (and thus noncommittal) stances against racism. Lastly, the notions of interest convergence, racism as endemic to society, and dominant ideology are prevalent within and throughout all three institutional and organizational responses to the incidents. The three aforementioned tenets of CRT are the organizing guides for the themes emerging from analysis.

### Interest Convergence

Racial incidents on college campuses are not officially addressed and typically remain undocumented until negative media coverage and disruptive campus protests occur (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Unfortunately, this was the reality with all three incidents. All three campuses and organizations remained mostly unaware and seemingly unaffected until institutional images were threatened when pictures of the offending incidents surfaced on social media websites. Media coverage of disruptive protests on campus at UT Austin sparked the development of statements from the fraternity and sorority organizations responsible for hosting the fiesta-themed party. The NSA at DU approached a senior administrator to have the cowboys and Indians party publicly acknowledged and concretely addressed after the offensive photos were revealed on Facebook. To address the NSA's concerns, in addition to calming the storm of media reports, a campus forum was organized during which a public apology was read by the two fraternity and sorority organizations. Members of the NSA also had the chance to speak at the event.

Analyzing this image-protective response from an interest convergence lens exposes how NSA members were given a voice and a

political platform because it served the interests of White students and administrators in an effort to restore the peaceful image of the institution (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). Although members of the NSA hoped to spread awareness regarding the truth and importance associated with Native American culture and traditions at the campus forum, the only members of the fraternity and sorority community present were the two required to read the apology statements. The lack of participation from the fraternity and sorority community minimally afforded NSA members the opportunity to advance their goal of increasing awareness. Contrarily, the forum did provide the opportunity for the fraternity and sorority organizations to read their statements in an attempt to show remorse for their actions. From these apologies, the university community enjoyed less attention from the media at the conclusion of the event, which begs the question: Who ultimately benefitted from this campus forum?

Interest convergence is also evident in the statements from the campus spokespersons for the events at DU and Penn State. The discourse in the DU letter asserted, "this incident, though negative, can stimulate a broader conversation on campus." The "incident" happened in the midst of the institution's campaign to promote and infuse Inclusive Excellence on campus. With this in mind, the above quote from the provost may have negated the impact of the racial incident while advancing the illusion of an inclusive environment at DU.

In the apology letter, we see the use of the phrase "our organizations will be using this as an opportunity" (Moya-Smith, 2012). Although the entire phrase is telling, the simple word "opportunity" encompasses the interest convergence implicit in the motives of the apology. Too often, offensive acts are proclaimed as remedies to promote "the

opportunity to learn” or the “opportunity to advance inclusive practices on a broader campus level.” Left out of these opportunities to learn are the acknowledgments of pain caused to those directly affected by the racial incident or the opportunities for those groups, such as the NSA, to increase awareness regarding their cultural practices and traditions. The opportunities instead focus on those who committed the racially charged incident, thus negating the negative impact such incidents bring to underrepresented campus populations.

### Racism as Endemic

As systemic forms of racism and exclusion become more normalized in society, both are increasingly difficult to recognize and to acknowledge (Solorzano et al., 2000). Evident from the public letter of apology from the sorority and fraternity who hosted the cowboys and Indians theme party at DU is that students were unwilling to frame and admit their actions were racist: “...the theme was chosen out of ignorance, not racism” (Moya-Smith, 2012). In the apology letter from the offending student organization at UT Austin, there is a failure to acknowledge the fiesta party with shirts reading “illegal immigrant” as actual disrespect by stating it as a mere perception: “We understand now what seemed to be an appropriate, celebratory theme could be perceived as mocking and insensitive.” (Maly, 2012). To claim a lack of understanding is a privilege bestowed upon students in the majority who do not have to think about their race or issues of race in society on a daily basis. From a CRT perspective, this ignorance is equated to the endemic and normalized nature of racism that is deeply embedded in many campus communities, making it difficult to expose and deconstruct racist acts that are standard within the institutional environment.

Further fueling the endemic nature of rac-

ism is the nearly unanimous inclusion of a statement clearing the fraternity and sorority organizations and institution as a whole from “condon[ing] racial discrimination of any kind” (Maly, 2012). Clearly, not condoning racism does not mean that subtle racist acts do not occur every day. And although the fraternity and sorority organizations and college campuses are quick to denounce racism, their actions to concretely acknowledge, address, and continuously work to prevent such incidents occur at a disturbingly slow pace, if at all. The constant, incremental claims of “not condoning racism” and “using this opportunity to better ourselves” used in statements from UT Austin and Penn State (Maly, 2012; Zap, 2012) push the entrenchment of racism further into the culture of these institutions while concomitantly creating the façade of taking small steps to remedy the situation. Furthermore, although there are unanimous declarations of “using this as an opportunity to improve our fraternity and sorority member education programs by increasing awareness and sensitivity of minority groups on campus” (Moya-Smith, 2012), such statements are not paired with concrete steps the organizations will take to increase awareness and sensitivity for underrepresented groups. The prevalence of such incidents continuing to occur in fraternity and sorority organizations, despite the increased visibility and backlash via social media platforms, clearly points to the endemic nature of racist attitudes and activities within these organizations.

### Dominant Ideology

Analyzing the documents through a CRT lens exposed dominant ideology embedded throughout the discourse of response. One such ideology, colorblindness, or living in a postracial society has become popular on the college campus with the election of the nation’s first non-White president. The master narrative of colorblindness, established

by the White majority, asserts that there is no race and, therefore, there can be no racism. This master narrative is seen when the fraternity and sorority organizations at DU declared, “the theme was chosen out of ignorance, not racism” (Moya-Smith, 2012). We continue to see this master narrative in statements from the student organizations at UT Austin: “Tri Delta does not condone cultural insensitivity or racism” and “Alpha Tau Omega does not condone racial discrimination of any kind” (Maly, 2012). Yet, both organizations hosted or planned to host parties rooted in the very cultural insensitivity uniformly denounced in each response. The dominant ideology asserted here is that there is some “other reason” these parties occurred and that racism has no part of the equation, even though this is clearly not the case.

The hesitancy to acknowledge wrongdoing by focusing on intentions versus impact is evident in the three apology statements from the fraternity and sorority organizations at UT Austin. The statement acknowledged that their actions could be “perceived” as mocking and disrespectful of Mexican and Mexican American culture as opposed to concretely stating that such actions are, in fact, degrading. The other offending organization’s statement offered that their participation in the offensive party was a “misunderstanding concerning the organization’s intentions” (Maly, 2012). This represents another demonstration of dominant ideology to emphasize intention versus impact because doing so allows the organization to claim innocence rather than responsibility for the incident. CRT deconstructs this reliance upon intention rather than impact as allegorical to restrictive versus expansive (Crenshaw, 1988) views of equality. The dominant tendency to focus on process allows for superficial (restrictive) acknowledgment of racial inequality that does not result in concrete (expansive) outcomes for people

of color in education and employment. In the same vein, reliance upon the fraternity’s intentions does not allow the detrimental impact of the offensive party to be concretely addressed.

Chi Omega at Penn State has the shortest apology statement, simply stating that the fiesta party “does not support the organization’s values or what they aspire to be” (Zap, 2012). Again, we see the shifting of focus from the present to the future. Despite having just hosted a party where members of the organization wore garb mocking Mexican and Mexican American traditions with phrases like “I don’t cut grass, I smoke it,” the members of the sorority would not condone the portrayal of such “inappropriate and untrue stereotypes” in the future. But what about their past actions? How will the members of this organization work to fulfill their aspirations of not contributing to such hurtful and fictional stereotypes of ethnic groups? We fail to see this question addressed in statements from the organization and the campus spokesperson. Such superficial acknowledgment of these acts of ethnoviolence on campus from students, administrators, and broad campus organizational standpoints are consistent with scholars’ (Glenn, 2008; Schmidt, 2008) assertions that responses to racial incidents condone racism in efforts to restore the public image of the institution under fire.

## Discussion

Through document analysis, we unveiled three main aspects of the written responses to the racial incidents: (a) lack of action-oriented language, (b) overreliance upon remorse and regret, and (c) failure to claim responsibility. First, throughout all statements from the fraternity and sorority organizations and campus spokespersons are expressions of sorrow for the racial incident. However, when the DU provost

expressed regret for the fraternity and sorority organizations' hosting of the cowboys and Indians party, he failed to mention the specific names of the organizations, allowing for a depersonalized acknowledgment of wrongdoing without implicating a specific campus group, except the NSA. As previously mentioned, it was reported that only two members of the fraternity and sorority community were present at the campus forum that included the members who read the apology statement, after which both promptly exited (S. Lucero, personal communication, March 30, 2012). Thus, a lack of action is demonstrated both as absent from the statement itself and the lack of presence at the public forum. Perhaps if the statements included a commitment to action, more representatives of the fraternity and sorority community would have been present at the forum, truly allowing a powerful exchange of information and interactions to occur.

Second, through the tenets of dominant ideology and racism as endemic, we exposed the collective effort by the fraternity and sorority organizations to emphasize their intentions as not meant to offend racial and ethnic groups on campus, promote stereotypes, or condone racism. There was not a similar effort to discuss the hurt and offense caused to specific groups as well as to the general campus body. In addition to focusing on a racism-free future, the apology statements from the fraternity and sorority organizations tended to focus on the intent to simply have a fun social opportunity and that donning shirts that said "illegal" and "border patrol" are perceptions of insensitivity rather than actual offensive, racially charged acts. The inherent conflict in those statements is clear, yet it remains unaddressed both by members of the fraternity and sorority organizations and by campus administrators. Thus, in addition to overreliance on remorse, the statements tended to overemphasize the intent of having fun rath-

er than acknowledging the hurtful impact of the group's actions.

Finally, all of the documents, including the statements from campus spokespersons generally claim to not condone racism of any kind. There is also a unanimous effort to distance themselves (either the entire institution or the fraternity and sorority chapter) from the offensive actions evidenced in the pictures circulating on social media. Phrases such as "the actions taken by these students does not reflect the values of the university" or "These costumes and this group do not represent fraternity and sorority life at [institution], nor the 95,000 students who attend our university" (Zap, 2012) are metaphorical of a ping pong ball that bounces back and forth to the point of distraction. The master narrative in documents from all three racial incidents asserts that the campus and offending student organizations are not racist despite their racially insensitive actions. If these often-held parties do not reflect the values of the institution or the student groups hosting them, then to whom does the responsibility fall? If the values of campuses and fraternity and sorority organizations alike are inclusive and embracing, then what are some examples of steps taken to illustrate those values? Addressing these questions in formal responses will make the statements that much clearer and intentional.

It is worth noting that because the goal of this paper is to deconstruct these responses through a CRT lens, there is a primary focus on what is at fault with the responses. This does not mean that the statements were useless, disingenuous, or intentionally eschewing of any wrongdoing. There are phrases in some statements that are direct and admit that although not intentional, actual pain was caused on a large level (i.e., "We understand that we have detrimentally affected more than just ourselves by failing to act as the community leaders that we

strive to be” from fraternity and sorority organizations at DU; Maly, 2012). Members of the NSA at DU even stated that they felt the apology was genuine and a “good first step” (Moya-Smith, 2012). Thus, although we as the authors can acknowledge the “starting place” from which these responses come in relation to awareness (or lack thereof) of the endemic nature of race and racism on college campuses, we also aim to provide not just deconstruction of these responses but also purposeful recommendations for reconstruction of future responses that more concretely address the root issue of institutional racism.

The increase of racial incidents on college campuses in the last year may not be an actual increase, so much as a realistic portrayal of what commonly occurs between and among college students. The increased visibility and publicity from various social media outlets like Facebook and YouTube no longer allow these racially charged incidents to remain unacknowledged and undocumented. It is imperative that we work to evaluate and make recommendations to effectively address and prevent these offensive parties in the future.

### Recommendations

The findings from this study have several implications for policy, practice, and assessment on the college campus. Student affairs and higher education administrators must (continue to) work with student groups and campus spokespersons to go beyond expressing sorrow for offensive behavior conducted in racial incidents. It is crucial that apology statements include an action-oriented nature that firmly states how the campus and specific student groups are working to address the subsequent issues, past, present, and future, from the incident. Incorporating concrete action steps to be taken as a result of unrest from a racial

incident must create interventions that reach students from the offending organizations rather than those who are dealing with the offenses (i.e., “preaching to the choir”). Doing this means that more than one campus response to a racial incident is needed and that follow-up statements go the extra mile in terms of showing a long-term commitment to addressing the issue as pervasive rather than isolated.

Also integral to a follow-up statement is the ability to provide evidence of a systemic approach to the situation that becomes embedded in the campus organizational structure, such as a protocol for responding to racial incidents developed by an on-going committee. The committee must include a diverse representation of students, student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators. It is imperative that the committee not be thought of as a defense mechanism against claims of racism but rather as a proactive means by which to consistently assess, report, and subsequently act on significant issues related to a racial campus climate. Systemic integration and continuous program development will demonstrate the longevity of the commitment to dismantle pervasive racism on campus rather than the implementation of one short-lived intervention program that is isolated and overly specific to the most recent racially charged event. A full disclosure of wrongdoing in statements from student organizations is more authentic and understandable than attempts to claim ignorance and good intentions. It will benefit campus organizations to concretely acknowledge that despite the best of aspirations, the reality is that an event resulted in deep offense and hurt for certain groups on campus.

Overemphasis on intent reflects a possible refusal to acknowledge any wrongdoing. Focusing on impact will also show that members of the organization are taking



responsibility for the offense. Group dialogues regarding race and racism tend to be the first step in addressing the aftermath of a racial incident on campus. However, conversations on racism should not be just that, but rather purposeful dialogues that are cross-racial, sustained, and deconstruct the normality of Whiteness (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Parker, 2006). Sustained dialogue is a documented practice originally used to strengthen relations between Americans and Soviets after the cold war and is practiced at several institutions of higher education today (Parker, 2006). It includes intentional dialogue between groups with a strained history, wherein the strategy is to cooperatively delineate the problems, goals, and outcomes of purposeful dialogue over a significant amount of time (at least one year). Ortiz and Rhoads (2000) outline a detailed framework for the deconstruction of White culture and the pervasive norms associated with it from which racial incidents can often stem. Applying tenets from CRT will assist in understanding aspects of Whiteness and racism as endemic to university culture. It would behoove student affairs and higher education administrators alike to utilize both techniques in initial steps to address a racial incident. Intergroup dialogues that are sustained over substantial time (i.e., an entire semester) work well for students who are frequently interacting in the residence halls, athletic programs, and learning communities. Institutions like the University of Michigan have implemented intergroup dialogues on a systemic level as a course offered by the institution. Regardless of the level of implementation, the results from these subsequent initiatives should also be included in follow-up statements regarding the incident.

Lastly, assessing the institutional climate for racial interactions and outcomes provides university constituents with an understanding of how students are experiencing the

campus atmosphere from a racial perspective. Although surveys are a common method of assessment for campus racial climate, it is also effective to gather qualitative data from students of color regarding their campus experiences in various spaces (e.g., residence halls, classrooms, cafeterias). Counterstorytelling as a methodology stemming from CRT will allow the voices of those marginalized students to be centered while providing rich data with which to address specific areas of the campus racial climate. It is important to acknowledge the attention that must be paid to students whose culture is often implicated in racially insensitive theme parties. To immediately provide support to those students and student groups who are offended by a racial incident, the president and vice president for student affairs at the institution can host “fireside chats” during which students have a safe space to vent their frustrations and provide thoughts on how to best address the incident moving forward (E. Rivera, personal communication, December 12, 2015).

The recommendations derived from this study are primarily characterized by an imperative need to include language that is direct, concrete, and action oriented. This language will demonstrate a commitment to dismantling pervasive racism on campus that goes beyond words and translates into intentional actions. It is important to recognize that statements are just words, and without actions to provide truth to the intentions, they are a wasted effort because these harmful racial incidents on campus continue to occur.

### Limitations

Qualitative research studies in higher education are not generalizable to all institution types and campus populations. The findings of this study are therefore most applicable to racial incidents similar to those analyzed



here. The researchers do not currently attend any of the three institutions cited in this study, providing a distance from the actual racial incidents that may result in an analysis not wholly reflective of the events. The three incidents do not broadly represent the varied nature and complexity of racially charged incidents on college campuses and, therefore, our recommendations may not be applicable to other situations of campus ethnviolence. In other words, one uniform campus response does not exist because it cannot account for the differences in context and impact of varying racial incidents. Although we reviewed three articles from the respective institutional student newspapers, the articles included a balanced representation of perspectives from the fraternity and sorority organizations, campus constituents working to address the issue, and students who were personally offended by the inappropriately themed parties. Campus-based student newspapers may be missing an opportunity to stimulate dialogue regarding racially charged incidents by maintaining a neutral stance, but we acknowledge that neutrality is a common goal of campus publications. Consistent with qualitative research is the goal of transferability of findings, and we hope the recommendations offered are useful for all practitioners, regardless of if they are tasked with addressing campus racial climate and racial incidents.

### Conclusion and Future Studies

Although document analysis was our primary method of inquiry, future studies should include interviewing both administrators and students involved in such incidents as an additional method for evaluating the impact. It is also important to acknowledge that not all racially charged incidents are the result of fraternity and sorority organization gatherings, but this study focuses on three incidents that recently received publicity in the media and all happened to involve

fraternities and/or sororities. Future studies may research fraternity and sorority culture and what aspects of it may or may not contribute to the hosting of offensive parties.

The current approaches undertaken on colleges and universities to address racial incidents do not prevent their constant recurrence. Although cross-racial dialogues that are sustained (Parker, 2006) and deconstruct the centrality of Whiteness (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000) are essential, several other steps must be taken to disrupt the cycle of oppression and dominance on college campuses. Student affairs practitioners arguably hold the most multifaceted skillset to work with both student groups and campus spokespersons to effectively address these incidents to prevent repeat occurrence in the future. More importantly, higher education and student affairs practitioners also have the skills to continuously work on issues of campus climate in ways that will dispel the myths of racial incidents as isolated and rare and instead explicitly connect such incidents back to the pervasive culture and climate constructed through social norms. Truly effective deconstruction of not just racial incidents but also the culture and climate permissive of such incidents can start with the purposeful embodiment and enactment of the recommendations offered in this paper.

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