

7. WHEN A SAFE SPACE BECOMES AN OPPRESSIVE SPACE: CHRISTMAS IN A CULTURAL CENTER

INTRODUCTION

As I began to compile my notes to write this chapter, I could not shake some of the childhood memories that came back to me. I was taken back to my junior year of high school, where I recalled the feeling of dread that would overcome me as I walked into my English Advanced Placement class. It seemed that no matter how persistent my efforts to succeed in that class, I could never connect to the themes, and find the profound literary connections I was expected to find as we analyzed the great U.S.-American literary works. As I persevered through *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Native Son*, and other works of literature, my repeated poor grades on my assignments reminded me of my "Otherness." While most of my peers were able to connect the necessary biblical references to these texts, I remained confused and clueless. Ironically, when we began to read *The Odyssey*, and I compared this epic story to the ancient Indian epic story, *The Ramayana*, my teacher was not able to appreciate the references and parallels I made because she was not familiar with *The Ramayana*. When I met with my teacher to discuss ways in which I could improve, I was offered the suggestion that I need to "catch up" with my peers by reading the Bible so that I could understand these texts on a "more intellectual" level.

Catch up? How is it that I managed to get behind? As an Asian American woman of color, I accepted and internalized this feedback, and I attributed my "lack of intellectual insight" to my ethnic identity. Reflecting upon this experience now, I am bothered deeply. I was never behind; I was just not part of a system that naturally benefited me in the way that it naturally benefited my Christian peers.

When I discuss Christian privilege, it is this unspoken, unnamed system of unearned benefits based on having a Christian identity that I aim to unveil. How many times have we heard the term "morality" interchanged with "Christian"? At its very core, morality, goodness, and ultimately the right for humanity is grounded in Christian dominance. How many times has our society, through media, mocked the religious practices of other cultures, or judged those individuals who define themselves as agnostic or atheist? This judgment, and Christian dominance is most evident within our policy arenas. Many non-Christian religious community leaders are not allowed to legally sign marriage licenses, political leaders are sworn into office with a Bible, the academic curriculum is grounded in a Christian norm, and the examples continue (Clark, et al, 2002). As a university administrator, I have entertained many phone calls from professors who want to confirm in fact, if their

non-Christian student is telling the truth about celebrating their particular holiday, yet we do not stop to think that Christian people do not have to confirm or prove the validity of their traditions (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003).

Using a campus cultural center as my case study, it is through the sharing of narrative voices and real-life experiences that I hope to share the depth of Christian privilege in our academic institutions, and the due diligence required of us to dismantle this privilege. Specifically, I address Christian privilege in this chapter by examining the tensions associated with the celebration of Christmas in a cultural center at a public university. Through this case study, it is my hope that we cannot only identify Christian privilege, but also expand the ways in which we serve our students as they explore their identities. This chapter is written with the hope that its readers will be able to recognize the impact of oppression based on Christian dominance, and the roles we play as educators to perpetuate and/or dismantle this system. I organize the chapter into four sections. In the first section, I offer an overview of Christian privilege literature while sharing the context of the case study. The second section offers a critique of today's cultural centers on most university campuses, while offering recommendations for a pedagogical shift for these centers to be more effective. The third section pays special attention to how Christian privilege dynamics parallel other power/privilege systems, and how consistent dominant group behavior shows up across social identities. Finally, I conclude with thoughts for future initiatives and research.

RECOGNIZING CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

As our society continues to diversify, we can no longer assume that Christian identity is the norm (Clark, et al, 2002; Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003; Schlosser, 2003). One of the challenges with recognizing the institutionalization of Christianity is how intricately woven Christian traditions are within the tapestry of our society (Blumenfeld, 2006). Additionally, the secularization and subsequent commercialization of specific traditions often blurs the distinction between what is "Christian" and what is "American." This blurring of distinctions results in very problematic outcomes. "Christian" becomes synonymous with "American," and we come to use those terms interchangeably, which makes it difficult for people, Christian and non-Christian, to recognize the impact of Christian dominance. For example, looking at our academic calendars, at first glance there seems to be a natural, logical divide between semesters, allowing for a break that falls around the third week of December. Because this break is so institutionalized, we do not consider that our entire calendar is positioned around the assumption that this time of year is equally significant to everyone (Clark, et al, 2002). However, rather than attribute this break to Christian dominance, our society has normalized the notion of an "American holiday season," where the focus is around celebrating specific traditions: stockings on the mantle, eating ham or turkey with all the fixings, and the exchanging of gifts. In the workplace, groups often have a gift exchange, and holiday gatherings, not to celebrate in a religious way, but to share in what has become a part of "American" tradition.

out celebrating their particular holiday, people do not have to confirm or prove (Sedlacek, 2003).

In this case study, it is through the sharing of what I hope to share the depth of Christian faith and the due diligence required of us to address Christian privilege in this chapter. The celebration of Christmas in a cultural center case study, it is my hope that we cannot expand the ways in which we serve our community. This chapter is written with the hope that the impact of oppression based on Christian identity continues to perpetuate and/or dismantle this system. In the first section, I offer an analysis while sharing the context of the case study. The second section discusses the role of today's cultural centers on most campuses and offers recommendations for a pedagogical shift for the next section. The third section pays special attention to how power/powerlessness, privilege systems, and how they play out across social identities. Finally, I discuss implications for practice and research.

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

One can no longer assume that Christian identity is the norm (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003; Schlosser, 2003). Recognizing the institutionalization of Christian traditions are within the tapestry of American culture, the secularization and subsequent blurring of distinctions between what is sacred and secular results in very little being synonymous with "American," and we live in a culture that makes it difficult for people to understand the impact of Christian dominance. For example, at first glance there seems to be a separation between allowing for a break that falls around the week of Christmas. If this break is so institutionalized, we do not question it around the assumption that this time of year (Clark, et al, 2002). However, rather than questioning it, our society has normalized the notion that the focus is around celebrating specific traditions: ham or turkey with all the fixings, and gift exchange, and religious way, but to share in what has

Drawing from the current foundational literature that explains and identifies Christian privilege, and its application to a case study, I aim to extract the attributes of Christian privilege. I interviewed multiple students about their reactions to the discussion surrounding Christian privilege, and specifically their concerns with and reactions to decorating for Christmas the cultural center: a student-run center designed to support students of color on the campus. In order to truly honor student anonymity, I deliberately choose not to reveal the actual number of students I interviewed, as their identities might potentially be revealed by their rhetoric and communication style, and I use a wide variety of gender-neutral pseudonyms (although in some cases, interviewees reveal their gender identity in the context of the interview). I also do not follow traditional subject pronoun agreement (using the pronoun "they" to refer to singular pronouns) to dismantle a gender binary. I specifically chose students who had a deep understanding of social justice as an operating framework because I wanted to dialogue with the students from a common lexicon base, and a common place of understanding related to oppression and privilege.

THROUGH THE CHRISTMAS LENS: WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE LOOK LIKE?

Drawing from examples pointed out in his "Beginning List of Christian Privileges," Schlosser (2003) points out that people experience Christian privilege, for example, when they can make safe assumptions that they will likely not have to go to school around their holidays, notably Christmas, and that they are likely to be able to have the celebration of their holidays reinforced by media—through music, television programs, advertisements, etc. I asked my students to reflect on how they recognized Christian privilege, and below are their responses:

I think that when you are living in the U.S., and you drive downtown and there's lights or a tree, or whatever, and you go to the store, and you buy things, and after your purchase is made, the clerk says "well have a Merry Christmas," or "Happy Holidays"—well how do you know I am buying this for Christmas? When you turn on the radio, you hear the same Christmas songs—it can become a strain for someone who does not identify with the holiday, just because I think there is a difference between allowing someone to celebrate a holiday and having it thrust upon you. Let's take Ramadan for example: What if all of the restaurants stopped serving food during the fasting times of Ramadan, because you are supposed to fast? Someone who did not identify with that religion would obviously be affected. — Gul

One of the most common manifestations of Christian privilege during Christmas is the prevalence of Christmas music, Christmas themed attire and/or language, and the general assumption that everyone is thinking about Christmas. All of these things seem "normal" to most of us, whether we identify as Christian or not, because these things have become an unquestioned part of our culture. Another interesting observation:

Just the fact that people who don't even celebrate Christmas know things like Santa Claus and Rudolph is like, to me, shows how deep Christian privilege is. I bet you anyone in here could sing the first three lines of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." — Sammi

As Sammi keenly points out, the idea of Christmas is so pervasive, that we could do a random survey and find that most people know the first three lines of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and I would further add that most children probably learned this song in school. Critics would point out that this example, again, points to the commercialization of Christmas, and that it has no religious significance. That its traditions and folklore have "become" secular further emboldens the institutionalization of Christianity and Christian norms (Blumenfeld, 2006; Clark & Brimhall-Vargas, 2003). I ask us to consider this question: Do we know the commercial aspects and cultural extensions of other religious and spiritual identities? Therein lies a core marker of Christian privilege. While people know the theological significance of Christmas, partly because of the commercialization of its cultural practice, we would not know the theological significance of other major holidays rooted in non-Christian religious traditions. On the contrary, we impose those Christian cultural norms on other groups who have historically not shared those norms. The following observations offer perspective on this concept:

When I was in school, in an effort to learn about different people's perspectives and different belief systems, we learned about Christmas around the world. As if Christmas was this thing that is just everywhere—it's so ubiquitous, it's in the air, it's like oxygen here in November and December.
— An

While efforts like "Christmas around the World" are done in the spirit of inclusion, we must pause to recognize that this action is a form of cultural colonization—an imposition of values and norms upon another's culture, which is a far departure from inclusion. Countries that do celebrate Christmas either celebrate it because of the commercial and retail component, the deep religious component, or because it was a tradition precipitate left behind from colonial days. When we teach about "Christmas around the World," we also lead with the assumption that it is celebrated with the same emphasis or significance as it might be in the United States, which is far from the truth. Again, many countries around the world might honor Christmas day as a public holiday, but that is clearly not the same as the two-week break, and the six-week commercial window within which it is framed in the United States.

Another way in which we try to be inclusive of people who do not celebrate Christmas is by finding the winter-holiday-equivalent for other traditions. Again, while this seems inclusion-centered, and certainly is based in good intentions, the outcome of actions like this further center the Christmas holiday as the holiday to "emulate."

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Iman's point is very relevant to the discussion surrounding the Christian privilege of Christmas. Essentially, if you do not celebrate Christmas, then your holiday must be "Christmas-like" in nature in order to carry some form of validity. Additionally, we create this paradigm so that we might develop substantiation for the phenomenon we call "The Holiday Season." In an effort to be politically correct, we find offices having "holiday" parties in place of Christmas parties, or we make plans for "the holidays," or we wish people "Happy Holidays," yet whose "holidays" are we actually referencing when we use that term? Again, the irony in using the term "holiday" instead of Christmas is that "holiday" has become synonymous with "Christmas." Rather than de-centering Christian dominance, the secularization of Christianity has further reinforced it (Blumenfeld, 2006; Clark & Brimhall-Vargas, 2003; Schlosser, 2003). Consider this note I received via email, along with all staff in the division, in reference to a division-wide holiday party:

Colleagues,

This is a reminder that all staff members who want to attend the [Division] holiday event this afternoon can do it. As in the past, individuals who choose not to attend the event are expected to stay in the office. Have a great weekend!

Let us examine the equity of this situation. Those individuals who wish to attend the holiday event are excused from their work responsibilities without having to take personal time off. However, those individuals who do not wish to attend, must stay in the office. Do those individuals have the opportunity to use their two hours of unused "holiday-party" time elsewhere? In this scenario, Christian privilege, masked in a "neutral-holiday-party," manifests itself so deeply that staff members are discriminated against, based on their choice to attend or not to attend this party. Yet, we choose not to see this as discrimination, but, rather, as a matter of options from which people can choose. We celebrate "the holidays" in December to align with Christmas. We do not celebrate "the holidays" to align with Lunar New Year, Diwali, Yom Kippur, or Eid. There is no division-wide "holiday" gathering in March.

Before one can even begin to understand the impact of Christian privilege, one must really acknowledge the existence of Christian privilege, which means being receptive to the idea that Christian norms are the operating norms in our society. Using Christmas celebrations as the lens through which we examine Christian privilege, we are able to grasp how pervasive Christian privilege can be within our society. In the next section, I will take a look at the impact of Christian privilege within the space of a cultural center on a university campus.

THE TRANSFORMING ROLE OF CULTURAL CENTERS

Cultural centers have historically been a space for students of color to find support, empowerment, and retention services at predominantly White universities. Since universities have often been perceived as a hostile environment to students of color, cultural centers have served as a haven from the oppression of racism that they must endure while trying to seek higher education. While the structural models can vary, from creating cultural programs, to being the catalysts for activism, to focusing purely on academic achievement, cultural centers have offered a physical space where students of color can "be themselves" without judgment, and without having to explain themselves.

Safe Space vs. Home

When I asked my students what they perceived the role of a cultural center to be, they offered the following thoughts:

I think a lot of people take it for granted, that it's about making people feel like they have a home, and that they are comfortable and feel welcome. Lately I have been thinking about that—what do we do here? I think more than anything it's empowering people, and it's about creating a safe space where people can find a home here. — Morgan

Another student shared:

There are two distinct roles. One role is that of a safe space—a space for community building among under-represented communities, whether that's in the arena of race, or sexuality, or gender, or any number of other identities. Providing the space, resources, time, for those communities to organize, coalesce, become activists....I also think of the role of it serving the entire university community: of educating, getting information out there, providing events that all people can benefit from, regardless of whether they are a part of that community. — Sammi

A common theme that emerged among Morgan and Sammi's comments was the notion of a safe space. They both felt that the cultural center should be a safe space for people of color (and members of marginalized communities) to examine, explore, and express their identities in a protected environment.

The source of tension, and need for precision around semantics revolves around the interpretation of the terms "safe space" and "home." The need for clarity around these terms becomes especially evident when combined with the dialogue regarding decorating the center for "the holiday season." Yuri pointed out:

When you come into a multicultural center, you should feel safe. If there is a place where I should not have to deal with this holiday, for even an hour of my life, it should be in here.

Similarly, Guadalupe explains:

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I feel like of all the places on the entire campus, this would have been the only safe space, or the only place where I wouldn't have to explain that I'm not Christian. Because I always have to say that I am not Christian, and then people give me this weird look—and that's the privilege—you don't have to say, "I am not Christian" because everyone assumes that you're, especially being a Latina. If you come into this space and you assume that everyone is Christian, and it compromises the safety of a space that is supposed to shelter me from this.

The students who enter cultural centers are not just seeking representation within the centers. They are seeking safety. While they might find that safety in relation to their racial identities, they often do not find the same safety in relation to their religious identities. An remarks:

There are so many aspects of my identity that feel safe here, and yet there are parts of my identity that don't—and so I struggle with how I toggle that. How do I overcome that feeling of imbalance here, when at one moment I feel very empowered by the programming and work that I am doing at that moment, and then I see someone walking by with a nativity scene, and how does that make me feel? Is that okay in this office?

While the comparison of the impact of oppressions is not fair, or even measurable, Gul offers an analogy:

If someone put up a Confederate flag because of their strong tie to its history, and their pride in that history without considering the impact on other people, we would call it out. A nativity scene triggers me. It may not be a racial slur, but it is a reminder to me about things that have happened to me my whole life. I tell Christian people this, and they are surprised, but I have been told repeatedly, "Oh, you don't believe in Jesus. Well, you are going to hell." When I was a kid, I didn't even know what it meant to believe in Jesus, and why I was bad for not believing in him. And that nativity scene you use to decorate this space represents that feeling.

A recurring message I received through the students' interviews was that they felt marginalized, and consequently betrayed by the one space they expected to care for them. Sammi shared the following:

I am not asking this office to represent me at all times, but it would be nice if they understood what we were going through. It would have been nice to be able to walk out of spaces like the alumni center, where there is this HUGE tree in my face, into spaces like this where I could breathe. Instead it was worse, because it was MY safe space that was compromised. It's even beyond decorating using things that have no connection to me, and my history, and my experiences. In fact, it has a negative impact because it's like they took all of my most embarrassing and humiliating moments, and all the times I wanted to break down and cry when I was little, and just put it on the wall. That's how it feels.

On the contrary, the greatest divide among the students in the cultural center emerged from the assumption that the "notion of home" and the "notion of safety" were interchangeable concepts. Students in favor of decorating the office for Christmas felt that the cultural center was their "home," and that they should be able to "be themselves" in that home. Morgan responded by saying:

I think this space can be a safe space to a much larger number of people than it can be a home to. I think our goal should be to be a safe space, to serve a greater good for the communities that we are supposed to serve, rather than a home to the 30 or so staff members that work here.

In line with Morgan's observation, while cultural centers have certainly provided a home-like environment for students of color on predominantly White universities, this is not a replacement for home itself. The sense of family that students experience as they build relationships within the center is still a replication of family, and not a replacement of family. However, when our students and staff begin to toggle their use of figurative and literal definitions of terms like "family" or "home," it becomes problematic. The following comments offer deep reflection on this tension:

I have become critical of familial rhetoric. When we use familial terms, we justify oppression. To me it's like calling the maid a "part of the family" because she is not a part of the family. It's the same kind of dynamic. You can't put familial labels on things, and suddenly it's okay. You can't cover up religious oppression by calling the office a home, and using familial labels to explain why you get to be yourself. It's not okay for the maid, and it's not okay for me. I can't breathe like that. — Sammi

It's not the same. This is not home, and it's not a family—literally. Yes it is a home for me on campus in a sense, but it is still on campus. I don't walk around without a shirt like I do at home. When I say I am going home, I don't mean I am coming here to this space. I mean I am going to my home. — Siva

For me with decorations, the issue about calling this home is that it ignores the fact that we all do have homes that we can go back to, and decorate in whatever way we choose. — An

Using familial references to create a safe space is probably a very common practice in cultural centers. What we need to realize, however, is that while striving to create a safe space for all results in a homely environment for most, striving to create a homely environment is highly subjective, and it results in compromising the safe space. Gul explains this difference:

And we talk of this space as being "our home," and we use that rhetoric. I think at some level we have to separate that I don't actually sleep here. This isn't where I live, and that in my home, and in my family's home, that we will have a Christmas tree, and we will have all of these things because we do celebrate Christmas, and I am not being challenged, or threatened, and no

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part of me is being removed by us not having a Christmas tree, or ornaments, or lights in this space. I can still go home to my family and celebrate that.

When students who supported the decoration of the office for Christmas argued that the center was their home as their justification, Angel responded:

My question is, what is the effect if we don’t put up decorations. What is really gonna happen? Is this threatening to people if we do not put up decorations? Am I as a Christian, is this seen as the end of Christianity because we don’t have decorations in the office? But then what is the impact on students who don’t identify with this religion or any religion? I see it on this campus, and I see it all over, that we are inundated with this Christmas nonsense. It’s everywhere. It’s pervasive at this time of year. How refreshing could it be to walk into a space, especially if it’s a space that is affirming diversity in all aspects of the word, without holiday decorations. I know it seems counterintuitive, because how is something affirming by not having something there, but that’s part of it. — Angel

Making a cultural center feel “like home” is not the same as having the center “replace home.” In this particular setting, we mistake analogous comparisons for actual comparisons, but analogous concepts are not interchangeable concepts.

Because of the expanding populations being served by cultural centers, and a shifting operational framework surrounding how those services are best delivered to our students, it is inevitable that tension and potential conflict would emerge over the perceived roles and responsibilities of the centers. Our students come to campus with multiple social identities, and the administrative leadership of the cultural centers must be equipped to consider how our students’ identities intersect and inform the development of each other. Morgan poses a powerful and necessary question:

Students of color do not come to the center with only a racial identity. All students have multiple identities that are interacting within them. To say that you are meeting the needs of a particular population in one area, while neglecting others, is that good practice?

The leadership and staff of cultural centers must be ready to develop “good practice” when it comes to serving their diverse student body. This also means that cultural centers must evolve by incorporating a pedagogical framework that considers the interactions and intersections of multiple social identities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTERED FRAMEWORK

A social justice centered framework allows us to consider our social identities in relation to one another. Additionally, this framework also allows us to identify the operating dynamics of power and oppression, and how these dynamics position us based on our social identities. In the case of the manifestation of Christianity in the cultural center through the decoration for, and celebration of Christmas, I learned

that my students felt discomfort around the manifestation of Christianity because of how it interacted with their other identities. Angel shares this reflection:

The reason all of the indigenous communities were killed when Spanish colonization happened is because the Spanish used Catholicism as a tool for the conquering of our indigenous communities. So for me, when I can trace back my indigenous roots, I am just like, mmm, yeah, the Church killed my people. That was a big thing for me, and it was one of the main reasons I gave up that religious identity.

Oppressions across social identities are linked. In this case, Angel's identity as a person of color with indigenous roots clearly collided with the history of Christianity in relation to indigenous peoples. Manifestations of Christianity also become synonymous with the blatant acts of racism, which were responsible for the mass genocide of indigenous peoples in North and South America. In many ways, Angel perceives Christianity as another facet of oppression based on "race," and it represents whiteness. Christianity-as-whiteness is experienced by many communities of color (Joshi, 2006). While the impact is different, particularly those people with indigenous roots (Latinos, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders), Desi (South Asian) Americans, and Arab Americans are assumed non-Christian because of their non-whiteness, and vice versa, which results in discriminatory treatment of these communities. (See Joshi this volume.)

Morgan shares another example of how Christianity is used as a medium to perpetuate oppression of other social identities (See also Harvey this volume.):

In the wave of anti-same-sex marriages [laws] that have been passed around the country, there has been this huge organizing and coalescing of Christian churches of certain denominations, and what's been interesting is that you have predominantly White Christian churches linking up with predominantly African American Christian churches. And if you were to rewind this to the Civil Rights movement in the '60s, these were the same White churches that were very much against civil rights based on race.

Morgan's example is especially powerful because it shows how some manifestations of Christianity have been used to maintain whatever "status quo" systemic structures existed at the time. Thus, the same Christian movement that is anti-same-sex marriage played a role in stifling the Civil Rights movement just a few decades ago. When students come to the cultural center with multiple identities—with one of those identities being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender—they are forced to choose which identity to support, and which should remain oppressed. With an operating Christian norm in cultural centers, we run the risk of dually marginalizing queer students of color (Schlosser, 2003). Guadalupe further explains that "as someone who identifies as bisexual, that part of my identity does not link up with Christian norms. As a Latina, the Catholic Church enforces gender norms in society, which I will never fit." Essentially the intersection of racial identity, sexual orientation, and religious identity position Guadalupe to question her identity because of how strongly Latino identity and culture is linked with

Catholic culture. When Guadalupe is forced to repeatedly confront that Christianity during Christmas time, she once again questions her authenticity as a Latina. It becomes extremely exhausting for her, and she does not have a safe space where she can negotiate these intersections.

It is important to note that a social justice framework allows us to intimately examine the intersections of social identities. It is not a surprise that certain students are passionate about decorating the cultural center for Christmas. For some students, their Christian identity is the source of perseverance and strength to overcome historic, multigenerational racism. As Siva reminds us:

I know that Christianity has also been a safe space for many communities of color as a refuge against race-based oppression, as a space for social change, and the push for civil rights. So I know that it has been all of those things, and it is tricky to try to weigh that it has been this positive force. And yet in the way the Christianity is elevated and celebrated, it is also a power dynamic.

It is virtually impossible to separate the privilege from the oppression in scenarios where one's identities intersect and inform each other. More specifically, it is difficult for one to acknowledge the power that comes with their dominant identities, when that same individual is trying to survive the oppression experienced by one's subordinate identity. So it would not be surprising for Christian people of color to not recognize their Christian identity as a dominant identity, because they rely on that dominant identity for strength to overcome the racism associated with their subordinated identities as people of color. Yet it is important to consider that Christianity, and emulation of physical representations of Christianity, religious or secular, itself offers access and entry to mainstream societal norms in a way that no other religious identity can ever rival in the United States.

In the rhetoric of social justice, this phenomenon of "access through emulation" might exhibit itself through internalized oppression: where one absorbs the norms of the dominant identity, often to fit in. I have noticed many students hand out holiday cards or gifts just because that is what they assume "normal" behavior to be, not necessarily because they are celebrating Christmas. In reference to internalized oppression attributed to Christianity, An shares the following:

I have internalized this oppression, and turned it into this love of twinkly lights! We didn't have Christmas trees when we were little. We weren't raised with this culture. It was on TV, and we saw it and that is what we think we have to do to buy into this mainstream culture to fit in. That's what we are doing, because when we have kids we don't want them to stick out like we did when we were younger. To shelter them, we will likely push them into this mainstream culture even more than I have internalized all this myself. You can't say that it doesn't have this negative effect, when I am sitting here having this identity crisis—not even my own, but for my nonexistent children.

It is truly humbling to see the impact of Christian dominance on students who do not identify as Christian. Students may internalize the oppression, redefining what it means to be normal based on a Christian standard (Blumenfeld, 2006). In a school setting, it is not uncommon to see students giving each other holiday cards and presents, or even participating in holiday rituals. While students may enjoy participating in these activities, they may also do so to meet the standards of "normal." Siva points out the pressure of having to meet this standard:

There are so many labels that are associated with people who don't celebrate Christmas: there's "Grinch," "Scrooge," and other labels. There are all kinds of things that have been built upon in this culture, and so if Christmas is cultural, then you cannot ignore the cultural side of how demonized you can be if you don't celebrate Christmas. Of course, there is pressure there, and people give into that pressure. And they may enjoy it, they may not enjoy it, but that doesn't take away the power in what they are doing.

Siva's observation clearly points to how internalized oppression might play out for someone who chooses not to celebrate Christmas, and therefore not align with a norm established by Christian dominance. This culture is alive and omnipresent in our rhetoric around Christmas. When Santa is "making his list and checking it twice to find out who's been naughty or nice," what might a non-Christian child believe about themselves if they received no gifts from Santa? Notions of goodness and badness are normalized through the cultural representations of Christianity through Christmas.

When students with multiple identities converge in a cultural center, all of their identities interact with one another. Students do not check certain identities at the door. As these identities collide and cohabitate, it is critical for everyone to consider that social identities cannot be considered in a vacuum, independent of one another. We must serve our students holistically, which means considering how their social identities work in relation to each other, sometimes in spaces of privilege, and other times in spaces of oppression.

Christian Privilege: Preventing Us From Recognizing The Parallels

One of the key struggles that unfolded in this dialogue surrounding Christian privilege in a cultural center revolved around the frustrations with working in an office that students perceived to be a place that worked to dismantle oppression. In my conversations with students, the source of the frustration came from what they saw as the center sending conflicting messages, as Sammi shares:

You can see how students [of color] who have normally worked together and get along really well who have this camaraderie and solidarity are now arguing, and that's fine. Conflict is great, but it's so hypocritical. We are so quick to say [to White students], oh, you need to recognize your privilege and work with your privilege, and now when it is about Christian privilege, I

don't see that question being asked of Christian students [in our office] to work with their privilege.

Morgan also speaks to how privilege operates in the same ways, regardless of social identity, and how that dynamic was so visible around Christian privilege operating in the center:

I think the most frustrating part, and this is true of anything, like when you talk about sexism, the men struggle to admit their privileges, and when you talk about racism, the White people struggle. And so you know again we saw a perfect example of this when the people who identified as Christian were like, not aware. You know it happens, a lot of times men don't think about walking across campus late at night because they have never had to. But it is still frustrating because when you have people that in a sense identify with a particular target group in the space of race and then not recognizing their status as an agent, that is definitely frustrating.

Gul also shared the same observation, and further reflected:

If we weren't talking about Christianity...if it was like "insert identity here," like if this was a heterosexual telling me, "Well, I'm fine with anybody being what they want to be," but that ignores the power, and just that the people saying, "Oh it's fine for me to have all of these symbols of my heterosexuality everywhere, and you can have your symbols, too." Well that's not my reality. I think you can talk about that with any number of identities.

These students' observations challenge us, as educators, to consider the dynamics of power and privilege that are operating in our environments. Additionally, the need for a transformation in a way that we educate our students and encourage them to engage in community work becomes of critical importance. It is not enough for us to have our students consider their identities through one social identity lens. They must be able to view through a kaleidoscope, to see the multiple lenses, multiple factors, and multiple outcomes.

Playing In The Intersections...Of Social Identities

Through this case study, I learned that our greatest work as social justice educators truly lies within the intersections of our identities, where perceptions of one identity inform the development of other identities, etc. We recognize this in our subordinated spaces: that a woman of color who is poor, or a man of color who is gay is negotiating multiple oppressions. What we have not examined is how the intersections of our dominant identities inform our perspectives and perceptions of other communities. Meaning, if you are Christian and heterosexual, can you see how your Christian identity informs and sustains your heterosexism? If you are White and Christian, does your whiteness inform and sustain your assumptions of Christianity?

These questions, and the dialogue within the intersections, become salient points of entry for authentic social justice work because we must also realize that Christian students of color experience a racialized Christianity, just as non-Christian students of color experience a non-Christianized person of color experience on our campuses. What this means is that while people of color who might be Christian experience oppression based on race, they cannot disassociate themselves from owning their Christian dominance, and disaggregate themselves from "other Christians." In our post 9-11 world, consider that Muslims do not have that same privilege of disassociating themselves from those individuals who practice violence in the name of Islam (Bayoumi, 2001; Kang, 2001). In fact, non-Christian people, Muslim or not, with brown skin do not have this privilege, either, because they are Muslim (code for non-Christian) by associative property (Joshi, 2006). There is not a diversity of religions perceived in our society. There are Christians and non-Christians, and if you are not Christian, it doesn't matter what you are, because you are defined by your non-Christianness. This is how dominance and privilege operate: the dominant group has the freedom to own group membership and individual identity by choice, while the subordinated group owns group membership and individual identity by circumstance (which is defined by the dominant group). To further elaborate using a parallel analogy, just as people of color (especially those who work in cultural centers) who challenge White people to consider their White privilege do not accept that "just because a White person didn't own slaves, or do racist things" that they do not benefit from White privilege, Christian people (of color, or otherwise) cannot willingly dissolve and disown their Christian privilege because of their individual relationship with their Christian identity.

Toggling Dominant and Subordinated Identities

One phenomenon that I was able to notice was how our students were able to toggle their dominant and subordinated identities around this conversation of Christian privilege. Essentially, when a student spoke in favor of Christmas, they used their "person of color" identity lens to articulate how Christmas decorations, etc. allowed them to be themselves as a person of color, rather than owning their dominant identity as a Christian person. This way, they did not have to hold themselves accountable for the oppression associated with Christian dominance. This phenomenon is not unique when it comes to people who have "one up/one down" identities, with one identity being dominant, and the other subordinated. Siva observed:

It's that same kind of thing, like when we talk about how White women won't see racism, while they can see oppression in sexism, and they can see male privilege, but they can't see White privilege. So we always go through the avenue of sexism to get White women to understand oppression, so that they can see the oppression of racism, and their White privilege. That's why it's so frustrating, because in this space, the students who experience

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As we delve further into the intersection of identities, Guadalupe asks:

Like if you are so strongly connected to your Christian identity that you can't see your privilege, then can you see it in a heterosexism conversation? It's so hypocritical, and I can't understand why there isn't this click, this light bulb, this "lets talk about this in an authentic way," because we ask people to do it. We ask people to change how they perceive things and look into their own lives to see what they actively do to oppress people in especially spaces of race, and we can't do it, and refuse to do it, in our own lives?

With these points of awareness, we cannot continue to toggle our social identities to maintain dominance, and also compensate for the subordination in our oppressed identities. In my observations around intersecting "one up/one down" identities, the assertion of dominance is vehemently protected to counterbalance the lack of power one has historically felt due to their subordinated identities. Yet we cannot use oppression of one identity to dismantle the oppression of another; instead we must recognize the intersections, and take ownership of all the identities we bring to the table.

Negotiating the Intersections

If we aim to prepare and empower our students in a holistic manner, we can no longer support them with one-dimensional interventions. If oppression is a disease, then we cannot only treat this disease where it shows us localized, physical symptoms. We must treat it systemically too. In cultural centers, if we are teaching our students to recognize their internal empowerment, we must also encourage them to recognize ways in which they benefit from privilege and perpetuate oppression. To take this idea one step further, we should be teaching our students how to work against oppression, particularly in the spaces where they are the oppressors. It is in this space that my students pointed out the inherent flaw of the current operating pedagogical framework of the cultural center. Iman noted:

We have these conversations everyday on issues of race, and sexuality, or other identities where we recognize that power dynamic, we recognize that it matters: who is in charge, and what their identities are, and what privileges do those identities bring to the table. And in this conversation, it was the same people who have these conversations, who didn't recognize that there was someone who was Christian in charge, speaking from that identity without recognition of their privilege in that identity.

Similarly, An offered a compelling suggestion:

I think that staff of multicultural centers need to realize that if they are truly going to be working against oppression based on race and ethnicity, that it HAS to be in a framework of working against all oppression. I think in the

end, if we are not doing it within that framework, then we will just be working against ourselves. We will just be reinforcing the same patterns of domination and power. So it has to be in that framework. If not, is the work really even authentic? Are we really working to create change?

Cultural centers may need to revisit their missions, as well as their pedagogical approaches by incorporating a social justice framework that offers the opportunity for greater inclusion of students, and authentic, systemic change. This means that the administrative leadership of cultural centers needs to actively seek training around social justice issue, particularly around the dynamics of power and privilege. In addition to the dynamics of power that operate based on social identities, administrative leadership and staff of cultural centers must be hyper-aware of the power they hold as full-time staff members with decision-making authority. They must be able to recognize their own privileges, and be able to own those privileges in conversations around their privileged identity. In the specific case of Christian privilege, a staff member who does not see their Christian privilege, and supports the students in favor of Christmas decorations in the cultural center by defending their position, participates in the oppression of those students who are not Christian, and uses her/his power as a staff member to do so. For processing purposes, consider this parallel within a race paradigm: What are the consequences when a White supervisor facilitating a dialogue on racism supports the White students' position that whiteness is not a position of power? What is the impact of that behavior on students of color? In a similar way, the same dynamics of the interplay of power and privilege are operating in the cultural center, but with a religious identity paradigm. A way to honor multiple paradigms, while holding all of them accountable for their impacts on others, is by operating under a social justice centered framework, which considers the intersections of identities in tandem with the negotiation of those identities.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Identifying and acknowledging privilege is a very difficult process regardless of social identity. In effect, we are asking people to take ownership of phenomena that they have historically not been able to identify, yet it is that same phenomena that offers them unspoken benefits of "normalcy." In this section, I share concepts that must be recognized in order for Christian privilege to be authentically addressed in cultural centers.

Dismantling the Hierarchy of Oppressions

Just as oppressions are not equateable, the benefits associated with different privileged identities are also not equateable. Meaning, I cannot equate someone's experience with ableism to another's experience with heterosexism, and I also cannot assume that there are greater or lesser benefits that come with male privilege than with White privilege. We often attempt to create a hierarchy of oppressions, which

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would naturally lead to a hierarchy of privileged identities, and this process is inherently useless when it comes to dismantling oppression. I make this point because this is our tendency when our dominant identities and our subordinated identities intersect with one another, and this is the unspoken operating system of cultural centers. We have somehow internalized the idea that oppression based on race is more significant than other oppressions, therefore the highest form of privilege comes from White privilege. This unspoken philosophy allows us to forgive ourselves, and even ignore the ways in which we manifest our privileges based on other social identities within the space of the cultural center. Consequently, Christian privilege is not even perceived as a privileged identity because we have not fully engaged in dialogue around oppression based on religious identity. Again, this emphasizes the need for a pedagogical process that is social justice centered.

Dominant Group Behavior is Consistent

The way in which people behave within their dominant group identities is consistent regardless of social identity. Ultimately in our space of dominance, we communicate with the goal of "being right" so that our dominance can be maintained, rather than with the goal of "mutual understanding" to create a system that is equitable. As a result, we seek ways to invalidate the positions, logic, and feelings of people within subordinated identities.

Throughout my conversations about Christian privilege with students who identified as Christian, here are some of the reactions I received, along with my critique of each of these statements:

1. *Well, if you want to decorate for your holiday, then nobody is stopping you.* This statement shifts the responsibility of change on the subordinated. It also does not consider that there are people who might identify as agnostic or atheist, who do not celebrate a religious identity. This statement assumes that everyone must value some kind of religious practice, and that those religious practices involve large-scale decorations. Again, it forces someone from a non-Christian identity to align with an operating Christian norm (like the "Christmas around the World" example).

2. *If you are passionate about something, then you should do what it takes to represent yourself.* This statement sounds so similar to the "raise yourself by your bootstraps" argument used by people who are against affirmative action measures. It assumes that there is a level playing field, where people have access to the same kinds of resources to create a system where they can be represented equitably. It also questions the commitment of non-Christian people to "their cause," meaning it forces them in a space to be passionate about an identity they may not want to be passionate about.

3. *I have a friend, family member, neighbor who is [insert non-Christian religion], and they don't have an issue with decorating for Christmas.* This is the classic "token" statement. I am amazed that I heard this from people who would have been angered if they heard, "Some of my best friends are [insert person of color racial/ethnic identity]," to ignore their privilege and emphasize their position.

It assumes that all people of all non-Christian backgrounds must be going through the same process, at the same time, and with the same intensity. In our dominant spaces, however, we reserve the right to “normalize” the experiences of people in subordinated groups to our comfort level.

4. *Explain to me why [non-Christian person] was handing out holiday cards, and I can't decorate the center.* This statement, a variation of “please be the voice of your people, or the voice of the people you advocate for,” is highly problematic because it offers no consideration that people are negotiating their identities daily. A non-Christian person handing out a holiday card might be okay with handing out cards, but not okay with a full-scale tree and light production; or they may have internalized that behavior and associated it with “the holiday season.” I am especially shocked to hear this because, again, the same individuals who might say this would also be the ones to challenge people who ask them to “share the [racial/ethnic identity] perspective on x, y, z issue...” in class, as if they could speak for their entire community. Yet in their space of dominance, this behavior is replicated.

5. *Celebrating Christmas has nothing to do with Christianity—it is a commercial holiday.* A common attribute of people within their dominant identities is that they have the option to define their identity as they wish. Christian people define what is Christian in order to maintain their norms. Christmas is not Christian, therefore I can celebrate it here, and it does not reflect my religious identity. This process is unfair, as the dominant group is not in the position to decide whether or not their actions/traditions are oppressive or not. I hear a similar argument used by men who claim that attending a strip club is not a sexist act because it is within the context of a commercial setting, and because men are not actively oppressing the strippers who work at the club, the men are not exerting male privilege. In this setting, the male in his privileged space defines male identity on his terms for his convenience in the same way that Christians in their privileged space define Christian identity.

6. *You are attacking my values.* A critique of Christian privilege is not an attack of Christianity, just as a critique of White privilege is not an attack of White people. This critique process is not a good/bad assessment, for the issues are not that simple. Nobody is saying Christianity is bad, or that Christians are bad. The premise of Christian privilege is based on the fact that there are unearned benefits that come with being Christian in the United States that people who are not Christian cannot access. Yet, in our dominance, we seek to simplify the conversation so that we can find flaws in the argument, to invalidate the position of those who are offering the critique.

While the impact of oppressions might not be interchangeable, the patterns by which oppression is imposed on the subordinate group by members of the dominant group are very consistent. With any one of the statements listed above (and the many statements not listed here), we could create the same statements for any dominant social identity.

CONCLUSION

As cultural centers on college campuses evolve to meet a new generation of students and future global citizens, we must evaluate the role that cultural centers will play in the future. Providing support services for students of color will not be compromised with an expanded pedagogical paradigm rooted in social justice. Rather, it will enhance the learning of students who find support in cultural centers. It will offer a holistic approach to healing the -isms that plague our communities, while dismantling the oppression that sustains those -isms. Cultural centers must work closely with academic departments to stay current on emerging literature surrounding anti-oppression initiatives, while also partnering with other centers on campus (women's centers, LGBT centers, international centers, centers that support students with (dis)abilities, etc) to develop cross-center, and cross-identity programming. We must also document these initiatives and research their effectiveness. Much research is needed on initiatives that have been successful in encouraging people to own their privileges, and how those initiatives can be replicated in other environments to foster social change. We must move in a direction that considers the whole of our students' identities to be greater than the sum of their parts, while also developing the philosophy that all of us are responsible for creating safe spaces within our spheres of influence.

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