

**The Bathroom Fairy and Other Xenophobic Tales:  
Developing a Research Agenda for the New American University**  
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April 5, 1976 is probably not an important date to most of you. And while I (Nadine) do not specifically remember the day, it was--and remains--a critical date in American history and in my personal story. If I show you the picture, you will know why (**show image**). On April 5, 1976, Ted Landsmark was walking across City Hall Plaza in Boston when he was attacked by white anti-busing protesters. Boston, as those of you who grew up in this country remember well, was at the center of the racial tensions that erupted over court-ordered desegregation of schools in the North in the 1970s. Luckily, the flag missed Landsmark. The police intervened a few seconds after this photo--now known as the "Soiling of Old Glory"--was taken by photojournalist Stanley Foreman. Landsmark had a broken nose and many bruises from the incident, but escaped with his life. In 1977, the "Soiling of Old Glory" won the Pulitzer Prize (Masur, 2008).

During this same era, I (Nadine) was growing up in the Boston suburbs. Just about the time that Landsmark was attacked, a petition started circulating in my neighborhood. While the court-ordered desegregation of schools in the city of Boston received national and international media attention, there was also a different type of busing that had already been underway for a decade. METCO (the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) was started in the 1960s, with original funding from the Carnegie Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education (see Eaton, 2001). A voluntary program, METCO bused poor, predominantly African-American children from the inner city of Boston to the wealthier, surrounding suburban schools, which were almost exclusively white at the time. While several of the surrounding school

districts had METCO programs by the mid 1970s, my town did not. As a result, I attended schools that were virtually (with one or two exceptions) all white. It appears, however, that by the 1970s, my school district was considering joining the METCO program, as one spring day, one of my fifth grade classmates rang our doorbell, with a petition for my parents to sign. I do not remember the exact wording of the petition, but I do remember the intent--to keep poor, African-American children out of our school district. I also do not remember if my parents signed the petition. I would hope that they did not--when we moved into the neighborhood in the 1960s we had been greeted by a swastika painted on our garage. Jews, it appears, were also not wanted. Though I have long forgotten the details of the petition drive, the memory stays with me. And it appears that the petition was successful: the METCO program did not come to my hometown, and 35 years later, it still has not.

Now, if as a ten year old I had been able to ask my classmate's parents why they did not want African-American children in their schools, they would have first insisted that they were not racist. And of course, they did not think of themselves in those terms. Primarily second and third generation Irish and Italians--and by the 1970s, a smattering of Jewish families like mine---they had escaped their working class roots in multiple neighborhoods throughout Boston in the early 1960s. During that period, African-American families moved into some of those areas, and other areas slowly began to gentrify. So, no, they were racist, they would maintain. They did not believe that they were superior to African-Americans but simply, well, that whites and blacks were "different." And if pressed, particularly in the company of a fellow white person whom they felt understood them and their concerns, my classmates' parents may have admitted that they were concerned about the African-American students' "habits" and "culture"---perhaps issues such as personal hygiene. This, as we now know, is simply a more sophisticated and

nuanced form of racism---a form that has come to be known and identified as cultural racism. As Judith Katz (2003) points out in her well-known work on white awareness, cultural racism includes the "myths and stereotypes that white people accept about people of color, for example, myths about black sexuality and stereotypes about laziness or personal hygiene" (p.121). By the 1970s, there was an explosion of literature that documented and tried to combat the slippery and insipid nature of cultural racism. Thousands of books and articles were published on cultural racism, and the identification of cultural racism as a new form of racist oppression was one of the founding principles of the white awareness and white privilege movements of the decades to follow.

Given that history and context, let me fast forward a bit to 2011 and take you into a bathroom stall in a women's restroom at a major research university in the United States. I was on sabbatical during spring of 2011, so not at work very often. Yet, I was there that day and needed to use the facilities. And here is what I found plastered to the inside of the stall,

Greetings fourth floor bathroom patron. It has recently come to my attention that some users of this floor's toilet may need a lesson in bathroom etiquette. Because bathroom use varies from place to place, I thought it might be helpful to explain the way the women on the fourth floor use the toilet.....

Yours truly,

the bathroom fairy

The note from "the bathroom fairy" goes on to explain in very exact detail how "the women on the fourth floor" are expected to use the toilet, detailing the proper use and disposal of toilet paper, the care that must be taken when urinating, and the correct way to dispose of feminine hygiene products. The bathroom fairy's assertion that "bathroom use varies from place

to place" underscores that her primary audience is the large number of international, female, graduate students enrolled in my department.

As I was standing, or well, sitting, in the bathroom, the image of Ted Landsmark (though I did not remember his name) and the image of my classmate from the 5th grade, standing at the door of my childhood home with a petition in her hands, flashed across my mind. My classmate and her parents would deny that their petition was racist:they had nothing against "those people as long as they stayed out of the schools in our district and our neighborhood. More than 35 years later, the bathroom fairy perhaps thought that she was being helpful and kind to new arrivals in our country: she of course, was not stabbing them with a flag, but trying to assist them in the proper use of the toilet in the United States. She certainly would not see any parallels between herself and the white protesters who attempted to murder Ted Landsmark or the white families who sponsored the petition to keep METCO students out of my childhood schools.

Yet, the history of cultural racism tells us otherwise. It suggests that the story of the bathroom fairy is a continuation of the history of racism and exclusion in the United States. Bathrooms, of course, have particular significance in the history of U.S. racial relations and racist practices. The segregation of restrooms in the Southern United States and of course, other countries such as South Africa, spoke to whites' contamination fears. While I have not yet seen the film, *The Help*, there is a memorable scene in the book that speaks to this troubled history. As those of you who have read the book may remember, Aibileen--one of the African-American domestic workers featured in the book, is responsible for toilet-training two year old Mae, the daughter of Aibileen's white employer. Mae's mother, Miss Leefolt, refuses to show Mae how girls use the toilet: leaving Aibileen responsible for toilet-training a very confused two year old. Desperate, Aibileen takes Mae to Aibileen's toilet in the garage for a quick demonstration while

Mae's mother is out. Of course, Aibileen is not allowed to use the toilets in her employers' house: taking Mae to the garage toilet is Aibileen's only option. Delighted with herself and her accomplishments, several hours later, Mae decides to try again. But this time, her mother is home, so Aibileen sits Mae on the toilet in the house. Predictably, Mae refuses and runs to the Aibileen's toilet in the garage shouting "My bafroom!" Aibileen, prevented from intervening, can only listen as Miss Leefolt, hysterical, shouts at Mae, "I did not raise you to use the colored bathroom!....This is dirty out here, Mae Mobley. You'll catch diseases! No no no!" And, as Aibileen relates "And I hear her pop her again and again on her bare legs" (Stockett, 2009, p. 95).

In the case of the bathroom fairy, the other--the one who was disturbing the pristine surroundings of the women's bathroom-- was not African-American, but was an international student. The discourse, however, is embedded in a long and troubled history of white racism that is global in nature.

Below, we suggest that the xenophobia and racism that is embedded in the tale of the bathroom fairy is not isolated, but instead is endemic on college campuses throughout the United States. While there is only scant research in a U.S. context that documents this reality, we draw below on one example from Nadine's research in this area to give a sense of the overall context in which international students find themselves when they enter U.S. universities. In the final section of this paper, we note some of the other related research on international students' experiences in the United States, and sketch the beginnings of a research agenda for both documenting and improving the experience of international students in colleges and universities across the country.

International student enrollments on American university and college campuses continue to climb, with 723,777 enrolled in 2010. The top three countries of origin in 2010 were China, India, and South Korea. Despite some declines in enrollments in the years immediately following the attacks of September 11, international student enrollments have increased steadily in the past decade, with overall trends indicating few limits to upward growth (Institute of International Education, 2011, see also McMurtie, 2011). For public universities engulfed in ongoing budget crises, international students (specifically tuition paying undergraduates) are viewed as a revenue stream in an era in which state support for higher education is rapidly dwindling. Similar to the boom in international student enrollment recruiting and enrollment in Australia more than a decade ago, American universities are becoming more global in outlook, though the push to internationalize is largely grounded in economic priorities not philosophical or social commitments (see Marginson and Considine, 2000 and Marginson et al., 2010). This context, as we illustrate below, provides an ideal breeding ground for the explosion of xenophobia, as international students are positioned simultaneously as an economic necessity for the health of the university, and an economic threat to the well-being and prosperity of the United States and its citizens.

For example, in January 2006, another major land-grant research university in the United States ---which I refer to a BTRU (Big Ten Research University) released the first version of its five year strategic plan. Buried in the 96 page document were goals that when combined created an uproar in the Chicago press and the state legislature. The first goal was to reduce the number of incoming freshman by 1000, from 7500 to 6500 (name of institution omitted, 2006a, p. 47). Sixteen pages later, the most controversial part of the plan included the following goal: “Increase the number of international undergraduate students.” (name of institution omitted, 2006a, p. 63).

The goal was modest: increasing international undergraduates in the freshman class from the current 300 to 500. Included in the strategic plan was a proposed \$100,000 to pay for additional international recruitment. While the vast majority of international graduate students come to BTRU (as other U.S. campuses) with funding from their home country, a fellowship, or a teaching and/or research assistantship, international undergraduate students are generally full-fee paying and thus can generate considerable revenue for an institution. International graduate students may be an indirect source of revenue generation for the institution as underpaid labor in classrooms and laboratories (Bousquet, 2008; Nelson, 1997). In contrast, international undergraduates are a direct source of revenue generation, at many institutions often paying tuition and fees above the regular out-of-state tuition for domestic students. This scenario, of course, is now a common one throughout the world. Amid considerable controversy, Australian universities, for example, have dramatically increased the number of international students on their campuses (primarily from Asian nations), in part to off-set steep declines in Australian government funding which started in the 1990s (see Marginson and Considine, 2000). The details of the proposed changes at BTRU were publicized in Chicago newspapers in the spring of 2006. Chuck Goudie (2006), a reporter for ABC News in Chicago and a columnist for the Chicago suburbs' *Daily Herald*, wrote,

Seemingly qualified high school seniors from Lake County to Lincoln County and from Moline to Monee will be denied access to the premier public university in their home state as [name of institution omitted] puts an emphasis on broadening its base of freshman foreign students (p. 15).

Goudie's column was laden with racism and xenophobia, as he pinpointed the home countries of the students,

There is an Indian dilemma at the [name of institution omitted] and it has nothing to do with the school's mascot dancing around in war paint and a headdress.

The quandary I am talking about concerns an increasing number of students admitted to [name of institution omitted] from New Delhi, Mumbai, and Calcutta in India.

But not just from there. Also from Seoul and Pusan in South Korea; Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin in China, and hundreds of other nations around the world.

(2006, p. 15)

Goudie adds later that diversity can be a good thing, but not if it “gets in the way of qualified Illinois students attending Illinois’ leading, tax-payer supported public university” (p. 15). Reaction from Illinois residents and BTRU alumni was swift and furious. Parents, such as Linda Mankivsky Ziemann of Naperville, wrote that,

There is something wrong when a 4.1 GPA, all-conference academic football/track athlete all-state band honor student, who worked his butt off taking challenging courses and maintaining an excellent GPA can’t get into the program of his choice at the alma mater of both of his parents (Goudie, 2006a, p. 17).

While the original Strategic Plan included plans to increase out-of-state domestic and international enrollment, comments such as Chris Gracheck’s that BTRU wants to be “educator of the world” suggest that the proposed increase in international undergraduates was more controversial. Another respondent to Chuck Goudie’s column, Caryn Zjeka of Buffalo Grove, reflected a similar sentiment, “I am all for diversity but when 25 percent of the BTRU student population will be ‘internationals’ at the expense of our residents, diversity has become

discrimination” (Goudie, 2006a, p. 17). While certainly Zjeka greatly exaggerates (or is misinformed about) the proposed increased the international student population, the underlying xenophobic concern about “internationals” taking over a state-funded institution are well articulated.

Of course, less publicly discussed is the high percentage of international graduate students at BTRU. As an Associate Dean of an administrative unit explained,

There are departments in engineering on this campus where 75% of the students are from other countries: that’s not widely known. I don’t know how that plays—particularly across the state—when they realize the high number of international students who are here as graduate students (interview, May 13, 2007).

He added that the number of international students is only discussed when “it’s the appropriate audience.”

Encountering entrenched opposition and a state legislature poised to consider calling for hearings on the pros and cons of the policy, BTRU abruptly reversed course as Rosalind Rossi reported, “Faced with a buzzsaw of opposition---some of it from lawmakers---BTRU officials said Monday they were ashcanning a proposal to expand out-of-state enrollment.” (2006, np).

While sometimes less public, the above scenario, no doubt replayed at colleges and universities throughout the United States is an apt indicator of the social and cultural spaces that international students enter, quite innocently, when they step off the plane and onto U.S. soil. Most--if not all--have no idea who Ted Landsmark was. Most--if not all--were saddened by the events of September 11, 2001, though of course now regard it as increasingly ancient history. Most may be unaware--or only dimly aware--of the larger political and economic forces at work in relationships between their home nation and the United States. This is the context of the

"contact zone" of the new American university: a reality that needs to be understood and confronted in research on international students, scholars, and the communities they become part of throughout the United States.

In the balance of this paper, we suggest that it is critical to develop a research agenda that works to improve the climate for international students on U.S. campuses, one that simultaneously broadens the global consciousness of U.S. students. Below, we sketch the five key components of a research agenda that addresses the specificity of the "contact zone."

First, too little of the research on international students takes into account the larger political, cultural, social, and economic climate (see Dolby and Rahman, 2008, for an overview of research in multiple subfields of international education). It is important to remember the broader history of research on international education, and the multiple and changing contexts that shape research and priorities. While we are sure that most of the researchers at this conference are aware of and work within that context that is simply not true of the vast majority of research on international students. For example, the literature on the "adjustments" that Chinese students need to make to function in American classrooms is almost wholly silent on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the American students sitting right next to them. What are those American students thinking? What are they saying to their new classmates? In most research on international students, those American students are the silent "norm" to which international students must adjust. As Nassim (2011) discusses in his study of international students at the University of Delaware, many international students face feelings of humiliation and rejection due to American students' lack of cultural awareness. Jenny Lee (2010, see also Lee and Rice, 2007) is one of the few educational researchers who is clearly documenting the discrimination faced by international students--particularly non-white international students--on

U.S. campuses. She is also one of only a few researchers to critique the "adjustment" literature which as she discusses (2007) focuses on how international students must assimilate to dominant U.S. cultural norms and how universities can best "assist" in this process. What is rarely, if ever, discussed, is how U.S. universities themselves can change what they do and how they do it: which is the real process of becoming more global.

Second, research on the "contact zone" must extend well beyond the classroom---which is the focus of most research on international students in the United States (e.g., Kim, 2008; Mahrous & Ahmed, 2009; Tatar, 2005; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Less researched are the lives of both undergraduate and graduate international students in residence halls and other social spaces, and their experiences in the local community. But of course understanding relationships in those spaces is critical, because most of our lives are not spent in classrooms. For example, on my campus (and I know many others), many international graduate students spend long hours in isolated lab situations, far removed from public view and scrutiny. The isolation, students' fear of speaking up, and the secrecy surrounding what actually happens in these labs is one area of international student experience that needs to be pried open and examined. In addition, there is virtually no research on the social and cultural spaces of graduate student housing, which on many campuses is actually international graduate student housing. American students, who are more familiar with the community and are also able to travel freely before the semester starts to find housing, tend to live in private housing, while international students, faced with more limited choices, often find themselves in university housing. On campuses with limited university options for graduate students, often particular private apartment complexes often become hubs for international students: the social and cultural dynamics of those spaces are rich sources for understanding international student life in university

communities. Also little researched is what happens when available university housing for graduate students is demolished to make way for more profitable and upscale accommodation for undergraduates. Similarly, the experiences of the children of international graduate students in local schools has received little attention, as have the practices of drawing district lines in particular ways to exclude these children from the best and most academically challenging schools in a local area. Most international graduate students are of course, unaware of such micro dynamics when they arrive, but quickly discover how the politics of school districts in the United States has a clear affect on the possibilities available to their children. In addition, there is limited research on the life and experiences of international student spouses who are restricted from any professional or academic involvement due to the US visa policies, and often feel doubly marginalized: not a part of either the university or local community (Teshome, 2010). Perhaps the most comprehensive study of international students to date is Simon Marginson and colleagues' *International Student Security* (2010). Examining multiple aspects of the international student experience in the Australian context, Marginson and colleagues clearly situate international students' lives within the surrounding reality of xenophobic attitudes, policies, and sadly violence.

Third, there is minimal academic work on how the larger institutional practices and discourses surrounding international students shape their daily experiences. In one of the few studies that addresses this critical topic, Claudia Matus (2003) examines how the discourses that are produced by an international student office at a major research university in the Midwest serves to "fix" international students and to fit them into particular discourses. Phrases such as "adapt," "frustration," "new culture and lifestyle," and "cultural shock" push international students into interpreting their experience within certain frames: shifting the burden to

international students, leaving untouched the attitudes and beliefs of the institution and the people who inhabit it. As Nadine (2003) has written about previously, such institutional practices deny the coevalness of life (drawing on Korang, 1999) and relegate the international student to an "other" who cannot ever become modern. These discourses, of course, have been well-documented in fields such as anthropology, particularly in Johannes Fabian's (1983) work on how one of the strategies of colonialism is to deny "the other" coevalness. Without careful attention to the attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent discourses that are produced by international student offices, and other international offices on campuses, it is very easy to simply reproduce and reinforce these troubling colonialist notions. Thus, those of us who are interested in improving the experiences of international students in the contact zone need to pay more attention to the role of international student offices and related entities on campuses. Who directs or manages these offices? Who works in them? What are their attitudes and beliefs? Do they have an understanding of the larger political, social, and cultural context in which they work, or are they---intentionally or not---simply reproducing fixed images of international student, that deny them their humanness and the specificity of their lives and experiences? There is no quick fix here: having an office fully run and staffed by individuals who were raised outside of the United States is no guarantee of a shift in attitudes. On the other hand, an office run entirely by Americans, regardless of how much time they have spent outside of the United States, tells international students very clearly that they are expected to "adapt" and "adjust" while the institution does not.

The above is important because all of it shapes a context in which the bathroom fairy can flourish. Symbolically, she represents perhaps the silent majority on American campuses. This majority includes faculty, students, parents, secretaries, administrators, and other workers whose

beliefs and perspectives about international students are shaped by the larger culture. What they hear and absorb in the larger culture dramatically affects how they interact with international students, and determines to a significant extent whether or not a campus climate is welcoming to all. Unfortunately, as we know, this larger culture generally promotes stereotypes and misinformation about other nations, akin to the realities documented by Marginson et al. (2010). For example, documentaries such as "2 Million Minutes" (Compton, 2007) position both China and India as major threats to the United States--coupled with programs originating in the United States Department of Education with names such as "Race to the Top." The implication, of course, is that the United States must fight off threats from China and India for global dominance. Cultural racism, discussed earlier, combined with the endless repetition of the "global dominance" threat replayed over and over again on Fox News and elsewhere, creates a toxic atmosphere. In addition, most of the people who work in administrative and clerical positions on my campus are white and lower middle-class. They are thus coping with the real economic decline of their wages (and of course, cuts to health and retirement benefits), at the same time that they embody unexamined white privilege, and harbor building resentment of international students who are perceived as wealthy. All of this fuels the conversations that happen behind closed doors. There are of course exceptions, and these, too, have been little researched. For example, on many campuses, Christian churches play a major role in welcoming and providing friendship for international students. While in many, if not most, cases, the objectives of these churches is recruitment, these practices often go unresearched and unchecked: even in the cases of public universities. A recent front page article in the local newspaper in my hometown suggests that international students find comfort and community in local churches, lessening their general feelings of isolation in the greater community. One undergraduate from

Indonesia, who has been at Purdue for three years, was quoted as saying, "I think the church has a lot to do with me not being homesick anymore...This is probably the only place I would call home here. I feel so strange on the outside. Here, I feel like I'm just normal" (Flores, 2012, p. A10.) International friendship programs, international centers and houses, and Cosmopolitan Clubs at multiple universities are all rich sources of research on the contact zone: but they have gone largely unexplored.

Can research improve the situation discussed above? Can it contribute to creating a public and institutional climate that is more inviting for international students? In their conclusion to *International Student Security*, Marginson and colleagues suggest that it can,

Research and the dissemination of knowledge that is linked to public discussion can make a difference, more so when research asks difficult embarrassing questions and foregrounds subaltern voices. The task of critical social research is to rip the mask from comfortable common sense and discover what is really going on. At best such research helps to foster social openness, movement, and reflexive change (p. 466).

Thus, building on the work of Marginson, our final suggestion for a research agenda for the new American university is to develop one that works *for* and *with* international students: prioritizing their voices and their agenda. For example, just last month, international students on my campus organized a protest of new fees that Purdue has recently instituted for incoming international freshmen. Their banners and signs loudly proclaimed "Education is NOT a business," and "International Students are NOT cash cows" (Hartman, 2012, Weddle, 2012). Thus, researchers need to pay closer attention to the *agency* of international students, granting them the coevalness that has been largely absent in the literature. Certainly, the tale of the bathroom fairy suggests that broad, sweeping changes are needed to create a different world for international students on

American campuses, and to shift both the individual attitudes and institutional policies and practices that currently dominate. Developing a critical research agenda for the contact zone is one step towards informed and meaningful change.

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