Introduction: When the Magic Happens. Critical Race Storytelling

The following articles originated as a class assignment in my *Introduction to Critical Race Theory* course. The students and I quickly realized the powerful depictions of race/ethnicity, gender, and class that they created with their counter storytelling. When putting my sister off the phone before teaching class, I tell her, “It’s time to make the magic happen!” I believe magic, in the sense that my students and I develop deeper understandings of systems of oppression and the faces at the bottom of the well (Bell, 1992), happens every time I teach a class. But in this particular class, with the authors in this special issue, this assignment was extremely impactful and meaningful for all of us. In these articles, the authors tell stories and counterstories about subtle and overt instantiations of race and racism in K-16 educational settings and communities of color, and the forms of resistance and resilience generated by students and families to withstand forces of oppression. The authors also use their stories to explain disparate education outcomes in communities of color, the crafting of white supremacy, and how past and current education outcomes have little to do with students’ academic abilities or intellectual merits. Last, the counterstories presented in this issue highlight community, family, personal strength, hope, joy, and love in ways that rarely appear in academic spaces. These stories, and being in service to our communities by putting these words in academic spaces, are so important that we need to share them—“our magic”—with a larger audience.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is often considered an analytic tool that maintains the integrity of the research question and the researcher’s perspective on the data. Critical Race Theory guides the methodology, the research methods, and the analysis. Race-based theories place the focus on race and racial oppression and privilege and how events, people’s perceptions, and institutions facilitate or oppose social (in)justice. Critical Race Theory is employed to interrogate past and present

manifestations of racism that continue to impact the future trajectories of individuals and communities.

Critical race theorists contend that the researcher is a vehicle for the research; she/he/them is someone who shares similar experiences with the research participants and who is personally invested in the communities attempting to obtain equity and justice in education. Ladson-Billings (2000) states:

> CRT asks the critical qualitative research to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which he or she is operating. My decision to deploy a critical race theoretical framework in my scholarship is intimately linked to my understanding of the political and personal stake I have in the education of black children. (p. 273)

Critical Race Theory embraces researchers' epistemologies and personal investments in racial justice and experiences with race and racism. These epistemological and ontological understandings are unapologicatically woven into the researcher's CRT project. Moreover, as an "academic voice" who divulges and explains people's lived experiences, the researcher, becomes a significant messaging tool of the research project.

Critical Race Theory and Counterstory

Research creates counterstories to elucidate how people's perceptions, stratified choices, and forms of agency are influenced by historic and present-day manifestations of race and racism. These counterstories reflect people's cultural ways of knowing and behaving within ongoing contexts of settler colonialism, racist policies, and socially and economically marginalizing societal practices. Counterstories provide the rationales behind how people make certain choices and live through particular circumstances. Counterstories reframe deficit narratives about communities of color and redirect conversations about access and equity in education towards an analysis of institutional and structural racism. Ladson-Billings (2013) explains:

> Despite what story is presented to the public, the "counter-story" is a contrasting story that describes the story from a different vantage point. The ability to tell that story is important

> not just as a defense strategy but also as a way to unmoor people from received truths so that they might consider alternatives. (p. 42)

By offering alternative stories, counterstories explain how the educational experiences of students of color are shaped by on-going legacies of race and racism, which maintain economic and societal barriers and invoke student, family, and community resilience and resistance.

Using counterstories, scholars illustrate the complexities inherent in negotiating schools and programs that remain rigid and uninviting to students of color and their families. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) explain the multiple functions of counterstories:

> These counterstories can serve at least four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical functions: (1) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (2) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established beliefs; (3) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (4) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (p. 475)

In this class, the students used their professional and personal experiences, supported by existing research on specific topics of their choice, to write their counterstories. As the students read each other's papers we engaged in the four functions of counterstories and created a powerful moment of connectedness and understanding among the group that remains with all of us and resulted in this publication.

Challenges to Teaching Critical Race Theory

At times, I have thought that such a powerful moment of engagement was a stroke of luck or hailed from a specific set of students, but that idea diminishes the conscious efforts that I, as a critical race scholar, invest in teaching this course and

cultivating “magic.” As a professor, I attempt to represent race as a living entity that shifts and evolves over time and circumstance, is institutionally and individually located, and includes common histories of persecution and subjugation. Critical Race Theory is a vehicle to convey the complexities of oppression and marginalization, survivial and strength, and love and support in the lived experiences of people of color. Instructors enter into teaching CRT in education with significant thought and consideration towards the students in their classroom, and the communities that those students hope to serve with their research and scholarship. Teaching CRT requires modeling sensitivity and empathy towards others, cultivating both breadth and depth in research and scholarship, and facilitating a safe space for students to build community with me.

Building Community

As a critical race scholar, I try to build a classroom community that allows students to take risks and be vulnerable with each other, despite the competitive nature of graduate programs. I design an environment where ignorance can be voiced without negative judgments and students can ask for help. To firmly establish a sense of community, I model vulnerability as a Black woman professor. I cannot ask students to jeopardize their emotional safety without risking my own. I share information about my family and academic experiences that influence my work in schools and classrooms. I discuss the classist, feminist, and heterosexist demons and ignorance that constantly challenge my own understandings of communities and schools. I share multiple examples of my research mis-steps while conducting research. Lastly, I model acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness, which are necessary practices for researcher reflectivity and solidarity among and across racial/ethnic researcher communities.

Seeking the balance between emotional safety and intellectual discomfort is a complicated undertaking. If I push too hard and make students too uncomfortable, they shut down and refuse to engage with issues of race. If I am too subtle or indirect, students avoid dealing with race by providing other –isms or societal challenges to fill the racialized space. There is

always some level of discomfort when students participate in talking about race and ethnocentrism, which is why I cultivate respect and care among my students before entering these conversations.

Grappling with Critical Race Storytelling

The racialized experiences that the authors in this issue grapple with in their stories are beautifully heartbreaking. The authors are critical of established unchallenged norms and values at the same time they reinforce community cultural wealth and student resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005). To convey these stories, the authors tapped into their own hurt and pain and addressed the damage that racism and ethnocentrism inflict on our society. When talking about the role of stories and counterstories, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2013) asserts, "We have an obligation to point out the endemic racism that is extant in our schools, colleges, and other public spaces" (p. 45). Using biographies, parables and allegories, *testimonios, cuentos, consejos*, chronicles, and narratives, the authors developed counterstories that elucidate the prevalence of racism and how it systematically impacts students' possibilities for success.

Brianna Ramirez's story takes place in her home and focuses on a school incident where her younger sister is disciplined for "improper" dress. She uses the conversation between her sister, herself, and her mother to highlight the inequitable outcomes of school discipline for Latinas and how their Brown bodies are surveilled and restricted in schools as a microcosm of society. Brianna's story focuses on the intersectional ways that Latinas are marginalized through race/ethnic and gender and forced to comply or resist the habitus of formal education.

Mayra Puente's story also takes place as a conversation in her home. The main character has been admitted to a highly selective university far from home. Mayra takes the reader through the gamut of emotions felt by her main character, including anxiety about the unknown, shame for wanting to leave, fear that her family will financially and emotionally suffer without her, and excitement about following her dreams. Through the conversation between mother and daughter, the

reader glimpses what Yosso describes as “familial capital” in Latinx families, and the author challenges stereotypes about Latinas as lacking academic ability or motivation.

James Crawford’s story takes place in a school and provides an intersectional critique of the treatment of Black boys in elementary school classrooms. He builds a composite story through well-documented accounts of dysconscious racism and the marginalization of Black boys by White teachers and school leaders. To emphasize the institutional and systemic nature of racism, James moves the story to focus on the compromised settings and the racial biases embedded within professional development for teachers around culturally relevant pedagogy that promise, yet do not deliver, pedagogical change.

While also taking place in an elementary school, Andrew Matschiner uses his story to expose how whiteness as property and white privilege are threaded throughout the hidden curriculum of public education that is rarely critiqued or contested. His story of a white middle-income boy going through an unremarkable school day reveals how constructions of whiteness, gender, and privilege gradually shape the epistemologies of White children and their future adult identities as “superior” racialized subjects.

By focusing on undergraduate education, Katherine Garcia’s story takes readers to the other end of the education spectrum. In Katherine’s story the reader watches as a young Latina navigates her unwelcoming university campus and classes. The main character is met with microaggressions from faculty and students that erode her self-confidence and make her question her decision to attend an elite university. Katherine’s story has a broad reach in that it exposes the challenges many students of color encounter while matriculating through a predominantly white institution.

Fellow authors Zaynab Gates, Kirk D. Rogers, and Ramon Stephens approached their stories using larger societal perspectives on race. Zaynab’s story about an Indigenous doctor who finds himself questioning the role of formal education, interrogates the role of education as a tool for assimilation, accommodation, and cultural erasure. She highlights the cultural erosion that formal education necessitates for Indigenous people, and all people of color, as they accrue more schooling. Zaynab’s story expresses the conflicts and tensions between formal

education and Indigenous way of knowing and being in the world that are the basis of education as the property of whiteness because these issues do not plague white middle-income students and families (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Similarly, Kirk D. Rogers' story about the death of a Black security officer at a nightclub highlights the continued killing of Black men by the police. Through his fictitious narration of the night's events through the eyes of the victim, Kirk humanizes Black men and reminds the reader to remain outraged by these recurring events. Kirk's story reveals how Black communities live underneath a spectrum of violence that reflects societal rationales for the dehumanization and elimination of Black bodies.

Lastly, Ramon Stephens's allegory on colorblindness provides insight into how white privilege and whiteness as property are maintained through the denial of race and racism. Ramon's story is a societal critique of systemic oppression, the vigilant maintenance of white privilege, and the necessary suppression of marginalized voices and counter-narratives. Following in the footsteps of Derrick Bell's futuristic storytelling (1992), Ramon's story critiques the societal norms, dispositions, and values that undermine the cultures and communities of non-white people.

Conclusion

In this issue, each of the articles require readers to connect with issues of race and racism in personal and professional ways. Tyson (2003) states, "In essence, we simultaneously attack the causes and heal the effects. We must work at both the macro level and the micro level—with systems and with individuals—in order to have an impact on ideology" (p. 21). Readers will see themselves, family members, and friends, in these stories. Readers will engage with the lived experiences of racialized groups, not just individual characters. For different reasons, these stories will stay with readers and remain a part of his/her/their memory. And for those of us who consistently apply our gifts and talents towards the elimination of racial injustice in education, these stories will haunt you.

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