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## **Conclusion: Collective Reflections on Critical Storytelling for Racial and Social Justice**

The eight student authors of this special issue were all drawn to the mission of a newly formed doctoral program at UC San Diego, *Transforming Education in a Diverse Society*, which focuses on equity, justice, and collaboration in an effort to transform educational contexts and systems. Our pursuit of a Ph.D. is driven by personal and family experiences, and ignited by our upbringing in a society that marginalizes the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Each one of the authors believes in addressing educational disparities while working with historically marginalized communities and educational stakeholders. We are eager to transform educational outcomes and patterns of socialization in formal and non-formal spaces for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, as well as for all children and youth. This special issue represents our collective attempt to resist the silencing of our narratives by drawing on the knowledge that we carry and the theoretical tools we have gained to advance racial and social justice for Communities of Color in the field of education.

### **Context: The Need for Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

We entered this doctoral program with a myriad of personal and professional experiences, ranging from teaching to counseling, from K-12 to higher education, and with local, national, and global expertise. The initial coursework of our doctoral program introduced us to foundational concepts and theories, including topics on educational learning environments, outcomes, and policies. Yet, conversations and theories on race and racism were limited within the core curriculum. As new cohorts entered the program, attempts were made to create inclusive classroom environments and to face the discomfort of discussions about racism, its permanence, and the ongoing racialized experiences of Students of Color. As a department, we continued to wrestle with our mission of “transforming education” in terms of curricular content, research methods and

theories, and educational practices within our program, given the wide array of expertise from students and faculty alike.

This nuanced understanding of transformation provided space for us to share our lived experiences in class, our growing expertise on race-centered epistemologies and theories, and to begin a series of ongoing dialogues in our doctoral program about educational transformation and social justice. These critical interrogations and conversations continued in the newly created Introduction to Critical Race Theory (CRT) course in Fall 2018, which brought together members from two student cohorts to dialogue, read, and write about educational issues related to race and racism. We would like to share with readers our reflections on the course and illuminate some of the implications of our individual stories in this collective special issue.

### **Exploring CRT as a Theoretical Home**

One of the most crucial undertakings for burgeoning doctoral students is finding or building a theoretical home. Exploring CRT as a theoretical home was an important milestone in our academic and personal journeys. For some of us, the course represented an opportunity to strengthen our understanding of key scholars, texts, and concepts, and for others, it provided a foundational introduction to CRT. This process was facilitated by our instructor and femtor, Dr. Chapman, who invited us to learn about the foundations of CRT as a theoretical framework in education, to ponder on its assumptions and implications, and to analyze current social realities and educational efforts from a critical race-based perspective. Further, many of us were drawn to this course because it spoke directly to the importance of engaging in educational efforts that are rooted in the racial liberatory mission of CRT. It almost seems destined for many of us to be called upon to further explore this critical way of understanding the world as many of us have navigated our daily lives, and now academia, on the margins. As a theoretical lens, a central aim of CRT inspired work is to challenge eurocentric research and the normative and deficit thinking that it reinforces. The CRT course reinforced these ideals and helped us develop and expand on our

epistemological lenses by unapologetically centering race and racism in our work.

CRT speaks to the complexity and racialized lives of People of Color while also making space for Scholars of Color to draw on our cultural intuitions and experiences as valid forms of knowledge construction in academia. By drawing from CRT and engaging in counterstorytelling, we center the ways of knowing of racially marginalized communities in our scholarship. Our own cultural ways of knowing are exhibited in this special issue, as well as the cultural ways of knowing passed down by our families, elders, and communities. We recognize that counterstorytelling in CRT draws from the cuentos, parables, fables, folktales, and narratives in our communities. We wrote these stories for our ancestors, elders, parents, youth, and children who reject daily forms of oppression through acts of storytelling and listening. We acknowledge the support of those who came before us and nurtured us to formally contribute as counterstorytellers in academia. CRT heeded our intellectual calls, as well as filled our spirits with fire and passion. The process of developing these critical stories allowed many of us to grieve the harm, pain, and loss that our families and communities have historically experienced because of white dominant structures, practices, and discourse. All the while, we cultivated a space of healing through our writing and through the sharing of our stories with the loved ones who informed our work.

Throughout the CRT course, there was an ambiance of exploration and openness for those of us who were, and some who still are, in search of a theoretical home. Our shared mission of transformation in education is what brought us together and it will continue to lead us on convergent journeys towards racial and social justice. We will continue to grow in our understanding of CRT as we use its tools to fight racial and social injustices both past and present. We have cultivated and witnessed the power of counterstories and we hope that this power manifests beyond our immediate friends and families as we share our critical stories in this special issue.

## Implications of Our Stories

Our stories emerged from a class assignment and have resulted in an opportunity to connect our stories to the narratives and experiences of countless other students, scholars, and stakeholders from all backgrounds. We encourage the readers of this issue to advocate for similar spaces where CRT counterstorytelling can be used to support their academic experiences and scholarship. In this way, we are hopeful that the legacy of our CRT course will encourage the critical interrogation of racialized oppression in learning environments where race-based conversations are absent, hidden, or stifled by dominant educational practices.

The legacy of the CRT course has already extended into its second year in many ways. Following the course, many of us continued to seek out and grapple with theory, methods, and epistemologies reflecting our own racialized experiences. Conversations in our program led to identifying a need for more spaces to interrogate the connections between *who we are* and *why and how we engage* our work as critical scholars. These conversations led to the creation of a student-led course for doctoral students to examine the ways our positionalities, experiences, and identities shape our approaches to research, including theoretical and methodological choices and developing meaningful and reciprocal relationships with participants.

A year later, Dr. Chapman called on us to visit the 2019 CRT class. We engaged the new cohort of CRT scholars with insights into our writing processes, including considerations behind the choice of subject matter, CRT tenets embedded in each piece, and techniques we used to weave composite and personal narratives into compelling counterstories. Each of us reflected on how and why we chose particular protagonists and dynamics that demonstrate the nuanced interconnections of racialized experiences. As the class ended that day, Dr. Chapman asked each of us to share the impact we hoped our counterstories would have on future readers in furthering the cause for racial and social justice. We recreated the sentiment below:

If my story...

Zaynab: Contributed to seeing the depth and complexity of Indigenous peoples' lives, dreams, and hopes for a better and more just future for all . . .

Kirk: Made you feel empathy, provided insight into the contentious relationship between Black people and the police, and inspired you to reflect on and critique the over-policing and killing of Black people . . .

Brianna: Provided insight into the racial and gendered violence that young girls of color experience in schools and the knowledge that mother-daughter-sisters hold for critically navigating oppressive systems and institutions . . .

Mayra: Called into question white middle-class conceptualizations of college "choice" and instead put forth an understanding of college choice as complex, as family-centered, and as community-driven . . .

Andrew: Helped you see how a wave of choice related to parenting, schooling, and racial segregation socialize white children to not only accept but embrace a society structured by vicious racial inequality . . .

James: Illuminated institutional dynamics that underlie the pervasive hyper-surveillance, implicit bias, and disproportionate disciplining of Black students that is inextricably linked to the anti-Black violence endemic in American schooling and society . . .

Katherine: Shed light on Latinx premed student experiences and the critical role of the racial campus climate for persistence of Students of Color in STEM . . .

Ramon: Demonstrated how systems of oppression become institutionalized, reproduced, and ultimately timeless. The story is a reminder about the necessity for constant, critical thought about educational institutions, given their contradictory and complex nature in perpetuating liberation and oppression simultaneously . . .

. . . then we have contributed to our collective mission of racial and social justice for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

We share gratitude for our collaborators, the theoretical home we have built, and our own epistemological foundations. At the same time, we look forward to how this experience and these stories will touch others. While these stories are deeply personal, they are also intended to sustain and inspire others experiencing, navigating, and challenging racism and other forms of interconnected oppression in educational contexts and beyond.