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A CRITICAL EDUCATOR'S TESTIMONIO AGAINST THE CURRENT POST-RACIAL FALLACY:

A Call to Action

VIRGINIA NECOCHEA

Abstract: *Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a guiding framework, this paper is an educator's testimonio against the post-racial ideology that currently plagues our society, especially as witnessed in the U.S. educational system. A testimonio is a qualitative narrative form that puts forth powerful messages that carry a sense of urgency. Testimonios speak to an individual's experiences that resound across groups of people. Testimonios especially speak to oppression and marginalization and thus have been historically used in the struggles of people of color. Here the author speaks to how testimonios can be used as a means to debunk the post-racial fallacy. The author also argues that a firm understanding of ideology and knowledge of how whiteness works further strengthens the challenging work of people of color in the academy and beyond. As all other testimonios, this account urges that there be action and thus it calls on other educators from all walks of life and positions to respond to a call to rise if transformation is what is desired.*

Keywords: *Testimonio, Race, Racism, Teaching, Teacher Education*

INTRODUCTION

This *testimonio*—my story, my witnessing, my account—has been brewing in my being for years. It is with great pain, vulnerability, and hope that I finally release it. I am an educator, a mother, a student, a *danzante*, and an activist. I am all of those things but the label that most identifies who I am is a person of color—a *Xicana*.¹ I do not wear that label with shame or stigma but with pride knowing that it connects me with countless Others² who do not need words to understand what oppressed signifies. Whatever road we walk on there is a seamless and invisible thread that connects all people of color—it is a thread of knowing and understanding that despite the continued relegation to the bottom, we remain hopeful and resilient by force and by choice.

I am from one of LA's concrete jungles.
I am from over-ripen skin kissed too long in the fields by a
scorching sun.
I am from a vomit-colored van filled to the brim with musty
melones for sale.
Soy de gente trabajadora, inteligente, y capaz.
Madre. Maestra. Danzante. Activista. Mujer.
Xicana por vida y que.

Years have passed without being able to write this piece because along the continuous battle against systems and structures that attempt to rip out our courage, my voice had been taken. Having become so weary as a result of the constant microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009) reminding me that I do not belong in the whiteness of academia, I had forgotten that my voice was the ultimate weapon in the battlefield. Suffering from racial battle fatigue (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006), I was on an automatic reaction-mode as a result of the constant attacks and had forgotten that this never-ending battle requires relentless strategy and precision. I had grown tired from the constant witnessing of the ever-present exclusionary acts committed against people who have done nothing wrong but to be mis-categorized as substandard humans on the basis of their skin. Nothing has changed. But there comes a time when those who deviate from the path find their way back full force. A recent upheaval at the university that I attend threw me into the space of activism. During this experience I was faced with two options—either respond to a call for action or settle for the continued exclusion and another loss of access for historically underserved students. Speak up or put up and of course as other educator-activists³ I chose the former and with this decision I regained my long lost voice.

This *testimonio* that has remained restless beneath the surface, strives to remind concerned educators that we have been divided and conquered for much too long. Enough is enough with the never-ending failing and excluding of *our* children. We need to become educator-activists and loudly demand for change if we are to ever close the dreaded “achievement gap” or better yet, “education debt” as critical researchers have renamed it (Ladson-Billings, 2006). At this moment in history, we find ourselves at a very important crossroad in the battle for justice. Many of us have been taking part in struggles for educational access and justice for many years. We approach the struggle from various fronts and independently we have witnessed victories. But what I see in the horizon is the need for a mass-scale consolidation of forces. The independent and individual fights are vital in battling various forms of oppression, but

let us imagine the potential and the might of our power if we were to unify and find the common thread that runs along all of us. What has become apparent is that we have remained comfortable and still for far too long and now has come the time for unity and the launching of yet another people's movement for that will be the only way to truly create change for our children and our communities.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the main theoretical framework to guide this work, I have chosen to use a *testimonio* to provide a first-hand account of the events I continue to witness and be subjected to in the field of education. As Huber (2009) argues, "testimonio can provide an important methodological tool for critical race theory" (p. 640) and race researchers. CRT has become foundational in the work of educators who take the position that race is the most salient factor that governs our societies the globe over (Allen, 2001). For those of us who align ourselves and our work with CRT, it is no longer a question of proving whether racism exists. Race impacts and defines every single aspect of our lives. "Race's full force cannot be grasped by examining the consequences of particular discriminatory episodes, but must be measured in the folds and knots of a whole social fabric woven and rewoven with reinforcing racial bands" (Haney-Lopez, 2010, 1056). As Haney-Lopez and other race scholars argue, race is not about individual tendencies or examining institutions in isolation. This encompasses the education we will be offered, the healthcare we will receive, where we will live, our work and professional experiences, our children's lives, and so on. This reality applies whether the individual is white or a person of color, for we are all subjected to an overarching racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). And although many whites continue to deny that race impacts their lives and/or even see themselves as a racial group, it is the "white" group that has the most power in the perpetuation of the white supremacist racialized system we live under. By using CRT as a framework, we are drawing upon a vast amount of research and literature that has sufficiently proven that this racialized system continues to exist. The ultimate hope of most critical race theorists is to dismantle this oppressive system and transform our lives as racialized beings.

CRT demands that our research and our work be embodied within a critical analysis and should always strive for social transformation. In education, those who use CRT as a framework are concerned with inequalities and aim to create change at the institutional and systemic level. Thus we no longer work at the level of awareness, but instead, work to dismantle these unjust systems with the hope of transforming them. The word "hope" is very important to point out because although

critical race theorists and critical social theorists are in constant battle with powerful systems that keep many of our people downtrodden, we continue to have “hope” that change (and the revolution) is possible.

Why testimonio?

A *testimonio* is a qualitative research method that “is an affirmation of the authority of personal experience” (Beverley, 2005, p. 548). This is an important aspect of this form of qualitative research because it validates the use of experience which often time are deemed suspect and an invalid source of data in dominant forms of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). “The narrator in testimonio is [the] actual person who continues living and acting in an actual social space and time” (Beverley, 2005, p. 549). Using the form of testimonio, my thoughts, memories, and my pain are interwoven within my writing. This practice allows me to reach a greater state of liberation, it is a state of being that I have felt only during danza.

Testimonios are commonly used in research related to Latin American resistance movements and in the immigration movement to bring forth the accounts of those living and experiencing the heavy hand of unfounded persecution, oppression, and marginalization (Beverley, 2005; Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). A *testimonio* differs from other forms of narrative accounts because of the sense of urgency it contains. “What is certain is that testimonio is not meant to be hidden, made intimate, nor kept secret. The objective of the testimonio is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 525). *Testimonios* have a long tradition in Latin American, Chicana/o, and Black literature. *Testimonios* similar to testimonies are immensely powerful in that they put forth *our* accounts, *our* witnessing, *our* experiences—deep and grounded data that cannot be discounted for they speak our truths and our realities. As Baszile (2008) states, “Testimony or the act of bearing witness to and thus working through trauma has been the primary way oppressed peoples have been able to tell their stories” (p. 253).

Although *testimonios* are usually related as a first-person account, they are powerful because they speak to the common denominator of oppression experienced across marginalized and underserved groups. So while one puts forth their testimonio as an individual, it actually speaks to the reality of oppression experienced across an entire group. “Although a *testimonio* is technically an account made by one person, it represents the voice of many whose lives have been affected by particular social events”

(Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 528). This aspect particular to this narrative form makes the telling so powerful. The testimonio of one individual resonates in the hearts and minds of many because it speaks to their lived realities as well.

I had first encountered the qualitative use of *testimonio* while reading literature focused on the inexcusable murders of a countless number of Mexicanas along the U.S. border. A number of the women murdered worked in *maquiladoras*. *Maquiladoras* are foreign-owned factories that exploit and oppress marginalized peoples, especially young women (Sanchez, Estrada, & Salas, 2013). Although there is no single variable in these horrific femicides, one thing that is common to the great majority of the victims is the factor of poverty (Bejarano, 2013). Many of the *testimonios* of mothers and community members have been brought to light to demand that the proper attention be given to the continued atrocities being committed against these young women. As I read the spine-chilling *testimonios* of these wounded mothers, thoughts of my *tía* came to the forefront.

Tía you didn't end up like one of the wrongfully slain *mujeres de las maquiladoras* but I clearly remember your tired eyes and being when you would arrive at *abuelita's* house at night. How many times did you walk home under the cover of night, *solita*? Most of your day spent in the maquiladora you worked at in Mexicali—"el lugar en donde ni se mete el diablo" (a place so hot that not even the devil goes there!). My *tía* with calloused hands and an aching back. All of that work so that you could earn in a month what some privileged white man could earn in an hour. That's what would burn the most about the maquiladora women who were horrifically murdered. They were already being exploited and abused by the corrupt capitalistic system in place. So much time spent out of their homes and removed from their families trying to make ends barely meet, only to be murdered.

Testimonios are not simply the retelling of stories or personal experiences; the words are powerful because they contain an urgent demand to be heard. But beyond simply hearing someone's account, all *testimonios* contain the demand for action, for movement, for uprisings, for revolts—anything but to continue to remain still.

Here I take up a *testimonio* as an educator, as a woman of color, as a Xicana, and as a mother of children who are and will be educated in "urban⁴" schools deemed to never meet the grade because of the skewed standards used to measure their worth. I use this *testimonio* to speak to the continued number of "failing," excluded, and oppressed children of

color in our schools and society. So many countless numbers of failing children, a reality that is criminal and deserving of immediate attention and action. I utilize the form and freedom inherent in a *testimonio* to give an account of the continuous oppression I endure as a mother of color with four children, as an activist in a community located on the other side of the tracks, and as a researcher that has chosen to study the racial structure inherent in our educational system.

I lost count of how many times have I been publicly asked by the ‘well-intended’ older white woman if all of those children are mine?

“Excuse me but I just have to ask—are these (brown babies) all yours?”

Seriously, *all* of these kids? There’s only four! Four or ten, I guess at that point there’s no difference. I always would bite back a possible quick-witted remark *pero para que pierdo mi tiempo con los ignorantes?* I think once I did say “Yup, I’m a breeder for sure.”

Although I recognize and grapple with my own position of privilege, a *testimonio* remains appropriate because it speaks to my ever-present reality as a woman and educator of color in what continues to be a white and male dominated academy that silences us. As Urrieta and Villenas (2013) state, “Testimonio . . . is thus still an appropriate methodology to validate our experiences as marginalized members of the academy” (p. 516). Huber (2009) powerfully writes how testimonios are an appropriate and justified methodology within the realm of race scholarship.

As Beverley (2005) states, “the predominant formal aspect of the *testimonio* is the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an ‘I’ that demands to be recognized” (p. 548) and thus this is the position that I am taking—it is a demand for my account to be heard and recognized. This is my *testimonio* that is attempting to capture the urgency framing the message that the time has come for educators and all of those concerned, to unite forces and rise to action for if we do not, our realities will continue unchanged. As people living within a supposed “free” society we have the choice to act upon this or not, but one thing remains clear is that this call to action can no longer be ignored.

It is my voice and my account that I use as a weapon to confront the silencing, the exclusion, and the denial of the numerous racial micro- and macro-aggressions that lend testimony to the fact that we continue to live in a white supremacist society that positions us along the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, 1997). Vast amount of data attests to the fact that we are definitely not beyond race as has been touted by the media and many others. I use the form of *testimonio* to discount the

notion of a post-racial society and I use it as an act to bear witness “from a critical perspective—to the traumas of racism” (Baszile, 2008, p. 253).

Beyond putting forth my testimony, this paper urges educators from all walks of life and positions to move towards real action for it is no longer enough to claim awareness as an act of social justice. We have to begin by understanding, not just *realizing*, the intricacies and power of the post-racial myth that has taken hold in our society and how it is rampant in our educational circles and programs. We have to realize, understand, and then *act*. There is a sense of urgency because this wide-held claim of a post-racial society is only causing people of color *and* white people harm. There is harm because this fallacy is blinding, dishonest, and prevents critical discussions from taking place in our classrooms that are absolutely needed if we want to reach a place of transformation. Second, this paper seeks to outline a vision and recommendations of what we can do as educator-activists if transformation is really what guides and moves us.

COMBATting THE POST-RACIAL FALLACY

Much of the *testimonio* that I put forward in my teaching and in my work focuses on debunking this “we’re beyond race” myth that prevails in our society. As other *testimonios*, I do not solely intend to bring awareness to this issue, but I urge other educators to answer the call to action. This is a call to rise so that we join the ranks of other educator-activists to confront and combat the post-racial fallacy and its associated evils that have taken root in education—especially as I have witnessed in teacher education programs. This is vital for us to do because post-racial claims belonging to a larger ideological system are being used to continuously discredit our voices and our battles against the race-based system that haunts and oppresses us. Our *testimonios* put forth our demand that we will no longer remain silenced and absent with our voices lost in the shadows.

If focus were placed on the general demographics of the university that I attend and there was a superficial reading of its vision and mission statement, an individual could easily draw from the descriptions that this institution’s programs would inherently foster more critical thought and diversity in perspectives; but this notion would be illusive and inaccurate. Like other universities it houses a handful of programs, individual faculty, and staff who fight their battles against upholding hegemonic structures of power. Aside from the few among the masses, over the decade that I have been part of this institution, it

has been saddening and tiring to continuously witness the relegation, the silencing, the discrediting, and the numerous racial microaggressions committed on the day to day that result in a macro impact.⁵ This is why it is imperative that we not only become aware of the current post-racial fallacy but that we understand its power so that we can debunk its myths that continue to be perpetuated and upheld within our academic programs. One of the first tasks for educator-activists then is to understand what this post-racial fallacy entails and how it works to undermine the struggles of people of color.

Understanding the post-racial fallacy

Times and ways of thinking continue to change in our society—specifically, in regards to race. The U.S. has gone from witnessing overt and brutal forms of racism (slavery, lynching, segregation, etc.) to more covert and insidious forms that have been described by scholars as “laissez-faire” racism (Bobo & Smith, 1998) and color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). The election of President Barack Obama brought with it yet another mutation in racial thinking and is one that is being described by the media and other power players as “post-racial” or beyond race (Apollon, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2009). President Obama has become the symbol for this post-racial ideology.

Since the election of President Obama, I continue to witness numerous statements and behaviors demonstrating the acceptance of this post-racial ideology. The majority of these witnessing events have occurred in the classes that I teach and in the countless number of interactions I have had with student teachers and teacher education faculty and staff. Statements such as, “well if Obama made it, anyone can” or “we have a Black president now so racism is obviously a thing of the past,” continuously resound in my ears. This mutated ideology is powerful in that it pushes the argument to a level where race is not “seen” and will no longer be dealt with or spoken about at *all*, because it is treated as being utterly politically *incorrect* and a waste of everyone’s time and energy. Race and racism are not only regarded as issues of the past, but invoke visceral reactions loaded with defensiveness and insult if you dare bring them up.

Because I hold myself accountable to a racialized reality, I routinely bring up the salience of race in connection with educational inequality and oppression. This action is almost always met with the same reaction from students and faculty. Baffled and frustrated looks on their faces saying to me “don’t we have *more* important issues to talk about?” This

statement captures the core of this post-racial ideology. People are not necessarily denying race, but are altogether dismissing discussions of race because they no longer deem issues of race as important as other societal issues such as ongoing global wars and the economy (as if these 'other' issues were not governed by overarching racial structures).

But as a woman and 'outsoken' critical educator of color who has worked in the field of education for 15 years, I constantly ask myself are we *truly* post-racial? Couldn't we easily argue that the record number of deportations, the anti-immigrant frenzy, Ferguson, the recent shootings in Charleston, and Sandra Bland's death stand in stark contradiction to any and all post-racial claims?

How is it possible that a human being can be shot 6 times, two of those in the head, without justification? Oh yeah, because he's a young Black man, a person of color and thus preconceived by so many in our society as already a threat. Something along those lines happened to my brother, a young Mexicano, his car shot at 7 times by an angry cop while he was driving to my mom's house only half a block from the scene. Our family is fortunate because none of those bullets penetrated his body and he is still with us, alive but left to deal with the aftermath of it all. It's the dreaded curse of being a young man of color in this society and it doesn't matter if you are educated or not, poor or not, causing trouble or not . . . they are already guilty. Guilty until (ever) proven innocent. The system has always worked backwards for us.

On August 9th this 18 year-old shot dead by police, left there for hours on the ground while his family gathered around watching their own flesh lying in cold blood before their eyes. Society is deteriorating, all of the incidents and inhumane treatment of people of color attesting to this fact. Over 500 years later post-conquest (aka genocide, forced colonization, and subjugation) and things are still far from being "equal" despite what the media, politician, and schools (yes schools) are shoving down our throats. The stories they continue to tell us and our children aren't working anymore. Death is not a penalty for theft, but being Black is. That is the horrible truth that our society doesn't want to talk about that it continues to sweep under *their* rug, not ours.

These events should force us to think long and hard before we join the countless others and jump on the post-racial utopic bandwagon. Moving to a more personal note, the numerous racialized microaggressions⁶ (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) I am continuously subjected to contradict these claims as well.

How much do we have to endure? How many times must we witness the tokenizing of our flesh as if our intellect was nonexistent? Even those of us who wear ‘race’ on our sleeves, become tired of the constant justification of our deserved ‘taking up of space’ at the institution. I know I lost my cool a bit when those two white women and the confused self-proclaimed descendent of Oñate in class kept questioning my experience as an educator. I still can hear the words ooze out of the gaping hole she calls mouth “What are you again? Hispanic? Mexican? She-con-uh [correctly pronounced as Chicana]?”

The day-to-day racial microaggressions that people of color in the academy continuously endure, take their toll over time and in turn wreak havoc on our minds, hearts, and well-being (Sue et al., 2009). Not only do we manage the normal stress and strain of teaching courses, working, and trying to finish programs, but we also have to endure the racial mistreatment inflicted upon us by whites and confused people of color as well. This is especially true for those of us who choose to take the more difficult path and are working to combat, confront, and dismantle the oppressive racial system that governs all aspects of our society, our educational system, and lives.

Although many try to convince us that the election and re-election of Barack Obama somehow symbolized dramatic change for people of color in the U.S., the numbers continue to indicate a different reality.

- At 71 percent Hispanics continue to have the lowest rate of high school completion among all racial groups (ACE Report–2011 Supplement)
- Young Asian Americans marked the highest rate of college enrollment (63 percent) in 2009, while American Indians registered the lowest rate (23 percent) (ACE Report—2011 Supplement)
- Minorities are more likely to receive high-cost mortgages: African Americans (53%) and Latinos (43%), in comparison to Caucasians (18%) (Logan, 2008 in APA Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status Fact Sheet)
- Unemployment rates for African Americans are typically double those of Caucasian Americans. African American men working full time earn 72 % of the average earnings of comparable Caucasian men and 85% of the earnings of Caucasian women (Rodgers, 2008 in APA Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status Fact Sheet)

These represent only a few of the sobering statistics that reflect the realities that people of color deal with on a daily basis. Thus we know

as critical and concerned educators that things have not completely changed. Therefore, we must demand, and no longer politely ask, for change to occur.

THE VISION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As countless other educators of color and allies, I envision an educational system and society that will one day free itself of its racialized ways. We hope for and strive towards an educational system that is truly inclusive and whose discourse and ideology teaches its youth of justice instead of the perpetuation of injustice and inequities. But until that revolution occurs we must continue in the battle against the hegemonic structures that dictate all aspects of our lives.

The following outlines some of the recommendations for concerned educators who want to respond to the call to action. Of course they represent only a few of the things that we can do and should not be treated as an end all for change or as a grocery list of sorts. They represent some of the ideas that plague my mind as I remain in the battle.

Understanding problematic ideologies

What I have learned over the past few years is that what our *testimonios* are really attesting to is the hegemonic force of ideology. As people of color we are battling the oppression caused by ideological structures firmly in place in our society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). One of the primary weapons that I use in bringing forth my *testimonio* and empowering it has been acquiring a solid understanding of how ideology functions. Understanding that our society remains submerged in meritocratic and post-racial ideologies that work to drown out our voices has been key in formulating my *testimonio* and subsequent counterattacks in the class and in the field.

To begin with, it is dangerous to regard ideology as a simplistic worldview that individuals and groups come to passively hold. Although our education programs continue to preach and indoctrinate students with this mindset, as educator-activists we must move far from this and instead move towards discussions that involve more complex questions of *how* and *why* we arrived at our specific ideologies. This should include what we *choose* to subsequently do as individuals to uphold and transmit ideologies and how they serve to benefit larger dominant social structures (Leonardo, 2009). Ideology is intricately involved with the maintenance of interests and can “be seen as a discursive field in which self-promoting social powers collide over questions central to the reproduction of social

power as a whole” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 29). People and groups have been manipulated into believing that society for the most part, functions in a fair and just manner. In this meritocratic system, individuals who ‘work hard’ will be justly compensated in life. This ideology has taken such a stronghold in our communities and schools that it is almost impossible to convince its followers that society functions otherwise—even people within our own oppressed groups.

Our education programs need to include frameworks that teach our students to understand that ideology works largely through manipulation, deception, and distortion. This is very different than teaching them to equate ideology as a worldview. Sometimes I think about the deep and meaningful discussions that can potentially take place if we created spaces in academia where our ideological baggage (instead of “leaving it at the door” as the trite saying goes) could be challenged without this practice being regarded as politically incorrect. We need to understand that it is during those moments of discomfort, tension, and challenge that provide the most opportunity for immense growth and the development of critical thought.

Imagine the power if our programs allowed us to explore our own roles (as individuals and racial groups) in the transmission of ideologies. Instead of teaching victimhood and passivity in the process, our programs should promote discussions in which we all explore, analyze, and problematize our complicity and conformity with ruling ideologies. Our students, as well as faculty and other instructors, need to understand and accept that social groups are not victims who passively succumb to the manipulations of ideology (although upon confrontation many of these individuals adamantly cling to this illusion). We *choose* to conform to and/or resist larger systems of oppression because there is something to be gained whether this comes in material form and/or in greater social benefits. Dominant ideologies cannot be reproduced unless there is some type of buy-in from the groups under its rule and it is crucial to not misrepresent individuals and groups as passive victims who are subjected to ruling ideologies.

Buy-in comes in many forms and one of these forms is a conscious buy-in whereby people and/or groups choose to remain complicit with dominant ideologies because there are benefits to be reaped and thus there is a vested interest. What is then fundamental to note is that there are strategic reasons why people consciously cling to their ideologies even if their ideologies promote oppression and injustice. What is key to understand then is that there is a material structure to ideology and that is what makes it so powerful. “Ideology is not (a) baseless illusion but a

solid reality, an active material force which must have at least enough cognitive content to help organize the practical lives of human beings” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 26). Again, it is crucial to understand that this material structure goes beyond the individual and group level. It operates at the societal and global level and this structure in turn dictates the ideologies that are present among significant social groups and the individuals within these groups.

Strengthening our testimonios

As educators of color in what continue to be white dominated academic settings, our *testimonios* will be constantly challenged and questioned by white students and confused people of color. This constant undermining of our knowledge and experiences can have an accumulative negative and debilitating effect that then leads to feelings of vulnerability. Operating from places of vulnerability leads to automatic defensive reactions subjecting us to greater psychological and emotional harm.

Over the course of time I learned that another effective way to counter these challenges was to strengthen my *testimonio* by becoming very familiar with the white mind. Knowing why and how whiteness operates has allowed me to become even better prepared to handle moments of white dissonance that occur whenever I give voice to my realities as a woman and educator of color. I use white dissonance to refer to moments when white people (and confused people of color) experience disaccord upon my attempt to engage them in discussions of race. Information that counters their “white” realities tends to trigger reactions of defensiveness, guilt, denial, and aggression that are primarily aimed at the ‘outspoken’ person of color who is considered to be acting ‘out of line.’

“What are you talking about? Are you implying that I’m a racist?!”

“My family didn’t own any slaves. I don’t own slaves! So how can I be part of this problem?” “We don’t appreciate you bringing up race in class, we all think it’s unnecessary and it makes us feel bad.”

When I first began to encounter white dissonance in the classes I would teach, I could not help but to react impulsively. It was as if I were on automatic-mode reacting to their reactions.

How many times will we be at the brunt end of the white-liberal-do-gooder stick?

I don’t see color, I see people.

I empathize with you.

I understand.

Serious?

You understand nothing.

You continuously undermine and disrespect me.

You use your swift and skewed semantic moves against us.

When will *you* be forced to examine the intersections of *your* privilege?

When will you hold *yourself* accountable to a scrutinous examination of how *you* stagnate and stall the voices of the *Other* women?

Self-entitled.

Self-justified.

Self-centered.

Self-pity.

Maybe one day you will be forced to come face to face with the smoking mirror whose reflection will reveal who *you* really are.

Over the years that I have struggled as an educator I realized that I could become more effective by understanding more of the “whys” behind white behaviors and reactions. By doing so I have become more in tune with predicting behavioral patterns and could then engage students in dialogues that have a better potential in being “productive” and could lead to an improved chance of transformation. As educators of color we can utilize knowledge of the white mind to reframe discussions and place the critique of whiteness at center stage especially during moments when students in class attempt to decenter it. We need to re-shift and redefine our position within academia by arming ourselves with strategic knowledge and responses that can be used during moments of white dissonance.

We can strengthen our antiracist agency even further by better understanding white psychology. Instead of remaining in the vulnerable position we are typically placed in when it comes to discussions of race, an in-depth understanding of how whiteness operates can be used as a tool in our *testimonios* against whiteness. We need to move beyond the continued misconception that *only* white people stand to benefit from engaging in and becoming experts in whiteness, for people of color have always been the greatest experts from their in depth understanding of the oppressor’s mind. People of color have the *most* to gain intellectually and psychologically by understanding how whiteness can be strategically used to understand the racial micro-aggressions associated with white dissonance.

GOING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

I have encountered the argument so many times before that pedagogy should be considered as an ultimate form of social action, especially for

the educator. But as someone who has been head-deep in battles alongside the community, I cannot agree. Maybe to some academics it feels as if it is enough to speak of inequities in the class, to assign numerous critical readings, and to engage in group discussions. This might be a start but this cannot be the end. It is not until we are out in the battlefield outside of the protected spaces of the class and the institute that we can fully understand what it means to be racialized by society and to live under the weight of oppression.

So many times I have witnessed the angry pedagogue speak to racial inequities in the public arena of conferences and lectures, but I have often wondered how those words would metamorphose if they were embedded within community action. What does the academic-speak mean to the *abuelita* who has to actually endure the acts of racism against her dark brown flesh that many lecture about?

With this I am saying (without a flinch) that in order to enact most change we must leave the comfort of the classroom and enter spaces where our words will be held accountable by the people who live on the day-to-day what we teach and theorize about. It is not enough to enlighten minds with knowledge on how the world was racialized by the privileged if it is not accompanied by action. As educator-activists we enlighten but then act. Of course there are many ways that we can *act* but most importantly I believe that we need to move beyond the confines of the classroom. As starting points we must engage in discussions with faculty, with administration, with students engulfed in the system, to demand curricular and programmatic change. We must learn to navigate those difficult spaces within the academy but we must also find our way to the outside as well for that is where what many of us teach and theorize about happens. We cannot be afraid of being scrutinized and of being questioned. If transformation is what we truly seek, then we must move beyond the class, readings, and discussions.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

So what does this all mean? It means that we must become even more effective in our demands and that attention be paid to our *testimonios*. By understanding the intricacies of ideology, hegemony, and how the white mind function to uphold power, I have in a sense broken free from a state of vulnerability to one of greater strength that has enabled me to continue in the battle against oppressive racialized systems. All of this serves as a constant reminder to not remain complicit or complacent. It has forced me to confront my own *tezcatlipoca* (Mexica philosophy of the

smoking mirror in which we gaze so that we can confront “*nuestro otro yo*,” our other self; see Meza Gutierrez, 1997). I hold myself accountable by staring into the smoking mirror to ask the difficult questions pertaining to what inhibits me and subsequently causes vulnerability. The smoking mirror does not sugar coat its reflections and I am left with the decision to either accept or reject complicity.

As people of color who live in a white supremacist society, we know that choosing to walk a road that confronts power, privilege, and oppression is not an easy task. Our lives are filled with continuous battles against systems and structures that deny our voices, our experiences, and our knowledge – basically our very existence. The constant battle takes its toll over time—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Because these are our lived realities, we must arm ourselves with not only the thickest of skins but also with other weapons that will allow us to endure. We develop thick skins not so that we do not feel pain from the constant witnessing and traumas borne out of the racialization of our bodies, but so that we can continue on in the work we engage in. Our thick skin often time is our first line of defense.

Along the trajectory of this road I learned that my voice functions as one of the most important weapons in the battle for it has become a *testimonio* reminding others and myself that things are still not right and that we must act. Even if people aim to shut me out of the discussion, I *will* continue to speak. Even if I am feeling a bit more vulnerable that day or if I am worried about the potential consequences and retaliation—I *will* continue to speak. As I give life to my *testimonio* I become empowered for as the words flow out of my mouth I remember the faces of my students, of our people, of my family and of *Others* who have suffered and endured for so long. Those are the images that provide me with the strength that I need to effectively state the realities of our lives and our human right to demand access, equity, and justice.

One tear has yet to fall but yet inside *me siento tan, pero tan mal*. Internally screaming at the top of my lungs to *el río* who I see every-day of my life, to *nuestros abuelitos* that I am ultimately accountable to, and to the land I TRIED, we tried, but the system won today.

Maybe I haven't cried because my being, my subconscious knows that we will never give up hope, even when the system betrays us, crushes us, and slaps us with the harsh reminder that we are playing under its rules.

So today I will mourn and be one with the pain. But tomorrow is a new day and another opportunity. *Mañana sale un*

nuevo sol. And although we may not ever completely dismantle the oppressive and unjust system, we will continue on in the battle.

I am done waiting.

The metaphoric sleeping giant has definitely awoken.

NOTES

¹ I use Xicana instead because I am a *danzante Azteca-Chichimeca* and thus I am aware of the Nahuatl pronunciation of “X” as “Ch.” Xicana is symbolic of understanding the indigenous roots of being Mexicana. It is not simply a label, it represents a deeper understanding of who I am and what I am connected to.

² By using Other it signifies that I am aware and critical of what society imposes on people of color. I use it as a reminder of how society continues to differentiate people of color from what is seen as the standard “white;” people of color are ‘Othered’ by a racialized society. The racialization of our bodies is imposed upon us by those in power.

³ I use educator-activist to describe the work of educators who go beyond the classroom; these are individuals who are not afraid to put themselves on the line and who work alongside the community in demanding all forms of justice; they are the educators who not only teach about the racial hierarchy but understand and live it within the communities it most impacts.

⁴ Most of us know that ‘urban’ has long been utilized as code word to denote spaces where there are larger amounts of people of color.

⁵ Reflection I had as I listened to D. W. Sue give his keynote address at University of New Mexico, November 8, 2013.

⁶ In their article Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso (2000) redefine racial microaggressions as the following: “1) subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered insults, based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and 3) cumulative insults, which cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging whites” (p. 300).

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