

The Weather is Great Today

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“The weather is great today” and other superficial conversations to avoid acknowledging identities and inequities: A critical race theory analysis.

“Creativity has often been a survival tactic ... a compelling quest for identity, a subversive perception of reality, and subterfuge and ambivalence as creative strategies” (Stetson, 1981, p. xvii).

This paper examines the marginalized experiences of two professors in the School of Education at a public university, an Arab straight woman who speaks Spanish and a White English Only speaking lesbian through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT sets the stage for using counter-storytelling to show how oppression is normalized in society. In addition to the use of counter-story, we weave poetry verses about the weather throughout the paper to reiterate the messages we receive as faculty. Our fellow colleagues avoid validating us and our work by discussing the Southern California climate – where the weather is usually the same and almost always pleasant. The message received is that even the most mundane weather is more interesting to our colleagues than our personal identities and professional expertise. Our paper models how counter-storytelling is used as a tool for countering the dominant narrative and how talking about the weather and other superficial conversations invalidate identities and inequities and ultimately normalize oppression. Our paper includes an outline of CRT framework, our counter-stories and an analysis of our counter-stories using the CRT framework.

Critical Race Theory Framework

This paper uses CRT based on Derrick Bell’s (1980, 1992, 1995) work that combines critical sociological theory and narrative inquiry in the field of legal scholarship. We draw from Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) call for action to use CRT to expose inequities and create social justice in the field of education. We use Jessica T. DeCuir and Adrienne D. Dixson’s (2004) definition of CRT to frame and analyze our counter-stories. Their definition identifies the five tenets of CRT as: “(a) counter-storytelling (Matsuda, 1995), (b) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992, 1995), (c) Whiteness as property (Harris, 1995), (d) interest convergence (Bell, 1980), and (e) the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988)” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p.27).

Carbado (2002) identifies a first and second generation of CRT scholarship, the first is focused on overt and material manifestations of racism and inclusion of racially marginalized people and the second generation extends the scholarship to include other markers of difference, such as gender, ethnicity, language, culture and sexuality (as cited in Lynn & Parker, 2006). This paper represents the second generation of CRT, because we focus on ethnicity and

sexuality, but recognize race as the primary defining and analytical lens within CRT.

Our Counter-Stories

Our public university is located in Southern California and is over 20 years old and growing. Our university is a Hispanic Serving Institution with many programs intended to support Latino and first generation college students. We both choose this university because of the potential a new university offers to create programs, curriculum and infrastructure, as well as for the location. The university serves a diverse student population both on campus and in our K-12 partnership schools.

*The weather is great ...
Is the majoritarian narrative to tell
When the high is 78.
Talking superficially is the White thing to do
instead of listening to you.*

The first tenet of CRT from DeCuir and Dixson (2004) is counter-storytelling; to tell the stories that are unknown, unrecognized and invalidated. Each of us experiences personal interactions with colleagues that invalidate who we are personally. What follows are two of our counter-stories, poetry that represents our sense making of our stories, and ending with a CRT analysis of each story.

Annette Daoud's Counter-Story: I Do Not Like Hummus

"I don't like hummus." I find myself saying that repeatedly in conversations when I reveal that I am an Arab to my predominantly White colleagues. Our university is located in San Diego County, a military hub with three enormous military bases (two Marine and one Navy). Given the context, two wars and 9/11, when I reveal my ethnicity to my colleagues, it creates a tension that they try to overcome by finding something they know about Arabs that makes them feel comfortable. Since I am standing right in front of them, they cannot avoid me. They search for a response, but the narrative they have of an Arab does not match the person in front of them. I am not a terrorist. I am not a Muslim. I am not someone to fear as they have been told to do so in the media, by the government or through their own "us v. them" understanding of the world. So their search takes them to food – a safe, superficial subject and hummus is the first "Arab-like" food that comes to them.

Perhaps this is the reason why I find myself telling so many of my colleagues that I don't like hummus. In order to "fit" me into their world, others search for a way to trivialize my Arab identity which takes them to the most

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superficial and non-threatening aspect of a culture, food. When I reveal to my White colleagues that I am an Arab, the most common response I get is, “Oh, I love hummus.” Well, I don’t.

*I love hummus or the weather is great today...
Are status quo things to say
Taking about food or the weather is the neutral thing to do
Instead of recognizing you.*

CRT Analysis

Annette’s counter-story represents a tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism. The context of the story is the military town. It is normal in our community to view Arabs as the other, where there is an assumption that Whites are superior and that Arabs are not White, and as a result are subject to oppression. Sabrina E. Vaught and Angelina E. Castagno (2008) state that “racism is a pervasive, systematic condition...a vast system that structures our institutions and relationships (p. 96). They also claim that racism adapts to the social and political context over time. Prior to the first Gulf War in 1991, there were rumors that the military budget would be cut and implications for that in San Diego were not only political, but economic in nature. Once the rumors became reality, military bases were downsized, which had a significant, political, economic and social impact for our community. After 9/11 the stereotype, “all Arabs are terrorists,” was validated and normalized based on the act of thirteen individuals. Within this context of our community and our country post 9/11, discrimination against Arabs has become pervasive, systematic and normalized (Taylor, 2009).

This counter-story switches from acknowledging race to culture. As an example of the CRT tenet of Whiteness as property, our dominant culture colleagues fit Annette into a culture in which they can claim ownership and maintain power by consuming and enjoying her culture through food, specifically hummus. Vaught and Castagno (2008) highlight how substituting culture for race is significant, because “focusing on culture provides a way to deflect power” (p.103). Recognition of culture is superficial and “maintains the status quo and makes it look neutral, embodying the neutrality central to Whiteness as property” (Vaught & Castagno, 2008, p.104). The colleagues in this story, do not want to recognize the nuanced nature of an Arab Identity, they want a more simplistic unified definition that fits into an “us vs. them” understanding of the world (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Anne René Elsbree’s Counter-Story: I Legally Cannot Marry

On the way to a university technology training, I (Anne René Elsbree) walked from the parking lot with a colleague from the theatre department. As we

walked Diego shared a little about his wife and his children and then inquired if I was married and had children. I said no I wasn't married because it wasn't legal to be married to my partner. Diego then looked at me with a puzzled bewilderment and asked why. He seemed very intrigued and concerned. I explained that the government did not allow marriage for same sex couples. He then changed the subject to the hot Santa Ana weather we were experiencing.

My colleague, Diego seemed surprised as if he did not expect that to be the reason. He instantly became very uncomfortable and changed the subject. Although his reaction was upsetting, it was not unusual. His dismissal, like others are a clear message that my identity as a lesbian is not important and that my desire to have equal rights, such as marriage is trivial. I expected more from Diego, because he seemed very interested when he asked about my life and even more when he asked about why I could not marry. It was as if he was going to be outraged for me, but he wasn't once he heard that I was a lesbian.

Diego did not acknowledge the injustice I experience because our state and nation refused to allow me the right to marry my partner. It was not odd to be dismissed as a lesbian. I experience that often. However, I thought he would recognize my experience because we both represented marginalized groups on a university-wide diversity taskforce.

*The Santa Ana winds are strong today.
Is the marginalizing thing to say
Talking weather is the dominant thing to do
instead of converging interests with you.*

CRT Analysis

This second counter-story represents the CRT tenet, interest convergence, or rather the lack thereof. When Diego and Anne René were on a taskforce to converge interest, he still did not acknowledge her marginalization, let alone see how they could have common interests that align them as allies to address equity issues on their campus. According to Bell (1980), interest convergence occurs only when members of the dominant group deem it beneficial to themselves to support someone from a subordinate group. As a Latino, Diego is positioned on the margins in many contexts, but in this relationship he was positioned as a property owner. His intersections of identity, positioned him to benefit from unearned privilege, male, heterosexual, married, with biological children.

As an extension of another tenet of CRT, Whiteness as property, Diego is privileged because he is heterosexual. He benefits from property rights and is able to maintain this position of power, by not recognizing Anne René's identity. She passes as straight, until she re-informs Diego that she has a female partner. According to Cheryl I. Harris (1993), passing is a feature of subordination, she

explains how racial passing is structured on white supremacy and in the same fashion straight passing is based on homophobia and heteronormativity. This was not a coming out story because Anne René was out on her campus and represented the LGBTQ community on the university taskforce on which she served with Diego. Her re-coming out breaks up the passing again, and removes the shield of interference (Harris, 1993). Her action disrupts the assumption that heterosexuality was the norm, so Diego was able to be blind to her identity. Colorblindness as an ideal (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) prevents Diego from acknowledging her identity because it perpetuates the status quo, his dominance as straight.

Discussion: Personal Stories to Counter the Dominant Narrative

Our personal stories are examples of how CRT uses counter-storytelling as a tool to counter the dominant narrative. In our stories we identify 4 of the 5 tenets outlined in our CRT framework, counter-storytelling, the permanence as racism, Whiteness as property and interest convergence. Although we did not frame our stories within the last tenet, critique of liberalism, we do address one of its basic notion, colorblindness. Through our analysis we fit ~~#~~-colorblindness under the tenet of Whiteness as property.

Counter-Storytelling

Richard Delgado (1989, 1990) claims that the marginalized stories set up an alternative framework that values the marginalized voices where oppression permeates all of their experiences. Solorzano and Yosso (2009) build upon this definition by stating that “the counter story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p.138).

We value five inter-related components of counter-storytelling: voice, alliance, navigation, survival, and change. The structure of the counter-story creates a common framework that gives power to “voice” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Part of voice includes validation and sense making of experience, individually, within a group, as well as across groups. Alliances can be formed when we find similarities (Delgado, 1989), nurture relationships for resistance (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and connect tenets of CRT across stories and experiences to leverage power. Navigation is an individual as well as a group action to resist oppression and survive (Chapman, 2007). Using a postmodernist approach we view navigation as a tool where we decide when, where and who we share our identities with and how that sharing will help us avoid obstacles and make positive change. Survival is the intended goal of navigation, but it is not guaranteed. Delgado (1989) claims that counter-stories are essential tools for oppressed groups’ survival and liberation. Liberation is the change we seek, and through telling our stories in this article we hope to be change agents.

The Permanence of Racism

One of the central tenets of CRT is that racism is a permanent and normal part of our society (Bell, 1992). According to Vaught and Castagno (2008), the permanence of racism is the understanding that the inequities between groups are expected and unavoidable. CRT “illuminates the relationship between the individual and the structure, between equality and equity” (Vaught and Castagno, 2008, p. 95). Equality and equity are unattainable constructs within a binary structure of “us v. them” where “us” is permanently “Whites” and “them” changes over time as the social and political context in which we live defines a new group to oppress. Given that racism is pervasive, systematic, and adaptable over time, it remains a normal part of our society (Taylor, 2009).

Whiteness as Property

Harris (1993) articulated the concept of Whiteness as property (1993), where Whiteness is perceived as the norm giving Whites the power and privilege of domination. Anything other than White is subordinate. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) summarize how Whiteness as property functions on multiple levels through the concepts of rights: “the right of possession, the right to use, the right to disposition. Furthermore, the right to transfer, the right of use and enjoyment, and the right of exclusion are essential attributes associated with property rights” (p. 28). The privilege of Whiteness is that you have rights solely because you are White. Vaught and Castagno (2008) analyze how teachers extend the concept of race to culture as a significant substitution because it masks the racism by not acknowledging the students’ race, but rather assigning their characteristics and performances to a cultural group which denies students their individuality and as a result their rights. In the context of property, passing can afford unearned privileges to those that are perceived to be part of the dominant group (Harris, 1993). The right to include/exclude plays out in the idea that the dominant group does not have to see/acknowledge race and be seen/acknowledged for race. The dominant group can then claim to be colorblind as a strategy to perpetuate racism. And as an extension of the rights, Vaught and Castagno (2008) claim that the dominant group can modify the definition of Whiteness by clarifying who they are not and to what groups they do not belong.

Interest Convergence

Within CRT, Bell (1980) introduced the concept of interest convergence by explaining that the “interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policymaking positions” (p.69). DeCuir and Dixson (2004) extend this concept by stating, “given the vast disparities between elite whites and most communities of color, gains that coincide with the self-interest of White elites, are not likely to make a substantive difference in the lives of people of color” (p.28). Socially,

economically and politically, what interests of the dominant White group will ever converge to benefit marginalized groups? The answer lies in the alliances marginalized groups can form to resist, navigate and change the structures for social justice.

Conclusion

As previously stated, counter-stories are tools to expose, analyze and challenge the majoritarian stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). We originally shared these stories with each other to make sense of our experiences, and to use them as entry points for conversations about tensions and contradictions we experience as “others” in our university (Rolon-Dow, 2011). We chose these two stories for the analysis to highlight the complexities of these brief daily encounters. Our stories are supplemented with poetry stanzas to reflect the messages that we receive daily. The poetry stanzas are created counter-stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009), where we use the art of repetition and rhyme as a medium to express our personal stories. Rosalie Rolon-Dow (2001) claims that “The use of multiple modalities can be particularly helpful ... to narrate and illustrate the sometimes covert and coded forms that racism takes in contemporary contexts” (p. 171). We have found great value in this analysis, which has allowed us to bask in the sunshine of our experiences.

*Talking weather is what our colleagues do
As a way to exclude us from their view.
Consuming our culture’s food is what our colleagues do
It is their right of use and right of enjoyment too.
The majoritarian story is the story they tell
According to Derrick Bell.
Racism is permanent **and** values Whiteness as property
But we can use counter-stories to expose, analyze and challenge in CRT.
Whether June Gloom, Coastal Eddy or merely morning dew
The marine layer is only so thick
the sun and CRT always shine through.*

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