Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Woman: Centering Examinations of Race, Power, and Privilege in Teacher Education Programs in the Wake of 45

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Abstract

Using a social justice framework provides opportunities to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in reflexive thinking centered on issues of access, equity, and social justice. This is particularly prudent in light of recently documented cases of injustice. In attempting to undertake a critical stance, there is value in embracing what Freire (2000) describes as "conscientization" or critical consciousness; acts which directly challenge marginalized thinking. In this time of post-truth politics, there is an even greater moral imperative to explore the covert and overt subversions being used to normalize the undermining of the BIPOC community and instructors whose work pushes students to confront issues of race, racism, marginalization and privilege. In this article, personal narratives are used to discuss an African American faculty member's experiences preparing teacher candidates before, during, and immediately following the 2016 election in the United States.

Keywords: Social Justice, Counter-storytelling, Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Testimonio

Historically, America has been fraught with the tensions of identifying itself as "the great melting pot" while contradictorily and vehemently opposing those viewed as outsiders. The metaphorical description was intended to portray America as a warm welcoming place for all who dare to come. However, from its inception, America was poised to become a bastion of whiteness. This fact inevitably surfaces during the course of arguably empty gestures to embrace all and offer seamlessly endless opportunities to the masses who come to embody what it means to be American; an ever-changing representation, yet always centered on white normativity.

Early European immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island were greeted by Lady Liberty in all her grandeur. For these immigrants, the Statue of Liberty symbolized freedom, hope, democracy, and a fresh start away from the perils of their former life. She signified the collective hand of America extended to welcome them. With her torch held high and broken shackles adorning her feet, "…Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World…not only represented democracy but also symbolized American independence and the end of all types of servitude and oppression" (National Park Service, n.d.-a para. 4). She beckoned to those needing refuge, "…mother of exiles…" (National Park Service, n.d.-b). As her inscription asserts, "…give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free…" (National Park Service, n.d.-b). We know that this freedom and democracy was non-existent for people of color and was not easily attainable for many immigrants.

The double entendre now evident in describing America as the great melting pot is that one's success or failure was, and is increasingly, measured by how well he or she embraces cultural assimilation, or undertakes complete acculturation. Whiteness was and still is the standard by which all others are measured (López & Johnson, 2014). Though this undercurrent has always simmered just below the surface, the 2016 election cycle, subsequent election of the 45th president of the United States, the 2020 election cycle, and the aftermath of the 45th presidency has again brought to the forefront a surge of white nationalism that shines a light on the metaphorical melting pot and the marginalization of and injustices enacted upon people of color.

Why Racism? Why Now?

Though many scholars have attempted to stake claims in a post racial society (Hollinger, 2011), the notion of racism in the U.S. is not new. It is, in fact, an ideological practice upon which our nation was built. As such, it is woven very deliberately into the fabric of our democracy. We have become astute at recognizing overt acts of racism while ignoring or denying the many covertly racist acts that inflict harm daily. Society as a whole tends to accept this covert, nice brand of Laissez Faire Racism (Bobo, 2017) enacted by those who would proclaim themselves to not be racist (DiAngelo, 2021). However, the brand of racism surrounding the 2016 election cycle as well as the resulting presidency was anything but covert. The nations collective sensibilities were raised as we observed a level of Civil Rights Era racism rear its ugly head in the 21st century. Bobo (2017) argued that deep seated cultural and

institutional racism and white supremacist beliefs were key factors in electing the 45th president. The resurgence of overt racism and white nationalism reignited and reaffirmed the need to bring the galvanizing voices and stories of people of color to the forefront in the fight for justice and equality.

From Conscientization to Critical Race Theory and Testimonio

As a female faculty member of color whose work is framed by a social justice orientation, the uptick in explicit and documented cases of injustices enacted upon Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) provides a multitude of opportunities to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in the kinds of deep, reflexive thinking that is necessary if they "are to unlearn [their] socialization from within an oppressive society" (Quin, 2009, p. 109). Freire (2000) appealed to individuals and communities to develop "conscientization" or critical consciousness; a critical understanding of one's social realities that leads to acts which directly challenge marginalized thinking. Freire further spoke of the power of education to steer people toward critical thinking and action:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

There is value in embracing critical consciousness as one attempts to undertake a critical stance. The U.S. and much of the developed world is currently gripped by a nationalistic, socio-political climate in which critical pedagogies are viewed as a threat. However, proponents of critical pedagogy hold the tenets as a symbol of hope of a civil democratic society (Giroux, 2010). The possibility of repercussions against those who espouse critical pedagogy and act against injustices creates tension for teachers who choose to move beyond what is taught in traditional teacher education programs as well as those who enact a social justice orientation in K-12 classrooms. The ongoing, intensified backlash against critical pedagogies also creates a space in which both students and teachers are silenced for risk of facing physical, psychological, and emotional harm.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education is a framework that draws from the lived experiences within BIPOC communities to understand how systems of power mediate

educational trajectories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Working in tandem with research methodologies such as testimonios, CRT provides a critical lens through which one can view the lived, racialized experiences of BIPOC individuals. Of CRT's five tenets, counter-storytelling offers a means for those from BIPOC communities to share personal narratives that center and legitimize their experiences (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Correspondingly, the use of CRT is both unifying and liberatory in that it provides a platform for the rich stories of BIPOC populations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Though, as a matter of praxis, CRT is not directly taught in K-12 schools, sweeping legislation was recently introduced across the country that calls for its dismantling in these settings. These measures are viewed as overt attempts to silence BIPOC people while allaying the guilt that some white people experience when, for the first or hundredth time, they are made aware or reminded of the impact of race and racism on the daily realities of BIPOC people.

Testimonios are personal narratives that sheds light on injustices, amplifies efforts to transform unjust systems and celebrates resiliency (Pérez Huber & Pulido Villanueva, 2019). Testimonios have been described as a way to create knowledge and theory through personal experiences. Scholars laud the use of testimonios as powerful verbal weapons used in support of marginalized communities while condemning institutions for being co-conspirators in acts of injustice (Craft, 1997; Smith, 2010). Both CRT and testimonios highlight injustices and systems of oppression that marginalized communities face, while valuing experiential knowledge and the lived experiences of said individuals. Additionally, CRT allows for discussion of the intersectionality that BIPOC often experience and that I personally experience in my dual roles as both a woman and African American faculty member.

Giving Voice to My Experiences

As a BIPOC faculty member at a predominantly white institution (PWI), my experiences have mirrored those described in the literature (Lazos, 2012; Niemann, 2012; Orelus, 2013; Pittman, 2012; Rollock, 2012). So, admittedly microaggressions and macroaggressions are not new to me. I have however, become keenly aware of a particular prickliness and brashness that have come to characterize these interactions with my students. The gravity of these occurrences is not lost on me as they tend to reflect a perceived dominance over BIPOC people, even those in positions of authority. I share personal narratives (Haden & Hoffman, 2013) crafted into my testimonio (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; DeNicolo et al., 2015) to offer counter-stories that

amplify my truths and illuminate the impact of race, racism, and marginalization in my work with pre-service teachers.

As I move forward in weaving together my story, the following questions guide the discussion: How did the campaign, election, and the 45th presidency impact me as a teacher educator who promotes culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining practices? What are the implications for scholars, more specifically BIPOC scholars and those whose work is aimed at increasing the number of K-12 educators who support and encourage social justice within their classrooms? What happens when students in teacher education programs, who are overwhelmingly white and female, ironically the same demographic who catapulted 45 into the white house, are challenged to consider and confront inequalities and injustices? Nelson Mandela believed that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2013). Likewise, I believe that I have been gifted with a platform from which I can promote equity and advocacy while simultaneously drawing attention to the impact that such work has on my life.

Let's Get Uncomfortable

Scholars have identified a growing diversity gap between K-12 students of color and teachers (Boser & Center for American Progress, 2014). I teach at a PWI in the Midwest. In line with these findings and as is the case within most teacher education programs in the U.S., the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom I work, are overwhelmingly white and primarily female. The pre-service teachers in my courses are majoring in elementary education and enter my courses the semester before completing the teacher education program. The in-service teachers I work with are pursuing a Reading Teacher or Reading Specialist Endorsement. All are enrolled in courses focused on literacy methods and assessment with an instructor-led emphasis influenced by Paris and Alim's (2017) notion of culturally sustaining literacy practices.

Given the critical lens that I bring, I firmly believe that it is impossible to talk about the course content without serious consideration and discussion of the inequalities that lead to the achievement gap seen in K-12 student populations. My courses are designed to walk students through an un-layering process that involves a fair amount of reflexivity. Students are guided in deep thinking about their biases, stereotypes, unfair characterizations, and examination of structural inequalities. These are uncomfortable conversations as often, students have either never discussed these topics in classes, or have never discussed them with the great specificity

called for within my courses. Then, there is the added layer of having an already uncomfortable conversation about bias, race, racism, and marginalization with an African American woman. I work hard to create a classroom community in which students are free to share while attempting to minimize the chances for negative consequences. Though admittedly, there is resistance, and that resistance comes in waves, more strongly from some students than others.

The Race Toward 45

The political and social climate created during the 2016 election in the U.S. was akin to picking the scab from a not so old wound. The socio-political environment that followed as well as the resulting presidency was a further undertaking of pouring salt into wounds that never fully healed. Throughout the 2016 campaign and after the election, there were enumerable incidents in which people of color, immigrants, and people whose native language isn't English were attacked. The rhetoric spewed on the campaign trail and throughout the term of presidency served as a lightning rod that ignited violence against anyone who looked, spoke, acted, or thought differently from what the perpetrators considered mainstream. Hostilities were launched at people of color in ways that seemed foreign to younger generations. The world looked on as lies became truth, victimizers were defended, and scientific evidence was rendered null. In addition, there has been a visceral outcry from white people who declare themselves to be the newly marginalized whose rights are being infringed upon.

A Trail of Violence

The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that there were 1,095 bias related incidents in the month following the 2016 election (Hatewatch Staff, 2016). Such incidents did not begin nor end with the election and were widely documented as the president showed indifference, or worse, encouraged the behaviors (Cineas, 2021; Media Reports of Violence, n.d.; Trump's History, n.d.). Early in the 2016 campaign season, before either political party selected a nominee, there was a noted increase in acts of violence at certain campaign rallies. Touting the desire to "Make Amerika Great Again", the candidate who would become the Republican Party nominee and eventually inhabit the White House, had a knack for inciting violence. In addition, there were further occurrences throughout the 45th presidency and escalating political violence perpetrated by white nationalist groups (Miller & IP Staff, 2021).

In a country that stakes claim to free speech, people were emboldened in both speech and actions as the appointed vanguard to protect all things "American". They too became the sole

proprietors of what it meant to be American. During both election cycles and the presidential term, it wasn't uncommon for the candidate and then president to raise calls to have violence enacted upon rally attendees, and protestors, having them thrown out of campaign rallies (Trianni & Berenson, 2016) and meetings. It was commonplace for the president to defend the enactors of such violence. Even when he did not lead the charge, his supporters were more than willing to assault attendees with differing viewpoints. What ensued was a barrage of news images depicting mostly people of color being pushed (*Protester pushed at Trump rally*, 2016), punched (Moyer, 2016), derided (Marans, 2016), and removed from his campaign events (Jacobs, 2016). These events set the tone for similar actions that transpired in places of learning from elementary school through college, also resulting in resistance to efforts to promote multiculturalism and culturally responsive teaching.

Building Walls Instead of Bridges

Students and teachers across the nation felt the impact of the campaigns and the presidency. An African American college student took to Facebook describing her encounter with a group of the 45th president's supporters who were holding an open forum in the lobby of her dorm. The African American student recounted how she was jeered and told to "go back to Africa" (Walton, 2016). Throughout the 2016 campaign, subsequent presidency and 2020 campaign, the rhetoric intensified with insults toward people from Mexico, a reporter with a disability, various members of congress and opponents as well as misogynistic discussions about and toward women.

The ugliness from the campaign trail crept silently and not so silently into other places of learning and appeared to become the new normal. The result was an emboldening of outward manifestations of bias and racism. During a Black Lives Matter (BLM) event, a guy now known to be East Tennessee State University student Tristan Rettke, attempted to provoke BLM members (News Channel 11 Staff, 2016; Svrluga, 2016). Donning a gorilla mask, overalls and a white t-shirt, the student dangled a banana from a rope in front of event organizers and participants. Again, these actions were not limited to college campuses. Immediately following the election, students at a middle school were recorded directing the chant "build that wall" toward classmates while seated in the cafeteria (Jacobo, 2016). An adult, presumably a teacher, can be seen walking the aisles without any attempts to address the behavior.

Hitting Close to Home

In early 2017, just over 100 days into the new presidency, the gravity of this alternate reality became apparent when I came across a Facebook post from an African American philosopher whose research focuses on CRT. The philosopher taught at a predominantly white school in the South, and they were not hesitant in sharing their work or the fact that it is often met with resistance. But this Facebook post was different. It was more graphic, more antagonistic, and filled with indignation. The post was a screenshot of a tweet directed at the philosopher. It showed a side-by-side picture of a monkey holding a banana in one hand and a gun pointed into his mouth in the other hand as well as a monkey laying on the ground with blood spewing from his body. In addition to the phrase "stoopid monkey", the person who sent the tweet to the philosopher felt it both appropriate and necessary to make further incendiary statements. Thinking that it was an isolated incident, I commented to make light of the ignorance in the post. Nevertheless, I watched over the next several days as the philosopher posted instance after instance in which it became evident that they were clearly under attack. The attackers mischaracterized the philosopher's work, misrepresented their viewpoints, and made threats against their life in addition to calling for their firing. The attackers mounted a campaign resulting in the president of the university speaking out again the philosopher. Colleagues, friends, and students alike began petitions to show support for the philosopher. Ultimately, extorted by these acts of terrorism and concerned for their and their family's safety, their livelihood, academic freedom, and well-being, the philosopher relocated their family outside of the United States. This story is just one of many that helps to expose the realities for black educators while also calling attention to the need to center conversations about race, power, privilege, marginalization and the experiences of scholars of color. This is especially true during the tumultuous socio-political climate that currently exists in the US as a result of the 45th president's speech and actions.

From Campaign Trail to the Classroom

As we neared the election and rhetoric on the campaign trail intensified, so did the interactions with students in my courses. Often, there are very few or no students of color in the courses. Nonetheless, there are always students with various social and emotional needs and at times this surfaces in the classroom space during group work and discussions. Critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) advises teachers to not only expect, but to

celebrate students that come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds, as well as working with students with varying special needs.

Tensions were felt in undergraduate and graduate course alike. In one course in which I was aided by an international teaching assistant, students began noticeably disengaging during our interactions. This was a course whose content I designed and had taught for years. Students in the course often seemed aloof and distracted and our attempts to draw them in seemed ineffective. Students openly defied me as they surfed the Internet and did crossword puzzles in class. Even when brought to their attention there was barely any remorse. As a teaching methods course, students were often asked to engage in simulations and teaching demonstrations. One student in particular, when asked to do a teaching demonstration, outright refused to participate. She sat rolling her eyes and sighing as I waited in silence for her to proceed. Sensing the tension, some of her classmates convinced her to do the demonstration. She reluctantly did so while shrugging her shoulders in defiance.

No Such Thing as White Privilege

I led students in a privilege walk exercise during a session centered on diversity and multiculturalism. I stood shoulder to shoulder with my students as I read a series of statements. If a given statement were applicable to their life experiences, they were to take a step forward. If the statement didn't apply, they were to remain in line. The activity was designed to simulate how some things that people take for granted actually privileges them over other people thereby causing them to move ahead in life as others remain stagnant or fall behind. Though leading the activity, I participated alongside my students. After all the statements were read and while standing at the back of the group, I told students to look around and silently take note of everyone's position in the room. I then revealed that I too had participated in the activity. Students, some now with tears in their eyes, looked as if they could not believe their position, relative to my position or the position of their classmates. I asked that they remain silent and transform the staggered line into a circle that enveloped me, the person at the very back of the line. I went on to explain that the intent of the activity was not to incite guilt or shame, but to show that we all have privileges that puts us ahead of someone else and that efforts must focus on lifting those who are being left behind.

I asked that students return to their seats in silence so that they could process the activity through writing. The most memorable reflection came from a white, female student who stood

closest to me at the back of the line at the end of the activity. The student questioned why she, as a white person, was at the back of the line with me. She questioned her own privilege and lack thereof. She argued that if there was such a thing as White privilege, then we should equally focus on black privilege. The student admonished me for discussing inequality, privilege, and racism and said they really don't exist, except for in the minds of those who keep "promoting them". During subsequent class sessions, the student was combative and insisted that any discussion about, race, power, and privilege should really be about socioeconomic status. She continued to do so despite being shown research that discounted her claims.

Throughout the presidency, there was an all-out assault on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The spotlight was once again shined on the criminalization and victimization of African Americans by the police as well as others. The issue came to a head during the late spring of 2020, after police murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis. What ensued were nationwide protests calling for justice and equity. Rather than expressing empathy or attempting to calm the protests, Rogers (2020) reported that the 45th president opted instead to tweet "that 'if protesters had breached the White House fence, they would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons, I have ever seen.'" Several months after the events, the president then went on to direct federal agencies to cancel all contracts intended to educate staffers about White privilege and CRT as a means of combatting racism. The trainings were deemed "divisive, anti-American propaganda" and said to have been a factor contributing to the nation's deep racial divide (Schwartz, 2020). With this action, the president appointed himself the arbiter of narratives about the lived experiences of BIPOC communities facing racism, marginalization, and oppression.

It's Not My Job

Each semester I choose a book to read aloud with my students. In preparing them to work with adolescents, I tend to focus on young adult literature. I intentionally select multicultural literature written by and about BIPOC people because I realize that this is likely my students' only exposure to such throughout their entire teacher education program. Upon a recommendation from my middle schooler, I selected Jewell Parker Rhodes' (2018) *Ghost Boys*. Rhodes' work offers a timely, child friendly discussion of power, privilege, and racism. Readers are taken on a journey with the main character, an adolescent African American male who lost

his life senselessly at the hands of a white police officer. The officer then goes on to lie about the encounter.

I led the pre-service teachers in examining the text and the social issues featured within the text. I purposefully brought the issues raised throughout the text back to their future classrooms and how they would address some of the issues if the characters where their students. I asked the pre-service teachers to explain their role in advocating for students and families that have historically been marginalized. Multiple students responded that their role was to support students' beliefs in whatever they felt was right. In addition, they emphatically denied any culpability in educating students whose beliefs contributed to the marginalization and oppression of others. Likewise, they abdicated their role in speaking for students who are being marginalized. Further, they stated that it was not their job to teach students anything contrary to their family's beliefs or "make them apologize for their race". When pressed further, one student angrily sneered "look, I believe what I believe and that's that"! In each instance, the student expressing this belief was both female and white.

The discussion was disheartening to say the least. Just weeks away from student teaching and I had failed to adequately show the pre-service teachers in my class how systemic racism leads to systems of oppression and marginalization and further impacts each one of their future elementary students. Following these interactions, the dean's office received multiple unfounded complaints that I was not providing timely feedback on assignments. When students were pressed about the reality of the situation, there was proof that all feedback had indeed been give within a two-week timeframe, after any work was submitted. Yet, because they didn't appreciate the uncomfortable conversations about race and racism with me, a black woman, the students chose to act in a way that could ultimately do harm to my standing within the program and to my career. They did not care that this too was an act of aggression, racism, power, and privilege.

Discussion/Conclusion

The issue of politics, privilege, race, and racism is, are central in conversations formally and informally here in the U.S. and abroad. Numerous marginalized groups that were affirmed under the Obama administration were attacked and threatened both directly and indirectly under the 45th president's administration. Women, people with disabilities, refugees, people of color, immigrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community were on the receiving end of hostilities and loss footing as policies that offered protections for some were revoked under the 45th president's

administration. Resulting from several years of divisive and harmful discourse, different segments of our population are now grappling with what it means to be American, what it means to develop critical consciousness, and what it means to enact critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Vitriol and violence have become all too common and have captivated audiences both nationally and internationally. Yet, many Americans still hold on to the idea that the U.S. is not a melting pot, but rather a salad bowl where individuals from any race, creed, or nationality can attain the American dream.

It has been challenging being a woman of color in the academy. So often it seems that white students assume a level of expert knowledge about the content that I teach. As such, they respond by attempting to usurp my control over course content and delivery. When faced with the discomfort of tackling social justice issues, students will completely shut down, or, as shown above, will double down on their right to maintain their beliefs without the least attempt to engage with and understand the counter-stories. Having an immediate past president who so openly derided various marginalized populations, has emboldened many white students and parents alike. Currently, there exists an impression that they not only have more of a right to do so, but must actively resist and push back against efforts to promote social justice or acknowledge the salience of race. These experiences are disheartening in addition to be both mentally and emotionally taxing. I am led to wonder what role intersectionality plays in these interactions with students whom I am charged with preparing to teach in the K-12 system. How would these situations be different If I were white? How would my personal narratives be different?

Though the narratives shared herein are personal documentation of my experience, I would argue that my situation is not unique. There are implications for BIPOC scholars as well as for how universities might support BIPOC faculty. For many of us doing social justice work, our jobs have only gotten more difficult. The strain is particularly felt when there is an absence of administrative support. Too often, BIPOC faculty members undergo these experiences alone, operating in silos without a sounding board or support. Without established support systems, it behooves BIPOC faculty to create their own networks consisting of BIPOC faculty and administrators who serve as sounding boards, collaborators, and problem solvers. BIPOC scholars must be hypervigilant in bringing administrators' and colleagues' attention to the diversity and advocacy work being done in their courses and, to the fact that the discomfort that

students feel surrounding the social justice topics covered along with the implicit bias of interacting with the BIPOC professors, often leads to lower scores from student on faculty evaluations. It is equally important that we press forward by finding other BIPOC scholars and forming alliances as well as by engaging white colleagues with dissimilar experiences. In addition, we must continue to elevate BIPOC voices and draw attention to the racialized experiences that BIPOC faculty endure, even as we teach the exact same group of students as our white colleagues. CRT provides a framework through which our voices can be heard, elevated, and our stories valued.

There isn't a way for BIPOC faculty to fully protect themselves. The work that I do is important and I will continue it even if it is difficult and causes heightened stressors and challenges. Otherwise, change won't happen. Given the historical context within the U.S., white students will likely continue to view BIPOC faculty as a threat as many times our emphasis on issues of equity does indeed challenge their privilege. However, the onus continues to be placed on educators to create classroom spaces where uncomfortable conversations occur. For, it is when we allow our students to rest in that uncomfortableness that we can begin to interrogate traditional notions of what it means to be American and get down to the work necessary to truly make our country great for all of its citizens.

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