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# **Beginning With Me: Accounting For A Researcher Of Color's Counterstories In Socially Just Qualitative Design**

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## **Abstract**

To avoid simplification, a methodological process that contextualizes decisions made in qualitative design must exist. Employing Critical Race Theory's counterstorytelling, I examine how qualitative research void of personal contextualization that informs design, renders simple designs. Since counterstorytelling reveals a nuanced understanding of racism, it becomes an applicable tool that informs racially just research design; thus, counterstorytelling results in complexification, a process rendering research designs more sophisticated. I propose that too much personal distance between researcher and research ultimately masks White hegemonic designs while marginalizing designs brought forth by the contextualization of researchers of color. This paper humbly offers a step-by-step process of how I, a researcher of color, operationalized my counterstories to inform my research design and how it impacted the data derived from the study at large.

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## **Introduction**

Countless articles demonstrate the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions on people of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). According to Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007),

[R]acial microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocuous. (p. 72)

Racial microaggressions are racially fatiguing, resulting in a stress-related deleterious health condition that develops in “response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily” (Smith, 2004, p. 180). However, racial microaggressions also serve as teachable praxes (Matias, 2012). Reflexively speaking, the same racial microaggressions that serve as teachable praxes are also the culture of wealth from which we draw from to design socially just research projects (Yosso & Garcia, 2007). That is, our<sup>2</sup> reservoir of painful experiences brought on by our subjugation to racism gives us a wealth of knowledge, specifically a resistant capital, not understood by those who benefit in a racist system. According to Tara J. Yosso and David G. Garcia (2007), such resistant capital is an asset that is developed in response to coping in a racist society and goes unrecognized in that racist society. Instead of continuing to ignore this asset, this article draws from the resistant capital developed from the counterstories of racial microaggressions in my life as a researcher of color to ultimately posit how such a capital gives me strength to produce socially just research designs. This article is written in a cyclic discourse pattern to mirror the concentricity of ideas that inform research design; after all, designing research is not a linear process.

### **Who am I and Why I am Relevant?**

Who I am as a researcher of color is a valid extension of how I conduct race-related research. To negate the inherent marriage between the two, denies a fuller, more complex understanding of how qualitative research is designed. For what is research void of who we are, what we have experienced, and how we view ourselves as socially just researchers? In fact, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (1994) argue that a “text that does not bear the

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<sup>2</sup> I strategically use the word “our” to accommodate the growing population of researchers of color.

traces of the author” (p. 578) does not exist. Therefore, this article does not subscribe to the false stamp of objectivity, for research is not objective. Rather, as a brown-skinned Filipina American with a Spanish surname, critical race motherscholar, and daughter of immigrant parents, I humbly offer myself as the essentialized “Other” (Said, 1979) to share my counterstories that “exposes how race, class, and gender work their ways” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 578) in my life and thus impact how I do socially just qualitative research. That is to say, as a racialized person of color fully armed with knowledge of Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies, and what I call Colored Feminism (Chicana, Asian American, and Black feminist thought), I am made privy to racial nuances often blinded to the racially privileged, just as Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1986) asserts that Black women have greater sensitivity of the oppressive mechanisms of racism and patriarchy. Frederick Erickson (2010) corroborates this by stating, “[I]nsider researchers who report on their own experiences can identify nuances that may well go overlooked or misunderstood by the outsider researcher” (p.117). As such, I present myself as an insider researcher who critically examines how my counterstories of being racialized as a brown-skinned woman inform the decisions I make for my research design. Conversely, “by failing to consider race, current experimental methodology reifies the interests of the prevailing cultures by reflecting color-blind racism” (Goar, 2008).

Race, gender, and class become definitive markers that impact researchers’ identity, agenda, and analysis. Therefore, by using critical self-reflexivity, the catalytic validity to my study then “empowers and emancipates [our] research community” in that my marginalized voice as a female motherscholar of color is now struggling to be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 581). Yet, the question remains – How do we, as scholars of color, shed light to our experiences to unveil nuances of race, racism, and White supremacy that impact our research identities and, thus, our research design? My answer to this inquiry is that we need to account for our counterstories that inform our research designs and demand that the larger qualitative research community accept the normalization of our colored counterstories. This will be modeled below.

### **The Painful Cost of Operationalizing My Counterstories**

Before delving into the “how” I operationalized my counterstories, I must caution my readers with the dangers in critical race and critical whiteness research. In Matias (2012), I describe the painful process of doing critical race pedagogy and how using such pedagogy opened me up to a barrage of personal attacks each time I chipped away the epistemology of

racial ignorance that my White students invested in. bell hooks (1995) corroborates this real fear of Whiteness in her book *Killing Rage* where she painfully re-examines the litany of race-based killings. Socially just researchers who acknowledge the real fear embedded in undertaking critical race research caution me that self-reflexive work makes me vulnerable. As such, I will entertain concepts of vulnerability.

Ming Fang He and Joann Phillion (2008) describe the “personal passionate participatory inquiry” as an “intimacy, closeness, and caring that . . . create vulnerability” (p. 271). Although they describe this phenomenon as a “dilemma” (p. 271), I opt for a different conceptualization of vulnerability. As critical race scholar Rita Kohli (2008; forthcoming) articulates that developing reciprocal vulnerability in the pedagogical process of teaching and learning between educators and students creates within us the potential for transformative strength. In fact, in a union of love, is not the mutual vulnerability of two people the start of a renewed strength as a coalesced entity? Applicably, I recognize that offering my counterstories is simultaneously offering my vulnerability, which opens me to hegemonic attacks from those who reduce my racialized experiences to mere isolated individualized acts rather than acknowledging how they are a part of a larger, racist system of how people of color are similarly racialized.

### **The Benefits of Re-Examining Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is under attack and rightfully needs to be. From colonial paradigms to hegemonic White discourses (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, Brijnath, & Crockett, 2010; Duncan, 2002; Tuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), the normative processes of qualitative research is inherently imbued with racially dominant paradigms often deemed common sense. Celine-Marie Pascale (2008) problematizes the inherent racism embedded in reductive “common sense” qualitative research design by asserting that, “common sense naturalizes complex historical productions of power in ways that appear to be self-evident” (p. 734). Despite the call to make “visible what hegemonic discourse conceals,” Pascale argues that such an attainment is limited in the current “scientific paradigm” (p. 736). The current scientific paradigm of qualitative research then becomes contentious and wrought with subjectivities masked under the cloak of self-asserted objectivity. As Pascale warns, unless we unravel these commonsense notions of what constitutes “valid” qualitative research, can we then extrapolate the fundamental inherent racial biases so embedded in normative research practices.

Validity in qualitative research is further explored when Mirka Koro-Ljungberg (2010) complexifies the grand narrative on what constitutes validity. Essentially, we need to question

what founding philosophies and epistemologies self-rightfully deem which qualitative research is valid. Conversely, to not question is to leave research limited in “how truth can be conceptualized” (p. 604). Similar to how subscribing to the mark of a single truthdom in history (Loewen, 1995; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1999) is painfully limiting, so is confining the validity of research to one master stamp of righteousness. Doing so, not only limits the potentialities of qualitative research, but also renders it simple in its analyses and reductions, and thus damages its capacity to explain the complex nuances that lay at the foundation of qualitative inquiry in the first place.

This assertion is again articulated in Melina T. Czymoniewicz-Klippel and colleagues (2010) whose multinational study on vulnerable persons (e.g. individuals with dementia, children, and women) critiques normative research ethics by asserting that such ethics favor the protection of the institution rather than the research participants themselves. The question then becomes – What is so inherent in normative ethic policies of qualitative research that begs for ethical critique? Ethics in qualitative research is problematic in that it “implicitly privilege[s] nonindigenous forms of knowledge and nonindigenous ways of doing” (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010, p. 339). In order to combat the over-dominating normality of qualitative research, the authors argue that, in undertaking socially just research, careful thought and preparation must be considered. This includes the mere designs of qualitative inquiries. For what begins a qualitative study more so than the mere decisions we employ in creating the design? For that matter, what experiences and knowledges precede and inform our decisions and how can we explicitly complexify qualitative inquiry by beginning with the researcher herself?

My intent is not to challenge researchers’ stances within their projects. Rather, I call upon other researchers of color to utilize our resistant capital by not silencing our wealth of knowledge, but by voicing our counterstories to illuminate the intricacies of how we develop agendas and identities that ultimately inform our research designs. I propose that just as how counterstorytelling is a method for conducting research (Delgado-Bernal, 2002) and analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), it can also be a method to re-center our histories as researchers of color, which ultimately impact our design decisions.

### **A Methodology for Explication**

Data used in this article is taken from my pilot and dissertation study from UCLA. However, instead of focusing on analyzing the data to answer a specific dissertation research inquiry, I strategically include some data here to illuminate how I drew from my counterstories to

inform my design decisions and, by doing so, was able to collect richer data for my dissertation study.

After employing my counterstories to make design decisions, the final design of my dissertation study was as follows: a yearlong, three-phased action-based study of a U.S. history course at a local Los Angeles public high school. The study documents the impact of critical race curriculum on racially diverse students (inclusive of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Whites). Phase I included semi-structured, racially-segregated group interviews. Phase II included an intervention of critical race history curriculum and pedagogy while implementing a two-way communicative journal between each student and myself. Doing this provided a medium for students to express their responses to the curriculum while privately dialoguing to me about their intimate racial identity process. Phase III included semi-structured racially-segregated group interviews and a project evaluation. However, as mentioned above, the focus of this article is to document how I came to these design decisions *after* I accounted for my counterstories. Below I share my counterstories as a brown-skinned Pinay (i.e. Filipina) to demonstrate two phenomena: 1) how such stories reveal a resistant capital; and 2) how the resistant capital embedded in my counterstories played a role in how I made research design decisions.

### **From Counterstory to Design Decisions**

#### **Dissertation as a Tool for Racial Justice**

Growing up as a person of color born to immigrant parents subjected me to painful racial microaggressions that, nonetheless, allowed me to intimately experience and understand the dynamics of race, racism and White supremacy. For example, my White kindergarten teacher, Ms. Watson, (and many like her) constantly asked me why I speak English so well or what country I am REALLY from, despite me telling her I was born and raised in a predominantly English-speaking household in Los Angeles, California, USA. Although she feigned racial colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006), I knew she based her actions, behaviors, and speeches on my racial markers, such as my brown-skinned pigmentation, almond-shaped eyes, and Spanish surname. This reoccurring racial trauma happened year after year in my urban public schools led by White liberal teachers. Despite my racial battle fatigue, I also learned how to transformationally resist (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). I resisted by re-directing the racial microaggressions toward the questioner. Specifically, I refused to succumb to her prescribed racial assumption of being a forever foreigner (see Suzuki, 1977/1995) by asserting that I too

can be American. Further, I remember asking her where she is *really* from and even helped her think through her Whiteness by positing options like Ireland, Scotland, and England. These acts of transformational resistance developed a resistant capital within me at the age of five.

I admit that in taking such a transformationally resistive and socially just stance I developed a rage that bell hooks (1995) describes as “a potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation” (p. 12). However, this rage does not stem from hate. Rather, this rage stems from love; a deep love I have for humanity that causes me to rage to defend it. And it is this rage that fuels within me what educational scholar Denise Baszile (2006) calls an epistemic violence needed to refute hegemony. Rage became a pedagogical process that politicized my identity, which cannot be divorced from who I am as a researcher. By politicizing, I mean a similar process of how Latinos and Hispanics politically transform their own identities by opting for the ethnic marker of Chican@<sup>3</sup> during the politicized Chicano movement (for example see Muñoz, 1989). For me, the research and political identities are my coalesced identity informed by my racially lived experiences. Therefore, to assume that the transformational resistance and rage that I experience on a personal level does not impact my identity on a professional, research level denies the complexity that informs the decisions I make for my research.

With respect to the personal level of resistant capital translating into my professional level, I based my research decisions off of “an activist’s agenda” (Denzin & Giardina, 2010, p. 16). Because of countless counterstories similar to the described racial microaggressions above, I do as Norman K. Denzin and Michael D. Giardina (2010) demand, namely, to “change the world and do it in ways that resist injustice” (p. 17) by conceptualizing a dissertation project that does not merely document phenomena that I have already experienced as a racialized being. Rather, I used my dissertation project as a tool to fight against racism. Yet, just how to create my dissertation project as a tool to fight against racism was elusive until I extrapolated my counterstories and applied it to my observations as a teacher of color in South Los Angeles and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

After teaching for years, I realized that the lack of raced curriculum<sup>4</sup> left my students of color deprived of a *colorscence*<sup>5</sup> of their racial identity. In fact, one day after my Brooklyn class,

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<sup>3</sup> I strategically use @ to recognize both gendered identities of Chicanas and Chicanos at one time

<sup>4</sup> racially aware curriculum instead of racially coded curriculum

<sup>5</sup> *colorscence* is a process of coming into positive critical awareness of racial identity that is predicated on learning *raced* history and re-centering the once marginalized counterstories of students of color as part of canonical curriculum (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; hooks, 1994). *Colorscence* is similar to Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993) *race cognizance* in that White participants develop an understanding of race,

I sat with a student discussing possibilities of attending college. He exasperatedly cried, "What's the point? I'm Black." His exasperation reminded me of the litany of racial microaggressions I experienced growing up. For behind such an exasperated comment is a shared understanding that the histories and realities of Black people are robbed by racial colonization and, thus, have been systemically devalued (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sandoval, 2000). And this devaluation of people via their removal from our collective history is what post-colonial scholar, Albert Memmi (1965) contends is "the most serious blow suffered by the colonized" (p. 91). Relationally, this serious blow is what educational scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) argues is manifestation of the "psychocultural assaults" of an urban education that parallels a colonial educational system.

This counterstory impacted my research design because, instead of focusing on Eurocentric curriculum (as initially conceived) and the extent it impacts the racial identities of students of color, I realized that I needed to change the structure of racism by using critical race curriculum as a tool. Consequently, I needed to create one. But before creating such a curriculum, I had to decipher what subject I must focus my curricular changes on.

### **A Process of Healing: Inserting the Historized Self, Two-Way Diaries, & Action-Based Qualitative Design**

Acknowledging this devaluation of the history of people of color in America and Memmi's demand for colonial revolution, I knew that my dissertation research must not focus on documenting the impact of current Eurocentric, or White European male-centered, history curriculum, but rather it had to transform history curriculum to center the marginalized voices of people of color without making any substantiation as to why it should be centered. By over-substantiating the need for and importance of the "Other's" voice, we inherently detract from the power of its mere presence. That is, as a person of color, why must I argue why my own voice, experiences, and counterstories are important? Instead, I assume they are important just as many White, male researchers have blindly laid claim to such an assumption previously.

As a racialized student having gone through K-12 public education with a Eurocentric curriculum, I realized I have an intimate knowledge of how that Eurocentric curriculum negatively impacted my racial identity. This negative impact was documented in the countless

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racism, and Whiteness. However, it falls short of capturing the development of racial identity so clearly described in Cross' (1971) conceptualization of Black racial identity. Because my project is deliberately implemented in a racially diverse classroom (Asian Pacific Americans, Latinos/Chicanos, African Americans/Blacks, and Whites), the term *colourscence* better captures the symbiotic development of racial identities (see Matias 2012).

diary entries I made throughout my life. At times, I hoped for someone to answer some of my personal inquiries. Hence, I included in my design a documentation process (specifically, a two-way communicative journaling between individual students and myself) to capture students' racial identity development in response to the curriculum. Doing so allowed students to work through their renewed raciality while still having guidance to answer their further inquiries.

To illuminate, consider my counterstory of growing up in Los Angeles public schools. Because there was a lack of critical raced curriculum during my K-12 schooling experiences, I developed a depressed racial identity. As such, I was forced to find a positive sense of racial identity outside of formal schooling and inside my relationships with Los Angeles-based Filipino American, Black, and Latino gangs. Embedded in street gangs is a sense of ethnic pride, one that counteracts schooling's development of depressed racial identities. In those gangs, I began to learn Filipino American history, Tagalog, and pride in claiming "Puro Pinay." However, the reason I felt I could develop a positive racial identity in these gangs was because our narrative, Discourse<sup>6</sup>, language, and behaviors was accepted as the norm and not as peripheral multicultural additives.

Years later, during the pilot study of my dissertation in three history courses at an urban public high school, I saw the same phenomenon. In interview after interview, students of color offered stories of their depressed sense of racial identity. One particular high school history student, who self-identifies as a Latina, offered a depressed account of her racial identity in regards to how her teachers perceive her. Through her tears she explained:

I am not too proud of my racial identity. Most teachers see a Hispanic and always assume it's a Mexican, the drops outs, and students who struggle are Hispanics, so when they see me, I'm nothing but a common stereotype. It does affect my life in the sense that I feel embarrassed about my ethnicity. I always think if I do poorly in school, teachers will automatically assume, "Oh great, another one." The only reason I don't feel too bad about my ethnicity is that they sometimes think I'm Asian because I have small eyes, so they look at me and think, "Maybe we can expect something good. Someone

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<sup>6</sup> I strategically capitalize the D in Discourse to recognize that it connotes to more than mere verbal expressions (written or speech). Rather, a capital D recognizes the hegemonic power of language that silences the verbal expressions (written/speech/mannerisms/topics/communication pattern) of marginalized peoples such that their Discourse is wrongfully deemed improper, irrelevant or inadequate. Take for example African American Language (AAL) where multiple negatives are considered improper English. When we finally acknowledge that African slaves were denied formal education on English acquisition and thus were forced to "relexify" English vocabulary on top of a Western Niger-Congo tribal grammar and syntax (hence AAL), then we begin to understand the hegemonic power of language and how it systematically delegitimizes people of color.

who is intelligent.” (2/25/08, Felicia)

Felicia’s claim to not being proud of her Hispanic identity, demonstrates the hidden curriculum (McLaren, 2003) of schooling practices that negatively associate her racial identity to perceived Hispanic and Asian racial stereotypes. Specifically, she attributes her depressed racial identity to the misconceptions of her teachers because they “automatically assume” racial stereotypes of Hispanics are true. To complexify the teachers’ misperceptions, she acknowledges how her racially ambiguous phenotype (“small eyes”) often gets associated with Asian racial stereotypes of intelligence. The tears Felicia displayed during her interview were the same tears I displayed when teachers refused to accept that I, too, am American.

In the pilot study for my dissertation, students read a passage from their history textbook and were asked to articulate how they make meaning of it. During this process, many students of color cried, claiming such passages do not make meaning for them except to solidify the fact that they are invisible to the formation of American history. Again, I saw familiar tears, ones that I once shed because I never found any history about Filipino farm workers, the lynching of Filipinos at Watsonville Riots, anti-miscegenation laws that outlawed the marriage between “Malays” and Whites, or U.S. colonization of the Philippines that led to formidable immigration waves to America. I knew these tears for I had experienced them.

Jaylyn, a self-identified Black female, cried about not knowing much about Black history. She told me that she had to self-enroll into Sojourn to the Past<sup>7</sup> (<http://www.sojournproject.com/>) to learn more about herself and her history. She then expressed that she learned more about Black history there than she had ever learned in her history courses. During her interview, she abruptly stopped and cried about how painful it was to not have known this history:

It just hurts me because why didn’t I know. Then I feel stupid because I feel I should’ve known this stuff. I am Black and I should know my history, but I didn’t. I just wish I could help, but I feel like I don’t have a voice. Sometimes, I don’t know what to say. I really wish I could do something. (Jaylyn, 2/25/08)

Embedded in her tears is the articulation of the complex dynamic of colorblind education (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006; Schofield, 1986). This dynamic produces the Pyrrhic victory encapsulated in Signithia Fordham’s (1988) study of how Black females who academically excel experience a process of racelessness. Sadly and unsurprisingly, I already knew this based on

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<sup>7</sup> a tour group that takes students to actual sites of the Civil Rights Movement

my own counterstories of dealing with this kind of curriculum and the consequences I endured finding my racial identity in gangs. And as a critical pedagogue, this is precisely what I did not want my students to have to do in order to find a positive racial identity.

Through Jaylyn's tears, I realized that simply inserting a new critical raced history curriculum was not socially just enough to produce the kind transformational healing I sought. In fact, as a socially just researcher of color whose ethical principles are bound to the protection of my participants, I decided the mere design of my qualitative project was not enough to address the tears of my students of color. Hence, I also made the research design decision to expand my study to an intervention-based design whereby three phases (pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention) would document the impact of the curriculum to students' racial identities.

### **The Responsible Role of Whites**

However, there was another dilemma I intimately experienced. As a person of color, trying to change a racist system among people of color that already intimately experience daily racism was like preaching to the choir. That is, learning the historical evolution of race, racism, and White supremacy<sup>8</sup> cannot change a state of racism if the curriculum is provided only to students of color. To illustrate, consider my counterstory above. When White individuals ignorantly or actively engage in nativist racism by asking, "Where are you *really* from?" and then deny the validity of my answer, it does nothing to change the existing structure of race if I choose to relay this story to other people of color who "get it". Essentially, doing so is like keeping it "in da house". In the works of Albert Memmi (1965), the state of colonization can only be altered when both the colonized and the colonizer hear its oppressive effects. Multicultural educators, Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2008), further articulate this need to include racially dominant Whites in combatting racism by asserting that multicultural education is antiracist education and, such an education is not only for students of color but also for White students. They state that providing antiracist education to White students becomes a "positive pedagogical tool to help students locate themselves and their responsibilities concerning racism" (p. 47). Therefore, the only hope for racial equity is engaging the racially privileged. Yet, how can we engage the racially privileged in order to transform our understanding of race, racism, and White supremacy so that we, as a humanity, get one step closer to racial harmony? Further, what pedagogical processes must be in place for Whites to truly hear and learn from the counterstories of people of color?

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<sup>8</sup> target objectives of my critical race history curriculum

By drawing from my resistant capital, I also realized that when engaging in antiracist work, people of color endure pain in attempting to transform Whites' epistemology of ignorance (Matias, 2012). Thus, I knew my project must 1) situate itself "in a transformative praxis that leads to the alleviation of suffering and the overcoming of oppression" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 154) while 2) fairly redistributing some of the racial burden onto Whites. By those suffering, I vulnerably include myself. For too long I suffered from racial battle fatigue, racial microaggressions, and racial stereotypes. However, it was not until I began to learn about critical race theory and critical whiteness studies that I felt a sense of liberatory healing (see hooks, 1994). Therefore, I needed a qualitative study that was going to symbiotically transform and heal the suffering people of color endured.

One such suffering students of color endure is their depressed racial identity. Thus, I opted to transform the depressed racial identities of students of color by producing a critical race history curriculum that deliberately silences White Diss-course<sup>9</sup> in order to centralize my students of color's counterstories. I use the term Diss-course because the employment of White Diss-course is tantamount to "dissing" or insulting people of color behind a façade of innocence or normalized speech (Rodriguez, 2009).

Whites needed to be present in this experiential process in order for the curriculum to transform the structure of race within a classroom, my microcosm of society. Hence, based upon my counterstories, the design decision was that this study had to include a White student body. I was hoping to develop a positive sense of racial identity among students of color, but, in order to change a hegemonic structure of race, I also had to document how to operationally silence White Diss-course. I did this by using the critical race curriculum as a racially microaggressive tool against Whiteness<sup>10</sup> in hopes of developing an antiracist White racial identity, one whose normative discourse was decentered and replaced with a "colored" Discourse. Nieto and Bode (2008) argue that this is the necessary function of mutual accommodation whereby both groups learn to accommodate their epistemologies, Discourse, and behaviors instead of forcing marginalized groups to accommodate to the dominant culture.

For example, whenever a White student (or a student of color who has internalized whiteness for survival) reduced a student of color's counterstories to mere individual experiences, I redirected the proprietary burden of proof on that enactment of Whiteness. I did

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<sup>9</sup> Inspired by conversations with Dr. Ricky Lee Allen

<sup>10</sup> Using a critical race curriculum as a racially microaggressive tool against Whiteness does not mean against Whites. Rather, it means to use the same racial operation that disrupts the lives of people of color to disrupt the normativity of Whiteness, a necessary step for Whites to understand how they dominant the center of all Discourse.

this by questioning why they feel their opinion should be considered true. Then I questioned, “Why do you assert that just because you have not experienced racism that it is not real?” Further, “Why doesn’t it happen to you?” Although this created great cognitive and emotional dissonance for my students, especially my White students, it was essential for my White students to feel the burden of race in order to be true antiracist White allies.

### **Racial Segregation: A Truer Picture of Race in Semi-Structured Group Interviews**

Now that I utilized my counterstories to justify the need to develop a critical race history curriculum, solidified my participants as both students of color and Whites, and presented a more intervention-based research approach, I needed to make a design decision on how to conduct the qualitative interviews. When making this decision, I recalled a counterstory of when I was in graduate school. Similar to how Black kids sit together in the cafeteria (Tatum, 1997), it was no wonder why the five graduate students of color out of a total of thirty graduate students opted to partake in a class project that critically analyzed the racist tenure process of a professor of color. Although the dialogue of my group was rich with common racial understanding and experiences that mirrored the experiences of that professor of color, it was clear that such a common understanding was lacking when our course professor asserted that race played no role in the tenure process. As a person of color, I quickly learned that White Diss-course must be mastered inside the classrooms in order to gain access to the language of the empowered and privileged. Yet, that discourse differed from the “Colored” Discourse that remained outside the classroom – a discourse that was “on the reals” with other people of color.

So, as a person of color, I learned that multiple Discourses exist. For example, there was one I used with White colleagues who erroneously and blindly subscribe to Charles Mills’ (2007) epistemology of racial ignorance. There is another Discourse I use with racially aware people (inclusive of White allies who critically check their Whiteness on a daily basis). Complexifying this process further is the fact that when White people are present, a process of surveillance (Foucault, 1995) curtails race discourse for fear of being mislabeled as *that* person of color who “pulls out the race card” or is merely an “angry brown person.” The process of flitting back and forth from different Discourses is what culturally responsive researchers call codeswitching from Mainstream Academic English to Home Language (i.e., African American Language/Black English Vernaculars, Chicano English, Hawaiian Pidgin, etc.). And because specific social connotations are attached to specific home languages, people of color are forced to codeswitch to survive in dominant society. In fact, topics, nonverbal communication, and

discourse patterns change when people of color codeswitch from home language to dominant language.

As such, instead of conducting one round of individual interviews, the new design included two rounds – a pre-intervention and post-intervention – to document the impact of the critical race curriculum. Also, instead of individual semi-structured interviews, I opted for racially segregated group interviews (African American/Black, Latino/Chicano, Asian Pacific American, and White/Caucasian). By separating the races, it unveiled a Discourse complete with topics, nonverbal communications, and discourse patterns embedded in the ethnic and cultural nuances of my participants of color.

As expected, during my initial interviews in the redesigned project, my students in the Asian Pacific American, Latino/Chicano, and African American/Black racial groups commonly expressed depressed racial identities. However, because I took into account how Discourse changes when amidst other people of color, the students expressed some intricate forms of racial depression specific to each racial group. Consider, for example, how my Asian Pacific American (APA) participants began a conversation around being racially stereotyped by other racial groups. Here, Candace and Janice, self-identified APA females, specifically Korean Americans, shared their experiences with racial slurs:

Candace: I got a lot of racial slurs.

Interviewer: What kind of slurs?

Candace: People would randomly say “You don’t belong here. You belong in Korea. Go make rice or something.” People would say, “Oh, you’re smart because you’re Asian. You guys are supposed to be smart in math.”

All others: Yeah [many nodding their head in agreement].

Candace: For example the whole chinky eye thing. They’ll say stuff like, “Open your eyes!”

This led to a conversation on how they felt APAs are “easy targets” for racial discrimination because it is assumed that APAs will do nothing to defend themselves.

Candace: They [in reference to other races] think Asians are easy targets because we won’t do anything.

Interviewer: Do you think they think making fun of eyes and assuming your smart might be racist?

Candace: No.

Janice: I think they’re aware that it is racist it just doesn’t stop them from saying it. It’s not

like we're going to do anything about it.

The design decision to racially segregate the interviews and move from individual to group interviews allowed for greater context. First, when discussing Asian racial stereotypes, participants bounced ideas off each other and used nonverbal communication to show alignment with assertions, such as nodding their heads, chiming “yeah,” and nudging other peers with eye contact as if reminiscing on a similar experience. Second, the timidity felt in the room suggested that such a topic would not have been brought up if the group interview was conducted in a racially diverse manner.

In fact, such is the case when two other racial groups contradicted the claims of my APA participants by stating that APAs do not experience race and/or its corollary, that of racism. This is demonstrated in how Elisa, a self-identified Latina student, ranked the races by placing Asians at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, not because she believes that Asians “have it worse” in the racial oppression Olympics (Martinez, 2003). Rather, she described how Asians are just nonexistent and, thus, the dynamics of race and racism that Latinos, African Americans, and Whites experience are just not found in the Asian American community.

Elisa: Well I think we [Latinos] are above Asians.

Interviewer: On top of Asians?

Elisa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why would you say that?

Elisa: Because I have some White friends that live in Palisades [wealthy community in Los Angeles] and when I see Asian people they are always like grouped together and smart. You never see them around at school. I don't even know where the Asians hang out. If I look this way I see Whites. If I look that way I see African Americans. When I look this way I see Hispanics. Like the Asians are so small. When you hear about racial things you hear about Whites, Hispanics, Latinos, Blacks, and for some reason right now Middle Easterners, but not Asians, whatsoever.

Interviewer: So you feel like Asians are at the bottom because they are not even in the picture?

Elisa: Yeah. Exactly. Nobody ever talks about them. In this history book there's not much about Asians . . . Asians are not even there for me.

Such an utterance suggests that if the group interviews were racially diverse the voices of

certain groups may have been silenced<sup>11</sup>.

However, more interesting to note is that despite her argument that “when you hear about racial things you hear about Whites, Hispanics, Latinos, Blacks, and for some reason right now Middle Easterners, but not Asians, whatsoever,” her claim ultimately racialized Asian Americans by racially positioning them as having no experience with race by virtue of them being racially Asian.

Based off of my counterstory of learning to master various Discourses to access different socially constructed realms, I knew racially segregating the groups would reveal more nuanced racial dialogues.

### **A Focus on Language**

In discussing Discourses, it is imperative that I acknowledge that my ability to articulate and critically analyze my racial experiences was predicated on the acquisition of critical race lingua franca. Just as understanding one’s sociopolitical history of Blackness cannot be divorced from Nigrescence (Cross, 1971), so too was learning more critical language of race tied to the colorscence of my own Filipino Americanness. As such, I began my journey of understanding my racial identity in gangs who demanded that Pinoys (Filipinos) should divorce ourselves from a colonized mentality (Leonardo, forthcoming) by self-engaging in a process of re-learning all that was not taught in K-12 schooling. Continuing my self-education, I enrolled in undergraduate courses on post-colonialism, ethnic studies, Chicana and Black feminist thought, and multicultural communications. I extended my self-study in my Masters’ program when I researched the development of Filipino colonial mentality as it transcended from a colonial educational system. The lingua franca I obtained from my undergraduate and graduate studies in post-colonialism, critical theory, and colored feminism gave me the language and concepts to articulate how my counterstories relate to a larger system of global racial oppression. When I reached my doctoral program, I laid critical race vocabulary onto my pre-existing knowledge. Doing so, helped me to better articulate my counterstories and analyze the racial microaggressions within them. Although each microaggression adds to my racial battle fatigue, I learned that they also provided me with opportunities for racially aware praxis.

With respect to re-learning through the expansion of one’s lingua franca, I deliberately

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<sup>11</sup> As the study unfolded and each lesson from the raced curriculum was presented, students wrote daily journal entries that encapsulated their thoughts after each session. After a session on Asian American racial discrimination and activism, such as the Japanese Americans involvement with the Black Panther Movement (Black militant civil rights advocates), students who identified as Latino/Chicano, African American/Black, and White commented on how they were surprised to hear this.

included extensive critical race vocabulary instruction in my critical race curriculum. Drawing from my years of teaching reading comprehension, I used the same teaching method of metacognitive think alouds and transferred it to model for students how to develop a critical race comprehension, a pedagogical approach that I call critical race metacognition. Knowing that the acquisition of lingua franca and a greater understanding of raced history positively impacted my colorsence, I sought out to replicate my process of acquiring lingua franca in my intervention-based qualitative research.

Methodologically, capturing this growth had to be periodic because as at each phase of my critical language acquisition, I incrementally improved in terms of understanding race, racism, and White supremacy. To capture this incremental development, I made the research decision to implement two-way student journaling, where students wrote their thoughts and inquiries to me after each class session and I responded individually.

The journal was an internal critical race dialogue between each individual student and me to document the process of race cognizance (Frankenberg, 1993) and colorsence. In fact, after a lesson on race, racism, and White supremacy as colonization, Haley, a self-identified White female, wrote about her understanding of the concepts and began to use lingua franca metacognitively modeled by myself during lecture:

*Journal Entry #5, 10/29/08*

The *oppressors* beat the ideas of *inferiority* into the *oppressed* until they actually believe them too which only reinforces the oppressors' feelings of *superiority*. *Oppression* and *colonization* is just a vicious cycle that only gets worse as it continues. We *justify* war with racism by saying we're really just protecting you. You're too uncivilized to do it yourself.

Racism is a key element in and also sustained by *colonization* which is basically the relationship between the *oppressed* and the *oppressor*. Because of the assumption of *superiority*, countries will *colonize* one's they feel are *inferior* to them. This *colonization*, built on racist beliefs, creates an *inferiority* complex for those being *colonized* and *oppressed*. According to Memmi (1965), the only way to overcome *colonization/oppression* is to accept that it is happening or reject it. It is hard to process to be able to be able to see the *power* at your fingertips or the *power* looming over you and be able to fight it, but it is necessary for the defeat of *oppression*.

Today in the media one of the presidential candidates, Obama, was recently accused of being Arab and that was supposedly a bad thing. The Republican media was saying that he could possibly be a terrorist because of that rumor. The association of all Arabs as being terrorists is incredibly racist and the fact that it was being as a deterrent for voting Obama-Biden just shows how close minded they can be.

In this journal entry, Haley demonstrates how she applies newly learnt critical race vocabulary modeled by me in her understanding of President Obama's campaign. Throughout the study, the journal entries became more precise in the participants' articulations of race, racism, and White supremacy, a process I underwent in my own colorsence. In fact, racial identity researcher, Janet Helms (1990) contends that anyone "who intends to lead others into the jungle of racial conflict, will first have to take the journey herself" (p. 219). That is, by accounting for my counterstories as a person of color, I was able to better inform the decisions I made qualitatively.

### **A Need to Pass the Torch**

In the end, I was not satisfied with merely documenting racism, for I have been documenting racism as an eyewitness my entire life. Drawing upon my counterstories allowed me to become a researcher activist in that I used my power as a researcher to create projects for change. One aspect of that change is the responsibility to pass the torch by cultivating new critical race activists to share in the racial burden towards racial equity. In fact, at the end of my project, the sentiment of activism was shared with my participants. After I completed the three phases of the study, I issued an evaluation where many students wrote about their need to become activists:

*Mid-Course Evaluation by Jocelyn, a self-identified Latina/Chicana -*

I am really thankful that I had the opportunity to participate in this program because it really opened my eyes to race and racism and made me want to do something about it and show other people that we can act and stop racism once and for all.

Further, the students contacted me months later requesting a phase four, whereby I was invited to participate (not facilitate) in a student-generated lunchtime race talk. Two years after the study took place, one of my Black male students emailed me to let me know that he is taking up ethnic studies with a focus on Pan-African studies. He wrote:

I hope all is well with you. I was actually thinking about you and your study the other day. I would first like to congratulate you on your success. I would also like to thank you for allowing me to be a part of your study. While participating, I can honestly say I did not see the "grand scheme" of things, but you did at least plant a "seed of consciousness." Now as a first-year student at a predominantly White institution, I see the importance of race and the role it plays. Race still needs to be discussed, and I applaud you on your courage to speak about it. I have recently declared myself an Africana Studies major because I recognize the effect race has on people and society, and would love to learn more about it. If possible, I would love to read your finished thesis, allowing myself to understand as many theories on race as possible.

As a person of color systemically forced to carry the proprietary burden for racial emancipation, nothing else warms my heart than to cultivate new critical race activists interested in the fight for racial equity.

### **Conclusion: An Activist's Beginning**

From this process, I learned that my counterstories as a researcher of color are rich with complex understandings paid forward by the design decisions I made for my dissertation project. Conversely, not accounting for the counterstories that compel researchers of color in conducting socially just qualitative research is tantamount to asking researchers of color to deny, silence, or forcibly ignore our histories that inform why we do what we do. And in terms of complexity, qualitative research becomes more nuanced and less hegemonic when two things happen: 1) more researchers of color whose experiences with race are explicated via their counterstories and 2) White ally researchers make way so that the validity of those perspectives get normalized and centered. That is, the face of qualitative research will be better complexified through learning from the counterstories of researchers of color. It will also challenge normative White researchers to critically interrogate their own racialized dispositions that tend to become normalized as truth.

In order to see social justice come to fruition, a movement must happen to alter the normalized state of racism, less we continue recycling normative racist practices. In a socially just movement dedicated to the equitable redistribution of racial power, we must remember that as researchers of color struggle towards the center of normativity, White researchers must decenter their proprietary ownership of that central location. One way to do this is for White researchers to learn how to feel the same burden researchers of color face in qualitative

research. For example, just as researchers of color are forced to explain the saliency of their positionality and methods, White researchers must explain why they believe their research designs and methods are colorblind and demonstrate how they can unmask hegemonic racism embedded in their experiences as Whites. As socially just critical researchers, we must also be aware that when people of color begin to situate themselves within the research canon, dominant groups who step outside the centrality of that canon must understand that they do so because researchers of color are both intimately and professionally qualified to unveil the racist oppression inside qualitative research. And it is not until Whites feel the burden of explaining normative racism in their research that they can truly support a socially just transformation in qualitative research. Thus begins the beautiful “complexion” of qualitative research.

Despite my vulnerability, exhaustion, and self-criticality, using my counterstories demonstrates how my research is intimately tied to who I am. I am a critical race, single-motherscholar of color imbued with counterstories of racism, classism, and sexism. My journey of learning, teaching, and resisting are the basis for the decisions I make in my research designs. Essentially, the very first decision I make in my research design is bound by years of experience and, therefore, should not be taken lightly. As a researcher of color, my inventory of counterstories is the empirical precursor that informs my designs. In a time of normalization, operationalization, standardization, and simplification, we need to resist and complexify qualitative research by holding true to what it is originally intended for – that of seeking answers to how “social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.4). One answer to our design decisions stems from our counterstories, which better contextualises, complicates, and enriches the meaning of qualitative studies. For in the end, what is more beautiful than deepening our journey as qualitative researchers than beginning with ourselves?

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