"Forget About Justice:" Survivance and Resistance in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This testimonio examines how systemic epistemic violence operates in teacher education. In this paper, systemic epistemic violence refers to the silencing of demands for justice voiced by faculty of color as well as the devaluing of counter-knowledges that draw on different epistemologies. This testimonio highlights the way the "Othering" of faculty from racialized groups produces and protects systemic epistemic violence. "Othering" in this case does not simply refer to individual racial discrimination or oppression rooted in White fragility. Instead, it refers to the intrinsic indignities faculty of color, in this case a Chicano assistant professor, must endure when they resist majoritarian narratives of progress.

Introduction: Systemic Epistemic Violence in Teacher Education

In teacher education, systemic epistemic violence involves two interrelated issues. First, systemic epistemic violence refers to the silencing of demands for justice voiced by faculty of color (Andreotti, 2016). A distinguishing feature of this silencing is the systemic devaluing of counter-knowledges that draw on different epistemologies. The second issue relates to the way the "Othering" of faculty from racialized groups produces and protects systemic epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988; Tuana, 2017). "Othering" in this case does not simply refer to individual racial discrimination or to the oppression caused by White ignorance or White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011; Fricker, 2007).

What I posit is that "Othering" actually functions as a complex process and logic that positions faculty from historically oppressed groups, for example Chicanas, immigrants, women, or Indigenous peoples, as less valuable (Spivak, 1988). For instance, "Othering" operates through assimilationist ideologies, logics, and discourses that obscure oppressive everyday social processes that produce intrinsic indignities related to the devaluing of "Other" knowledge (Congdon, 2017). These intrinsic indignities thwart desires for justice by rendering faculty from racialized and oppressed groups as intellectually inferior, incapable of "knowing," and less than human (Alcoff, 2012; Fricker, 2007; Smith, 1999).

In this paper, I argue that silencing faculty from racialized and oppressed groups involves more than just erasing their narratives or promoting the supposed superiority of Euro-centered modes of thinking (Mignolo, 2012). Instead, systemic epistemic violence in teacher education programs (TEPs), constitutes a form of violence that intentionally harms faculty of color by diminishing and suppressing the counter-knowledges that inform and inspire their demands for justice in education (Dei, 2008). Justice in this case includes multiple dimensions, including a challenge to the majoritarian story that racism is declining, and the nation is moving progressively toward a future where race no longer matters (Mills, 2007).

In contrast to this majoritarian story, the personal and collective counter-knowledges

of oppressed peoples recognize different epistemologies, including decolonial knowledges that question dominant ways of describing, ordering, and labeling knowledge (Santos, 2007). Counter-knowledges also challenge the reproduction of current social arrangements. In short, the counter-knowledges silenced by systemic epistemic violence constitute important personal and collective knowledges that contest majoritarian narratives by drawing attention to the continuing impact of racism and coloniality on people of color (Andreotti, 2016; Grande, 2015; Mignolo, 2012).

Theoretical conceptions, definitions, and traditions of systemic epistemic violence differ, however, for this paper I draw on Andreotti's (2016) conceptualization of systemic epistemic violence as an attempt to silence and harm people from racialized groups when they seek to mobilize their counter-knowledge for different ethical imperatives, such as for understanding, exposing, resisting, and critiquing oppressive practices and ideologies.

Need for Study

Interestingly, despite the ever-growing body of literature on racism, bias, and discrimination in education, including research on micro-aggressions or the intersection of oppressions, much still remains undertheorized about the way systemic epistemic violence operates as a tool of domination in teacher education (Vasquez, 2019). Moreover, the way TEP *faculty* actively participate in reproducing, upholding, and masking systemic epistemic violence remains undertheorized (Medina, 2013; Yosso, 2006).

Purpose: Breaking the Silence

By theoretically reflecting on specific incidents of systemic epistemic violence in my experiences, I problematize assumptions about racism in teacher education, especially in sites positioned as liberal through their own self-serving narratives of progress (Medina, 2013). For a conceptualization of liberal, in this paper I draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to illustrate how "liberal" notions that simplistically equate progress with "commonsense" obscure continuing systems of oppressions that resist incremental change (Delgado, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Understanding how systemic epistemic violence silences faculty of color first requires making visible how majoritarian stories of progress, such as the ones deployed by White faculty, hinder critiques of existing social arrangements and racial hierarchies (Haney-Lopez, 1995).

Why this Project?

I conceived this project while teaching as a tenure-track faculty member at an East Coast public university. At this institution, I recognized and theorized my "Othering" by White faculty as a form of systemic epistemic violence rather than merely as an expression of racial animosity from my colleagues. Systemic epistemic violence positioned me, a Chicano man, as incapable of "knowing" anything worth knowing and functioned as a tool for downgrading my humanity (Congdon, 2017). As far as my positionality, I am a double anomaly, a Chicano man and former bilingual elementary teacher, as well as an assistant professor of teacher education at a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Literature Review: Epistemic Violence

Most studies of the effects and processes of racism in education tend to focus on the actions of K-12 teachers (Gay, 2010). In some ways, this makes sense given that schools remain the sites where people from racialized and oppressed groups first encounter sustained exposure to systemic epistemic violence (Vasquez, 2018). For instance, scholars such as Grande (2015) have theorized ways of understanding how the practice of privileging dominant modes of thought constitutes symbolic violence, rather than merely teacher bias. In a similar manner, Valenzuela (2005) describes a process she refers to as deMexicanization which also involves a form of symbolic violence that silences children of Mexican descent. Renewed struggles for educational justice, however, have led to increased interest in understanding and exposing systemic epistemic violence in a variety of education sites, including in higher education (Huber, 2011). One outcome of this increased interest includes paying greater attention to different ways of theorizing the everyday experiences of people from racialized groups across different spaces (Fine, 2017).

Gap in Knowledge

Related studies remain useful, few studies have investigated the experiences of faculty members from racialized and historically oppressed groups within the context of systemic epistemic violence in teacher education (Han & Leonard, 2017; Truong, Graves, & Keene, 2014). In particular, studies have interrogated and explained the perspectives of faculty of color who challenge assumptions of incremental "racial" progress by drawing on counter-knowledge from their personal experiences (Truong, Graves, & Keene, 2014).

Some research studies do examine the silencing of faculty of color; however, the central themes to emerge from this scholarship include the continued persistence of micro-aggressions against tenure-track faculty of color in higher education (Louis et. al, 2016). For instance, Pittman (2012) found that African American faculty experienced multiple instances of silencing through micro-invalidations and micro-insults during everyday interaction with White faculty. A related group of studies also describes and examines racial micro-aggressions directed toward faculty of color, particularly against women faculty of color (Kohli, 2009; Gutierrez Muhs, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012). Another theme to emerge related to silencing highlights the way that faculty of color, especially Latinas, experience hostile racial climates when they question issues of racial diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999).

The everyday experiences of Chicano faculty, particularly men in teacher education who experience systemic epistemic violence on a personal and professional level, remain invisible from the research literature (Solórzano, 1998). Not surprisingly, even less is known about the struggles for justice by male Chicano faculty in teacher education who seek to use critical race studies to question oppression (Truong et al., 2014). In this study, I change the terms of the conversation around racism by elucidating a distinct type of epistemic violence scholars of color face when they engage in critical race work, especially work that draws on their counter-knowledge and theorizing of racism and oppression. In the context of my *testimonio,* systemic epistemic violence refers to the violence done to faculty of color when their credibility and status as "knowers" comes under attack by White faculty (Andreotti, 2016).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

As an epistemological and methodological approach, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an analytic tool for revealing, understanding, and explaining the way racism, in its various manifestations, including the silencing of counter-knowledge, operates in different education sites and society (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The tenet that racial oppression remains permanently entrenched in U.S. society constitutes a significant CRT core principle (Bell, 1979). Contrary to liberal discourses of progress that seek to normalize colorblind ideologies that deny the persistence of oppression by rendering it "a thing of the past," as one of my colleagues at the research site stated, CRT theorizes racism as normal rather than an aberration (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The liberal conception of colorblindness, an ideology that claims to advocate for social justice, actually works to prevent effective racial justice (Haney-Lopez, 2011).

Critical race scholars draw on the principles of CRT, including a critique of liberalism, to understand and disrupt institutional structures and discourses that maintain and reproduce racialized oppression (Delgado, 2000; Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017). The critique of liberalism in CRT is rooted in the tradition and practice of critical theories that question the limits and contradictions inherent in liberal approaches to justice. For example, liberal approaches reinforce the logic of "going slow" rather than interrupting racism through the use of counter-knowledges (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Methodology

As a methodological approach, *testimonio* draws from a range of epistemological and theoretical perspectives from Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) that typically remain devalued, delegitimized, and marginalized within mainstream research (Huber, 2011). For instance, *testimonios*, draw on counter-knowledge or decolonial knowledge to disrupt "commonsense" by theorizing oppression beyond White/non-White binaries and interrogating hierarchies of knowledge (Huber, 2011; Popkewitz, 2015). As a research method, *testimonios* describe and communicate complex everyday realities absent from mainstream research (Chávez, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). *Testimonios* also provide people from historically oppressed groups, such as Chicanas and Indigenous peoples, a way to theoretically deploy their perspectives and subjectivities in the service of justice and liberation. In this study, I use the narrative approach of *testimonio* to enrich understandings, both theoretically and methodologically, of the everyday, mundane, and normalized way racism imposes dominant epistemologies and impinges on hopes for a different world (Bamberg, 2006).

Procedures

My *testimonio* consists of a narrative of my perceptions, experiences, everyday conversations, and email exchanges with colleagues (Bamberg, 2006). By analyzing the themes that emerged, I disrupt previous conjectures about faculty identity and elaborate on the way that liberal ideologies and discourses position White hegemonic power as "an event from the past" rather than as a continuing structure (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002;

Wolfe, 2006). Drawing on the LatCrit tradition, I theorize vignettes and highlight themes from my everyday experiences of resisting systemic epistemic violence (Trahar, 2009; Yosso, 2006).

Limits of Conventional Research

There is a long history of people from historically racially oppressed groups having their stories distorted and denied by mainstream researchers (Crenshaw, 1989; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Smith, 1999). For example, by reducing racism and oppression to a lack of numerical diversity, quantitative studies perpetuate simplistic assumptions about a complex multi-dimensional phenomena (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using a *testimonio* approach provides a way of attending to this methodological injustice (Smith, 1999). The point of *testimonios* is to illustrate neglected ideas, including the pervasiveness of epistemic violence (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

My *Testimonio:* Welcome to New England

After completing my doctoral degree, I was hired by Pioneer State University (PSU, a pseudonym) to teach undergraduate courses in multicultural education. My areas of interest include racism and the continuing legacy of coloniality on Latinx people, so I was optimistic about this teaching opportunity. I hoped that my years of teaching elementary school in the Chicano and Latinx community of Pico-Union in Los Angeles would serve as a valuable resource for theoretically addressing anti-Latinx racism (Rodriguez, 2009). I was concerned, however, that teaching at a predominantly White institution (PWI) might pose challenges and risks. In part, my concern derived from my desire to draw on counter-knowledges about racism in schools from my previous teaching experience in urban Los Angeles. When I taught elementary school, Latinx children were especially vulnerable to ideologies in schools that positioned them as culturally deficient and inferior. Interestingly, as an elementary teacher, I worked with a variety of educators with different ideological commitments and cultural backgrounds who recognized that racism was not a "thing of the past." One of the goals for my college courses was to remember and to represent the many counter-knowledges and lived experiences of my former students and their families, including the persistence of racism.

Working in a field comprised mostly of White women, both as TEP students and faculty, I was eager for the opportunity to help "diversify" the department. As a first-generation college graduate having grown up in poverty, I expected that students would have questions for me on the first day, and I was correct. For instance, they wanted to know more about my successful "urban" experiences. My positioning as a successful urban teacher, as defined by the undergraduate students themselves, served as an asset by making me and my knowledge acceptable or "legit" to the students in this program.

My training is in CRT, so I anticipated some potential issues, but was hopeful that my knowledge of racism could help students rethink some misconceptions. Nevertheless, I was not surprised when at the start of my first semester most students proudly claimed to embrace "colorblindness." In short, they claimed not to notice my visible Browness, or by extension the counter-knowledge that comes with my lived experience. Eventually, after a few classes, they admitted noticing my "multicultural" identity in addition to my "legit"

academic identity.

Resistance to the knowledge and perspectives of people from historically oppressed groups is well documented, overall I was pleased with the intellectual and emotional progress students made in my courses (Kohli, 2009). Discussing racism from a critical race perspective can potentially make some students uncomfortable, but it can also lead to greater student learning about racism (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). In my courses, learning included new ways of thinking about knowledge systems and their relation to racism. For most students, this class was the first time they had engaged with difficult and unfamiliar concepts, including the notion that different knowledges are possible.

Despite the difficulty of the subject matter, students were grateful for the experience to see new perspectives. In fact, they nominated me for the highest teaching award offered by the university, which I won in my second year at PSU. Interestingly, what I did not anticipate was that other TEP faculty who self-identify as liberal would provide the fiercest resistance to discussions of dismantling racism.

Talk about race, but "don't rock the boat"

During my second semester, a series of events labeled as "racial incidents" occurred around campus. These incidents consisted of threatening notes placed on the doors of Latinx students. I was hired as the "multicultural" person, I was asked by some faculty members to lead a teacher education faculty discussion about student dispositions and racism (Zeichner, 2009). Although it was my second semester on the faculty, I agreed to plan and lead the discussions, which included small group activities. During the first of these planned meetings, I introduced a critical race framework for understanding racism as a permanent aspect of U.S. schools rather than an aberration (Bell, 1979). This framework included counter-knowledge from both my personal experiences and memories from my K-12 teaching experiences in Los Angeles. Topics included racial hierarchies that position White people as superior (Omi & Winant, 2014)

The response from my colleagues was overwhelmingly negative. In a small group, one faculty member stated, "There's an MLK way of doing things and a Malcolm X way." This faculty member glared at me while articulating his view of critical race studies as being "too much." This type of resistance to my counter-knowledge as well as my academic training in CRT occurred multiple times during the meeting. More than one faculty member dismissed my presentation by saying I was "too invested in radical theories." This discourse called my knowledge into question and belittled my experiences. The faculty members who repeated the refrain "don't rock the boat" always prefaced their comments by highlighting their liberal views, which included a fear of American "divisiveness." An example of this discourse included "we all have to be in this together." A common mantra repeated by many faculty members at subsequent meetings involved iterations of "we all came on different ships, but now we're in the same boat." The theme of sameness and inclusion became a way of emphasizing and highlighting the need for everyone to assimilate, including me, and to "not stick out" in ways that called attention to anti-Latinx racism in our department. This was a way of silencing and displacing my counter-knowledge as well as of devaluing me as a knower of a "different" truth, both clear examples of a systemic epistemic violence.

Some of the related themes to emerge from that and subsequent meetings included the

belief in the inevitability of progress and incremental racial change in U.S. society and schools. For instance, this idea was articulated by statements such as "All this does not matter because in fifty years we're *all* going to be Brown anyway." When I asked this person to explain or elaborate on his comment he ignored my request. Verbal resistance became a regular occurrence along with sighs, eye-rolling, raised eyebrows, and shrugs. All of these responses constitute forms of epistemic violence that were intended to silence me by denigrating my personal counter-knowledge of racism and my lived experiences. It was clear to me, in part because of the contempt for my type of "rationality," that this epistemic violence was also intended to lower my status in the department (Tuana, 2017).

According to one faculty member, the academic terms I was using, such as "anti-racism" and "Whiteness," produce "hard feelings" for White people. To this comment another faculty member added that White women are "also victims of racism." This last point ended up generating much agreement and head nodding among all faculty, including some faculty of color, yet no one explained exactly how White women are also victims of racism. Instead, the conversation shifted to students with disabilities: "It's not about race since special need kids are also victims."

Overall, my presentation was attacked as "too focused on race" and I was subjected to more rebukes. Over the next weeks, in hallways and in emails, I was asked, always "informally," why I was so concerned about racism and so invested in "radical theories" that made "our progress" look bad. As evidence of progress, two faculty cited the election of a Black man as president of the nation. According to one faculty, this served as proof that "things have changed." Finally, another faculty member, a White woman who had taught for over thirty years, told me, "You don't know what you're talking about. Real racism is mostly a thing of the past." Despite using my repertoire of skills and knowledge, faculty members refused to consider or discuss the possibility that they were involved in perpetuating forms of racism and oppression. All this happened after a series of racial incidents occurred on campus in which racial slurs were written in highly visible places.

Discussion

This *testimonio* provides a richer description and nuanced way of understanding everyday struggles over critical race work and epistemic justice. This paper shows how discussing racism from a critical race perspective is never easy, especially for faculty of color who draw on counter-knowledges. The claim that racism is "mostly a thing of the past" provides an example of the diminishment of my counter-knowledge. The insidious nature of epistemic violence is the way it operates as a benign discourse in some cases. For example, I was warned in private by faculty members about the "risky nature" of pursuing what they categorized as an "over the top" or "off the rails" critique of racism. In other words, as I was told by a different faculty member, "stop rocking the boat," at least until you get tenure. Another faculty member also suggested I "focus on micro-aggressions or implicit bias or something that's safe, not experiences." Clearly, what I was expected to do was to publicly support and uphold the dominant liberal narrative of the logic of incremental racial progress. This narrative of progress, of course, rests on the eventual elimination and displacement of the "Other" through assimilation and inclusion. By obscuring the long histories of struggle over racism and justice, liberal faculty actually reproduce and institutionalize racial hierarchies (Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017).

More disturbing, liberal discourses of progress deployed by faculty members undermined my work of preparing future teachers to work with all children in schools. By symbolically erasing my counter-knowledge and silencing my questions and challenges to racist policies and practices, including those that minimized racist acts against Latinx students, these stances served to tacitly maintain and reproduce existing asymmetries of power (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

In this work, I use a vignette of my experiences to highlight how normalized discourses marginalize the perspectives and knowledge of people from historically racially oppressed groups, including Chicanos (Clandinin, 2006; Yosso, 2005). By privileging stories of incremental progress, TEP faculty in this program positioned critical race concepts, including the permanence of racism, as divisive and harmful to "diversity." By marginalizing the critical race framework, I shared, the task of exposing and critiquing multiple forms of oppression within our department was left undone as was any effort to understand the racist acts on campus theoretically rather than as "one-off" incidents. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

As a Chicano man, and the only faculty member positioned as an "Other" in the department because of my Brownness, my reflections elucidate several under-theorized concepts and contradictions (Trahar, 2009; Villenas & Foley, 2002). Moreover, my *testimonio* complicates commonsense assumptions about the source of White resistance to justice in education as well as the role of liberal hegemony (Milner & Howard, 2013). Specifically, in this *testimonio* I describe how TEP faculty, rather than undergraduate students, actively resisted my attempts to introduce critical race paradigms that draw on my counter-knowledges into the department (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Moreover, in this paper I show that the fiercest resistance to critical race frameworks came from White faculty members who self-identify as politically and socially liberal (Crenshaw, 1989).

Significance

As a research method, *testimonio* enabled me to describe, analyze, and interpret my experiences in the department in ways not possible with quantitative methods (Chang, 2008; Yosso, 2005). For instance, measuring the effect of non-verbal gestures remains difficult with mainstream methods. I purposely chose *testimonio* in order to question the majoritarian story of racial progress. An underlying assumption of this study is that understanding subjective experiences requires examining actual everyday events as they happen, rather than through climate surveys or other instruments. Ultimately, critical research aims to challenge and interrupt prevailing social structures, which this paper also seeks to do (Truman, Mertens & Humphries, 2000).

Future Directions

This *testimonio* contributes to the growing body of critical race and epistemic justice research. By providing a space for a Chicano scholar to narrate previously under-examined experiences, this paper raises important questions about justice in teacher education as well as about the paradox of liberal discourses of inclusion that actually harm people of color. By describing the resistance, I encountered to my use of critical race perspectives, my *testimonio* elucidates the undertheorized phenomena of overt faculty resistance in teacher

education (Picower, 2009). Yet, despite what I describe in this paper, much remains unknown about the way liberal faculty reproduce these types of narratives, for instance, "it's class not race," within their own courses. The way epistemic violence remains undertheorized in TEPs also requires more attention.

Advancing an understanding of TEPs from the rarely heard perspective of faculty from historically racially oppressed groups provides an opportunity to develop new theories by problematizing previous conceptualizations of racism. My *testimonio* provides a theoretical lens for understanding how narratives of racial progress deployed by faculty constitute forms of epistemic violence. Specifically, by silencing critical perspectives that challenge the existing racial hierarchy, faculty were engaging in epistemic violence. The critique of established racial hierarchies and asymmetries of power is a key tenet of CRT, as well as an important element of the struggle for justice in education. The conclusions from this study suggest that more work is needed to understand the complex ways epistemic violence operates and how it remains obscured by the paucity of research on faculty. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how everyday struggles over critical race work affect the epistemic well-being of faculty of color.

Author Note

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