Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

Checkpoints: TSA as a Microcosm of Our "Post-racial" Society and the Need for Social Justice Education

Rajni Shankar-Brown

Stetson University

Abstract

This reflective scholarly essay explores privilege and institutional oppression as complex and multifaceted systems that merit the immediate attention of educators. Employing the Critical Race Theory (CRT) method of counterstorytelling, personal narrative in the form of autobiographical reflection describes the social-emotional impact and immobilization from encountering recurrent injustice, discrimination, and racism in the United States. Airports are viewed as a microcosm of structural *isms* in society, including but not limited to racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and religionism. Collective social action and transformative education, focused on increasing understanding and dismantling power and privilege, are encouraged. With significant social disparities and inequities, the author asserts that there is a deep need for critical, humanistic, and social justice education.

Keyword: Social justice; Equity; Critical race theory; Classism; Sexism; Ableism; Religionism; Institutional oppression; Systemic change; Privilege

Rajni Shankar-Brown, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor, the Director of Education Graduate Programs, the Jessie Ball duPont Chair of Social Justice Education, and the Founder and Director of the Poverty and Homelessness Conference at Stetson University. She is also the President of Stetson's American Association of University Professors, member of the Hollis Institute for Educational Reform, Co-Chair for the International Society of Information Technology &Teacher Education's Equity and Social Justice Group, and serves on the Board of Directors for the National Coalition for the Homeless. She is an internationally recognized scholar in the areas of poverty and homelessness, diversity and inclusion, and social justice education. She is deeply committed to addressing social inequities through transformative education and civic engagement. In addition to being a passionate teacher-scholar, she is a dedicated mother, multi-media artist, and social activist.

This reflective scholarly essay uses autobiographical counterstorytelling to explore privilege and institutional oppression in the United States. Interlocking and multifaceted systems of oppression are complex, and merit the immediate attention of educators. This work is grounded in and guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and utilizes the method of counterstorytelling (Delgado,1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT seeks to expose experiences of people of color, eliminate oppression, and advance social justice (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, 1991; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Common goals of CRT as described by Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995) include "understand[ing] how a regime of White supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained … [and] a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power, but to change it" (p. xiii). I share personal experiences as a form of counterstorytelling to expose and challenge pervasive discrimination. I use personal reflection as a site of resistance to master narratives. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain, counternarrative "urges Black and Brown writers to recount their experiences with racism … and to apply their own unique perspectives to assess law's master narratives" (pp. 7–9). In using counterstory as a vehicle to expose and analyze privilege, I embark on a self-reflexive journey and work to contribute to antioppression scholarship, ultimately calling for collective social action and transformative education that embraces inclusiveness, equity, and justice.

As a social justice teacher-scholar, I have the privilege of regularly traveling around the nation and overseas to present at conferences, summits, research conventions, and community engagement and service-learning endeavors. I love to travel. I love making new friends, exploring new landscapes, and having new experiences. And I love the reflective processes that accompany the very nature of traveling — time for inner reflection and growth.

Along with these many privileges, traveling also reminds me of my lack of privilege or the social marginalization of my identities. At a very basic level, I am a Brown woman living in the United States. On a more complicated level, I am Tamilian, Hindu-Buddhist. English is not my first language, but my predominant language. I am middle class; on the lower end of the spectrum, truth be told. I am a mother, wife, daughter, and sister. My parents are both from South India. When I don't have my bindi on, I am mistaken for Latina, Arabic, Brazilian, Hawaiian, Italian, Thai, Native American, and biracial. Sometimes, even with my bindi, I am questioned and mistaken for other ethnicities. I recently had a colleague nonchalantly share that upon first meeting me she thought that I was a [putting her hand over her mouth and making a stereotypical imitation of a Native American war cry] "Indian," and then went on to say [putting her pointer finger to her forehead] that she later realized I am an "India-Indian or curry type" instead. Sadly, this colleague's remarks were not the first time.

For as long as I can remember I have been asked the question, "Where are you from?" and more often than not, the follow-up question of "No, where are you *really* from?" *Born in Washington, D.C., and primarily raised in Northern Virginia* always seems to disappoint, confuse, and/or concern inquiring strangers and acquaintances. I have had some even argue with me and plain out refuse to accept my answer, which apparently conflicts with the

"exotic" supposition already planted in their mind. Regardless of the details, I am Brown and a woman — and this seems to supersede all else. Over the course of my life, I have learned that my color and my gender speak before I do — even when I do my best to interrupt this vexing sequence.

After Barack Obama took office, many of my White colleagues and students shared (and continue to share) their joy at living in a "post-racial" nation. My social justice work, paired with my daily lived experiences, clearly affirms the very opposite of such a no/nation. In North Carolina and now in Florida, our family has received Ku Klux Klan (KKK) flyers and other unwarranted hate mail for being a biracial family, for not being Christian, for being seen as "foreign," for … the list continues. When I have shared these experiences with local authorities, I have personally been told to "calm down" and to remember that freedom of speech is protected under the First Amendment. When my child finds a disturbing KKK flyer in our mailbox, this goes beyond freedom of speech and becomes hate speech. *Where is our protection?* Although I find myself carrying such distressing realities in my bones like crushingly heavy weights, these realities also fuel my heart — guiding my life's work, propelling the work that I do, and directing the paths that I travel. Travel. Let's return there for a moment.

I had an incredibly busy travel schedule this past year. I flew Delta, JetBlue, American, U.S. Airways, and Southwest, to name a few. And I met many Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agents at numerous checkpoints. In the spring, over the course of two months, I traveled from Orlando to Phoenix, Phoenix to Los Angeles, Los Angeles to Orlando, Daytona Beach to Savannah, Savannah to Atlanta, Orlando to Washington, D.C., and from D.C. back to Orlando. This intense bout of flying magnified the macro- and microaggressions that many people outside of the dominant group face at airports, clearly a microcosm of our larger society. Like many of my brothers and sisters, I am regularly presented with jaundiced narratives like "airports do not employ racial profiling today" or "Dr. King's dream has been fulfilled and we live in a post-racial society."

On almost every flight I have taken over the past year, I have been pulled aside, groped, questioned, humiliated, the whole works — even with my extra precautionary actions: pulling out all of my electronics, putting TSA size-approved liquids in a clear bag or, more often than not, checking in my liquids just to avoid any hassle. During my condensed stretch of flying this past spring, in airports across the nation, I was repeatedly greeted with discrimination, bias, and hurtful displays of unwarranted callousness. Here is a description of one of these ceaseless experiences.

I was running late for my flight to L.A. from Phoenix due to an unexpected delay with the shuttle service that I had reserved. Needless to say, at the airport security checkpoint I was pulled out of an extremely long line of White folks. The agent, a middle-aged White woman, asked me to roll my carry-on suitcase over to a different table, and she began to unzip it, along with my book bag. She was moving extremely slowly. The clock was ticking. Nervous about missing my flight, I gently informed her that I was running late and my flight was scheduled to depart shortly. She laughed and proceeded to ruffle through my stuff even more slowly. I patiently waited, telling myself that maybe she did not hear me and surely she would be finished soon. After a

few more minutes passed and once she finished conversing with another agent about the best way to cook macaroni casserole, I again spoke up. "Excuse me, ma'am. I just want you to know that my flight will be departing soon. I am running late and I" —she immediately cut me off. "Not my problem," she responded. I froze as she gave me a cold stare. Then she moved her face closer to mine, close enough for her saliva to sprinkle on my face as she spoke. In a belittling and ruthless tone she said, "Maybe if you Brown people didn't blow things up, we wouldn't have to do these extra checks now, would we, honey. Ever think about that?"

Truthfully, I have been callously compared to terrorists many times before. In fact, on a past September day, I took my children to a frozen yogurt place in our hometown after school. Many of my students had recommended this establishment, and I was excited to try it out with my children. As my kids and I discussed the fun flavor choices, an older White woman standing in line in front of us grabbed her husband's arm and let out a loud sigh. "They should not let terrorists in our town," she told him, while looking directly at me with an icy stare. I remember that it took me a few moments to process this … I mean, surely the statement was not directed at me … after all, I am not a terrorist. While analyzing the statement in my mind and before I could respond, my son swiftly pulled his sister and me outside. Tears were streaming down his face. "Why would she say such a mean thing, amma (mom)?" he asked. "Why?" The memory still haunts my now 12-year-old son. He was 10 at the time; my daughter was fortunately younger (just 3 years of age) and too little to know the gravity and the hatefulness of this woman's words. Sadly, frozen yogurt has never tasted quite the same—especially for my son.

Despite previous terrorist references, the comment made by the TSA agent exceedingly troubled me. Perhaps because she was a public servant and I am part of the public (or supposedly so)? Perhaps because I reached my tipping point from being treated unkindly and like an underclass human being, particularly at airports? Perhaps because I am fatigued from feeling like a perpetual foreigner in my own homeland? (Ironically, I was born in our nation's capital but apparently I am still not "American" enough.) Perhaps because ... well, whatever the reasons, it bothered me deeply. Her words stabbed me, as did her cruel tone and gaze. So much so, I wrapped my arms around myself in a protective hug, praying that the deep puncture wounds would heal and all the while fearful that they would add to the permanent scars on my soul. And her comment did not end there. The agent then repeated the comment to another agent (White, middle-aged man) who laughed and said, "Yup. So true." I had packed my clothes neatly, folding my dresses and suits in preparation for a national conference, where I would be meeting some of my amazing undergraduate and graduate students to present on community and civic engagement. The agent purposefully shuffled through my clothes, carelessly tossing them around. She made sure to make a complete mess. In addition to taking her sweet ol' time "screening" my items, she told me that she needed to attend to something else and temporarily walked away. That something else was her walking a few feet away to say hello to a co-worker (young, White woman). As I watched them laughing, I thought about zipping up my suitcase and just moving forward. I needed to catch this flight, after all. But I knew I

could do no such thing, as that would only detain me longer.

I asked the other agent (her middle-aged male counterpart) if I could speak with a supervisor. "Now, now," he said in a patronizing tone with a malicious grin and wink. "No need to get your panties in a big wad. She'll be done in a minute." There was a cascade of emotions flowing through me. To add to the blatantly racist remarks, now I had to deal with flagrant sexism, too. When the agent returned, she turned her head to look at the television in the distance. The Boston marathon bombing trial was on. There was a picture of 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the screen with captions moving underneath. "Hey, did you know the brothers who killed and hurt all them Americans in the marathon?" she casually asked. Stunned, I stood there in silence. I thought, *did she seriously just ask me this*? I thought, *is this a twisted hallucination*? As I stood there in disbelief, she forcefully tapped my left shoulder. "Hey, you understand English?" she said while smirking and talking in slow motion. A massive wave of emotions hit me like a tsunami. I started to tremble.

I wanted to start dancing and screaming the lyrics to my hip-hop artist and activist friend, Olmeca's, recent song entitled "Browning of America." I wanted to turn around at the other passengers and say, "Are you seeing this? Someone? Anyone? Will you please speak up?" I wanted to disappear. I wanted to fall to the floor in fetal position and start crying. Above all, I wanted to be done with this humiliating process and board the plane so I could be united with my students— who always fill me with immense hope, even during awfully bleak moments such as this one. But instead I stood in silence, trembling and fighting back tears.

Once she finished with my suitcase, she decided to ruffle through my book bag. She smiled the whole time. I stood there trying to hold back tears, not wanting to give her any more pleasure. I stood there feeling completely powerless. After what felt like a decade of torture, I was finally "free" to leave. Fortunately, my plane was slightly delayed and I (barely) made my flight to Los Angeles.

I quietly cried most of the flight. I struggled to breathe and literally felt like I was drowning in emotions — to the extent that I briefly thought of pulling out my seat cushion as a flotation device. And in utter frustration and in an effort to both feel connected with loved ones who were far away and to raise social awareness, I put up a Facebook post about the incident. Within minutes, I had numerous supportive, comforting comments flooding in from family and friends. From "I'm so sorry" to "That is unacceptable!" to "Totally ridiculous" to "This makes me really mad." I also received a few "I know what you mean" and "Happens to me every time" comments. Interestingly enough, my Black and Brown loved ones consistently made the, "Yup, I get it" comments, once again confirming the biased nature of security checks at airports and the intersectional systems of oppression that exist in our nation. When sharing aloud this experience with others, I have received the same response. To be more precise, White people often apologize, get angry, feel sad, empathize (or at least try to empathize), convey indifference, share puzzlement, or respond with denial. While Black and Brown people often do more than commiserate; they respond with similarly disturbing stories. Extra scrutiny, pat downs, and verbal abuse. Unwarranted injuries to the psyche and heart. Unfortunate confirmations that racism is still alive and rampant in the United States.

In addition to commiserating, I have had White folks become uncomfortable when I share my experiences, basically telling me to "shake it off." In fact, when I tried to talk to a friendly TSA agent (young White man) about the racist experiences I had endured and inquired about TSA diversity training, he told me exactly that. "There will always be racist people out there," he responded. Then, in a gentle tone, he went on to say, "Plus, you should be glad because the security checkpoints are there to keep everyone safe. My advice to you is to just shake it off." He was well intentioned, but his words illuminated a large part of the problem — White privilege and apathy. When I recall painful incidents such as the one I shared above, I am sure that I convey a swirl of unpleasant emotions, including sadness, resentment, anger, and anxiety. Believe me, I (along with millions of Black and Brown people living in the United States) "shake off" macro- and microaggressions every single day. We have to "shake it off" in order to survive and so we can still smile, laugh, and not give up hope. But when it comes to airports, I can no longer "shake it off." I am exhausted from shaking. It is time for the TSA to include intensive diversity training for all employees. If diversity and inclusion training is in fact a part of TSA's current policies, it clearly needs to be reexamined, because it is not working. Just look at recent social media postings, including prevalent stories of racial profiling in airports, a Muslim woman being humiliated while flying United Airlines, or a woman with a physical disability asked to crawl onto an American Airlines plane.

My husband is White. We have been together for over 20 years. He is a social justice comrade and the first to admit that he is not beleaguered like I am on a daily basis. As a White male, his experiences at airports have been vastly different than mine. And although we both attended public schools, our schooling experiences were vastly different in regard to access, opportunities, and feeling included through curriculum and instructional practices. Since being with me, he has witnessed and also experienced repeated discrimination, often for living in the Deep South and for having an interracial family. And our children are mixed or biracial and of a nondominant religious group. Sadly, they too have experienced bullying and exclusion inside and outside of school; and when incidents have occurred in school, they have often been met with refutation or apathy from educators. These oppressive actions and constructions are deplorable, especially considering that it is now 2016. In addition to mandating intensive diversity training for TSA employees, we must actively address diversity and inclusion throughout teacher education programs and K-12 professional development. Understanding systems of power, privilege, and oppression warrants the immediate attention of educators and calls for collective social action and transformative education.

I know that discrimination exists in our world and society. I understand the brutal, unjust history of our nation, the lingering chains of slavery, which socially marginalize millions of individuals daily. I understand that there need to be security checkpoints in airports, and I am certainly grateful to those working every day to keep us safe. I understand that the TSA agents, police officers, and other public servants are human beings and are allowed to think freely. I also fully acknowledge the fact that TSA agents are some of the lowest-paid federal employees in the United States and are often faced with public backlash within the oppressive structures that surround them, which can result in a high turnover rate. But

as a fellow public servant (educator) and citizen of humanity, I insist that we hold each other accountable to *all* those whom we serve, including those outside of the dominant narrative. Along with checking my suitcase, purse, clothes, and shoes, the TSA and our society need to check themselves. Power, disenfranchisement, privilege, and oppression are rampantly alive in airports across the United States, as well as in other institutions operating in an unequal and deeply fractured society — including in our schools. The racism I have experienced and described in relation to airports parallels educational injustices in our schools, as does the silence of the passengers.

Pervasive, unequal treatment of Black and Brown students within schools is well documented, as is the overwhelming silence of public school stakeholders. Students of color are disproportionately punished through detention, suspension, and expulsion. A three-year research report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014) reveals the devastating impact that unequal and severe punishments have on students of color. With research documenting extensive disparities and egregious outcomes of these disparities, we must actively dismantle privilege, eliminate oppression, and educate for social justice. We must be cognizant of the fact that public schools in the United States are as inequitable as the society that they reflect and in which they exist. Addressing oppressive social structures, biased institutional practices, and inexcusable conditions of highly segregated public schools is a pressing priority (Shankar-Brown, 2016). We need to pay and train our public servants better in the United States, especially TSA agents and public school teachers. Deficient salaries and benefits for TSA agents and teachers alike, along with inadequate training, perpetuate and exacerbate the reproduction of social inequality. Public policy changes, beginning with better pay and high quality training for public servants, need to be a national priority. Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, there is a continued need for CRT scholarship within academic discourse, specifically using forms of counterstorytelling.

Using counterstory as a form of scholarly inquiry provides a medium for resistance and opportunity to disrupt social reproduction processes that advance social inequalities. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) explain, "[CRT] advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism . . . and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language and national origin" (p. 25). Interestingly but not surprisingly, academia often dismisses CRT's approach of counterstorytelling, specifically when used by scholars of color who seek to assert alternate narratives within dominant academic discourse. We must hold institutions, including the TSA, schools, and higher education, accountable for supporting master narratives that perpetuate oppression. CRT scholarship offers what Parker and Lynn (2002) describe as being a "discourse of liberation" (p. 7), and counterstorytelling can actively contribute toward antioppression teaching and learning.

Despite persistent *-isms* and rising inequalities, I keep hopeful thanks to my amazing students who are positive change agents and dedicated educational leaders committed to equity. When it comes to social hatred and inequities, we can no longer afford to shake it off or remain silent. We must work together to address pervasive

injustices. It will take collective voice and action to create real change and sustainable justice in our communities and schools. With a world that desperately needs repair, we must act with urgency and passion. There is a deep need for critical, humanistic, and social justice education that seeks to actively dismantle inequity, power, and privilege. The good news is, as a wise 13-year-old girl named Anne Frank wrote in March 1944, "How wonderful it is that no one need wait a single moment to start improving the world" (2003, p. 795). Please join me in speaking up, transforming, and healing our world. Let us march on an emancipatory journey toward inclusion, equity, and social justice. Enough with shaking it off and silently waiting at checkpoints. Enough with idly standing still in schools and on our nation's runways. *It's time for all of us to take flight.*

References

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement.* New York: The New Press.

Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review, 87*(8), 2411–2441.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

Matsuda, M. J. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *The Yale Law Journal, 100*(5), 1329–1407.

Morgan, E., Salomon, N., Plotkin, M., & Cohen, R. (2014). The school discipline consensus report: Strategies from the field to keep students engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system. In Council of State Governments Justice Center Report. Retrieved from https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The_School_Discipline_Consensus_Report.pdf

Frank, A. (2003). *The diary of Anne Frank: The revised critical edition*. New York: Doubleday.

Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What's race got to do with it? Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 7–22.

Shankar-Brown, R. (2016). Urbanization and persistent educational inequalities: The need for collective action towards equity and social justice. *National Youth At-Risk Journal, 1*(1). Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar/vol1/iss1/4/

Solorzano, D., & Delgado-Bernal, D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education, 36*(3), 308–342.

Solorzano, D., and T. Yosso (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 23–44.

Taylor, E., Gillborn, D., & Ladson-Billings, G. (Eds.). (2009). *Foundations of critical race theory in education*. New York: Routledge.