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## THE PRAXIS OF RELATION, VALIDATION, AND MOTIVATION

Articulating LIS Collegiality through a CRT Lens

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In this chapter, we use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to demonstrate how our critical raced/gendered epistemologies are supported by validation theory within a relational-cultural mentoring framework, and how they work to empower both students and librarians to assert their rightful places as scholars and members of a larger academic community. We also borrow from Latina/o Critical Theory (Lat-Crit), which, in concert with CRT, emerged as a theoretical framework from legal studies, to theorize issues particular to the Latinx identities shared by many of our students, such as language, immigration and citizenship status, and identity. A Lat-Crit analysis is especially valuable now, in a place and time where students and their families are literally criminalized and targeted for deportation. For ourselves and for our students, the axis of citizenship/legal status intersects with language, class, and phenotype to articulate a specific raced subjectivity that is politically targeted. All of these intersections impact both our worldview and the ways we are perceived by our students and colleagues. We see our professional practice, including teaching, research, and service, in alignment with Solórzano's five defining elements of CRT in educational research:

- Our perspective is *informed by the experience of racism and other forms of oppression*, and of our active resistance to the same.
- Our work *challenges claims of objectivity, meritocracy, and neutrality*, which form the dominant ideology of higher education.

- We demonstrate our *commitment to social justice* with the specific goal of working for the empowerment of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other marginalized groups.
- Our pedagogy and our research practices privilege experiential knowledge and the lived experiences of marginalized people, often expressed through counterstorytelling (narratives that are counter to the majoritarian “story”).
- Our perspective is interdisciplinary, coming from the fields of ethnic studies, women’s and gender studies, psychology, and education. (Solórzano 1997)

Drawing from the varying levels of experience, areas of professional inquiry, and individual experiences of its three authors, this chapter will apply a critical race analysis to explore the dynamic process by which we support each other’s development of professional identity in a way that acknowledges, nurtures, and supports the long-term well-being and effectiveness of teacher-scholar-librarians of color. We do this by delving deeper into the concepts of validation theory and relational cultural theory and by sharing our counterstories.

In our professional practice, we are particularly interested in the work of challenging the dominant ideologies of neutrality and objectivity as they are valorized in information literacy pedagogy, and we will explain the ways we employ this particular element of CRT in our teaching and research. The same tools that we use to empower students help us to empower each other, as women of color librarians. Using a critical race analysis and validation theory to examine relational teaching and mentoring, we center the lived experiences of both students and teacher-librarians of color to understand how racism and other forms of oppression intersect to mediate our experiences of higher education.

Our place of work is a midsized, regional public university and designated Hispanic-Serving Institution located in Southern California, in the US-Mexico borderlands. Many of our students experience the specific forms of oppression that come with a militarized border and heightened policing of People of Color. In our relatively conservative region, long-standing xenophobia informs an expectation for Latinx people to “blend in” and assimilate in order to earn the right to live among “real” Americans, despite how long our families have been here. Nationalistic White Supremacy informs assumptions about Latinx people being unassimilable. This has a long history that is borne out in historical research of education policy in the United States. “Today, bilingualism often continues to be seen as ‘un-American’ and considered a deficit and an obstacle to learning” (Delgado Bernal 2002, 112). The assumption of resistance to assimilation has to do with the fact that Latinxs are always and forever

seen as immigrants, owing to the historical amnesia around the fact that we are living on land colonized by multiple waves of ancestors who were here long before it was the United States. Counter to Eurocentrism is the Chicana feminist epistemology that values collective experiences and community memory, which is taught to youth through various modes of storytelling. “It is through culturally specific ways of teaching and learning that ancestors and elders share the knowledge of conquest, segregation, patriarchy, homophobia, assimilation, and resistance” (113). Learning the history we are not taught in schools, we learn survival skills—literally informing the way we survive as a culture. “Within this framework, Chicanas and Chicanos become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change” (113).

By centering the assets that our students bring to higher education, we refuse the deficit framework that prevented so many of us from believing that we had something of value to say in an academic environment. We also resist the assumptions about our cultures that we’ve been told are implicitly at odds with university life. For example, there is an assumption that college marks a threshold across which a teenager moves in order to become an adult, and this usually means moving away from their families and establishing independence of belief, opinion, politics, and so on. While this independent sensibility is still present for our students who continue to live at home while attending college, remaining closely tied to their communities helps them maintain a sense of safety and belonging that college doesn’t offer to outsiders. Putting aside the reality that it takes major economic resources to live independently anywhere in San Diego County, the fact that our Latinx students highly value family and community support makes their experience of college different from students who are mirroring their parents’ experience of making this transition. It is important that we realize that the university community is not our students’ only community, and it’s not necessarily the most important one.

Faculty of color often come to academia with personal and scholarly commitments to social transformation and the uplift of marginalized people in our own and other communities. Our cultural resources inform all aspects of the work we do, whether or not we think this work will be rewarded or even highly regarded. “The cultural resources and epistemologies that many faculty of color bring to academia contribute to the goals of higher education and to the overall knowledge base in academia, yet these resources and epistemologies are often unrecognized or devalued” (Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2016, 88). The possession of these unique cultural resources is supposedly part of the reason we were hired in the first place, but the

inability of promotion and tenure committees to adequately value the expertise and emotional labor required can mean that our contributions are minimized and often totally ignored. Mentoring by other faculty of color helps us to navigate these inequities on our respective career paths. In this chapter, we explain how we have used the same theories and frameworks—validation theory, community cultural wealth, and relational-cultural theory—that we use to build up our students, in order to create a bottom-up, radical grassroots mentoring formation among library faculty of color at our institution. The CRT imperatives to challenge notions of neutrality and objectivity, as well as the privileging of experiential knowledge, figure powerfully in both our pedagogy and community building.

For faculty who intentionally craft their pedagogy using culturally responsive methods, the shift from a Eurocentric epistemological perspective is often seen as not in conformity to the values we wish to instill in college students as future scholars. In an institution that promotes norms of neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy, “alternative” epistemologies veer too far from the valorized evidence-based practice. Applying tenets of CRT that seek to challenge the limitations of official knowledge, Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2016) write, “A Eurocentric epistemological perspective can subtly—and not so subtly—ignore and discredit the ways of knowing and understanding the world that faculty of color often bring to academia” (81). They call this an *apartheid of knowledge*, and go on to describe the assets that this form of apartheid ignores and excludes: “We believe that cultural resources include the knowledge, practices, beliefs, norms, and values that are derived from culturally specific lessons within the home and local communities of people who have been subordinated by dominant society” (2016, 81). Showing that we value these cultural resources runs counter to the academic insistence on an “objectivity” that privileges Eurocentric epistemologies.

Race and racism inform the experience of our work in academic librarianship in several ways. We often endure microaggressions that extend from white-dominant assumptions about what authority in higher education looks like, and that can come from both colleagues and the students with whom we work. We constantly negotiate power differentials in the classroom. Incorporating issues of racialized oppression in our teaching, a value that our social justice–focused campus espouses, lands in different ways depending on the racial makeup of the students in any given class. Despite socially progressive values, our campus’s Western teaching and collegial practices are still firmly ensconced in norms of neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy, and “alternative” epistemologies are seen as veering too far from valorized evidence-based

methods. Our authority and expertise are questioned by students and faculty of record alike when we push up against sacrosanct academic values like objectivity and neutrality. Despite our positions of power in relation to our students, academic librarians' experiences of institutional hierarchies are especially complicated by the fact that our status as faculty is often contested.

Our small numbers in the academy as a whole, but especially in academic libraries, contribute to a lack of opportunities to mentor and be mentored by folks who share an understanding of life as a marginalized person. If we are mentored at all, we are often given advice that runs counter to our cultural values or are told that we have to cover or hide aspects of ourselves that don't conform to what a scholar or professional looks like. No mentorship in research and teaching means that our pedagogies, teaching identities, and research methodologies go unsupported.

## **RESISTING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND EUROCENTRIC PEDAGOGIES**

### **VALIDATION THEORY**

Validation theory (Rendón 1994) in its original higher educational context specifically defines validation as an "enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents" (44) to support a student's academic and personal development. When a student is validated, they feel capable of learning, have higher self-worth, and feel that they bring something unique and valuable to the college experience. Validation is recommended for students from underrepresented backgrounds who come to higher education with high anxiety about belonging and succeeding. Students interviewed in Rendón's original research indicated that the reassurance and validation they received from any number of individuals helped them believe that they could be successful in college. "For many students, this was the first time someone had expressed care and concern and the first time someone made them feel that their prior life experiences and knowledge were valuable" (Rendón Linares and Muñoz 2011, 15). In counterpoint to these "nontraditional" students who are first in their family to attend college, traditional students can be defined as those whose families have a legacy of college attendance and hold an assumption that they, too, will attend and succeed in higher education. These expectations and attendant conversations are part of the culture of the family.

We have incorporated validating practices in our own teaching of first-year Latinx students participating in a grant-funded student success initiative. Many of our validating actions are achieved through individual interactions with students, but the

vast majority of engagement is made in class. The main way is through the design of culturally relevant pedagogy, which Ladson-Billings defines as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (1995, 469). Framing the process of inquiry and the resulting scholarship around their own lives and communities (in which students have unique existing expertise) allows them to use their community circumstances as official knowledge, which allows for students to think critically about the conditions of their lives. For example, when students are encouraged to consider their home or social communities as sites of inquiry, they begin to understand that their experiences in these groups are valid and important forms of knowledge. A favorite, real-life illustration of this process comes from a group of students struggling to identify a common community that they felt was worthy of scholarly focus. After they were shown that their actual common affinity, skateboarding, has been the subject of scholarly inquiry in many disciplines, they were able to present their own wealth of knowledge. What they understood about the politics of public space, the limitations of city planning, and the impact of public skateparks on juvenile crime complemented the existing scholarship in urban studies and sociology. These students were able to see that their lived experience, rather than being illegitimate or unimportant, was actually a valuable addition to a scholarly conversation when they were given the chance to critically examine it.

#### COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AND CHICANA FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

Coming out of CRT as a way to challenge deficit thinking in education, community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) is an alternative to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, which we see as centering white middle-class values and white privilege, and another example of white supremacy culture reflected in the values of higher education. “In other words,” Yosso writes, “cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are *valued* by privileged groups in society” (76; emphasis in original). To counter, if not replace, these culturally specific and exclusionary ways of knowing and being, students of color often bring a wealth of knowledge and experience from their communities, families, and cultures of origin that higher education has not sought to value. Yosso names six forms of capital, and we’ve included an example for each:

1. Aspirational: the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even though you know you'll face significant challenges. Example: I know I'm going to have to pay for college myself, but I'm going to be the first in my family to graduate, and this will improve the upward mobility of my whole family.
2. Linguistic: the intellectual and social skills that come from being able to communicate in more than one language and/or style. Example: I can easily move from talking like "myself" to talking like an academic, because I have had to employ various forms of code-switching my whole life.
3. Familial: cultural knowledge nurtured among family members that "carr[ies] a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (79). Example: I know where I come from, I know what my family members endured, I know how we are unique and how their stories inspire my own understanding of who I am. I know the history of Mexican American people in California and I know about the specific legacies of colonialism in the Southwest.
4. Social: networks of people and community resources. Example: I would not have been put on the road to college if Mom hadn't used her connections as an office worker for San Diego City Schools.
5. Navigational: having the resilience and the ability to move through spaces not created for your benefit (e.g., school). Example: I entered higher education through community college and the transfer process, which is something I had to negotiate on my own, as no one in my family had gone to college.
6. Resistant: the will and ability to participate in strategies and behaviors that challenge inequality. Example: Whether or not we are explicitly taught to resist oppression, we are part of a long line of people who fought to survive, to preserve our culture, and to resist the status quo, particularly in regard to race, gender, and class inequality.

By shedding the idea that our lived experiences don't belong in our pedagogies and other interactions with students, we might establish what Rendón calls a *familia* atmosphere in the classroom or at the reference desk. Because we self-disclose the fact that we are, variously, first-generation college graduates, immigrants, Spanish speakers, or working-class, students will seek us out even if we aren't their subject librarian. There is a shared vulnerability that garners a sense of safety for students when they know that some of us understand firsthand how hard it is to work full-time while trying to stay in school, or when we counsel students to care for themselves first when they or their families are facing a crisis. Connecting students to the right faculty members for advancing on their educational paths, or to social services when

they are struggling in other ways, can be especially impactful when we can share our experiences of having been there, too. Even the practice of talking a student through selecting a research topic can benefit from acknowledging a standpoint that we can personally relate to but that might seem taboo to talk about with other faculty. A student who wanted to do research about why her working-class Mexican family didn't seem to value a college education in the way mainstream US culture does was surprised to find out that Torie's family also had no clear cultural expectation for her to achieve a college degree. Rather than accepting these beliefs as evidence of a backward and deficient culture, we were able to talk about the cultural and historical complexities that surround our families' relationships to hegemonic US institutions.

Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal 1998) is a powerful mode of envisioning cultural wealth because personal experience also includes collective experience, community memory, and ancestral knowledge, all of which have been deployed in our communities as survival strategies. As information literacy librarians, we are especially interested in epistemological questions: What kinds of knowledge are valid or "authoritative"? Epistemologies are culturally informed, and we need to be transparent that the epistemologies that higher education privileges as objective or authoritative are culturally informed by Eurocentric, capitalist hegemony. Critical Race Theory challenges color blindness and meritocracy and shows how they work to disadvantage marginalized people to further advantage whiteness. Delgado Bernal (2002) points out what we might consider our main challenge within the hegemonic university: "In other words, they believe their stories are based on facts, and because Eurocentrism and white privilege are invisible, they fail to see how subjective their stories are" (120). We mustn't forget that the concept of neutrality has always been part of the core ethics of librarianship. In what ways might we break that concept apart in service to the reality that nothing is free of human values, and put deeper critical thinking about information at the forefront of our information literacy practice? When we identify the ways that we reproduce these Eurocentric, liberal values in our teaching and interactions with students, as well as within the organization of power in the university itself, we can begin to decenter whiteness.

When students can see their home knowledge, including their language, their immersion in two (or more) cultures, and their strong commitment to uplifting their communities as unique assets, we as educators also have an opportunity to see the worldview and community history that we share with our students as a site for connection.



## VALIDATION AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AS FRAMEWORKS FOR RELATIONAL MENTORING

First-generation college students experience the academic environment with the anxiety of not knowing whether they can or will succeed, with the stakes being earning a college diploma and gaining upward mobility and the status of being educated. It is a highly competitive milieu where they continue to be measured according to standards that privilege the epistemologies inherited by continuing-generation and mostly white students. The validating message we want to signal to these alienated students is, “You belong here.” Community cultural wealth communicates, “Your unique cultural resources are valuable here.” What if we extended that pedagogical strategy to our professional relationships?

In a profession with so few visible People of Color, where we are constantly measuring ourselves against white people who have been raised in the normative (Eurocentric) way of relating and competing with each other, while also trying, often in vain, to fit in and succeed, who will tell *us* we belong here? How might we use the concept of community cultural wealth in both our approaches to information literacy pedagogy and the development of our teacher identities? How can we apply validation theory in our professional role (in relation to our students), as well as in our approach to peer-mentoring relationships with other BIPOC librarians at our institutions and beyond? We suggest that relational-cultural theory (RCT), a feminist therapeutic practice developed in the late 1970s by psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller and the Stone Center Theory Group at Wellesley College, offers a framework through which we can concretize ways to create authentic, validating, and supportive mentoring relationships among colleagues of color.

## RELATIONAL-CULTURAL THEORY AND FOSTERING AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

A central goal of relational-cultural theory (RCT) is to create “power with” connections with colleagues and students, rather than imposing “power over” them. In “power over” relationships, “one person has the ability to decide the rules of discourse and the direction that the relationship will take” (Jordan 2004a, 35). A “power over” dynamic also prizes competitive individualism over “power with” cooperative connections such that gendered and raced meritocratic systems disenfranchise those who have never been afforded any power to begin with—namely, BIPOC, women, and queer and disabled communities (Jordan 2004c, 12). Critical Race Theory, then,

provides a lens through which we may identify, critique, and specifically name those oppressive structures, particularly white supremacy, and attendant negative practices that facilitate and reify the disconnection marginalized folks experience in LIS. These structures include white supremacist institutions and discourses that privilege *objectivity* and *neutrality* over experiential knowledge and epistemologies grounded in non-Western identities. “Transformative social action in pursuit of social justice is a critical objective of the [CRT] paradigm” (Ortiz and Jani 2010, 190). Undergirding this paradigm is the analysis of social interactions across a range of subordinating identities that allows us to better understand multiple levels of privilege and oppression (190). RCT examines disconnection caused by systemic marginalization and oppression (Jordan 2009) and offers practical, relational approaches for actualizing CRT’s social justice values that focus on challenging destructive systems and structures of domination in higher education.

As Latina, Chicana, Desi, female-identified, immigrant, *pocha*, of mixed-status family, bilingual, working-class, middle-class, parents, nonparents, white-passing, and visibly “Other,” we don’t always see our ways of knowing (or being) acknowledged, which complicates our ability to fully advocate for self-determination within the academy. The undercutting of our identities is tied to “power over” dynamics in academia that stratify racial and gender differences. “This stratification is the consequence of systematic miseducation that teaches that white is superior and black is inferior. The *stratification*, not the *difference*, constrains our capacity for authenticity and undermines our desire for connection” (Walker 2004, 93). Racial stratification leads to what Kendrick terms *deauthentication*, a cognitive shift requiring BIPOC to engage in intense emotional labor in order to navigate primarily white workplace environments (2018). To avoid macro- or microaggressions, we mask any detectable markers of ethnic, racial or cultural identities, including language, physical presentation, values, and traditions (Kendrick 2018). We not only suppress our full selves, we also must wear the mantle of whiteness in order to be regarded as legitimate contributors to the academy. Deauthentication is profoundly painful when you consider how BIPOC preempt shame and humiliation through performing whiteness in the workplace out of fear of appearing inadequate. Brown and Leung note the futility of this task, where no matter how much we “stuff down the parts of ourselves deemed too far from normative identities ... the reality is that no amount of pretending or silence erases who we are, and it certainly doesn’t stop us from being made hypervisible at will” (2018, 340–341).

We cannot inure ourselves to microaggressions from library users and colleagues that range from “Where are you *really* from?” to “Your English is impeccable!” These

inquiries seem innocuous to non-BIPOC, but are actually emotionally debilitating reminders that we don't belong, despite how hard we try. Every moment spent on correcting such misperceptions reinforces our sense of shame over being viewed as Other. This shame is compounded when you happen to be the only faculty of color at your institution and you begin to feel "a sense of unworthiness to be in connection, an absence of hope that an empathic response will be forthcoming from another person" (Brown and Leung 2018, 340–341). When we publicly decry these microaggressions as symptoms of structural racism, we are met with skepticism or outright denial (macroaggression), which demoralizes and isolates us.

"Power with" relationships emphasize interdependence and have the potential to mitigate the trauma of shame and isolation through mutually empowering connections (Fletcher 2004, 276). "Power with" culture also dismantles the notion of instrumental competence, which has traditionally been defined as mastering a task and demonstrating measurable success in a competitive (read: capitalist) context (Jordan 2004c, 13). In the "power with" paradigm, we move instead toward relational competence, which is the capacity to engender a sense of well-being in a relationship (15). Relational competence shifts us toward associations where vulnerability is perceived as a strength and a site of growth (15). In being open about our need for support and acceptance, our trio connected in meaningful, real ways, rather than upholding a completely false barrier of neutrality, authority, and competitiveness. It is only through the guidance of our women of color (WOC) peers that we have been able to courageously bring our real selves into the classroom. We leverage our own vulnerabilities in material ways, including vocally supporting each other at instructional planning meetings and implementing learning objects in our first-year information literacy courses that explicitly address lived experiences of People of Color and marginalized groups. As individuals, it can be intimidating to agitate for paradigm shifts, but collectively and visibly ("I've got your back, girl"), we are concretely changing teaching and learning departmental values, which has implications for greater institutional change.

## **SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN SPACES NOT MADE FOR US**

Our cultural resources (Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2016, 81) connect us to our students and show them that we, too, have to learn how to survive in this space that was not made for us. As professionals having to perform on this putatively neutral ground, our cultures nurture and empower us. We can apply a relational lens to

Yosso's six forms of capital to survive and thrive in a professional environment in which we feel like outsiders, no matter how long we've worked there.

1. *Aspirational*: We intentionally envision, strategize, and sometimes enact a radically different form of higher education that puts equity first.
2. *Linguistic*: We freely code-switch in class or in a reference interaction, as well as with our colleagues.
3. *Familial*: We feel a responsibility to the larger community, which is why we focus our instruction on first-generation Latinx students.
4. *Social*: Librarians are the ultimate social network connectors for students who feel lost or out of place, or don't know what questions to ask. With our colleagues, too, our knowledge sharing connects and lifts us all up.
5. *Navigational*: As we learn "the ropes" and unspoken rules of academia (often the hard way), we share that knowledge with our colleagues.
6. *Resistant*: Our personal visions and professional missions almost always involve dismantling oppressive structures that harm our students and our colleagues. We form networks and strategies to this end.

Similarly, Rendón's (1994) elements of validation are acted out every day in our peer-mentoring cluster, and they truly keep us focused on why we belong here, why we must be here. They are:

1. The responsibility for initiating contact is on the institutional agents: the senior, tenured librarian approached the newly tenure-track librarian, the tenure-track librarian approached the new lecturer. No one had to formally ask for mentorship. We initially approached each other with invitations to team-teach and do research together, as well as to signal that we are "safe" to talk to.
2. We value each others' unique experiences and perspectives, especially as they apply to teaching and research.
3. Consistent validation by our colleagues helps us to feel more like we belong here, that there is a place for us in higher education and in librarianship.
4. Validation can occur in and out of class. The parallel to this is that validation by colleagues happens on a professional and a personal level. We commiserate, celebrate, grieve, rage, and strategize during walks on campus, in our offices with the doors closed, on Slack, through texts, and out in social spaces.
5. Validation nurtures us throughout all stages of our careers.
6. Validation is most critical when it is administered early. The first few weeks in a new position are when we need the most help and when we are looking for mentors but not sure if it's OK to ask.

How do we support each other to push our professional practice into a more courageous and honest one? We do this partly by sharing our stories with each other and validating each other's experiences. We foster supported vulnerability and validate each other's teacher identity by team teaching with each other and allowing each person to share their expertise in the classroom with our students. Instead of competing, we collaborate professionally (teaching, research), but we also care for each other personally (closing ranks, seeking safe harbor in each other). Unlike typical, top-down mentoring structures, our connection is formed through affinity rather than an institutional process. We get different things professionally out of our relationships with each other than we get with our non-WOC colleagues: real talk about being a WOC in academia versus real talk about academia. Both are helpful, but only one truly honors our authentic experiences. Part of those authentic experiences is sharing sometimes painful memories/experiences of our professional journeys without each other.

## OUR COUNTERSTORIES

As a CRT strategy, counterstorytelling disrupts majoritarian narratives (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32; Cooke 2019, 223) and enhances the agency of oppressed populations by centering their stories and experiences (Ortiz and Jani 2010, 186). Far from simply being responses to the dominant narratives, counterstories have the power to further conversations and reform around institutional racism by illuminating, preserving, and strengthening social, political, and cultural survival, as well as resistance (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32).

We employ collaborative autoethnography (collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic) to share our counterstories (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2015, 17). Autoethnography focuses on self-interrogation and self-reflection, but when we shift toward a collaborative methodology, we are "building on each other's stories, gaining insight from group sharing, and providing various levels of support" (17). Cooke notes that counterstorytelling can be a cathartic but also emotionally exhausting process that requires the reliving of painful experiences (2019, 228). We eased some of this pain by creating an affinity group where we shared previously untold stories in an empathic, safe environment without feeling isolated or unsafe (Fedele 2004, 197). Here, we relate our individual stories and further examine how these experiences have critically shaped our trio relationship to the extent that we feel empowered to bring our authentic selves into our work.

## TONI

When I first started my career in librarianship nearly twenty years ago, I was fortunate to be a part of Knowledge River and Spectrum, so I had strong support groups from other librarians of color both as colleagues and as mentors.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't until I moved into the real world of academic librarianship that I felt isolated. For the first time in a long time, I was one of "the only" in a sea of "the majority" and, although it was not always intentional, I was made to feel very much an "Other." Being the Other naturally means one does not fit in to the interdependent order of a society and is, therefore, disenfranchised in a sense. I will not go so far as to say I was completely ostracized from my library communities, because I certainly had friends and allies from various backgrounds. The times I did feel excluded (or disenfranchised), I had to learn how to navigate the climate of my institutions and quickly turn to my allies for help and support.

As an example, there were times earlier in my career when my ideas were quickly dismissed or simply ignored for reasons I did not fully understand. I came to realize it was the messenger these colleagues didn't like, not the ideas themselves. Unfortunately, I was the messenger, so I learned to be silent. Thankfully, I was able to navigate my way around this issue by asking close colleagues and allies (sometimes that included people from outside my institutions) to pitch these ideas as their own. And sure enough, the ideas were met with enthusiasm. I'm not proud of this silence and this dependency on colleagues to help further my ideas, but I was in a situation where even my research was not valued the same as that of my colleagues, who published works on more traditional library topics. Although I produced multiple articles, a dissertation, and even a book on topics of diversity in libraries, it felt as if it simply didn't matter. Either the topic of diversity was not valued or I was not valued, and I felt that hit more strongly when I decided to take the next step in my career.

When I decided to go up for tenure and full librarianship, I did not feel comfortable asking very many of the senior librarians for help. Instead, I looked to other senior faculty on and off campus (current and retired) to help me with my dossier. Although I successfully earned tenure and full librarian rank, there was still this feeling of "not good enough." Regardless of how many degrees, awards, or publications were under my belt, I still felt invalidated and rejected by many of my associates. Yet, I was celebrated outside my institution.

I am told by junior colleagues that I am a leader in their eyes, but I admit to not always feeling the part. I am not like other leaders in our institution (or even in our profession). I try not to accept the lie I've allowed myself to believe over the

years—the lie that I am “not good enough,” or that my ability to be authentic with these junior colleagues is not equal to traditional leadership styles. Instead, I am learning to understand that once we as librarians of color build the powerful structure of nontraditional leadership ourselves, we begin to build a critical mass within the profession itself. Amplifying ourselves as leaders to help bring other librarians of color up and empowering them as leaders as well is how we change not only how we view ourselves in this line of work but the profession itself.

## TORIE

Toni was the only working-class Latina librarian in our place of work when I started on the tenure track. Coming from a nontraditional educational and career path, I never expected to feel comfortable in a professional environment. At the time I was hired, I received formal mentoring from various tenured librarians who could answer my questions about campus culture and internal politics, as well as expectations of new faculty regarding research, teaching, and service. Toni and I developed our friendship outside of this formal mechanism. We connected over family stories, shared cultural references, and the particular grief and rage that comes from loving people who are constantly fighting (and mostly losing) battles with addiction, violence, the criminal justice system, and the militarization of the US-Mexico border. Our perspectives on the things that really matter to us went far, far beyond our jobs. We were both committed to supporting our communities, and that included the Latinx students at our university. We knew what it meant, to them and to their families, to come to college—many of them were the first in their families ever to do so, after making it out of underfunded high schools and a lifetime of low expectations.

Toni invited me to team-teach with her, working with a cohort of students from migrant laborer backgrounds. I saw how powerful it was for her to speak of her own childhood in the fields and of her mixed-status family, to fluently switch between English and Spanish, and the way this seemed to put students at ease. The fact that she was sharing this with me felt intimate, like she was trusting me with this other, authentic self. We went on to design a culturally responsive information literacy curriculum together, and cotaught every semester until she went to work in another unit of the library. We continue to write and publish together, as she was the person who convinced me that my experiences, perspectives, and ideas needed to be out in the world. When I became an academic librarian, I never entertained the idea that I would research emerging technologies or assessment metrics. I was told that research

that focused on cultural competence, social justice, or “diversity work” wouldn’t be taken as seriously as more traditional library science topics. My motivation for doing the work of culturally responsive pedagogy in the information literacy classroom was and is to validate students and their communities as creators of knowledge and to affirm marginalized people as valuable members of the academic community.

Presenting my research in a way that shows my very personal connection to the work has been challenging. Finding my audience hasn’t been easy, and learning how to write in a way that feels completely inauthentic to me but is the standard for my profession is a constant exercise in keeping my imposter syndrome at bay. Having a mentor like Toni, who believes in the importance of my work, assures me that I belong here, that what I am contributing to our students and to our field is worthwhile and unique. It is with this bolstered confidence that I can believe that I am a worthy mentor to both her and Lali. What Toni and I did in the classroom is akin to forging a space that didn’t exist before. We gave each other room and permission to offer our authentic selves in the service of pedagogy, and now when Lali and I teach together, we’re making that space even bigger.

## LALITHA

Despite my firm goal of becoming an academic librarian, the first professional role I accepted was in a public library, a field in which I had virtually no experience beyond a handful of LIS classes. I knew within my first month on the job that I was not right for this institution and it was not right for me, but for the next four and a half years I proceeded to ignore red flags including lack of mentorship, minimal validation from my superiors, and a general lack of collegiality. My white supervisor advised me to “smile more” in order to appear more approachable to coworkers and the general public. Looking back, I recognize that this so-called feedback was a form of intersectional oppression, but I shrugged off my discomfort, choosing to see this microaggression as a form of genuine regard for my professional development. Considering how outgoingness and general sociability are typically coded as Western (read: white) traits (Matsumoto and Kudoh 1993, 223), my apparent lack of approachability signaled my Otherness. Over the years, these and similar interactions I endured (from colleagues and community users alike) in public libraries eroded my confidence to the point where I questioned my professional (and personal) value.

When I transitioned to full-time academic librarianship two years ago, I was a solid mid-career librarian, which should’ve made me feel secure in my expertise. But



I tentatively stepped into my lecturer role, feeling unsure and unwilling to take risks because I wanted to demonstrate off the bat that I was a cooperative and competent colleague who fit in. But according to what standards? Imagine my surprise when I stepped into a department that prioritized psychological safety and protection of its most vulnerable members—the lecturers and tenure-track librarians. I profoundly connected with Toni and Torie because, like me, they actively researched and reflected on topics related to cultural identity, institutional racism, and social justice, tying these ideas to our pedagogical practices and campus values. But more importantly, we had similar histories, being first-generation women of color in LIS. I often spoke with Toni and Torie about growing up with immigrant parents who didn't impart the social cues deemed necessary to navigate a society that privileges whiteness, and how that impacted my educational and professional experiences. These are stories that resonated not only with them, but also with our first-generation students who also understood the difficulties and the joys of navigating two different cultures.

Knowing my aspiration of becoming a tenure-track librarian, Toni and Torie were more than willing to take me under their wings and work together with me on writing projects. In championing my research potential, they were both validating my place, as well my ideas, in the academy. When a tenure-track position opened at our institution, Toni and Torie not only encouraged me to apply, they also advocated for showing realness during the application and interview process, which included calling out the inherent white supremacy in LIS and drawing on lived experiences to detail strategies for approaching pedagogical and research practices with an equity lens. Without their support, I could not have visualized myself in, let alone pursued, a tenure-track position.

### OUR TRIO CONNECTION

In relating our counterstories and assessing them through a collective autoethnographic lens, we are trying to address the question, "How do we build up the librarian to do the critical work of validating our students?" Given the master narrative of whiteness that prevails in higher education, it is difficult for BIPOC to see their marginality as a site of strength and resistance; on an individual level, we have had to grapple with our positionality as teachers and how to create the spaces in scholarly *and* collegial conversations to raise up and legitimize our own lived experiences. Critical Race Theory gives us the language to identify the "intercentricity of racism and other forms of subordination" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 25) in higher education.

Informed by a CRT and LatCrit lens, we apply relational, validational, and community cultural wealth frameworks to create relationships that not only help us do good work, but also help us to acknowledge that we are our best selves when we can openly challenge and critique white hegemony.

Our trio relationship is premised on fostering connection, and we adhere to psychological safety, which is the idea that we can freely share ideas without fear of reprisal or shaming from each other (Edmondson 1999, 354). Too, we practice care for each other by engaging in relational practices that mitigate our emotional labor. These specifically include what Fletcher terms *mutual empowering* and *creating team* (2004, 272). As a senior-level librarian of color at our institution, Toni leverages her own power to lift up fellow BIPOC colleagues; by offering to publish and coteach with us, she is putting effort into increasing our (Torie's and Lali's) competence, self-confidence, and knowledge (Fletcher 2004, 275). Mutual empowerment is grounded in interdependence and fluid power relations (275); Toni's mentorship of Torie was instrumental to Torie's ability to mentor Lalitha. In *creating team*, Toni helped two librarians of color achieve tenure-track positions, which contributed to an institutional and professional legacy of inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

The working theory of this chapter is that the same critical tools we use to build up our underrepresented students in order to help them claim their rightful sense of authority and belonging in higher education are the very same tools that librarians of color employ among ourselves for the same purposes. Chief among those tools is the liberatory act of sharing power that comes with forging human connection. Mutual empowerment is rooted in intentional actions designed to foster interdependent, productive relationships and minimize power differences (Fletcher 2004, 277). For example, by resisting the idea that effective pedagogy comes from a sense of authoritative neutrality, we build capacity for authentic participation in an ongoing relationship between student and teacher. Likewise, when librarians of color form a strong sense of relational bonding and are validated in the workplace for what we bring to the table, it has the potential to increase confidence and self-efficacy and to build trust. Through validation and relation, we may be seen as valued and respected contributors to the profession, increasing the potential for us to see ourselves as leaders who may inspire others.

When we are encouraged to voice our views and ideas in the workplace, we feel recognized and appreciated. Team-teaching creates a supportive environment where

we can feel comfortable putting forward our ideas and questioning things openly without fear. It is vital to the psychological safety and well-being of each librarian in these relationships to have the ability to take risks and be vulnerable in front of our peers without fear of ridicule or perceived weakness. Using the lens of Critical Race Theory to understand how our epistemologies confront the accepted values of higher education in the US, we theorize that our direct resistance to hegemonic expectations built by centuries of white supremacy might force open a space for us, our colleagues, and the generations who come after. What would librarianship look like if we all felt strong, supported, and validated throughout our careers?

Library workers of color are currently engaged in this critical work through validating in-person and online spaces including Libraries We Here, WOC+Lib, and LOCLA.<sup>2</sup> But at our individual institutions, we must be intentional about voicing the need for change. The three of us acknowledge the uniqueness of the Teaching and Learning Department of the library, in that we have a significant amount of autonomy in how we experiment with and deploy our pedagogy. However, these values do not necessarily extend to the whole of the library or campus. For one of us, twenty years in academia has proven that we cannot rely solely on our white colleagues to consistently support our work and be dependable allies. We place our trust in each other because of our common experiences, and in doing so, we help build up the leadership capacity of other library workers of color. To challenge the macro-level institutional racism, we must call for what Brown, Cline, and Méndez-Brady eloquently refer to in chapter 3 of this volume as an “arable beginning,” by collectively refusing to go along with inequitable labor practices. As they argue, we must ask our white colleagues to critically reflect on their own complicity in reinforcing dominant hierarchies that subjugate their colleagues of color, and we must also require fair compensation, demanding salary transparency at all levels of the job search. We lean on the relational bonds within our affinity group for one of the most difficult asks of our white colleagues: to use CRT to explicitly surface in their work (from administration to technical services to teaching) the historical failure of our profession to support our most vulnerable populations, including students and faculty of color, and to take concrete actions (rather than voice vague platitudes and promises) that are officially documented and shared publicly to create equitable and just working and learning environments. By articulating these material desiderata, we shape the world we want to live in now, which is the ultimate validation of each other’s teaching, research, and identity as academic librarians.

## NOTES

1. See University of Arizona Knowledge River, <https://ischool.arizona.edu/knowledge-river>; American Library Association Spectrum Program, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/spectrum>.
2. See Libraries We Here, <https://www.wehere.space/>; WOC+Lib, <https://www.wocandlib.org/>; Librarians of Color–LA (LOCLA), <https://www.instagram.com/librariansofcolor/>.

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