

# Forged in the Crucibles of Difference: Building Discordant Communities

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article, the authors present a narrative that illuminates alternative visions for connecting K12/college collaborations, exploring the potential for social justice work at the intersection of K12 teaching and academia. Told as a collective autoethnography in narrative form, they recount their decisions to teach in K12 spaces, while simultaneously pursuing their careers as professors. Their narrative serves as a reflexive analysis of the challenges faced as their K12 and college worlds collide. The authors find that teaching at the K12 level, alongside their college students, fosters powerful pedagogies. This autoethnography explores the possibilities and complexities at the intersections of personal, K12 teacher and academic identities.*

*Those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*

—Audre Lorde (1984)

## INTRODUCTION

Audre Lorde's eloquent words pose a challenge to those of us committed to revolutionary, social change. To researchers, pedagogues and education activists, these words present the particular task of challenging entrenched assumptions of meritocracy and, instead, creating opportunities for empowering relationships, practices, and curricula in our K12 schools.

This challenge inspires us, the authors, to forge an identity for ourselves that resists the traditional academic role; instead, we take on the role of transformative intellectuals, working in our local K12 schools while conducting research and teaching at our respective colleges. Merging these two worlds, K12 classroom teaching and academia,

has implications for our identity as academics, and in turn, how our work is received and perceived. Embracing the stance of transformative intellectuals (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985; Gramsci, 1971) presents a host of challenges working in higher education, public education, and other social organizations that resist transformations and maintain a system of rewards and consequences that maintain the status quo—including tenure which looms large for young academics (Berg, 2002; Burawoy, 2004; Pelias, 2003; Petras, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2005).

Drawing on critical race theory, critical theory, Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1991), and critical pedagogy, we present this feature article as a collective autoethnography that explores the complexities of embracing work beyond the ivory tower as central. In a dialogue set in Eric's family room, we explore the complications, challenges, successes and heartbreaks of our work as college professors and K12 teachers. While this is a narrative convention, it authentically reflects the many actual conversations that have occurred between the authors over the past two years, often times in one of our homes, in the car as we shuttle our kids to a snowy day activity or via cell phone while juggling other tasks. This rhetorical device offers a way for us to explore our identities as academics striving to be transformative. As well, it allows us to explore in a more intimate and authentic way how we work together in collaboration and solidar-

ity across our differences—Colette as a Black, single mother at a small liberal arts college and Eric as a White father and spouse, at a small university. This essay, then, also takes as its secondary charge to suggest how scholars of color might collaborate closely with White allies around issues of race in education. While Colette aligns her work with critical race theorists, together we work to develop community across our differences, building on Paulo Freire's concept of *praxis* defined as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1986, p. 36) Here we examine our work to build a space to theorize together about authentic K12/college collaborations that seek to center race and actively address racism in schools. Furthermore, this writing tool, more so than any other writing in which we have engaged as academics, best captures the important role of humor and love that permeates and sustains our professional relationship and friendship as we struggle in the formation of this new academic identity.

## METHODOLOGY: COLLECTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography operates within the interstices – and blurs the boundaries – between individual reflexivity (auto-), the transcription of collective human experience (-ethno), and writing as a form of inquiry (-graphy) that does not merely 'write up' the research but is itself the 'method of discovery.' (Denzin,

Lincoln & Rolling, 2006, p. 427)

This article is presented as an autoethnographical account of our efforts to claim an academic identity that captures the work that we feel politically and ethically compelled to accomplish. Though marginalized as a methodology, we find that autoethnography gives us license to examine this academic culture within which we are steeped. As a form of ethnography, autoethnography is appropriate to the study of cultural norms and expectations (as well as deviations). Yet, in autoethnographical work, the one written about is also the author of the ethnographic tale. Duncan (2004), in her study of her own pedagogical practice as a professor, writes about the unique location of the autoethnographer:

He or she, in fact, is the insider. The context is her or his own. Through autoethnography, those marginalized individuals who might typically have been the exotic subject of more traditional ethnographies have the chance to tell their own stories. (np)

An autoethnographic account such as the one we undertake here also serves the purpose of revealing alternatives to dominant discourses around academic identities (Okawa, 2002). Alternatively, it may unveil areas of discontent, for academics such as ourselves, where political, financial, and/or emotional support might be necessary (Stanley, 2006).

There are several forms that an autoethnography might take (Ellis, 2004). We create a personal narrative described by Ellis as follows:

Where social scientists view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative stories specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives.... The primary purpose of personal narrative is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context.... Readers... take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, aroused to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. (pp. 45-46)

More specifically, we conduct a "collective autoethnography," a term coined by Lapadat (2009). Lapadat, in her description of the collective autoethnographical work her graduate students conducted, writes that collective autoethnography allowed them, as a group of researchers, to analyze and interpret each other's work, while creating a space for class members to respond to that work. Here, we similarly write individual narratives based on critical moments in a narrative form that allows for response to each other. We define a critical moment as one when, in the course of our work, we feel compelled to make a decision between a traditional academic response and a critical academic response. We use these critical moments as evocative spaces to explore what it means to be a transformative intellectual.

Collective autoethnography is steeped in an Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1991) – one that claims a research grounded in the concrete experience of those researched, engages others in sincere dialogue as a method of coming to understanding and acknowledges the moral, ethical, political and value-laden dimensions of research. This epistemological framework is consistent with our experience, guided by our political beliefs and is ethically in line with our conscience.

Collective autoethnography is also closely aligned with the narrative and counterstorytelling traditions in critical race theory. Autoethnography, as a reflective and reflexive process of telling, performing, constructing, analyzing and representing, provides a space to own one's stories and study them rigorously for what they have to offer others. An empowering methodology, autoethnography seeks to embrace experiences through a self-telling that does not use "voice-over" or ventriloquy (Fine, 1994). Indeed, it brings marginalized voices into spaces that have attempted to delegitimize them. Tierney (as cited by Holt, 2003) writes:

Autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the

borders. (Tierney, 1998, p. 66)

Similarly, Lawrence (1995) holds that narratives bring marginalized stories to the center, making them honored and valued in academia, and provide support to others with similar untold stories. Narrative serves the critical purpose of sustaining the souls and spirits of the writers and readers.

In this writing we incorporate a narrative counterstory into the collective autoethnography method by employing the narrative convention modeled by Solórzano and Yosso (2005) in which they use a fictional dialogue between a tenured Latino professor and his former student who is currently an untenured professor. They use this fictional dialogue to add the perspective of critical educators who like other marginalized groups may "be at the margins of higher education" (p. 72).

The use of fictional counterstories has long been valued in critical race theory going back to Derrick Bell's (1992) fictitious "Space Traders" story. Such story-telling is powerful because it is "honest and relentless" and, in its creation, enables the author to offer "the lie that tells the truth" (Dufresne, 2003, p. 14). In our case we've constructed a fictional scene in Eric's family room not to present a hypothetical scenario to discuss a point. Rather our scene serves as an analysis of those critical moments in which we felt compelled to a transformative academic response. As Dufresne goes on to say, we care little that it happened exactly that way; rather we are interested in "telling the truth, not telling the facts" (ibid).

In writing about the power of stories, Delgado (2000) asserts that stories can have both community building functions as well as destructive functions. "Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and a deeper, more vital ethics," writes Delgado (2000), "but stories... can (also) show... when it is time to reallocate power" (pp. 60-61).

In these tentative first steps as professors, we communicated with each other regularly at these critical moments. Some stories were too painful to tell immediately and would be told nonchalantly weeks later as if unim-

portant. Other stories were so painful that they erupted before we could censor ourselves. As we began to conduct research for this paper, together we culled these critical moments – often reminding each other of moments that we had forgotten. As themes evolved from this sharing, we narrowed on specific critical and evocative moments that best captured the themes arising from these experiences.

We used a method called memory-work to conduct this research. This involved recalling these critical moments, sharing them again with each other, sharpening the details of the story and searching for their narrative truth. Each researcher had heard the stories on multiple occasions, also reading them in written, narrative form. Citing the work of Australian researcher Frigga Haug, Lapadat (2009) described memory-work as a feminist methodology with an approach that: grounds theory in collectively recollected experience, is consensual and nonhierarchical, and has an explicit aim of empowering the coresearchers.... (It) involves collectively analyzing memories written out by group members. Each coresearcher is both research subject and object. Common elements emerge during subsequent analysis and appraisal because members of the collective share a social context and appropriate from it depending on its constraints and affordances (p. 960).

Lapadat contends that memory-work, by *definition*, is causal and interpretive in the telling of stories because the storyteller begins the analytical process in even the choice of story to tell, how to tell it, and the moments and details to include in the story. Thus, we reject claims to objectivity, securely claiming a space that fits logically within the autoethnographic tradition.

### A COLLECTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: WORKING AT THE INTERSECTION

The following conversation picks up at the end of a long, but joyous day. Colette and her 3-year-old daughter are in Worcester visiting Eric's family. Her daughter, ecstatic to see Eric's

daughters, was "on 10" all day – trying to keep up with the older girls. They'd played Guitar Hero in the morning (a contentious way to start the day with two guitars and three superstars in the making) and visited the Children's Museum in the afternoon. Colette's daughter had been too excited to nap and so, finally, at 7 o'clock, fell asleep.

All of the girls had now been in bed for an hour and the cleaning of the house was almost complete. Eric's partner of almost a decade had headed upstairs to do some work with the warning, "Don't stay up too late talking. You two aren't as young as you used to be. There isn't enough caffeine in the world to get you through a day with three girls under 10."

Colette is now half in the freezer looking for the vanilla ice cream she knows will be there. "You want some ice cream?" she asks over her shoulder to Eric.

"No, no, no. Some of us have to worry about the middle age stomach coming on," replies Eric lifting his feet up onto the coffee table and patting his stomach.

"Ha! I gave up on chasing the flat belly. My daughter gave me the wondrous gift of an excusable pooch," grins Colette.

"Yet another reason to wish that men could have babies."

"A secret desire of men that I don't know about?"

"Hurry and get your ice cream so we can chat before we start to nod off," Eric replies, ignoring her comment. Colette grabs a spoon out of the drawer and starts eating her ice cream as she heads into the den.

"Oh, but can you bring me a beer?" Eric asks.

"You have seriously lost your mind! You can get your own beer! I asked you if you wanted something while I was in the kitchen. Now, it'd be like me serving you if I went back into the kitchen to get the beer," argues Colette as she plops down onto the couch with a bowl of ice cream.

"You know I'd get you one if the situation were reversed!" Eric unfolds his tall 6 foot 3 inch frame off the couch knowing that, regardless of his sighs, Colette isn't about to get up again to get him a beer. "You're wrong and

you know it." He grabs a beer out of the fridge and comes back to the couch saying, "When I've finished this beer, that's it. We've got to get to bed."

"I hear you," replies Colette. "We've been talking all day in snippets between the giggles and tantrums of the girls. I know I shouldn't be surprised, but we have really figured out how to double task an academic conversation and load three kids into carseats with snacks. We've actually covered a lot of ground already in our thinking about what it means to be a transformative intellectual.<sup>1</sup> I really want to get to the core of the work that we're both doing this year – the work that defines what I think it means to be a transformative academic doing activist work."

"Ah, yes, our choice to teach simultaneously at the K12 and college levels!"

"Right! I don't want to belittle or underestimate the power of educational research to address racial injustice and to create social change in schools," Colette continues. "And I obviously think the teaching we do at the college level has this same potential. But I think the most important aspect of our work as transformative academics is our engagement in activist work in public schools as educators. In this work we are confronting race- and class-based inequities directly, and this work informs our research and college teaching. Building on Freire's work, this is the *praxis* of transformative intellectuals or a transformative praxis."

"Delgado & Stefancic (2000) ask of legal scholars: 'Should a lawyer advocating on behalf of a particular community live there? Or learn another language if it is the dominant one in that community...? How much energy should one devote to litigation and how much to street marches, political organizing, and other forms of non-legal work' (p. 591)? These are profound questions not only for lawyers working for social justice, but for academics working for change in the educational realities of youth of color."

"Burawoy (2004) asks the same questions," responds Eric. "What should be our involvement in the world beyond the academy? Recognizing we are part of the world we study, we must take some stance with respect to



that world. To fail to do so is to take a stance by default' (p 1606)."

"Dixson and Rousseau (2006) conclude the introduction to their edited work by emphasizing one of the key tenets of critical race theory – a call to action toward a more racially just world. They argue that many theorists in education using a critical race theory framework have translated this into policy recommendations whose impact isn't always measurable and clear."

"Yes, this praxis is hugely important in our work. We cannot simply advocate for racial and social justice from the podium or the computer, we must be out in the streets fighting for it," reflects Eric.

"Exactly. And this activist work not only legitimates what we say at the podium or computer, it also grounds and informs it. This is the praxis of a transformative intellectual. In thinking about praxis, it helps us to rethink the traditional academic identity. For example, Stovall (2006) taught as both a professor at the college level and a teacher of high school students in a program that prepares recent college admits for their first year in college. In this program, he taught a course that used critical race theory as a framework for their analysis of contemporary media. He engaged in a transformative praxis with the act of teaching youth to dismantle dominant narratives about race, equity and justice. But it is also a transformative praxis as we're defining it now in that he is teaching at the K12 level to change opportunities for youth of color while he remains a researcher and professor at the college level pursuing the same goal."

"So you want to frame our work that transgresses the boundaries of the academy into activist work in schools as transformative praxis?"

Colette thinks for a moment. "Well, I think I want to at least use it as a starting point. What is difficult about doing this work is that there isn't a whole lot written about professors who take this path. And it is difficult work to take on anew without the guidance of those who have been doing it for awhile."

"Agreed! This has not been an easy year for me. My life partner wonders why I'm taking on this extra respon-

sibility teaching a high school course, when it's not going to help with getting tenure."

"Well, I think there are very real challenges with time – the time to teach at the K12 level comes from somewhere. And if our colleges are not going to recognize this work as valuable, then the time comes from our research, writing or occasionally, our family time. And I know, for both of us, we're unlikely to take it from our family time!"

"I think we'd both like to think we aren't taking it from family time. But I know that those nights when we were working to get out that last grant last fall, we were working late into the night after my girls had gone to bed. And while I was around the next day for my family, I was tired. And that, most definitely, takes a toll from the *quality* of my time with my family.

"Staying organized and healthy in this process is also difficult." Wincing, Eric continues, "Once I forgot to bring my lesson plans for my high school class as I was hurrying out of the office at my University. I got to the high school, realized that I'd left them and had to 'wing it'. Not something that you want to do ever—and something I preach to my pre-service teachers to *never* do. And here I am, not walking my talk. *And* on a day when some of my pre-service teachers came to observe me teaching."

"Ouch! I remember you telling me about that. Your pre-service teachers were still impressed with the job you did!"

"Or so they said. But you and I both know how mediocrity passes for greatness in so many urban schools." Eric sits up, removes his feet from the coffee table and places his now empty bottle on a coaster. Previous promises to head to bed after finishing his beer are long forgotten. Sighing, he leans back again, "Either way, I was exhausted by the end of the day and wasn't even sure my efforts had been worthwhile."

"For me, teaching in this after school program has been exhausting – there's no two ways about it. On top of my other 'sanctioned' roles as a first year professor – teaching, holding office hours, going to meetings, answering emails – I also have to try to grab some food. My

time is so short; I don't even have time to eat fast food in the car. I eat as I run into the school building, nodding to security, weaving in and out of students heading the other direction."

"You love the excuse to eat fast food – I've seen you eat it twice this trip and you've only been here three days," says Eric smiling. "Seriously, though, despite the challenges to time that we both seem to face, there's another challenge that came up for me repeatedly last year. Feeling always vulnerable and visible. Pre-service teachers coming to observe me teach at the high school level and my high school students watching me interact with the pre-service teachers."

"Yes! Constantly and everywhere vulnerable and visible. You know as well as I do that there are days in the classroom that don't go as well as you'd hope. In part, that's what makes K12 classrooms such a dynamic and exciting place to work. I leave the classroom everyday thinking about how I can become better at my vocation. I'm constantly challenged by how to improve my practice so as to increase learning opportunities for youth. The reality of this work, though, is that you make mistakes."

"Yes, but that's why reflection is such important part of this work," Eric reminds her.

Mildly acknowledging Eric's interruption, Colette continues, "Yes, yes, yes. But when my college students see me make a mistake in the classroom, they don't always get to witness the reflection. I can't take time out of our college class to constantly reflect on what happened at the middle school that day. The logistics are complicated. Here's an example. I missed a week of the after school program because I needed to present a paper at a conference. In some ways, it was a much needed break escaping *to* academia. I flew to sunny California to this conference. I was well-rested, eating healthier, spending time with my family and engaging in deep conversations with colleagues interested in similar topics."

"Sounds nice," Eric muses, "that's how I felt when I left full-time teaching for graduate school."

"But when I returned," Colette says,

shaking her head, “I felt disoriented. The program had run for a week in my absence while I had been otherwise engaged in academia. Indeed, when I returned, I felt off my game.”

“Alright, but you had to know it would be like that. You’ve been doing this long enough to know that it’s hard coming back from an absence.”

“I know. I know. That’s why when I was teaching high school math, I never missed a day of school. But now, balancing two responsibilities, I cannot always control my schedule in a way that allows me to be present all the time.

“Anyway, when I got back, I couldn’t quite get back into the K12 space. We open the after school program with a community circle that often requires that I occupy a central space for a brief period of time. It is a very visible stage with the eyes of the middle school students and tutors on you. I had been gone for awhile and the middle school students had been acting out a bit – pushing the limits in predictable ways. I struggled to acknowledge this, re-set high expectations and move on.”

“We all struggle in the classroom as events in our personal lives sometimes seep into our ability to fully inhabit our teaching identities. Here, your responsibilities to academia caused you to struggle a bit. Why is this stressing you out?” asks Eric.

“But my college students don’t expect me to struggle. They don’t want to see me struggle. Yet, I did struggle. Had it not been so public, had I not been so visible, I might have been able to transition back into the role smoothly. What increased my visibility was the fact that many of the college tutors had been or presently were students in my educational course that semester. Thus, my pedagogy was on stage, just as much as my teaching identity. How would I re-establish ‘classroom discipline’? They were viewing my actions through the lenses of educational theory and their own ‘failed’ attempts to establish respectful relationships with students.

“Anyway, I was anxious; tutors had complained that while I was gone, the students were less ‘on point’ – a prevalent problem when the program had been run in years prior by college stu-

dents. Racism inserted itself into the rationalization of behavior in ways that were implied and coded. So I was struggling to re-enter my K12 teacher identity and struggling against racialized perceptions of our youth – all on the stage of our community circle.” She pauses, seemingly to collect another thought, but remains in silence. Eric waits, wary of interrupting again.

After a moment, he cautiously picks up the thread of the conversation, “This work of living in the Borderlands is difficult. Not without precedent, likely – but surely, not shared often. You are finding your way through a new space where your worlds collide, sometimes catastrophically and other times, I assure you, creatively. You were telling me the other day how excited you were about a new research project that will result from your work at both the college and the middle school – a creative collision!”

“Yeah,” notes Colette quietly. “I hear what you’re saying. I think I’m still too involved to be able to step back. But, yes, I am excited about the research – just tired right now.”

Changing gears and shaking her head slightly, she continues, “Tell me how your year at the high school is going. I have been inspired by your decision to co-teach a high school course this year. You’re teaching with your former credential students, right?”

“Well not exactly. I am co-teaching with two teachers who were in a critical inquiry group with me the year before. So I had worked with and mentored them. We explored what it means to be White teachers engaging in critical pedagogy in the classroom. After a year of difficult conversations and struggles in the classroom, they were like, ‘Let’s do this for real. Let’s create a class based on critical pedagogy that we all co-teach.’ They challenged me to live my words and co-teach with them. With a bit of reservation, I don’t mind admitting, I accepted this challenge to re-enter the K12 space authentically as a classroom teacher.

“Talk about visibility,” Eric continues. “I also have my current teaching credential students coming in to do their student-teaching and observations in our classroom. It is really hard

to try to wear so many hats—teaching and learning together with college students, high school youth, and my co-teachers. But it has also been powerful for me. I have been so frustrated teaching at a predominantly White college because so many of my ‘liberal’ White students really don’t get it; while I believe that it is my responsibility to speak to whiteness, without the voices of students of color challenging White students in class, our conversations move slowly and, sometimes, without passion. They resist in ways that I understand but cannot always access. The quality of their learning is hurt by the fact that our conversations on race and racism, not to mention class, are devoid of the voices of the oppressed. One of the most powerful things I am involved with this year is co-teaching that high school class. I set up a structure where the high school students stay after school once a week to collaborate with undergraduate students in a first year seminar to develop an art exhibition about voice and agency in the community. The goal is to get them to interact around art and see how different folks think about things.”

“That sounds amazing! It sort of builds on the work you were doing in your teaching years ago as a graduate student – having your undergraduates do collaborative work with K12 students. So how did you structure it specifically?” Colette asks over her shoulder as she walked to the kitchen to grab a pen and some paper to jot down notes.

“The first couple of meetings we placed them in groups of three to four and sent them out into the community with cameras.”

“In these groups, were high school students matched with college students?”

“Absolutely – so they could get different views on the neighborhood that the University resides in and the high schools students live in. You see, their task was to capture images that, for them, best represent the terms self, home, community and dreams. Some crazy stuff jumped off right from the beginning. One of the first groups that went out had a high school student who had been involved in a local gang. The

two college students, when they started out, wanted to go across the street from the college to a little market to get something to drink. That meant crossing a gang boundary for the high school kid. He sort of hesitated and said that he didn't think that would be a good idea—but he never told them why. It was the middle of the day and the college kids were confused and were like, 'Don't sweat it, nothing's gonna happen.' My high school student still was hesitant, but he allowed them to convince him to go across the street to buy some sodas. Well, as soon as they crossed the street and began to approach the store, a large group of kids from the rival gang began to approach them.

"What?!"

"Yeah, it was crazy. The high school student was ready to stay and fight even though he was heavily outnumbered. The college students were terrified. They convinced him to cut out and they all went into a nearby campus building. The kids from the rival gang ended up surrounding the building and called more folks in. The high school student called my co-teacher who somehow was able to drive up to a back door of the building to get him away safely."

"So I want to know what your college students thought! How did they handle that? To my way of thinking, they were responsible for what went down, more so than anyone else involved. Their smugness resulted from a sense of safety which, to me, was rooted in White privilege. Their failure to acknowledge someone else's reality and really try to understand why your high school student was hesitating almost cost him his life."

"I am not sure I agree with that. I mean, I think it is too simplistic to simply lay the blame on them simply as individuals. Sure they were totally clueless. They had just arrived on Clark's campus from their safe suburban homes a month earlier. They were pretty freaked out. But I think there are larger systems of white supremacy at play here that structure inequality and shape the discourse on what knowledge and whose knowledge is valued. For example, I have been fighting behind closed doors, where white

privilege thrives, to have our university financially support folks of color from the local community who would like to pursue a teaching credential at our University. We currently pay for credentials for recent graduates (primarily White, middle and upper income kids). They get a full scholarship to train as a teacher. But no one wants to recognize this as privileging whiteness. Until the institutional structures change – and I do continue to fight this battle – we will continue to reproduce the same White teachers in Black and Brown educational spaces. This is just one example of what I believe is a structurally racist policy.

"At another level there is my high school student who knew better than to cross the street. He had not been on that side of Main Street in almost four years. He clearly had the knowledge and insight that everyone should have been listening to. I mean, the college students walk across the gang turf boundaries all the time oblivious to the existence of those boundaries; it's a continuing manifestation of white privilege. Yet my high school student was somehow intimidated by these college kids who were only a year older and had no real 'street smarts' at all. I mean, he is a leader in the school, was a leader in his gang at one point, and here he was intimidated by a couple of college students he had just met because he didn't feel comfortable explaining the reasons behind his hesitations.

"Maybe there were things stated or insinuated that made him feel intimidated to use his knowledge. But I think it is bigger than this single social interaction. There is a larger discourse that is tied to dominant structures of white supremacy and capitalism that determines what knowledges and whose knowledges are valuable in our society that led not only the college students to think their perspective was more important than his, but it also led my high school student to think this. It somehow made him willing to cross a road he had not crossed in four years. There is something powerful going on here that is both tied to this moment, but also bigger than that moment."

"It was a powerful crossing of borders in more ways than one."

"You could say that. Yet, despite this experience, I could not get my high school students to see that they had something to add to our weekly meetings. They remained relatively silent in their interactions with the college students. It really taught me a lot about how much work is needed to get my high school students to believe in themselves and the importance of their voice. I am sure I could have done a lot more—I know I made a lot of mistakes."

"The naïve thing to say and, perhaps what your White college students thought," suggests Colette, "is that they didn't have anything to say."

"No, not at all. After almost every weekly meeting with the college students at least one of the high school students would be pissed off about something one of the college students had said at the meeting. I'd be like, 'Why didn't you say anything?' One time we all watched a documentary called, 'A.K.A Don Bonus' in which a Cambodian immigrant student basically videotaped his senior year. It shows him cheating on a high school exam, cutting class, interacting with his family, and dealing with violence in his project apartment. In the end, he barely graduates from high school, his mom can't come to his graduation because it is on the same day as his brother's sentencing hearing in juvenile hall for gun possession. The kid, Sokly 'Don Bonus' Ny, is revealed to be this smart, sweet and deeply sensitive kid and his story is very captivating and compelling."

"I think I have seen that—was the film set in San Francisco?"

"Yeah," replies Eric, "he lived in Sunnydale Projects at the beginning and then moved to a tiny apartment with his whole family into the Tenderloin. He went to one of the better high schools in San Francisco. Anyway, after the class, my co-teacher asks the group of college and high school students, 'So is Don Bonus smart? Should he be admitted to Clark?' The high school students stayed quiet, but the college students dutifully responded, 'Maybe he wouldn't have wanted to go to college.' 'I am not sure he would like college.' 'I don't think he would have the discipline needed to go to college.'



I mean it would suck for him to be admitted and then fail out.”

“A great question for your co-teacher to ask!” Colette jumps in. “It really forces your college students to think about whether Don Bonus is as smart as they are or, at the very least, deserving of the type of education they have. Their responses are typical attempts to rationalize away the opportunities of other youth. Reminds me a bit of Bell’s Space Traders – this sympathizing away of other folks’ opportunities as if you have the right to do so. ‘For the sake of the planet, for the sake of the majority or for the sake of the Black and Brown youth themselves, we’re not going to let them have the same opportunities as we do,’ seems to be their sentiment. How did your high school students respond?”

“They didn’t offer many responses to this question, but the next day before class, one of the high school students was upset with the Clark students. Actually, he became upset at the entire college system. He identified strongly with Sokly Ny and he was angry because he felt that the college students dismissed *his* own college ambitions. I remember him being like, ‘I think everyone should get a chance to go to college and try to make it there. This system is so screwed up.’ He had pretty much messed up through high school, getting horrible grades. Now as a result of this course, he was really re-thinking his future and wanted to go to college. He was smart and knew he could go and do well in Clark, but he also knew his past grades would prevent him from being accepted. He was so filled with rage. I was like, ‘Why didn’t you say anything yesterday to the group?’ ‘I don’t know, I didn’t know what to say...’

“I kept sensing this rage building in my high school students. I didn’t have a lot of interaction with the college students – they were not in my class, but rather being taught by a colleague who was cooperating with us– but my sense was that the college students didn’t have a sense of how many of the high school students were feeling.”

“Was there any space for them to enjoy the collaboration?” asks Colette. “Were the high school students angry all the time?”

“No, there was a lot of fun and laughing. I guess I am only sharing one side of the story. There were many really creative and touching moments. The rage really came at times when my high school students felt that they didn’t have the words or the right to challenge the ‘more educated’ college students. This led them to silence themselves. In part it was directed towards some of the things the college students would innocently say, but it was also a result of their own frustrations with themselves for remaining silent, I think. But, I kept pushing them to speak up.”

“Did you try to diminish some of the status difference between the two groups? I mean, it’s clear that part of the issue was that the college students were framed as smarter than the high school students simply because they had already gotten into college. Did you create opportunities for them to have authentic conversations around something academic where the college students weren’t the experts?”

“Hmmm? See this is why we need to figure out a way to work on the same campus—I need you to push my thinking in these ways. We did have the high school students share their memoirs and the college students share their college statements. The high school memoirs were an assignment from class that resulted from their reading of Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand* about a young Latino who is silenced by his own illiteracy. After landing in jail, he finally gets his voice and becomes a poet and articulate writer. These were beautifully written and powerful pieces; so I had them share these memoirs with the college students in exchange for reading the college student statements.”

“Kind of a way for them to get to know each other through their written pieces?”

“Exactly! Well, at least that was what I was attempting to do. But, even then, I inadvertently set the high school students up to be marginalized. The college student statements were polished pieces, already submitted and considered successful writing pieces (since they’d been admitted to college already). The high school students’

memoirs were ‘pieces in progress’ and so were presented as drafts. The college students were asked to give feedback on the memoirs which led to the college students being seen as helpers for the high school students.”

“Oh! Reinforcing that status difference. You do need my help!”

“Anyway,” Eric pauses to roll his eyes, “in one pairing, one of the college students began to read one of the high school student’s memoir. Half-way into it, the college-student remarked something like, ‘Wow, this is much better than I expected.’ The high school student didn’t say anything at the time, but the next day she came up to me upset because she was like, ‘She is so ignorant, expecting that I don’t know how to write.’”

“This is so much for your high school youth to take on alone. How are you facilitating, providing support for them and challenging the White college students? Where are you in this?”

“In this instance, I stepped in to facilitate a conversation between the high school and college student. I was constantly looking for ‘teachable moments’ like this when we could use a moment of conflict to get at deeper issues of race and racism at play.”

“Was this the only time you stepped in?”

“No, as I got more sure in the role I would play, I interrupted more, but I probably should have taken a stronger facilitator role. However, eventually the tension rose to one of those critical moments when all was laid bare and there was no turning back to that ‘polite’ space of minimal confrontation.”

“Wait, wait, wait – I’m going to need more ice cream for this. This sounds like it’s going to blow-up,” Colette says as she runs to the kitchen to scoop out more ice cream. “Do you want another beer while I’m in here? Oh wait. You said that was your last one for the night. When you finished the beer, we’d finish our conversation... at least for tonight.”

Eric pushes himself out of the couch he’d been deeply embedded in and joins Colette in the kitchen. Looking at the clock on the oven, Eric is surprised at the late hour. “Oh, man! Look what time it is! We have to rise and shine tomorrow to take the kids out to the park

as promised.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about – I promised to get up early to make pancakes with the girls while you two sleep in. Our girls will be waking me up before the sun rises! But I’ve got to hear the rest of your story. One more beer and that’s the last story for the night.”

“Okay, Okay. It was about a month before the end of the semester. We were planning an art exhibit to display the masks, artist books and the photographs as a collaboration between the high school and college students. For the photographs we had taken about 500 pictures. The plan was that a group made up of some of the college students and some of the high school students would work with a professional photographer to select about a hundred photos that capture our sense of community and home. Of these hundred, the entire group would narrow it down to fifty for the photograph exhibition. However, due to some drama at the high school, all after school activities were canceled the Wednesday when we were going to form the initial selection team. So, only the college students went with the photographer to select photos. The deadline we had to get them printed meant we couldn’t delay it another week. The next week, then, we met as a large group to select 50 photographs from the 100 chosen by only the group of college students.”

With her eyes and nose scrunched in anticipation of what was coming, Colette exclaims, “Oh no! What a setup—I can see where this is going.”

“Yeah, so a few of the college students got up at the meeting along with the professional photographer and started to talk about each photograph one at a time as they flashed the photograph across a large projection screen. The college students from the selection group would share why they liked a photo. The professional photographer and his assistant talked about the composition of the photographs. It begins initially with everyone being asked to raise their hand if they want the image in the show or not. Initially, there is only limited and rather pleasant discussion before the vote on any particular photograph.”

“Initially,” sighs Colette while sitting forward on the couch, absent-mindedly eating her ice cream.

“Well, a small group of the high school students got more and more vocal with each passing slide. Finally, one of them said, ‘These photos are too nice of the neighborhood. That’s not the Main South I know!’ Another exclaimed, ‘We have two different visions. You all,’ meaning the college students, ‘see the neighborhood different than us.’ Some of the high school students kept asking who took each picture. The discussion began to devolve and it was hard to reach any real conclusion about what to do.”

“Ha!” cries Colette as she slams her ice cream mug on the coffee table in her enthusiasm, then picks it up to see if she left a water ring on the coffee table. She rubs the place where the mug had sat briefly and then runs to put the mug in the sink. From the kitchen, she shouts, “They finally found their voices! It sounds like on the surface it seemed like a debate about the photographs. But really, it was about something that had been simmering all semester!”

“The real, albeit unspoken issue, was who really has the authority to say what best represents the community—the high school students who lived their entire lives in Main South or the college students who are recent, seasonal visitors? In the end it was about the politics of representation. Some of the high school students who finally unleashed their voices said some things that were hurtful.”

“Ah! Thus, silencing the college students in return?”

“Well, many of the college students felt that their perspectives were being dismissed. But the high school students asserted that since they had grown up and struggled to survive in this community that they knew it in a way that was more authentic than the college students who had just arrived and were not really ‘of’ the community.”

“Well said! Indeed, their voice has more legitimacy than the college kids!”

“One high school student said that they should be the ones who choose the photos and the college students could offer their perspective or feedback to

try to sway the decision. In defense, several of the college students articulated a position that indicated that, although they had a different perspective on the community, that it was just as legitimate. They also argued that the point of this art exhibition was to showcase the collaboration across differences and excluding from the choosing was not collaborative.”

Colette points out, “But selecting the photographs had not been collaborative. Yet, they went forward with that. For reasons connected to age, race, and location, the high school students had been unable to participate in the empowering act of choosing the initial set of photographs.”

“Good point. I wonder how it would have all went down if the high school students selected the hundred and then they collaboratively selected the fifty. I think that is what the one student was advocating—I am sure the college students would have felt that was unfair, yet the de facto reality was unfair and no one really conceded that. It was merely viewed as circumstantial. The debate raged on for a while and we were clearly not completing the task at hand to choose fifty pictures. The conflict was eventually ended when one of the high school students said that everyone should just pick one photo and explain why they chose it. People left frustrated and hurt. The whole debate seemed to divide the high school students from the college students. In the end the high school students continued to assert their voice by formally naming the exhibition, ‘Us and Them.’”

“I love it!” exclaims Colette.

“I did too – they were willing to name the actual underlying issue. They looked at it directly and called it by name. The college students, of course, were not there yet and the title itself became hotly debated and contentious. A lot of people were saddened by the conflict. I was probably the only one that felt good about it. I was like, ‘Yes, finally!’ It was the first time that there was intense passion in the conversation in which people were really trying to speak their truth to each other across the differences. The college students had felt that the collaboration had been going smoothly throughout the semes-



ter and were taken aback and saddened by the hostility and conflict that occurred which they felt had undermined the progress. I felt like it was really the beginning of progress, the beginning of authentic dialogue. The prior pleasantness of the interactions and lack of conflict really hid the underlying frustrations that had been hidden by the general silence of the high school students. Now they were struggling with what the community really was and how it should be represented. This is messy and contentious stuff. Finally, college students could see what the high school students, who had been silenced for so long, really thought, and the high school students began to find their voices. I felt the learning had really begun."

Colette sits back, smiling, feeling like she had just finished a ten-course meal. "I feel inexplicably content by that outcome. It perfectly captures both the challenges and potential for transformative praxis. The K12 and college students act as both learners and teachers in a way that they could not gain from textbooks or lectures alone. And your role of facilitating all this was indispensable. As their high school teacher, you knew the high school students well. You were already doing this work of teaching at the K12 and college levels simultaneously. Yet, you add this other layer, connecting your work with K12 students, college student and pre-service teachers together. Layer upon layer upon layer."

"It was really a powerful exchange for me, and I hope for my students.."

Colette smiles as she thinks about Eric's work this semester. A yawn catches her off guard and she stands up to stretch. As she begins to say something in response, she looks over to Eric who is now once again deep in the couch staring off – no doubt thinking back to the photography show. So, instead, Colette leans over to grab his empty beer bottle off the coffee table and says, "I'll get this for you before I head up to bed." She knows he's going to climb the stairs to his office to grade "just a few more papers" before turning in for the night.

Looking back over her shoulder as she leaves the kitchen, she sees him lean forward, head in his hands, shak-

ing his head. She turns to head upstairs, her thoughts already turned to a morning of giggling girls and Mickey Mouse shaped pancakes...

### DISCUSSION: DISMANTLING THE MASTER'S HOUSE THROUGH DISCORDANT COMMUNITIES

In this section, we engage with this narrative to explore the challenges and opportunities such border-crossing offers. The private colleges where we teach and the nearby urban schools in which we work present contrasting racialized (and socio-economic) contexts. Our work with our students at the K12 and college levels is similarly about developing what we term "a discordant community"<sup>2</sup> – a community based on difference that serves to challenge assumptions and raise critical (racial) consciousness so that individuals can work together across differences for greater social justice. It is, thus, a theory that views critique as a form of engagement that promotes individual and community growth, albeit often painful growth, so that we can achieve better social, psychological and material outcomes for us all. How do the youths' identities and backgrounds, both the high school and the college students, affect these border crossings? How do our personal and professional identities affect our work in each of these contexts? How can our own relationship marked by difference, yet held together by love for each other and focus on our social justice work in schools, embrace conflict, critique, and challenge as well as solidarity, support, and celebration? In this narrative form that is new to us, we have attempted to analyze our data – those concrete, critical moments when we made choices to act as transformative intellectuals, moving between and within racialized classroom spaces. Here, we seek to build theory that can conceptualize this work across difference: across student communities, across work sites, and across race.

Given the nature of white supremacy, we must first recognize that most of the benefits of developing discordant communities accrue to the White people engaged in the process. People

of color in the US, particularly in US schools, routinely experience and are affected by racism. They have little choice but to develop a "double consciousness" as they progress through this landscape – both critiquing and embracing institutions of possibility in society, both seeing the world through the eyes of White folks and people of color (DuBois, 1969; Matsuda, 1995).

White folks, by contrast, are rarely forced to recognize the world from the perspective of people of color. Delgado (1996), in his eleventh chronicle, argues that there is no basis for empathic action across race for White folks as the experiences of a people historically subjugated run counter to the experiences of the racially dominant group. He notes, "persons of radically different background and race cannot be made vicariously to identify with [people of color] to any significant extent..." (pp. 514-615).

### Across Campuses: The Work of High School and College Students in Discordant Communities

In our narrative, one of the high school students working with Eric was encouraged to cross a street, a gang boundary line, that he had not crossed in four years. This student was also very clear that for the college students this boundary was invisible. When the high school student tried to persuade his group to not go across the street, he was asking the college students to empathize and view the world through the eyes. However, the college students resisted his warning and placed the high school student in danger. Barbara Flagg (1997) refers to this as "transparency," which is the striking aspect of whiteness in which White people usually lack awareness of their whiteness. Transparency, Flagg notes, "affords substantial advantages to whites over blacks even when decision-makers intend to effect substantive racial justice" (p. 629). Indeed, it is remarkable that the college youth, who are often of a similar age, are rarely implicated in the events that consume lives of the college-aged youth "from" these communities; in fact, the college youth are typically al-

lowed free passage – their pass embodied in their racial and class privilege.

In this case, the high school student's entrance into this discordant community put his own life at risk. Although the college students were also placed at risk for failing to heed his warning, they also were afforded an education about his world and the worlds of social youth in the surrounding community. Being with the student, rather than observing his experiences, moved them beyond empathy (or false empathy, as Delgado argues) to truly create an opportunity to begin the journey to examine and dismantle their own privilege. However, through conversation and reflection, the high school student also grew. As a result of this instance and his own lack of voice and power in the discordant community even when he had the best and most valuable knowledge, he was able to begin to understand the importance of the knowledge he possessed. He also came to realize that his double consciousness gave him an important perspective, and he quickly emerged as a leader with a stronger voice who began to embrace his societal marginalization as a space of radical insight (hooks, 1990).

Similar challenges/dangers and opportunities occurred in bringing the high school youth and college students together into a discordant community to create the art exhibition. While there were moments of sharing and collaboration across divides in important ways, the high school students frequently returned to class on the following day with frustrations at some comment or statement made by one of the college students. These silenced tensions eventually came out in a large conflict around the photographs in which the arguments had more to do with the feelings than with what was said. The discord that occurred resulted in pain but also growth. The college students came face to face with a group of high school students who, after a semester of collaboration, still wanted to call the exhibition "Us and Them." Again, through these meaningful relationships and conflict, the college students were moved beyond false empathy to engage in a dialogue often silenced (Delpit, 1988). They were directly

challenged in their racist world views.

Meanwhile the high school students also found their voices. It was emotional and full of "attitude," but without this conflict they probably would not have felt compelled to stand up to the college students. A further benefit accrued to the high school students. They expanded their social capital with college students and learned about college life. They were able to read the college statements of successful college students. They visited dorm rooms to see what life is like inside what they perceived to be the hallowed halls of academia. These connections demystified college. The high school students began the semester intimidated by the status of the college students. But as they developed their own voices and recognized their own knowledges, they realized that they were as intelligent and capable and deserving of attending college as the college students with whom they were partnered.

It is in the messiness, the conflict, and the pain where much of the growth occurs. And this, we believe, is the value of discordant communities. It is in moving into and through the conflict where honest conversations can occur. This is the power of forging communities across difference; our own efforts to cross borders created opportunities for our high school and college students to cross borders. The work of discordant communities is a space to wrestle with ourselves and our positionality in relation to others so that we can move forward together in the struggle against oppression. It is similar to what Zeus Leonardo (2009) writes about race theory: "At its best race theory is the move to remember our racialization, to reclaim the racial meanings of our lives not in order to further to divide people from each other but to educate one another for mutual benefit" (p. 3). This is what engagement in discordant communities does for people.

### **Across School Communities: The Construction of a Transformative Intellectual Identity**

Following the work of Hall (1992) and Wenger (1998), we argue that

identity – specifically our professional identity – is continually negotiated as we traverse and inhabit both the K12 and university school communities; each community shapes this identity differently. As Wenger (1998) explains, "Identity is thus more than just a single trajectory; instead, it should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership" (p. 159). This is not to say that we have multiple identities (a K12 teacher identity and a college professor identity); rather our identity is informed by our memberships in multiple communities of practice. Wenger continues, "(C)onsidering a person as having multiple identities would miss all the subtle ways in which our various forms of participation (in different communities of practice), no matter how distinct, can interact, influence each other, and require coordination" (p. 159).

An identity at the nexus of multimembership is not an uncontested identity. We argue that this identity itself is a discordant site. That is, it is an identity marked by useful conflict – conflicts of time and allegiances. bell hooks (1990) problematizes "multimembership", raising the complexities of inhabiting, negotiating, transitioning and transcending different social geographies. hooks offers a view of multimembership as charged, painful, politicized, but (potentially) empowering. She argues, for example, that the cost of full academic membership is often not a layered identity, but an assimilated identity. The offered alternative is a marginalized membership, an academic presence as an outsider "involved with" but never quite "of" the different academic social geographies. Quoting hooks, Thomas and Hollensted (2001) write, "I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of racial openness and possibility" (p. 166).

Our efforts to construct professional identities as transformative intellectuals affect our choices to do this work, crossing borders daily. Our commitment to directly interrupt the construction of Black and Brown youth as academic "failures," working in schools

as teachers to affect how students experience schools, is attributable to our decision to claim this identity.

Similarly, while this paper attends, in part, to the negotiation of this academic identity, we acknowledge the importance of our personal racial, gendered and class identities on our academic work. Our focus on our academic identities does not diminish the role that our personal identities play in how we experience this border crossing. Class, race, gender, language and sexuality (for example) remain dominant narratives that shape the social worlds in which we exist. We recognize that in the negotiation of our academic identities, we simultaneously construct personal identities that interact with our academic identities. These personal identities respond to dominant and essentialist discourses in this continual process of identity construction. Thus, while our narrative does not seem to focus intentionally on the construction of our personal identities, it necessarily tells the story of our own efforts to challenge dominant discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.

Delgado Bernal (2002) contends that our identities, raced and gendered, matter to our identities as teachers. As well, they matter to the identities of those with whom we work. Far from essentializing race and gender, Delgado Bernal argues that there are “core values” to which folks of color, for example, subscribe (“education, self-determination, resistance, family and freedom” [p. 119]); these core values are central to our multiple, intersecting identities born out of experiences with and in the world. Bringing our personal identities to bear on our academic identities promises rich experiences for our K12 and college students. It is not without dilemma, though, for in so doing we take risks in our careers as we challenge dominant narratives about what it means to be a professor.

### Across Difference: Theorizing Collaboration Across Race and Gender

Lastly, the power and pain of discordant communities is enacted in our relationship with each other. Late night conversations in each others’

homes or on the phone, and even the process of writing collaboratively is an on-going act of forging such discordant communities. It is an act of friendship that confronts each other on both our ideas and our practice even when (especially when) the two seem in contradiction. It requires open and honest communication and sometimes quite lengthy conversations when we realize we have been talking past each other.

While our own relationship shares many similarities with other forms of community, we characterize our relationship as a discordant community because it is a relationship built across differences and conflict. Many communities come into being because they offer safe spaces for people to share in their commonalities. Thus, the basis for such communities is commonality. While we affirm such spaces and such communities, we are reminded of the need for discordant communities in which people come together to discuss not the spaces of commonality, but the spaces of difference. In fact, we discuss our commonalities around being junior academics and secondary teachers; but our most profound learning occurs around conversations of race, class and gender – where our experiences in the world differ. These are not easy conversations – they force us each to learn (returning to Audre Lorde’s [1984] words), “how to take our differences and make them strengths” (p. 112). Such discordant spaces enable us to step beyond our own realities and connect with others across borders. For Eric, this has meant embracing the role of White ally who challenges racism and white supremacy and continually works to raise his own and other White people’s consciousness of a US racialized hierarchy that masks racial injustice in a veil of meritocratic ideology.

### CONCLUSION

In addition to affirming the need for discordant communities, we have sought to foster and model it through the writing and presentation of this article. We write in the hope that this narrative offers a lens through which others can continue to theorize about the possibilities of this border-cross-

ing work in which we, as academics in the field of education, engage. The development of discordant communities is inherently conflict-laden. But discordant communities also present the opportunity for powerful learning for their members and a means to dismantle the master’s house.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is one of a series of articles under review. Elsewhere (under review), we explore the work of a transformative intellectual and the implications of this work for research, community building, mentoring and teaching in the college classroom.

<sup>2</sup>We theorize a discordant commu-



nity in contrast to literature that defines the purpose of communities as “to nurture and protect the individual” (Ginwright paraphrasing Somé, 2010). While we don’t deny the need for such a community, here we make the claim that communities can also serve the purpose of creating dialogue marked by useful conflict – conflict that increases awareness of racial and social injustice.

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