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‘Teaching while Black’: narratives of African American student affairs faculty

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African American faculty have historically been underrepresented within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and deal with academic isolation, marginalization of their scholarship, and racial hostility. Little is known about the experiences of African American faculty who teach in student affairs graduate programs. The purpose of this study was to focus on their experiences through examination and utilization of their personal counter-narratives. This paper highlights the racial profiling that often shapes their experiences. We employ a qualitative critical race analysis that utilizes counterstorytelling as method to elucidate the experiences of the 13 African American faculty participants in our study.

Keywords: African American; faculty; student affairs; critical race theory

Introduction

Our worlds comprise and are constructed around stories. Our lived experiences are transmitted through stories, which in turn story our lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) indicated, ‘people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives’ (2). Stories are especially relevant for outgroups, or individuals whose experiences have been relegated to the margins of society. ‘An outgroup creates its own stories, which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality’ (Delgado 1989). Through qualitative research, narrative inquiry in particular, such stories become the phenomenon of research (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). The study presented herein focuses on the lived experiences of an outgroup. We present a powerful example of how the lives of African American student affairs faculty are storied and how their narratives can be used to disrupt majoritarian stories of the academy. To do so, we relied on the larger societal story of racial profiling. Tomaskovic-Devey, Mason, and Zingraff (2004) described ‘driving while black’ as ‘the practice of targeting drivers of color, especially African Americans, for unwarranted traffic law enforcement’ (4). The story of ‘driving while black’ comprises three erroneous assumptions that allow police officers to single out African Americans based upon their location. The first assumption points to racism within the larger law enforcement system, which dictates expectations regarding ‘who belongs and where they belong’ (Meehan and Ponder 309). The second is that African Americans should remain within their communities or rather
out of suburban neighborhoods. Meehan and Ponder (2002) argued, ‘when driving through suburban communities, they [African Americans] are profiled because they are presumed to be “out of place”’ (407). The third assumption, and perhaps most salient, is that African Americans should not be where they do not belong, that is, in white (codeword: suburban) residential neighborhoods.

We applied the ‘driving while black’ phenomenon as a metaphor to analyze the personal narratives of African American student affairs faculty. Hence we use the phrase ‘teaching while black’, coined by Frank Tuitt who first used the phrase to describe the racial profiling of African American scholars. African Americans and faculty of color in general often experience racial profiling, are presumed to be ‘out of place’ in the academy, and are subjected to assumptions regarding whether and where they belong.

**Overview of the literature**

The relative absence of African American faculty has been a pervasive issue in higher education (Allen, Epps, and Guillory 2000; US Department of Education 2008). At present, 78% of the 675,624 full-time instructional faculty at degree-granting institutions are White and non-Hispanic. Faculty of color represented just 16.5% of the full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions – .004% (3340) American Indian or Alaskan Native, 7.6% (53,661) Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.55% (24,975) Hispanic/Latino, and 5.5% (37,930) Black/African American. Further, African American faculty constitute just 4% (12,886 of 307,636) of tenured faculty (associate professor level and above) compared to White colleagues who comprise 84% (258,443) of tenured faculty at these institutions. The presence of African American scholars within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that are renowned for their resources, profitable social networks, large endowments, and high levels of prestige has typically been low and continues to decline (Constantine et al. 2008; Samuel and Wane 2005).

The absence of these scholars within PWIs reinforces false stereotypes that African Americans cannot or do not succeed in higher education (Smith 2004), inhibits an institution’s ability to recruit and retain newer African American faculty (Blackwell 1989; Holland 1993; Witt 1990), and limits the number of same-race mentors for African American students, which is central to their academic success (Grant-Thompson and Atkinson 1997; Hickson 2002; Patton 2009). The absence of these scholars within the tenured ranks greatly restricts their capacity to be involved with politically relevant coalitions that push for the development of institutional policies to address diversity and equity issues on campus (Assensoh 2003). Moreover, their demographical absence contributes to feelings of isolation. They are invisible among the largely White professoriate, yet ‘hyper-visible’ when their presence is needed to serve as the ‘diversity’ voice (Stanley 2006; Thomas and Hollenshead 2001; Turner and Myers 2000). African American faculty also feel they must work twice as hard as White colleagues, which may induce significant stress (Johnson-Bailey 1999; Laden and Hagedorn 2000; Smith and Witt 1996).

There is a growing body of research that examines the gender dynamics among faculty of color. The vast majority focus primarily on African American women who comprise approximately 51% of African American faculty and 2.7% of the total full-time faculty at degree-granting institutions. These scholars often endure the effects of racism and sexism simultaneously (Allison 2008; Harris 2007; Patitu and Hinton 2003; Thomas and Hollenshead 2001; Turner 2002; Zamani 2003); are stereotyped as
loud, aggressive, and bitchy (Weitz and Gordon 1993); and earn lower salaries than
their White colleagues and male counterparts (Guillory 2001). African American male
scholars, experience little or no senior-level African American male faculty mentors,
lack knowledge regarding ‘rules of the game’, lack respect for their research and
scholarship, receive resistance from White male students, and are expected to be intel-
lectually inferior (Harrison 2000; Heggies 2004; Williams and Williams 2006).

In the classroom, African American faculty report that their authority and knowl-
edge is challenged by students (Bower 2002; Stanley et al. 2003; Vargas 2002). Focus
group interview findings with 10 African American faculty at a large PWI indicated
that White students were more ready to ‘(1) critique their classroom effectiveness, (2)
challenge their authority, (3) have a lower level of respect, and (4) report their
concerns and critiques to the professor or to his or her superior’ (McGowan 2000, 21).
African American faculty also experience resistance from students regarding issues of
diversity in the form of students’ critiquing the validity of their work (McGowan
2000), sharing their dissatisfaction on course evaluations (Bower 2002; McGowan
2000; Stanley et al. 2003; Tusmith and Reddy 2002; Vargas 2002), expressing dissent
through public venues such as the Internet or student newspapers (Stanley 2006), or
utilizing silence and color-blind ideologies to resist the intellectual efforts of African
American faculty (Williams and Evans-Winters 2005).

There are very few empirical analyses that examine the experiences of African
American faculty in disciplines within the Graduate Schools of Education (GSEs)
(Constantine et al. 2008; Smith 2004; William and Evans-Winters 2005), and none
chronicling faculty of color in student affairs graduate programs, which prepare
future practitioners, teachers, and scholars to facilitate the holistic development of
postsecondary learners and pursue careers in higher education as administrators and
leaders. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the non-existent knowledge
about African American tenure-track faculty within student affairs graduate programs
at PWIs. Using a critical race theoretical framework, we utilize counterstorytelling as
a method to elucidate their experiences and offer implications for research and
practice.

Critical race theory
The conceptual and methodological framework for this study is critical race theory
(CRT), a movement of scholars committed to examining, challenging, and transform-
ing the manner in which race, racism, and power operate to maintain systems of White
supremacy. CRT emerged in the legal field but has since been used to understand
racist policies and practices within education. According to Solórzano and Yosso
(2001), CRT in education acknowledges the centricity of race and racism in society
and is committed to challenging dominant ideologies such as colorblindness, objectiv-
ity, and race neutrality. CRT scholars situate race, racism, and power in historical and
transdisciplinary contexts to promote social justice strategies that dismantle systems
of oppression while simultaneously empowering oppressed groups (Solórzano and
Yosso 2001).

The validation of the experiential knowledge of people of color is a major tenet of
CRT and most applicable to this study. This ‘voice-of-color thesis’ presumes that due
to their diverse histories and racially oppressive experiences, people of color possess
knowledge that allows them to discuss race and racism with White people who are less
likely to have those experiences (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Nuanced understand-
ings of their racial realities are shared through storytelling, interviews, life histories, chronicles, and narratives (see Bell 1987; Delgado 1989).

Race is particularly prevalent in the stories that we are told and ultimately retell. One type is the majoritarian story. Love (2004) described majoritarian stories as ‘the description of events as told by members of dominant/majority groups, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant position’ (229). Those in positions of dominance create and tell majoritarian stories to continually be reminded of their dominance over marginalized groups and to fashion a shared, but subverted reality among other dominant group members to maintain their superiority as normal (Delgado 1989).

‘If there are narratives that reinforce and reproduce dominant cultural perceptions, then narratives also have the possibility of revealing gaps in those same perceptions’ (Williams 2004, 168). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined counterstories ‘as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society)’ (32). Counterstorytelling is a strategy of telling stories and an analytical tool for examining stories (Solórzano and Yosso 2001, 2002). They are important because they use race as a filter to deconstruct and contradict majoritarian stories, promote community building, challenge dominant thinking, and introduce alternative realities for those on societal margins (Solórzano and Yosso 2002).

**Counterstorytelling as method**

Counterstories are not fictional, but instead grounded in actual life experiences. They can be presented in the form of a composite narrative in which the author uses a variety of data sources that when combined tell the experiences of marginalized communities. In this particular type of counterstory, composite characters are created and contextually located to allow the participants’ experiences with racism and other intersecting identities to be foregrounded.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) recommend a particular method for creating counterstories, grounded in theoretical sensitivity and cultural intuition. Theoretical sensitivity, introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990), involves the process whereby researchers tap into the subtle nuances of making meaning of data by exercising particular sensitivity to their own experiences as well as those of the study participants. As researchers, we approached this study with particular sensitivity given our own experiences in the classroom. The first author is a tenure-track faculty member and the second is a student affairs practitioner-scholar with a sizeable amount of teaching experiences. We both identify as African American and have research experiences and interests that focus on African Americans in higher education. Our own experiences coupled with our knowledge of the literature contributed significantly to the sensitivity we practiced in approaching our data collection and analysis. Cultural intuition stems from Delgado Bernal’s (1998) work on Chicana feminist epistemologies in which she extends Strauss and Corbin’s idea of theoretical sensitivity. What distinguishes cultural intuition from theoretical sensitivity is that it expands beyond experiences on a personal level and acknowledges a more holistic process inclusive of communal experiences, knowledge, and memory. Moreover, cultural intuition is practiced in data analysis as a collaborative sensemaking process between the participants’ and the researcher (Delgado Bernal 1998). Both theoretical
sensitivity and cultural intuition stem from four main sources: existing literature, diverse sources of data, personal experiences, and professional experiences.

To construct the counterstory, we began by combing the current literature focusing on faculty of color broadly and African Americans specifically. Particular themes in the literature such as the impact of the campus climate, experiences related to teaching, the challenges of tenure and promotion, and gendered racism emerged to provide a backdrop. The literature also provided us with a guide for how we approached collection of our primary data. Invitations were sent to 24 African American student affairs faculty across the country at all levels, of which 13 agreed to write a narrative describing their experiences. They were provided with flexibility to story their own experiences and exercised sole authority with regard to the length and content of their individual narratives. However, they were asked to address aspects of teaching, research, service, and departmental perceptions and provided with optional prompts (‘How would you describe your research agenda?’; ‘How would you describe your teaching experiences?’; and ‘In what ways do your identities (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) shape your experiences as a faculty member’) that could be used to construct their narratives. Once all narratives were submitted, the lead author conducted the analysis, which involved reading each narrative individually and identifying key situations that shaped how participants viewed themselves in their faculty roles. The second reading was comprised of noting how their experiences were either supported by or missing from the literature. In the third round of analysis, both authors engaged in a series of conversations regarding the participants’ experiences. We also reflected on our experiences as student affairs educators and the varied voices of colleagues who helped shape our meaning making with regard to the profession.

Upon completion of the data analysis, the lead author engaged in ‘compositing’ or the process of developing composite characters to construct a critical race counterstory. Compositing is an essential procedure to studies such as the one presented herein because it protects the identities of individuals within populations who might otherwise be easily identified if the information was presented thematically using direct quotes from participants. There are so few African American faculty in student affairs programs writ large; thus, composite characters were developed to illuminate the voices of participants without placing them at risk given the politics of the academy shared earlier. Compositing is also helpful in bringing similar themes that arose across narratives together to present a more cogent picture of the participants’ experiences, while simultaneously allowing unique experiences to unfold. Compositing provides space for symbolism in scholarly writing and foregrounds our use of metaphor (teaching while black) to bring forth an enriched and alternative reality for the readers. The symbolism is also prominent in composite character development. The protagonist characters in the counterstory not only represent the stories of 13 African American faculty, they also have larger social meanings in relation to the operation of race and racism in society and its disproportionate impact on racially oppressed groups. Conversely, the antagonistic character not only reflects individual, localized thinking and behaviors among beneficiaries of systemic racial dominance but also alludes to how such elements typically play out in academic settings and beyond the academy.

In this counterstory, readers are invited into the lives of composite characters that explicate the hegemonic and overlapping nature of race, racism, and power. The characters were intentionally designed to contextualize the experiences of African American faculty in a student affairs setting and to represent individuals, much like
ourselves who have experienced the ‘teaching while black’ phenomenon. Through their dialogical exchange, the findings of the data are illuminated, and readers will notice the prominent themes related to teaching experiences that emerged from the narratives including lack of respect, defending credentials, having their teaching questioned, and challenges with diversity courses.

**A critical race counterstory**

For the past decade at the annual student affairs conference, faculty members have participated in a mentoring program designed to foster relationships between senior faculty and junior faculty. Ronald and Danielle, the youngest and only African American tenure-track student affairs faculty in their respective programs, wave to one another from across the room. The students whom they teach are 85–90% White. Although they had heard about one another and crossed paths early on, they officially met at a CRT in education conference a few months back. Ronald is in his third year of teaching, while Danielle is in her fourth. They had been selected to participate in the mentoring program and assigned to work with Ann Bailey. Ann, a senior faculty member, has been teaching for years and is excited to have an opportunity to serve as a mentor, especially to two African Americans. Ann approaches Ronald and Danielle:

Hello. I can’t tell you how nice it is to meet you. I want to learn about you. I am especially interested in your teaching experiences. I realize that research is very important to your tenure and promotion, but often teaching falls by the wayside. I hope to impart my wisdom in a way that will be helpful to you. Should we run out of time, we will continue our discussion at our next meeting, two days from now. How does that sound?

Ronald and Danielle equally express their excitement about the mentoring opportunity and agree with Ann, who inquires, ‘So, I know we’re going to focus on teaching but how are your overall experiences thus far?’

Danielle begins:

Overall, things are okay, but let me clarify. I enjoy the pursuit of my research interests and teaching. However, it’s not always easy. I’ve had experiences that caused me to reflect upon why I remain a faculty member. On the surface everything seems fine, but immediately beneath the surface, there’s a lot of racism that I contend with. Oftentimes, it seems like a game that I have to play to get tenure. By this I mean that the rules for tenure, as you know Ann, are quite ambiguous and seemingly fluid. Therefore, I often feel as if I need to work twice as hard. After participating in several workshops on tenure and promotion and reading the university tenure policies, it seems like there are a lot of hidden rules and mixed messages. Not too much of ‘this’, a whole lot of ‘that’. You work really hard to accomplish these things and find that your white colleague down the hall who has less of ‘this’ and ‘that’ got tenure. As an African American scholar, I never feel as if I can afford to have less of anything. So I’m in this system of hidden and coded language that I’m learning to understand but feel less comfortable about everyday. And don’t let me get started on the teaching piece. I have much to say where that’s concerned. As far as my teaching goes, I have four courses that include, theory, diverse issues, intro to student affairs, and the practicum experience.

‘I’m experiencing a similar situation Danielle’, Ronald interjects:

I also teach the diversity course in my program as well as college environments, and the administration course. I’m working in a pretty decent department and feel really good about my decision to pursue faculty life. However, there are some situations that have
forced me to really examine how my race shapes my experience. The CRT literature that I’ve been reading has made a significant impact on how I analyze my experiences in a student affairs graduate program.

‘Danielle, I see you nodding in agreement. Can one of you expound on CRT. I’m not sure I understand to what you are referring’. Ronald states:

Sure Ann. CRT stands for critical race theory. CRT is a movement of scholars as well as an oppositional framework that interrogates and challenges the status quo of systemic, racist ideologies, behaviors, and beliefs that continuously benefit dominant groups, while further marginalizing those who fall outside the dominant group. Specifically, CRT is concerned with the relationships between race, racism, and power as well as how race intersects with other oppressed identities and is committed to working toward social justice. I really appreciate this framework because it gives voice to people of color and provides a language through which we can articulate and interpret our experiences, while also challenging dominant, white, hegemonic systems that are treated as ‘normal’ This is probably more than you wanted to know about CRT, but it really is worth exploring.

Danielle adds:

Ann, since you wanted to focus on teaching in this conversation, I can give you an example of how CRT has helped me better understand the racial dynamics of my life as a faculty member. It’s fairly common in my department, and I’m sure it goes the same in yours, for students to address faculty by their first names. However, on several occasions, often inside the classroom, students will refer to me using my first name, but will refer to the senior colleagues in my department, all of whom are white, using their titles.

Ann notes, ‘well, that happens all the time. You’re right in that students often pick and choose how they will address professors. I’m not sure I understand what this has to do with race’.

Don’t get me wrong Ann. I don’t need to be referred to as ‘Dr.’ if that’s the culture, but it’s awfully rude for a student to call me Danielle in one breathe and then in the next refer to my white colleagues as ‘Dr. so and so’. I believe race comes in because I’m not being extended the same respect as my colleagues. I also think that my gender and age play a major role in why students approach me in this fashion.

Ronald adds, ‘Right Danielle. I totally understand the microaggressions you’ve mentioned’.

Danielle goes further:

Microaggressions are pretty common in my experiences. During my first week in my position, a white male faculty member assumed I was a graduate student. I thought to myself sarcastically ‘Of course, there’s no way the department would hire a young, Black woman to teach in the program’. When I told him I was a new faculty member he proceeded to look at me in disbelief, telling me, ‘You’re too pretty to be a professor’. So immediately I saw my age, race, gender and physical appearance converging all at once. I could have screamed, but I’m too pretty to do that!

The group laughs and Danielle continues:

I remember one situation where a white male student would bring his computer to class and each time I said something, he would Google it on the internet. He would read what he found and then add to what I was teaching and even attempted to correct me once or twice. The funny thing about it is that he thought he was ‘helping’ me. I remember
thinking about his assumption that I needed help in the first place. He was not confident in my abilities as an instructor. This type of challenge by students is particularly common and when I call students on their behavior, I’m perceived as having an attitude.

Ann adds:

Oh yes, students in our graduate programs are often excited to learn new information. I appreciate being challenged in class. It has made me a stronger teacher. I know how such situations may seem unpleasant now, but you should just use them as teachable moments and try to avoid being defensive. (Danielle pauses ... She is now skeptical of Ann’s advice)

Ronald begins to share some of his experiences:

Teachable moments [pause, sigh] indeed they are. I think what I learn most is that there are certain things I can expect in the classroom when it comes to being an African American faculty member. I expect to be challenged in class. I expect students to have arbitrary criteria that will be used to judge whether or not I am a suitable teacher. I know that I will have to ‘pass’ some informal test of competency that they construct as a valid measure of my abilities. I expect to receive a great deal of resistance in the diversity course I teach, mainly because students don’t want me to perceive them as racist. I expect to work really hard on my facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice because when I do challenge students, I know the possibility of it being perceived as a personal attack on them. I expect that at the end of each semester, my course evaluations won’t be as strong as they could be. They will be okay or even good, but laced with comments that will certainly reflect negatively during my tenure review process. ‘He focuses too much on diversity issues’, ‘Too much of his perspective pervades the course discussion’ and ‘He inhibits students’ comfort level in engaging diversity topics.

I know this story all too well. This all reminds me of a conference presentation I attended some years ago when a colleague used the phrase ‘teaching while black’ to describe a sort of racial profiling that happens in the classroom. He too suggested that African American faculty, by virtue of their race, are subjected to unwarranted attacks on their credibility. As each new cohort enters my classroom, I am prepared to present my credentials and prove my credibility. But it doesn’t stop there. The students have to assess my teaching before I receive my ‘pass’. I can’t tell you the number of times where students, especially older White men in our doctoral program, have challenged my authority in the classroom or took subtle shots at my credibility. When I see them coming from semester to semester, I already know the ‘unspoken assumption’ is that the skill sets I bring to the academy are substandard.

Ann is intrigued. She follows up, ‘Ronald it’s interesting that you say that these types of challenges are going on. Clearly, you wouldn’t have been hired if you didn’t have the qualifications to teach right? Or at least that’s how I see it. What do you think you could be doing to possibly offset these challenges?’

Danielle raises her right hand [index finger pointing up] and says:

Ann, let me respond to that question. The answer is nothing. There is nothing that Ronald or me, or any other African American professor can do. Resolving the issue with our credibility in the classroom does not rest with us. I think the way your question is framed assumes that the situation is our fault or our responsibility to resolve. I have attended teaching workshops, observed classrooms and have had my courses observed. These things have helped for sure but the reality is that when I enter the classroom a dominant script has been written that says I’m not good enough and I don’t deserve to be there. I feel out of place, but if I think really, really hard, I can convince myself that surely every
faculty member has to go through the same melodrama at some point or another. However, that is not the reality of the situation. My white colleagues don’t deal with these types of situations nearly as much. They don’t have to prove anything because their script says that they are credible before they even speak one word. I sometimes feel as if I spend a majority of my time explaining my credentials when instead it could be spent disseminating knowledge about the subject matter at hand. I have to work twice as hard on my teaching, all the while knowing that there are few extrinsic rewards that will follow. The result is that on many occasions, I feel frustrated, exhausted, and drained mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally.

Ann expresses:

You two are giving me a lot to think about. I certainly don’t want to blame you for what goes on in the classroom, but I want to impress upon you that as the instructor, you have to take responsibility for what goes on since you will be largely held accountable. Now I know that both of you teach the diversity course in your programs. I too have taught that type of course and understand some of the challenges. Some students enter student affairs programs having little to no experiences working with diverse student populations. What I have found is that with those courses you have to establish a level of trust. If you’re patient with them in the learning process, they eventually come around, but it takes time and patience.

Danielle responds:

Indeed, it does take time. It’s just that I have to first prove to them that I understand the process before they trust that I know how to guide and mentor them through it. When I provide feedback on assignments, there’s always at least one student who disagrees with my assessment. Or perhaps they want to keep meeting to discuss their expectations of me or inform me that something I said upset them in class the week prior. When I reflect on all of this, I remind myself that it is part of playing the game, but wonder instead if the game is playing me. A key strategy for me is to rely on mentors and trusted friends to provide me with support and allow me to vent when I need to. They also offer suggestions for handling these difficult situations. I don’t have what I would call mentors in my department. I remain in communication with African American faculty in similar programs across the country to get the support I need.

Ronald follows by stating:

In my experience the same is true. At other times however, the students are enamored with me. They are not used to seeing an African American faculty member, let alone a male. I often find them staring at me in awe as if they’re thinking, ‘How the hell did he get here?’ So while I have dealt with some of what Danielle is sharing, there again is a gender-race intersection at work. Ann, it makes me think back to the statement you made earlier about being hired because I’m qualified. I sometimes wonder if I was hired because I’m like an anomaly in the academy. There’s so few African American men that perhaps they just had to get ‘one’. For example, when prospective students visit the program, it’s essential that they meet me. If I’m not around during prospective visit days, it is absolutely noticed. As far as my diversity course goes, I feel as if I’m very patient with the students, but I often tow the line. I challenge the students in their thinking but am aware that pushing them too far will lead to negative repercussions. I guess one good thing is that my race brings a certain level of credibility in the classroom when it comes to discussing racial issues. By relating my own experiences to some of the materials, they see my teaching as more authentic. What has been key for me is identifying counter-spaces in which I can vent and share my experiences, while also gaining a sense of validation and accomplishment for the work that I continue to do. Unfortunately, I have not found many white scholars willing to serve as mentors. Sometimes I think that might be best because many of them simply just don’t get it.
Well, you both have certainly given me an earful. It was important for me to hear your perspectives. I just wish that I could give you more concrete advice. It seems that much of your experiences are filtered through a racial lens. That lens is definitely important, but it may also be necessary for you to consider alternative lenses that can shed light on your experiences as well as engage in continuous reflection about how you approach teaching. In my many years of teaching I have consistently sought methods to improve. Not all of them have worked, but I learn from each and every experience [she pauses]. My, how the time flies. I look forward to seeing you later this week at which time I want to provide some insights on research and departmental politics. Until then …

Ann exits the room. Ronald and Danielle sit in quiet contemplation about the time they just wasted, both realizing that this likely would be their last meeting with Ann.

Discussion and implications of our counterstory

There are a number of noteworthy observations that stem from this counterstory, which was presented through the composite characters of Danielle, Ronald, and Ann. However, it is critically important for readers to understand that this story is less about these characters and more about the 13 African American student affairs faculty members that wrote the narratives necessary to construct this counterstory. First, this counterstory makes a significant contribution in validating existing research studies, many of which were mentioned in our literature review, that have highlighted the experiences of faculty of color. For example, both scholars faced oppressive experiences in the classroom where the majority of their students were White. These experiences, consistent with the literature, included having to prove their credibility, and garnering less respect from students (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001; Turner 2002; Turner and Myers 2000). In some cases, the students described in the counterstory resisted discussions of diversity by evaluating their instructors negatively at the end of the course (Bower 2002; McGowan 2000; Stanley et al. 2003; Tusmith and Reddy 2002; Vargas 2002). The students further resisted their assessments by perceiving any constructive criticism as a personal attack. This is indicative of how cross-racial communication is often misread prompting the emergence of stereotypes that construct African Americans as more aggressive and posing a threat to White people.

While the narrative focused on teaching, the experiences of the characters demonstrated that issues related to teaching extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom. African American faculty face a multitude of barriers, such as lack of mentors (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001) and trying to assess the ‘rules of the game’. The scholars depicted in the counter-narrative shared a common experience with those discussed in the aforementioned research. They understood the requirements for tenure but understood that tenure was awarded in differential ways according to race. In order to resist some of the obstacles, they relied on mentors in student affairs programs across the country. In one way, CRT has served as a liberatory framework for both scholars, giving them a lens and language to confront racism in their professional lives (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). By having a mentoring connection with other faculty across student affairs programs, they resisted the racism that they felt on their campuses as African American faculty (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000). This supports the literature presented earlier in that there are too few same-race,
same-gender mentors available broadly speaking, but also among student affairs graduate programs.

The counterstory also alluded to the role of differential effects of gender in the experiences of Ronald and Danielle. Danielle experienced a form of gendered racism when a White colleague challenged the reality of her being hired because he perceived her as a young, attractive, African American woman (Pope and Joseph 1997; Turner 2002). Immediately, her different identities converged in ways that challenged her viability as a faculty member. Her identities also converged in the classroom where her credibility was often questioned.

While Ronald noted that he had unique experiences that made him ‘hyper-visible’ to his students due to the lack of African American male faculty at the university (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001; Turner and Myers 2000), his physical presence was being objectified and commoditized. Farley (1997) poignantly detailed the use of the black body as a fetish object. He stated, ‘Race is the preeminent pleasure of our time. Whiteness is not a color; it is a way of feeling pleasure in and about one’s body. The black body is needed to fulfill this desire for race pleasure’ (1). In essence, there are so few African American male faculty that they are deemed a rare commodity; one which every academic department must have. Underlying the desire to hire an African American male, or as Ronald noted ‘to get one’ is interest-convergence. Bell’s (1995) interest-convergence theory, simply stated, is that Whites will only agree to advances for African Americans when their interests are also promoted. Thus, Ronald’s department benefited from having him there because he represented ‘diversity’ or at least a departmental commitment to recruiting diverse faculty. His presence could also be beneficial in recruiting students of color to his graduate program. Ronald recognized the costs and benefits of being an African American faculty member leveraging his identity as a source of credibility and using it to authenticate his teaching (Alfred 2001; Allison 2008; Harris 2007).

Another observation that deserves mention is the nature of the dialog that ensued between Ronald, Danielle, and Ann. As they discussed their experiences and shared their stories with Ann, she offered very little substantive feedback. To be sure, much of what Ann discussed represented the types of microaggressions that White faculty often commit unconsciously. Microaggressions are subtle, covert racial attacks that are often subconscious in nature. White people make such comments without realizing how they may be perceived as insulting and racist. Microaggressions do not go away. Instead, they accumulate and become integrated into a person’s collective memory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). At several different points in the conversation, Ann committed microaggressions. For example, rather than thinking critically about the differential treatment that Danielle speaks of when students address her, Ann fails to acknowledge the relevance of race to the situation. Ann later encourages Danielle and Ronald to view their classroom challenges as teachable moments, again avoiding the obvious role of racism in their experiences and suggesting that all teachers have such challenges. Ann’s third microaggression involves placing the onus on Ronald to offset the situations he encounters in class. Ann’s response suggests that Ronald should be accountable for changing racist behaviors in his class and that somehow he is the cause for these issues, rather than offering helpful feedback for how the White students he teaches should own their behavior. Finally, Ann exits the conversation with Danielle and Ronald by suggesting that perhaps they should try to view their experiences through a lens other than race. Ann’s statement was used to promote the
minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Her overall approach ultimately resembled nothing close to the mentoring from which Danielle and Ronald might have benefited.

Not only did Ann represent much of what participants noted about the White colleagues with whom they work, a deeper examination of her character reveals that in many ways her behavior resembled the historical ‘Miss Anne’ often represented in Black literary works as deceptively appearing to be well intentioned, innocent, gentile, and untouchable (Thomas 1973). Historically, ‘Miss Anne’ represented ‘the mistress of a plantation house and its slaves. Put on a pedestal by white men for her virtue, she derived her power from her position as wife, daughter, mother, and sister to the white slave owner; to maintain this power, she willingly deferred to her husband in all things’ (Edmondson and Nkomo 2003, 240). The Ann in our counter-story brings many of these characteristics to light, particularly given her excitement about having the opportunity to work with faculty of color. Ann appears to be an altruistic, benevolent, and genuine person who has Ronald and Danielle’s best interest at heart. However, as the meeting unfolds, we learn that her actions are nothing more than an unwarranted attempt of racial profiling in the academy. The undercurrents in much of what Ann shares suggest that Danielle and Ronald ‘do not belong’ in the academy due to their inability to view things beyond a racial lens, their lack of patience, and their failure to understand that their situations are not unique and are shared by faculty writ large. Ann’s behavior helps maintain the status quo, fails to challenge dominant racist paradigms, and ignores the contextual role of race in the experiences of Ronald and Danielle. Even more troubling is that when she received push back from Danielle, she continued the conversation with an oblivious mindset. She listened to them discuss racism, but for her, racism was something that was ‘out there’ rather than something that she was actively practicing. Ann’s behaviors are symptomatic of a larger issue in the academy in that faculty of color have a difficult time finding mentors who ‘get it’ and whom they can trust to offer sound advice and guidance when needed.

Implications
Ladson-Billings (1998) asked, ‘What is critical theory and what’s it doing in a nice field like education?’ We further extend her question to consider what role CRT might have in a nice profession like higher education and student affairs. Given the challenges expressed by the study participants through our composite characters, Danielle and Ronald, perhaps the field of student affairs is not as nice as some believe. Danielle and Ronald experienced a great deal which often led to feelings of frustration, disappointment, exhaustion, and anger, factors symptomatic of racial battle fatigue or ‘the constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments (campus or otherwise)’ (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007).

Recruiting and retaining African American faculty in student affairs programs is essential to preparing future practitioners for a dynamic and diverse student population. Student affairs graduate programs that prepare faculty can assist in increasing the number of African Americans in the profession by developing intentional programs to recruit potential African American faculty. Such programs should be facilitated with the understanding that these faculty will be recruited because of a true departmental commitment to diverse perspectives. Thus, the end goal should not be
about recruiting one faculty of color, but to consistently identify ways to recruit additional faculty, and also to incorporate diverse perspectives into the curriculum. One approach would be to encourage more African American graduate students to consider tenure-track faculty positions as a professional option. This can be accomplished through the provision of intentional research and publishing opportunities during the students’ masters and doctoral graduate programs. Another approach is for student affairs graduate programs to intentionally develop partnerships with practitioners on their campuses to create opportunities for research collaboration on practical issues as well as the encouragement and training to publish. This might cultivate the interest of talented African American practitioners to consider pursuing student affairs faculty as a career option. Student affairs graduate programs should also consider reexamining the extent to which African American and faculty of color in general are supported and engage serious questions such as: (1) Are we doing everything in our power to support this person? (2) Have we constructed a safe and trusting mentoring space? (3) Do we assume that this person is the only one who can teach a diversity class? and (4) If we continue as we are, will we be able to realistically retain this faculty member?

The absence of a critical mass of African American faculty in higher education is an enduring reality. That being said, student affairs professional associations can also assist by constructing intentional mentoring programs that connect junior African American faculty with senior faculty who are committed to the professional success of these scholars regardless of their racial or gender background. In particular, White male faculty can be key allies in this effort. Recruiting these scholars as mentors and providing the necessary support for their success can counter some of the marginality that African American faculty face by broadening the pool of potential mentors considerably.

Notes on Contributors

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