Turning Theory into Faithful Community Engagement: A Retrospective on Teaching Counterstory for a White Reconciling Church

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In summer 2021, I appeared on local media to define critical race theory (CRT) and challenge narratives that CRT suggested white people are inherently bigoted and that white K–12 students should hate themselves (Ballentine). However, a quick comment that fits in a two-minute local news segment or a few answers that fit in a five-hundred-word newspaper article pose less challenge than teaching a summer class on counternarratives for a majority-white reconciling Methodist church in Kansas City, Missouri. Since my move to the city, the pastor, a white Mississippian who had marched in the Civil Rights Movement, had plans to have me teach a class for the congregation. The formal invitation came in February 2021. While the Black scholar teaching white people how race works can be an exhausting trope, you are sometimes called to be that person when no one else is available. English teachers can use antiracist discourse to, as Frankie Condon argues, "engage critically racial ideologies as well as the material effects of those ideologies on the lives of peoples of color as well as whites" (Condon 5). Condon goes further, writing, "From constructions of *rationality* to what passes for *common sense*, antiracist discourses aim at naming, resisting, countering, and transforming the everyday force of racism" (Condon 5). Because racism is an everyday systemic experience, teacher-scholars leverage antiracist discourse not only in the classroom but also in public. The antiracist discourse for this summer six-week synchronous Zoom class would translate CRT into action for white Christian accomplices to show how it could enhance their established orientations toward racial justice and help undo the legacies they sought to dismantle. During this first summer class, my white Christian students came to better recognize how their lives and experiences diverged from the lived experiences of people of color; however, it also became clear that many of the racial literacies I brought to the class remained invisible to these students.

In this essay I share my thoughts on the perspective, feelings, and voices of white Christians by necessity. Following CRT's tenet that institutions reinforce oppression across social identities, the Church in the United States has been a tool for white supremacy since the colonial era (Bracey 504–6). Black churches took the lead on civil rights, while white Methodist churches

maintained that segregation was the Bible's official theological position on race (Hawkins 48). White Christian accomplices (Green 29) reckon with this legacy as they attempt to course-correct their institution toward justice. In addition, scholars of CRT have been called to revive the analogous and literal link between law and religion that its founders drew on. Spirituality flows throughout CRT's six tenets; narrative, the focal point for this essay, "seeks to recognize everyone's full humanity" (Bracey 509). If all people are created in the image of God, all people have dignity and worth that white supremacy disrupts (Tisby 30–31). Counterstory creates a pathway toward reclaiming that dignity and worth.

My year-long fellowship with the Methodist church showed me that congregants were eager to become better accomplices to Black and Brown people in their neighborhood. While the church had a history of reading academic work for book study, they were also action oriented, such as helping people navigate new oppressive voter registration laws in Missouri, joining social justice activists in rallies and testimonies for affordable housing, and offering a food ministry to the houseless and individuals struggling with substance abuse. The first iteration of my course on CRT would build on this well-established philosophy of community for racial justice. Just as counterstory is an accessible point of method for rhetoric and composition (Martinez 2), counterstory is the most accessible point of entry into praxis for community engagement. These narratives could land on kitchen table conversations among their family and friends wrestling with race and racism and help create frameworks for the church's own justice efforts. I leaned into my experience teaching writing through the prism of race and designed a curriculum that would guide church members to wield the power of narrative. Toni Morrison explained in a 1993 interview that she wasn't responsible for solving white people's racism: "If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is that white people have a very, very serious problem and they should start thinking about what they can do about it" (*Toni Morrison, HBCU Grad, Takes White Supremacy to Task*). Rather than taking responsibility for racism, I showed my white Christian accomplices how to use counterstory as a device for attending to the problem of race.

Marginalized people use counterstories to reveal racial oppression in action and resist beliefs, myths, and assumptions about themselves; they unravel majoritarian narratives that racism ended with the Civil Rights Movement and show that their lived experiences are a source of knowledge. Counterstories bridge differences and invite dominant groups to enter marginalized people's worlds (Delgado and Stefancic 50–52). However, in this class of twenty-five I

taught that white accomplices could leverage counterstories too. The first step was to be self-critical of their own privileges and then share their journeys toward reconciliation for an audience of white friends and family. To begin this process, I invited church members to learn that racism "is about power, it systematically disempowers people of color. It systematically privileges whites. It dehumanizes everyone. And racism accomplishes these things by utilizing systems and institutions to advance its purposes" (Green and Condon 288). To brainstorm their own counterstories, I presented the following prompts for vulnerable yet necessary reflection:

1. What master narratives about being white have I believed, currently believe, or have heard from others? What about other racial identities?
2. How have I behaved based on these narratives: What harm have I done or how have I tried to resist these narratives?
3. What are possible counterstories to these master narratives as seen through events, policies, personal decisions, and actions in my life and community?

These questions welcomed church members to identify how they benefited from white supremacy, how they had participated in white supremacist narratives about race knowingly and unknowingly, and how they could draw the contours of their journey toward racial justice. While I taught CRT's key tenets and invited members to apply them to Kansas City in breakout rooms, these personal reflections were more powerful and were more accessible to members.

Finally, to guide drafting their counterstories, church members considered the following characteristics of being a white accomplice: commit to overthrowing their own privilege, share narratives that do critical self-reflection on their own whiteness, learn how the stories white accomplices tell themselves are contradicted by the stories of people of color, and be prepared to be uncomfortable. Ultimately, their counterstories were to be personal yet recognize where they diverged from the lived experiences of people of color and then turn those lessons into calls for action. Story isn't just a story of the heart; it is a story for the mind and body to work against the material realities of oppression. That was the work of Jesus.

However, class meetings and counterstories revealed that this generation of older Christians best understood racist ideas dating back to the 1950s and 1960s when racism was overt. While analyzing these tropes in counterstories about their lives made sense, their analysis did not carry forward into the subtleties of contemporary racism. For example, members occasionally shared news articles in email threads about the latest overt racism of Republicans but had trouble recognizing microaggressions. I don't fault my fellow

white Christians; I think about my responsibilities as an instructor and how the racial literacies I brought to the class remained invisible. I had not spent enough time with the hidden workings of racism in contemporary racism. To teach praxis as quickly as possible within the six weeks I gave myself, I had sacrificed the theoretical work that makes action on the firm ground of racial literacies possible.

Noticing this gap in bringing the fullness of my racial literacy into teaching, I took a different approach to teaching racial justice practices in spring 2023. Leaning into the mandate that critical race scholars return to CRT's religious roots, I taught a second course that put race and racism in the context of Christian theology. Using Jemar Tisby's *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice,* church members brainstormed what events and activities they could do within their church and neighborhood. This class established that all people created in the image of God have dignity and worth; thus, we must disrupt white supremacy's subtleties. During week 4, the class read about race, relationships, and reconciliation (Tisby 85–120). Using a list of microaggressions as a guide and Apostle Paul's call for reconciliation to the Church of Corinth (*New International Version,* 2 Cor. 5.18–12), I posed questions for whole-class reflection. I share here the two most essential questions:

1. What are your relationships with marginalized people like?
2. Why is reconciliation important for doing racial justice? How do we turn forgiveness into reconciliation with those people in our personal lives?

The matrix of domination (Collins 26) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1242–44) helped members map out how their multiple social identities put them closer to the privileges and rights of dominant identities. Diving into the rhetoric of racism in our personal lives and linking that back to inclusive readings of Scripture helped members think deeply about contemporary racism. This personal take and spiritual approach led members to grapple with the idea that the prevalence of racism in their lives made antiracism difficult to practice.

The classes on counterstory and courageous Christianity gave church members new tools for extending racial justice efforts beyond voter registration and fighting for affordable housing. I'll note two stories that show the power of CRT in the context of this church. First, church member David[1] confronted his discomfort with his son-in-law, a Black man who his white daughter had married. Both classes taught David to share his misgivings with his daughter's husband. The son-in-law appreciated David's openness, and this moment of vulnerability allowed them both to create a stronger relation-

ship. Second, Jose, a Brazilian video and sound coordinator for the church, wanted to compile some counterstories into a church zine. The Winter 2024 issue honored Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and featured two counterstories from the summer 2021 class, with a brief note from myself that put those pieces in context.

Laws and policies against CRT and antiracism in public schools and higher education have ramped up since 2021. Community teaching demonstrates hope that while educators weather these awful storms against them, community members still hunger for justice. In the public sphere there is a fight to be had. Counterstory offers teacher-scholars a process for blending their profession and knowledge with the lived experiences of communities around them, where no law can restrict mutual organizing. Meanwhile, counterstory gives white communities tools for self-critique and a starting point for leveraging their privilege to collaborate with marginalized people.

Note

1. David gave me permission to share his reflections in this essay via email.

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