

Finding Our Paths to Social Justice Education

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INTRODUCTION

For several months, we, the three authors, met once a week to share stories about our evolution as social justice educators. While we come from different backgrounds and are different ages, we have each pursued a career in academia, motivated by a desire to address social injustice. Different identities and experiences have shaped our lives, but we share a common understanding of social justice and a collective desire to make an impact on the lives of our students. We are Korean, Black, and White, all raised in the United States. We are cisgender heterosexual, bisexual, and gay. We are from the northeast and the south. Together, our ages span two decades. We were raised upper-middle, middle, and lower middle class. While we each found our way to the field of education, we share common values of equity, access, and empathy.

As social justice educators, we view our roles in education not just as passing along discipline-specific content but communicating a framework for understanding the world around us, and the social dynamics within it. We ask our students to examine their own positionalities and the experiences that have led them to our classrooms. We model the curiosity and humility indispensable for learning, while striving to help students develop a set of values and their own voices. We foster a sense of agency and a responsibility to civic duty. We do all of this through a social justice framework which equips students with a lens, a voice,

and an understanding that their life experiences are intrinsically linked with the world around them.

Each of our stories illustrate that the path to becoming social justice educators often meanders but is shaped by the connections we make with others. Our paths include histories of feeling isolated or marginalized, looking for reflections of ourselves in the communities around us. We reached out for guidance from those whom we saw as mentors. We sought out our own stories in literature, finding connections in the social metaphors of literary giants. We were affected by significant historical events, recognizing their impact on our own communities. None of these paths led us directly to our calling as teachers, but the learning we gained from experiences along the way is infused in our practice. We all have been fortunate to achieve careers where we can empower students and influence change in our communities. Yet we maintain humility, understanding that we always have more to learn and that we will never stop growing as educators.

ALYSSA

I fell in love with history in the summer before my junior year of college, when I reluctantly took a summer course on the Civil War that changed the way I viewed history. It was the first time that I learned about slavery in a deep and meaningful way. My paternal grandmother raised me on stories of her own experiences in the Jim Crow South, and the oral histories of our family's past that had been carried down through the few generations from slavery. I suppose part of my younger disconnect with the past is related to the ways in which the U.S. History has been told. Traditionally, U.S. history was collected and taught in ways that often relegated the experiences, contributions, and collected memory of non-Whites to the background landscapes of stories and scenes that, in turn, put White leadership, experiences, and culture in the forefront.

It was not until I took that class on the Civil War that I made the connections between my own experiences and the larger history of the culture and society in which I lived. I went through a Renaissance that took me through a period of Black militancy. Beyond that was a reckoning with the Kingian philosophies of universal love. I continued my education with mentors who guided me towards a deeper understanding of civil rights. This education set me on a path of community engagement and civil rights enforcement in South Florida.

Miami-Dade County is a large county covering over 2,400 square miles of land. It is also one of the most populous counties in the country and home to people from across the world. I moved in very diverse cultural circles during my time working in civil rights advocacy. I read stories about civil rights to Haitian children, participated in celebrations for queer people of color, and provided

disability sensitivity training for city employees and private management companies. I traveled to the southern edge of the county to talk to groups of newly arrived immigrants and visited high schools to remind pending graduates that they were protected under civil rights laws. In all these communities, people shared intimate stories of struggle, resistance, bravery, and triumph. It was the first time that I lived and worked among such richness of difference. And yet, as I learned more about what makes us all unique, a new understanding began to dawn on me. I began to see how much we all have in common.

The intimacy of my experiences with others whose realities and struggles were different from my own helped me learn to see past my own perspective. I became aware of some stereotyped messages that I internalized as a young person. By helping others fight injustice, I also grew in my capacity to appreciate the world and my place in it.

This was not a lonely journey. I was never without my advisors. Academic mentors steered me towards the writings of MLK, Angela Davis, and James Baldwin. These historic voices shaped my appreciation for social justice activism. In my civil rights work, community members opened their circles and spaces to me so that I might learn about community engagement. Local representatives and business leaders gave me their time and helped me learn to communicate in ways that might effect change. There were obstacles, of course. But struggle is inherent in the experience of living.

It was not long after President Obama was elected that something began to happen more and more often: police were shooting Black men in and around Miami. In 2010 and 2011, city police shot and killed seven Black men over the course of 7 months. I worked in these neighborhoods. I was in these communities. I spent most weekends at open-air community fairs distributing information on civil rights and speaking at homebuyer workshops and community events. These were my friends and neighbors, and we were all mourning and somewhat fearful.

We drove slowly in our neighborhoods to ensure we would not be pulled over. It was about this time that I was stopped by an officer who approached my car, screaming and accusing me of swerving in traffic and crossing several lanes to almost sideswipe his vehicle. I was so stunned that I was silent. After all, I had been in one lane for several miles. He then demanded, "Do you even speak English?" To which I replied, "Yes officer, I do. I am just confused by your accusations." He seemed surprised and told me that I should be very careful on the roads and stormed off. I often wonder what would have happened that day if I did not speak English.

There was a new focus and sense of urgency that washed through the non-profit world in South Florida during this time and new initiatives and targeted work emerged. I saw increased partnership opportunities with companies like the Boys and Girls Clubs and local schools. So, in 2012, when one of our own local

teenage boys was stalked and murdered in Sanford, Florida while walking home from buying sweet tea and Skittles at the local convenience store, it was devastating for our community. George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch coordinator for the Sanford community, had been instructed by police to stay in his car when he called to report a suspicious person walking in a hoodie, but he ignored those directions. He stalked Trayvon Martin and then shot him while the two struggled on the ground. He was charged with murder and pled not guilty under Florida's *Stand Your Ground* statute. Our community held out hope that the courts would deliver some justice. Instead, on a Saturday evening at 10 p.m. in July 2012, the news broke that Zimmerman was found not guilty. It was unbelievable but not surprising that the news broke at such a late hour when people would not be able to immediately react.

The following Monday, I was in the small satellite office that I shared with my colleague who was a Black father of two teenage boys. I will never forget how he looked when he arrived that morning. His eyes were puffy and red. His voice trembled as he described the conversation he had with his two sons the day before. It was not safe to travel alone. You could not cover your head with a hoodie. You could not be out in the evening. You could be targeted for your race. You could be killed for no other reason but their fear and racist suspicion. That same week, I was offered an adjunct teaching job at Dillard University in New Orleans. It was a 75% decrease in my pay. I would have to live off my savings for a while. I would have to break my rule on quitting a job without having secured another full-time position. But I would be teaching at a historically Black college in the city that felt like home. It was the easiest decision.

There is a different cultural complexity in that part of Southern Louisiana. New Orleans, itself, is an intricate mix of French colonialism, Haitian and African originalism, and Cajun wonder. It is a Black city and a European city. It was also the site of large-scale federal failure and practical abandonment.

When I began teaching at Dillard, I found that many of my students were ill-prepared to engage in academic research. Because of the lack of governmental intervention after Katrina, many spent their childhoods in neighborhoods that did not have libraries, leaving them unprepared to navigate such college resources. I would take them over in small groups and we would wander the aisles and examine different books of interest. Over time they began to trust the safety of our classroom. Repeatedly, my students would find connections in our class content to their own lives and would share stories about their experiences during Hurricane Katrina. I would often find myself pausing the class content in order to make space for students to talk about the trauma of that time. Some sat for days on the rooftops of local businesses and homes waiting for rescue. I saw students comforting each other – supporting each other through illness and loss. I watched

them celebrate good fortunes together. I came to understand a deeper meaning of community building and community outreach.

There is a real responsibility in higher education to ensure that students not only learn the content of a given discipline, but also become empowered in their voice and their reasoning. I learned that this was a process of creating brave spaces where we made connections based upon commonalities; my students trusted each other to be honest, truthful, and respectful of difference; and we all learned in those moments how to support each other. It was not always easy. Many sad and painful truths were shared, but we were brave, and we faced it together. I thought this experience was unique to the place and the moment, but I was wrong.

When I moved to Western Massachusetts to develop a history program at a community college, the demographics of my students changed dramatically. The move brought me to the poorest county in the state and it did not take long for me to realize that these students lacked certain academic skills. What I once saw as a regional and racial issue became one of class. I started to see an even deeper connection between institutional power and community impact. Embedded within class are the issues of race, gender, nationality, disability, age, and identity. Within class is a shared common experience of struggle and marginalization that transcends one group identity. I still find myself walking small groups of students to the library to show them how to do real in-person research.

In the summer of 2020, the lynching of George Floyd painfully rocked our country. The images of a defiant police officer slowly killing a helpless man was one of a history of moments of awakening for this country. I think about all the students and neighbors that I have so far been blessed to know, guide, and learn from. I wonder about how they navigated this painful moment and the movement that was part of the aftermath. I wonder who marched. I wonder who grieves even now. I wonder if my small role in their development has helped them in the ways that I hope.

What does it mean to be a social justice educator? We see a social justice framework in education as both a process and a goal (Adams, et al, p. 1). As educators, we make intentional choices to highlight content that pushes students of all backgrounds to reflect on their assumptions about the world. Through an examination of historical patterns, social forces, literature, and research methodologies, we all strive to engender agency and empathy in ways that strengthen marginalized voices. We interweave the narratives of divergent voices within our content so that students who rarely see people like themselves represented in higher education, see themselves reflected in the stories that we share and the lessons that we teach. We lead those with privilege to an understanding of their role in constructed hierarchies and nurture a sense of responsibility to contribute to social change.

While the content of our disciplines vary, there is also significant overlap. Social issues and inequities are fundamental to who we are and how we evolved as

a country. They are interwoven in our shared history, the same way that the analysis of literature weaves together history and social issues and helps us understand our world better.

In addition to content, we identify the skills of empathy, agency, and critical thinking as foundational to fostering students' capacity to be productive members of society. Part of our role as educators is to help students recognize the institutional structures of society that contribute to theirs and others' oppression, because once we can recognize this, we can then understand and take action. Making sense of the past helps us to contextualize the present so we can improve the future. By increasing our understanding not only of facts, but of our human experiences within these contexts, we aim to raise awareness of our collective responsibility to each other.

To this end, we teach critical thinking skills as the foundational tools for analyzing history, society and literature. Evaluating evidence and integrating new information with prior assumptions makes room for this critical thought process and becomes part of the way our students navigate their worlds. We train students to consume and synthesize information, identify subjectivities, and discern fact from fiction.

Ultimately, our classrooms are a microcosm of society beyond the walls of higher education. Most of the dynamics that operate in our world eventually show up in our classrooms. We give students the opportunity to practice new skills, to try out new language, to envision new ways of relating with people different from them, and to envision systems that reflect the values of equity, social justice and respect. We humbly hope that our students are transformed by their experiences in our classrooms and that they will become motivated to take what they learn and transform their communities, families, and workplaces.

LINDA

I teach my sociology students that there is no such thing as objectivity, and that anyone who claims to be objective is willfully ignoring their own positionalities. Instead, I encourage them to recognize the lenses through which they see the world, and to identify the social identities that have shaped their biographies. As a White lesbian woman, my own identities have been integral to my journey toward a career teaching sociology. Sociology is an ideal discipline that encompasses a study of society, examination of one's positionalities, and a sense of responsibility to better the world. It never fails to bring me joy that I get to discuss social issues and inequality with students as part of my job. I cultivate both the *sociological imagination* and something called *sociological mindfulness*. In the first, I want students to understand that their lives are shaped by larger social forces, and that

this historical moment and their own biographies are intertwined. None of us are as independent as we believe. In the second, I want students to understand how they are connected to others and that their individual choices impact others. Though we are socialized to think otherwise, no one person's life exists outside this context. The most important concept that I teach students is that everything is socially constructed. And, if we created this, we can also change it.

My own biography was defined by feeling marginalized, isolated, and in search of community as a young person. I was bullied by kids from my neighborhood for being different. I couldn't pick up on social nuances and often broke the rules without understanding they even existed. I verbalized thoughts that others knew to keep to themselves. I couldn't detect what I needed to do to be just like everyone else. My attempts were sometimes blunders that made me more of a target than I'd already been. Increasingly, instead of looking to other people for connection, I found myself in the stories of others, and never left home without a book. This feeling of being an outsider has kept me ever aware of how my students might feel, in an educational system that does not support or expect their success. I never saw myself in my teachers, so I feel a responsibility to be honest and genuine in the classroom. I feel a special responsibility to LGBT youth and to those with gay parents or siblings; I recognize that I might be the only lesbian professor they ever have.

I began reading *The Boston Globe* regularly when I was about 10 years old. One of my favorite parts was *Confidential Chat*, which was a combination of *Dear Abby* and a recipe swap. They fielded everything from people seeking sewing patterns, to what to do with stacks of old magazines, to people wondering where to bring their pet bird for medical care. It was a community – letters were printed and readers would write in with their advice. Before the Internet, this was a primary way for readers to find information for any problem, great or small. You name it, there was someone asking about it, and someone was there to respond with a solution. I imagine I loved this partly because I saw people connecting with one another and finding common ground.

One of the best decisions my parents made for me was to send me to a YMCA summer camp for girls when I was 10. There, I met children from working class cities like Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and other places I had never heard of. I had the opportunity to make friends with children of color for the first time. Instead of feeling like an outsider, I felt like an insider; people knew my name and wanted to engage with me. Everyone was different, and for the first time, I felt seen somehow. I returned to that camp for 4, 6, and then 8 weeks, over the next five summers. It was the most diverse environment I was ever in as a child and, truth be told, these were the best summers of my life.

My last summer at camp, when I was 15, there were rumors that Cathy Jacobson had been seen kissing another counselor in Chalet. I was confused. I felt I was

supposed to express disgust, and I probably did, but I was also secretly intrigued. My best friend and I would often lie on the tennis courts at night, the concrete still warm from the sun, looking up at the stars, smoking cigarettes. We talked about everything, and eventually we tentatively addressed the rumored lesbian activities at camp. It felt like just gossiping, but internally, I was trying to conceive of a world where I might be gay.

Arriving at boarding school that fall, I couldn't shake the idea that people could be gay. Was I? Though there was a school psychologist available to the student body, asking for help was not a skill I had developed. Instead, I investigated on my own. At night at the library, while I should have been studying history or math, I stood in the stacks trying to absorb what I could about what being gay meant and how I would know if I was. Although I found some information about "the homosexual lifestyle," I wanted to know about real people. I wanted to know about gay people.

One day in late fall, it dawned on me. There, in my beloved *Boston Globe*, in the *Living* section, was a possibility. I wrote to the readers of Confidential Chat and asked, "How do you know if you are gay? Where do you meet gay people? I think I might be. What should I do?" My letter was printed, I was shocked to see it, but there it was, on page 3 of the *Living* section. It seemed innocuous enough, that one paragraph, those few questions. But one day, some weeks later, I stood in the school mailroom with *The Globe*, and there it was again. My letter. But this time, *The Globe* had published it on the front page of the *Living* section, as a feature story about gay youth. This was 1982, when many gay people were shunned and disowned by their families. And way before gay and lesbian people were featured on television in any positive roles. The feature story called attention to the isolation of gay youth (me) and made suggestions for how our society could better support them.

And then the mail came. Letters upon letters. Advice, encouragement, cautions, Psalms. Many elders in the gay community wrote supportive, "It will get better" letters. And some cautioned me that while they too were attracted to the same sex when they were young, they knew enough to turn away from those feelings, and that I should too, that life would be better for me if I resisted these feelings which veered from the natural way of God. On the whole, the letters were mostly supportive. They suggested I go to BAGLY (Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth) in Boston, but that felt about as possible as going to Mars. I never went to Boston on my own; I was a young 15, sheltered in the suburbs. I couldn't imagine getting there or finding a building somewhere in the city with gay kids talking about their lives. Without access to transportation, or independence from my parents, I was at a loss as to my next steps. So I took none. I kept the letters in boxes under my bed, and occasionally laid them all out to review my options again.

I never came out in high school. With no support, no community, and a profound terror about this possibility, I laid away those feelings like the letters under my bed. I found a boyfriend (or, he found me), which helped me to fit in better, which was always my primary concern. It wasn't until I encountered lesbians again, 8 years later, that these feelings found their way back into my consciousness.

As a college transfer student mid-year, the choice of available classes was limited, and I ended up in a Women's Studies class called *Contemporary Issues*. In that class, my world was transformed. Among other issues, I learned about sexual harassment and assault, date rape, domestic violence, and the wage gap. This course led to more, and to a Women's Studies major, where concepts like intersectionality, white privilege, and feminist theory equipped me with an analytical lens to help me make sense of the world around me. Classes like African American Women Writers, Feminist Theory, Chicana Studies, and Feminist Theology not only introduced me to alternative understandings of history and society, but illustrated that learning is most powerful when one sees one's self in the material.

In my *Mothers and Daughters in Literature* class, I was taken off guard by the three friendly lesbians who spoke openly about their sexuality. Lesbians. All my memories of camp and being 15 and my letter to *Confidential Chat* came flooding back to me with a mixture of fear and recognition. Serendipitously, I began to see advertisements posted around campus for a Coming Out group that was starting soon. On the scheduled night, I found my way to The Feminist Alliance's office in the Student Center. Walking down the hallway, I was overcome with a physical terror, but I managed to get myself through the doorway. Inside, I found a community and a path to fully embracing my sexuality.

I was introduced to activism. I helped organize and lead *Take Back the Night* marches. I got involved with protests against the Gulf War, and participated in actions against Rocky Flats, where they made plutonium triggers for nuclear bombs. With these groups, I learned about consensus building and affinity groups. I was surrounded by people who also cared about inequality and injustice. I began to recognize the connections between my own experiences and the world around me.

After college, I studied Sociology in graduate school where I was trained in classical theory and methods. Instructed to find a fieldwork site for my master's thesis, I began facilitating at a gay youth support group. My thesis focused on the connection between identity and community, and on the importance of feeling part of a community. I knew from experience how isolating it was to feel so different from everyone else. At the time, I thought the gay youth group was simply a convenient site to conduct my fieldwork, but it was undoubtedly an opportunity to be the role model I never had.

As a doctoral student in the Social Justice Education program at the University of Massachusetts, I learned how to teach about racism, sexism, classism, and other types of oppression. I learned about the importance of both process and content, and, like my college Women's Studies courses, experienced much of the dynamics in the classroom that we were reading about. In the classroom community, we learned not only from the books we were reading, but from each other. We spent intense time together in weekend workshops where there were tears, there was conflict, and there was resolution, sometimes. I observed the skill with which our professors handled and in fact elicited the strong emotions that come from experiencing social injustice.

Today, when I teach sociology, I am relaying content about the theories and concepts important to the field, but I am also cultivating an environment in which experience plays a critical role in our learning. Balancing the emotional and cognitive processes that unfold when delving into difficult topics such as racism, classism, mass incarceration, or nationalism is challenging; it necessitates a group dynamic that centers empathy and acceptance. Creating a brave space where students are willing to take risks and reveal their perspectives is an intentional process. Students will not engage with difficult ideas and with each other, if they do not feel there is room for their stumbles. Students need to be able to raise their hand and blurt out the wrong answer or find a space where they can ask the question that they cannot utter out loud. And, they need to find the place where they can see themselves as belonging in a community they believe in and are willing to fight for.

How do we promote social justice education? We create democratic classrooms with intention, where students actively participate in their own education through problem solving, rather than the passive model of education where students are merely vessels into which information is deposited. In our classes, we value collaboration, individual responsibility, contextualized personal experiences, responsibility, social change, and personal growth. This kind of collective learning often invokes feelings of cognitive dissonance; students come to recognize that the world doesn't actually work as they had been taught to believe. Helping students unpack that confusion is essential for understanding how they are growing. To do that, we create brave spaces for learning where we welcome the affective in the classroom. It is a key way that teaching in a socially just manner differs from traditional pedagogies.

A social justice curriculum is designed to acknowledge, honor, and call forth students' feelings and emotions, and to share these truths as an inherent part of the learning process. In addition, emotion-based learning is considered to be of equal value as discipline-specific theories and ideas. In practice, this translates into an emphasis on the validity of emotional responses to cognitive-based material, and reliance upon critical questions to examine the influence

of power and privilege on the perspective of the author, reader, student, and teacher.

As part of our pedagogy, we balance the emotional and cognitive aspects of learning, along with the process (in the classroom) and content (our course material). We establish a learning environment that allows for personal and academic growth. We recognize that students sometimes have personal reactions to course materials, and we attend to those reactions. We respond to the individual students' experiences, while calling attention to systemic and structural forces that shape those experiences.

Group dynamics can affect learning in meaningful and destructive ways, so we attend to the dynamics that develop among students. This requires flexibility and patience and a willingness to cast aside a learning plan in favor of addressing the current moment. We notice and name whose voices are elevated and whose are missing. We allow space for mistakes and stumbles. We support interpersonal interactions that lead to new learning. By viewing conflict as a learning opportunity, we demonstrate that growth can emerge from misunderstanding, if it is addressed in a constructive way. In sum, sometimes the most powerful learning experiences emerge from dynamics among the students in the classroom.

We hope our students see us as whole, fallible people, who have also gone through stages of development and paths of learning. We share with our students that we are all life-long learners and that the more we learn about ourselves, the better we are able to understand how we relate to others.

LEO

In the introduction to *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram Kendi writes, "Even now I wonder if it was my poor sense of self that first generated my poor sense of my people. Or was it my poor sense of my people that inflamed a poor sense of myself?" (6) and I am struck with the realization that like Kendi, in my earlier years, I adopted the racist thinking that I was surrounded by and that permeated American society in the 1970s and 1980s. For the longest time I thought I was struggling against racism and racist stereotypes, but the reality is, I had internalized those stereotypes and expectations to the point that I believed that I might be able to craft an entirely new identity that was separate from my lived reality. "Racist ideas make people of color think less of themselves, which makes them more vulnerable to racist ideas," Kendi continues (6). I was very vulnerable.

Racism against Asian men in the 1970s and 1980s had several different stereotypes (Asian women experienced additional layers of stereotypes that were no less destructive). The first was that of the foreigner who was intruding in the spaces of "real" Americans. This sentiment ranged from the, "Go back where you

came from!” statement in its mildest form, to the more acerbic sense of Asians as the dehumanized enemy in war where we became, “Chinks, gooks, and Japs.” In any case, it was clear that Asians were outsiders and did not belong.

The second stereotype was that of the association of Asian with junk. Made in Japan, Made in China, Made in Korea, Made in Taiwan – those were the stickers on cheap toys, small cars, and unreliable electronics. The anthropomorphized version of this was of Asians as untrustworthy, inscrutable, unfair, cowards and cheats. In its mildest form, it was a joke about cheap products and the highly inflected, “What a bargain!” exclamation. At its most vicious, it manifested in incidents like the killing of Vincent Chin in 1982, a Chinese man who was beaten to death by two Michigan auto workers who blamed him for the success of the Japanese auto industry.

The third stereotype was that of the shamefully inept Asian immigrant that appeared in countless films of the time period. In a mild form, it appeared in the simple Korean peasant characters in the television show *M.A.S.H.* but the most archetypal figure was that of the character Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*. He represented the utterly bumbling Asian man who lusts after unattainable white women, who find him so unsuitable that the joke is that the man is delusional for even imagining that he has a chance with them. The character is emasculated as a comic gag. It was a cultural phenomenon to have one Asian eunuch buddy in a whole generation of popular movies from *Goonies* to *Fargo*. It made watching movies with white people very uncomfortable.

Stereotype four was the kung fu master. On Boston area TV, in addition to the beloved Bruce Lee films and the *Kung Fu* show reruns, there were the seemingly endless reels of overdubbed Chinese martial arts films and early Japanese manga cartoons. While I watched these shows and movies with rapt attention as they were the only representations of Asians in mass media that were not based in stereotypes, my White peers all saw them as additional fodder for highlighting my difference. They would mouth extra syllables in a pantomime of overdubbed talk while teasing, and of course make the high pitched, “Hi-ya!” sounds of kung fu while kicking the air or making karate chops. It was humiliating to have the one cool and masculine depiction of Asians in popular American culture be coopted and once again made to symbolize the foolish foreigner.

The last stereotype was the model minority: the Asian student as being preternaturally good at math and science. The model minority stereotype is the essentialist racism that Asians are good at these things because that is how their minds work. It is the idea that all Asian kids should become doctors or engineers. It is the idea that the Asian student will behave, will submit to hard work unquestioningly, and will follow any authority figure because they are essentially obsequious.

There are more stereotypes I didn't recognize at the time, or that have evolved since, but these were the images that obstructed my imagination as a child and teen. Because I allowed myself to be shaped by the society around me and did not have the tools to think critically about their impact, because I consumed the mantras of racism, and because I did not have a lot of models or guidance on how to see myself differently, an entire continent of people were amalgamated in my mind to have certain specific traits. I could not imagine alternatives to these images, and I was left to form an identity in response to them. I did not have a strong enough imagination to envision a different kind of Asian masculinity and sexuality. Instead, I saw myself as part of that pan-Asian stereotype and I thought the only way to fight against it was to try to exist outside of those expectations. I did not allow myself to be whomever I wanted to be: I had to be the opposite of these models I saw in the media. I had to be able to respond to bus stop taunts with something that denied the validity of their teasing. I didn't define myself by who I wanted to be, or what I felt might be my preferences; instead, I defined myself in relation to what I was not. In so doing, I also defined myself as "not Asian" and "not Korean," because to be Asian or Korean would mean trying to fit into the American stereotype of Asians or Koreans. I was not going to be the fool, I was not going to be the scapegoat, I was not going to be the nerd. Instead, I was going to misbehave, I was going to be rebellious, I was going to lift weights and play football. I was going to reject the emasculation of the Asian body by becoming hyper-masculine. I was going to hang out with the troubled kids and smoke cigarettes. In all these actions, I ended up denying the existence of my own heritage and sense of self in order to remake myself in what I was convinced was an entirely independent identity, but in reality was a full embrace of the assimilationist ideas of what mainstream White American visions of cool and desirable were.

When I look back at my childhood, my adolescence, my young adulthood, I see the ways this lack of imagination manifested in my life and limited its potential richness. It was not only a fear of embracing White stereotypes, it was a fear of embracing my own identity, and ultimately who I would allow and not allow myself to be. Eventually, I was able to move beyond those limitations. I have been able to learn to recognize and deconstruct socially constructed stereotypes in media and recognize what, of these, I have internalized, and then, explore how I can move beyond these stereotypes and start inhabiting the sense of self that is not inhibited by a lack of imagination.

Kendi explains a similar revelation:

I feel free to move in my imperfections. I represent only myself. If the judges draw conclusions about millions of Black people based on how I act, then they, not I, not Black people, have a problem. They are responsible for their racist ideas; I am not. I am responsible for my racist ideas; they are not. To be antiracist is to let me be myself, be my imperfect self (p. 205).

Like Kendi, I take responsibility for my own racist ideas, my own lack of imagination. This lack of imagination hindered not only me but hinders people throughout our educational systems. I see reflections of my former self in our students as they seek some kind of connection in their lives. How do they make meaning out of who they are becoming? We can work to address this through an educational system that is designed with a social justice agenda. We need to explicitly privilege racial justice, and integrate a fluid understanding of how to foster and support imagination in our LGBTQIA students, in our students with disabilities, in students from different economic backgrounds and religious faiths. We need to support imagination in all our students.

We do this through an attention to the individual, through a practiced posture of continual self-reflection and exploration so we can better understand how our own failures of imagination were shaped. And we do this through a willingness to listen to stories – the stories of our future doctors, engineers, scientists, musicians, poets, painters, politicians, and playwrights. As we look at our curriculum and our individual courses, where do we encourage these stories? How do we support the sharing and learning that comes from these stories? Our students can reach their full potential only when they have access to the entirety of their capacities. When our students' imaginations and images of themselves are constrained by their experiences of racism, homophobia, sexism, or any other form of discrimination, we are failing as educators. In contrast, when we can witness the transformation that happens when a student is able to realize a full sense of self, when an imagination is unbound, and when they feel safely heard both inside and outside of themselves, that is truly transformative teaching. We can do this by helping students learn to value themselves and value others. To help increase students' imagination by increasing their vocabulary with which they can describe themselves and their experience in this world. Once students can recognize themselves as valid and valuable permutations of humanity, then they can begin to fulfill their potential.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to forge an identity that is true to one's self and to pursue that vision, and yet it is crucial to finding a way to flourish in life. We have each been confronted with choices, and without the educators who helped us see ourselves, those choices could have led us down long lonely paths, dead-ends, or circular driveways. We were each lucky enough to have encountered the right degree of mentoring, support, and independence. We found ways to integrate those things that are most important to our identities into careers that bring our lives meaning

because we are able to help students navigate some of the same challenging paths we have trodden.

In this chapter, we have revealed some of the foundational experiences that have shaped us as people and educators. Each of us has offered a story shaped both internally and externally, by context, history, and community because, while we may walk different paths, we have been led to similar standpoints, undergirded by a set of values established by our experiences, impacted by our mentors, and filtered by our own unique perspectives. At the heart of these shared stories are a few commonalities of note. Like the students that we now teach, we were molded by our college experiences. Our good fortune came from finding those educators who taught us to look for ourselves in the narratives that we embrace.

In academic spaces, we found paths to our callings as social justice educators. We found ways to love ourselves. We were taught a new way to look at the world that gave us active agency and helped us to work within our compassion as we defined our own teaching philosophies. It is this agency that we hope to teach to others: the ability to step beyond the forces that wish to shape us in one uniform image, and instead imagine a diversity of possibilities and futures that are not pre-determined by the expectations of stereotypes.

Being an educator is a responsibility that we each take seriously. We recognize that we may be one stop along the way for our students, who are on their own journey towards their chosen goals and the goals that they will awaken to in our classes. To truly be available to our students, social justice education requires that first we learn to appreciate our own value. Only then can we guide the path for our students to do the same.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Adams, M. (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook*. Routledge.

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Schwalbe, M. (2018). *The sociologically examined life: Pieces of the conversation*. Oxford University Press.