Spring 2015

Peripheral No More: Repositioning Narratives for Empowerment and Change in Sustainability Education

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Table of Contents

Preamble

Danvers (2009) said that "the word *sustain* carries both the sense of enduring and the sense of giving nourishment to or supporting" (p. 188). To only "endure" brings the implication of suffering. To live sustainably, to seek out connections, to learn, to teach, to change and grow; these experiences should not be about suffering. I have learned for myself that simply enduring has not made me strong. It is nourishment and support that has been essential for my strength, resilience, and sense of hope. What is it that nourishes me, and how can I give that back to the world? These are the concepts behind my guiding values and principles as a sustainability educator, leader, and learner.

Guiding Values and Principles

The values that guide me in my practice provide me with a sense of comfort, a space to be myself, and fuel for a fire; a home. **Community** and **kinship** are the foundation of that home. I grew up in a cultural environment where a sense of **family/familia**, not just blood but *all* relations, was everything. This feeling for me is summed up by Armstrong's (2008) statement that "the realization that people and community are there to sustain you creates the most secure feeling in the world" (p. 72). What I've learned from family is that I have to take care of them, including those who irritate me, those who I don't understand, and those who have hurt me. Striving for **caring** and **empathy** are essential in how I try to live in community, and it can require a lot of patience. As Noddings (2005) said, "caring is a way of being in relation, not a specific set of behaviors" (p. 17). Whether it be my family, my neighborhood, or my bioregion, I am a part of something to which I feel love and **responsibility**. This sense of responsibility is a huge part of what brought me to the LSE program, what motivates me to think outside of myself and into what I can do to create change.

My guides, however, are not always about "home." I try to consistently **push** outside of the zone of comfort and security. Conflict and the learning that can come from it are an essential part of transformative learning and sustainability. The angry, anti-establishment, punk rock sensibilities of my youth have evolved into a more nuanced set of values that still stem from a volatile core. **Courage** has provided me with the initial push through discomfort and uncertainty. Courage is often spoken of in relation to learning to speak up or find your voice, but I find it also requires immense courage to **listen**. I gravitate towards places and stories of **resistance**; to oppression, to injustice, to commonly accepted yet harmful ways of being. In my life, some of the most prominent spaces for this resistance have been found within art, music, and science fiction; I can now add sustainability education to the list. All of these spaces provide room to **examine and disrupt the binaries** that Western culture often wants to place the world within; human/nature, male/female, good/bad, black/white. These are also realms of **creativity** and **wonder**, both of which are essential in how I create meaning.

The intersection of all of these concepts is **empowerment**. My conception of empowerment is about pushing back against oppression to find that "home" to be yourself and understand your story; within oneself and the community. Empowerment has helped me understand my foundations, which in turn enabled me to form personal, meaningful philosophies of sustainability education and leadership.

Educational and Leadership Philosophies

My educational journey has been a struggle, where I found myself continually wondering, "*What is this all for?*" My thinking was often stuck within the confines of mainstream, formal education, a place where I've long felt like an outsider. Coming to understand my own philosophy required me to temporarily set aside how I felt about my own

experiences. Rather than a capitalist, Western notion of "*What am I getting out of this?*" I think about "*What can I learn and share with others?*"

In relation to sustainability education, Sterling (2001) said that "you cannot learn without changing, or change without learning" (p. 22). This idea of education *as* change, rather than for change, has had an enormous impact on my practice and philosophy. I believe education should be a place where transformation and change is welcome and encouraged; a space where intellectual and emotional risks are taken and knowledge is co-created. This kind of change requires one to step outside of themselves. Elenes (2001) said that "while it is important to encourage students to use their own personal experience to understand and make sense of the world, students should not stay within the narrow confines of experience" (p. 694). Ferrer's (2003) ideas on dialogical inquiry align with the kind of learning space I'd like to foster, for it supports the idea of a critical yet empathic practice, searching not simply for agreement but for liberation.

Paolo Freire's (1970) stance that all real education is political is one that continually resonates with me. I believe that to accept dominant educational ideology is also to accept compartmentalization, unbalanced narratives, business as usual and a "one size fits all" approach to life and learning. Education has long been used as an assimilation and colonization tool, a conduit through which dominant cultural norms are plugged into students. For this reason, I am drawn to alternative and critical theories and pedagogies in education, for they are political acts. However, as Villanueva (2013) stated: "to devote a space for offering critiques without offering hope is to ensure despair" (p.37). In order to create this kind of space, there have to be relationships of trust.

Baumgartner (2001) states that "transformational learning is not an independent act but it is an interdependent relationship built on trust" (p. 19). Noddings (2005) discussion of the need for caring in education gets to the heart of how I can co-create these relationships: she says, "...teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are the carers...they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care" (p. 18). When you separate caring from education, you not only create a divide of learners from educators, you also alienate people from the world around them. bell hooks' (1994) concept of an engaged pedagogy is where the critical, transformative, and emotional are able to intersect. This allows us to share our stories with each other in order to examine our personal and collective understandings and assumptions. Grunewald (2003) talked about "the importance of people telling their own stories...in a place where people may be both affirmed and challenged to see how individual stories are connected in communities to larger patterns of domination and resistance in a multicultural global society" (p. 5). That "place" is where I want to be.

Articulating my philosophy as a sustainability leader has previously been difficult, due to my inability to both view myself as a leader, and to see outside of the traditional view of leadership. My leadership philosophy is not much different than my educational philosophy. Ferdig (2007) said that "sustainability leaders create opportunities for people to come together and generate their own answers" (p. 31); in this sense, being a leader is inseparable from being an educator. To lead in sustainability is to set aside mindsets of control, paternalism, rigidity, and the need to be right. Responsibility is a vital component of sustainability leadership, and it comes from a place of collaboration, care and relationship building as opposed to martyrdom or competition; to be a part of and not "above" the community (Ferdig, 2007). Even the traditional concept of leadership is based on relationships, but it is a relationship of dominance as opposed

to reciprocity. Recently I've had the opportunity to work alongside individuals whom I look up

to as leaders; I have to constantly check myself to not place them upon pedestals, and instead

focus on what I share with them. This shift in mindsets has given me space to understand that

anyone, including me, can be a leader.

This program has given me more than space to craft my philosophies; it has provided me

with opportunities to engage in reflective and experiential learning in the four key learning areas

of the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) program:

Self-understanding and commitment. Creating and supporting a sense of self

awareness is one that has been continually reinforced throughout my studies in LSE. In

Advanced Leadership for Sustainability one of the first assignments was to create a self-care

plan, which I have frequently returned to throughout the last two years. However, some of my

most personal reflection that term took place in the ELP core class, *Developmental Perspectives

on Adult Learning*. My final paper in this class was related to multiracial identity formation,

which allowed me a space to examine my own experiences as a multiracial individual. This

feeling of being "caught between worlds" has been with me for much of my life. Zaytoun (2005)

discussed how important it is to be aware of your multiple identities, and how "living between

and among identities can keep one intensely aware and constantly in mental motion, making

transitions back and forth between old and new ways of thinking" (p. 13). Embracing these

identities has been vital to my sense of self and resilience within the program.

In *Philosophy of Education* I examined my own understanding and assumptions about

education. In this setting, I was able to dig deeper into the foundations of modern education that

are so troubling to me, as well as reflect on my love of learning, both of which have influenced

my desire to be an educator. For the past year I've also worked as an intern at a local K-1 charter

school, KairosPDX, which is dedicated to culturally relevant pedagogies. I've long gravitated

toward adult education, but spending time here forced me to confront the ways in which I had

closed myself off to the joy of children and discounted their role as community members. As

open minded as I believe myself to be, I'm still continually surprised to discover the ways in

which I might have unknowingly confined myself.

  Systemic view of world. Having entered this program with a background in ecology, I

was familiar with many concepts around webs of relationships and the interconnectivity of living

beings. Wheatley (2006) and Capra's (2005) discussions around change, complexity, and

interdependence gave me a much better understanding of how to apply ecological systems

thinking within different contexts. Yet as Capra said, "not everything we need to teach can be

learned from ecosystems" (p. 22). Systems of oppression are embedded within modern society,

systems which require one to examine the past and present on a much deeper, often obscured

level. Related to this "deepness" of levels is the iceberg model, and learning how to notice what

is beneath the tip. In *Global Political Ecology* I took part in a group research project and

presentation on a chosen commodity: coconuts. The group looked at not just the production and

consumption of coconut as a product, but the ways in which this plant is a part of the daily lives

of millions of people. If I was concerned about the low wages that coconut farmers are paid, how

would, say, boycotting the industry actually show my support for those I claim to be concerned

about? This inquiry reinforced my belief that simply trying to change one's consumptive

behaviors does not address the complexity of globalized industrialist systems because they are so

deeply embedded. In *Principles of Educational Research and Data Analysis* I faced the challenge

of setting aside the transformative educational paradigm that LSE supports, in order to engage in

the world of traditional academic research. Throughout this course I realized that research

methods often reinforce oppressive systems. Where are the leverage points here where I can make the most impact? Should I fight the system within the system? These are questions I expect to be asking for quite some time but feel prepared to examine.

Bio-cultural relationships. At the heart of my sustainability education philosophy is the question, "*What can I learn and share with others?*" The ability to develop, nurture, and sustain meaningful and balanced relationships is essential to that idea. One of most important readings for me in this program has been Grunewald's (2003) *The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place*, from my *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning* class. Grunewald addresses the need to understand the connections between people and place. Only since I've moved to Portland have I realized how rooted I am in the American Southwest. I feel both love and disdain for the place, but a responsibility to it regardless. This has encouraged me to look for that connection here in Oregon, which means taking everything in, from the native plants to the history of racism.

Throughout this program, I also took part in group projects that involved trust, collaboration, and, occasionally, conflict resolution. These are skills I worked on not just in the program, but in my places of employment. For an assignment in *Educational Organization and Administration*, I selected readings related to building a care ethic in non-profit organizations, and brought some of these concepts into my workplace. I also found connection in my *Permaculture and Whole Systems Design* course, in the spaces of *edges*. In permaculture, edges are a place where communities overlap and where biodiversity is richer. As someone who has long felt that they were living in the edges, perhaps I am uniquely situated in a place where I can build connections.

The intersection of my learning in place and community came in a *Public History Seminar* elective class, where I engaged with oral histories from affiliates of the Portland chapter of the Black United Front. Listening to stories that were not from a dominant cultural narrative and were directly related to resilience and resistance was an invaluable experience for me. At times I found that the LSE program did not provide enough opportunities to intersect with different communities, and often felt frustrated that I had to go "elsewhere" to find this. However, that frustration turned into a kind of call to action that has ultimately became the backbone of my comprehensive exam.

Tools for sustainable change. Throughout the past two years, I've had the opportunity to turn my learning into active experiences that have both built my confidence and allowed me to share with others. As part of multiple special projects credits, my *Sustainability Education* class, and my employment with Saturday Academy, I co-coordinated a week long summer camp for middle school students based around the Willamette River and the Portland Harbor Superfund site. I utilized the Burns (2011) model during the design, implementation and debrief process of the camp, to some success. The group presentation on coconut that came out of my *Global Political Ecolog*y coursework was presented at the PSU Social Sustainability Colloquium. Prior this this, I also assisted a peer with a workshop on interrupting oppression that was given to the fall 2014 LSE cohort. These experiences have pushed me to present my work to others and practice articulating my voice, skills that I had previously not utilized in academic settings.

I would be lying if I said that my time in graduate school was without suffering and struggle; I often felt like an outsider within. Yet, I cannot imagine myself in another program of study. Despite everything, the LSE program has helped me to understand the purpose that underlies my thoughts and actions, and with that has come strength. I'm uncertain about what

comes next, but I aim to always be a learner; to keep asking questions and to continue seeking

out those spaces of empowerment and sustainable change

Part II: Academic Synthesis

Introduction

Storytelling is about much more than stories; it is a method of transmitting information

from one generation to the next and creating ongoing *narratives*. It reflects the ways in which

individuals and communities create *meaning* and *identity*. Stories allow us to *learn* together, to

vision and imagine *change*. Stories are also used to keep existing power structures in place, to

oppress and to deceive. In her TED Talk, author Chimamanda Adiche (2009) describes the

relationship between power and stories as such: "How they are told, who tells them, when

they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power" (9:36). In this sense,

telling, sharing and creating stories with others can be acts of reinforcement or resistance. Take a

moment to reflect on the stories you know, the stories that inform your life. Now look at the

stories being told within educational institutions, mainstream media, and the sustainability

movement: Who is the story about? Who is telling it? Does the story reflect anything relatable

back to you? Are there many different versions of these stories presented? How are the stories

judged, valued, compared and perceived?

Throughout my time in the LSE program, it has been difficult for me to find instances

where the narratives presented were outside of a white, privileged, and middle-class context.

This is not to say that other perspectives are completely absent, but considering the vast amount

of people and communities that are engaged in both sustainability and alternative education

models, I felt an imbalance. As someone who identifies as working-class, multiracial and

Chicana, I found myself questioning my thoughts and feelings; was I being too biased? Too

personal? Too sensitive? Regardless, that disconnect was making me feel less engaged and empowered by my education. The field of sustainability education challenges dominant modes of thought, with a particular emphasis on the need for diversity and "multiple perspectives" in order to confront complex issues (Capra, 2005; Sterling, 2001; Wheatley, 2006). If this is the case, why are certain perspectives still missing and what perspectives have been given prominence? Is it just about bringing other perspectives "in" or also about acknowledging and supporting those that are already there?

In describing her practice, bell hooks (1994) said that she shares "as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively" (p. 91). Education should not be just about exploring perspectives that are the same as yours, and only hearing narratives reflecting that experience (Montecinos, 2004). Understanding differences is essential in finding commonalities, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and co-creating knowledge and change. However, students with marginalized identities often benefit from entry points, relevance, and the spark of connection, particularly as a way to build resilience and cultivate leadership in environments where their narratives have historically been sidelined (Cantu, 2012; Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002). From here, students are then able to critically reflect on their identities, beliefs, and relationships, finding spaces for empowerment and change within their communities. *In order for sustainability education to be truly transformative and empowering for students, leaders, and their communities, the narrative of sustainability must be repositioned from a dominant, white, middle-class context to one that affirms, values and engages with the counter-narratives of marginalized identities.*

Literature Review: The Problem

Narratives and identities, like living systems, are not static; they are ongoing processes. Despite this, there are *dominant narratives in higher education and sustainability in the US*, and these narratives are based around a constructed, normalized identity that is both "white" and "middle-class." The dominant narratives have been used to marginalize the narratives and experiences of many different individuals and communities. While the bulk of my discussion is related to marginalized racial and cultural identity, this is just the tip of the iceberg of many different identities, engaged in countless intersections of: race, ethnicity, class, place, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, country of origin, religion, language, etc. In order to understand this problem, I utilized guiding questions to acknowledge and unpack the context and positioning of these narratives.

What are some of the dominant narratives affecting marginalized identity in higher education?

Higher education has long been rooted in mindsets that are both mechanistic and elitist. This has affected how information and knowledge is valued, shared and created. Entwined throughout this is the divide between objectivity and subjectivity. Many fields of study lean towards strict objectivity, which Bernal (2002) calls a myth used by dominant culture to make other perspectives invisible. This objectivity is also embedded within traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods, creating unbalanced power relationships between a detached observer and the "object" of study (James, 2003). These methods rely on comparison to a dominant, Eurocentric baseline, which contributes to the "othering" of marginalized groups, and the "normalizing" of dominant culture (Bernal, 2002; Huber, 2009). An outgrowth of this is cultural deficit theory, which places marginalized communities in categories of "minority," "at

risk" or "disadvantaged." While deficit theory is especially prevalent in public K-12 educational discourse, it is rooted in the research methodologies of higher education (Huber, 2009; Milner, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The emphasis on objectivity also leaves very little room for "subjectivity," such as personal narrative or "I" statements in academic writing and research (Villanueva, 2013). This deprives individuals of opportunities to not only assert their identities, but to tell a story that cannot be quantified.

While there has been an emphasis on increasing "diversity" in higher education, the focus is often placed on numbers and representation amongst students and staff as opposed to how that diversity is supported by institutions, educators, pedagogy and curriculum (Montecinos, 2004). While preaching diversity, many are hesitant to examine both the systems of oppression that affect institutional change, and the different identities of students, choosing instead to reinforce the dominant narrative of a colorblind, equal opportunity, "objective" education (Bernal, 2002). An example of this is an approach found within many multicultural teacher education programs, which is the emphasis on teaching white students how to engage with diverse communities, often while ignoring the needs of students who do not identify as white. Montecinos (2004) and Kohli (2009) both suggest that, although students of color bring unique perspectives to these programs, they still need support in their ability to teach diverse learners and explore relationships between marginalized communities, as opposed to just the dynamic between "white"/"non-white" communities. Related to this is the idea of students with marginalized identities being used as "pedagogical tools" (Montecinos, 2004; Srivastava & Francis, 2006; Sule, 2010). This problem is found in many educational settings, both formal and informal. In this sense, storytelling is used as a way to teach the dominant culture about the "other," without reciprocity and built trust.

Tatum (1999) posits that students, in order to be engaged in their education, need to see themselves reflected in their environments, peers, mentors, teachers, curriculum and programming. Quite often, this reflection is not available to those whose identities have been marginalized. The educational narratives of individuals who have been placed in a "minority" status within their educational institutions are often much different than those of the "majority" student body, particularly for people of color at predominantly white institutions. In these environments, students of color have recounted stories of: micro-aggressions, discrimination, "impostor syndrome," a lack of institutional support, and the discouraging effect of not seeing oneself reflected in the curriculum or in leadership and faculty roles (Gonzalez, 2002; Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002; Morrison, 2010). Educators of color are often fighting to navigate the same environments as their students. Sule's (2010) research with faculty who identified as women of color reflected on their experiences with microaggressions and discrimination, along with the pressure to constantly prove their legitimacy to students. Villanueva (2013) and Elenes (2001) recount stories of pushback and hostility they have faced when prominently featuring Latina/o authors within their curriculum, particularly from white students and administrators. Many students with marginalized racial identities have discussed how mentors and role models with whom they identify have contributed to their resiliency and sense of empowerment during their time in higher education (Cantu, 2012; Jones, Castellanos & Cole, 2002; Morrison, 2010). If these mentors are absent or silenced, it will likely affect the students that are seeking that support.

What are some of the dominant narratives in mainstream environmentalism and sustainability?

The "diversity problem" in sustainability and environmental fields has garnered much attention recently, particularly from the release of Green 2.0's report, *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* (Taylor, 2014). This report showed that, despite ever changing demographics in the US, those holding board, leadership, staff and member roles in these organizations were predominantly white, male and middle class. Alongside this, research has shown that communities of color in the US are just as, if not more likely, to be concerned with environmental issues than white communities (Adeola, 2004; Jones & Rainey, 2006; Whittaker, Segura & Bowler, 2005). While many of these organizations have expressed a desire to diversify, a major shift has yet to occur. This has led some to question whether or not there are cultural biases embedded in these fields (Agyeman, 2003; McClean, 2013).

Mainstream environmentalism has historically been focused on "wilderness" conservation, protection, and preservation. Many have pointed out how this way of thought is rooted in racism, Manifest Destiny, frontier romanticism, constructs of masculinity and the morality of nature (Agyeman, 2003; Bonilla, 2010; McClean, 2013; Ray, 2013; Sze, 2004). These narratives have led to the creation of biases, misrepresentations, stereotypes, and myths about the relationship between the environment and people of color, women, indigenous peoples and others with marginalized identities. Much like in traditional higher education, narratives around cultural deficit are entwined in environmental thought. Some of these narratives include that black and Latina/o communities are "nature deprived" or inherently linked to a less virtuous "urban" life, or that people of color and the poor are more concerned with basic needs and civil rights than the environment. At the same time, women and indigenous peoples are romanticized as inherently more connected to the earth, yet continually undervalued or appropriated by mainstream environmentalism (Bonilla, 2010; Ray, 2013).

As environmental concerns began to shift towards the negative impacts of industrialization, the dominant narrative also shifted towards the concept of sustainability. Along with this came an emphasis on finding commonality together as humans to "save the earth." While this might not seem like a problem on the surface, it also flattens out different identities into the larger category of *humanity*, ignoring the many layers of power structures that have created unequal access and opportunities (Ray, 2013). More recent movements in sustainability have shifted context yet again to become place based and "local"; sustainable food systems and urban gardening, for example. Still, the public-facing stories of these movements have been dominated by white and/or middle class privilege and ideologies, leaving many communities to be viewed as deficient, needing to be saved, or simply made invisible (Alkon & McCullen, 2011; Anguiano, Milstein, De Larkin, Chen & Sandoval, 2012; Ramirez, 2015). Slocum (2006) refers to this by stating that these communities are often positioned as "the objects of the work but not the leaders of it" (p. 330). Many sustainability movements often aim to move those with marginalized identities closer to white progressive ideals and values (Alkon and Mares, 2011). These ideals are often rooted in frontier settler narratives and privilege: land and property ownership, self-sufficiency, and "urban homesteading" to name a few (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Related to this, sustainable development projects, conscious consumerism and green-washing continue the narrative of capitalism and colonialism, systems that rely on the marginalization of identities to exist.

To simplify "nature" or environmental movements as *white* spaces is to completely ignore the long history of land connections for communities of color and the vast diversity of people working in the field (Deming & Savoy, 2011; Finney, 2014; Tzou, Scalone & Bell, 2010). Some of the most conspicuously absent narratives and images are those of people of color

engaged or working professionally in mainstream environmental fields, from the sciences to outdoor education. Bowser (2012) discusses how people are often surprised or shocked to see her, a black woman from an urban setting, working in the field of wildlife biology in the national park system (p. 66). This is because, on top of preexisting biases, much of the history of people of color working in outdoor and environmental science and education has been made invisible (Bonilla, 2010; Finney, 2014).

While these are examples of mainstream environmental thought where marginalized identities have been ignored, there have been important shifts created within more radical movements, such as ecofeminism. Ecofeminism equates the destruction and devaluation of the earth to the devaluation of women (Kirk, 1998; Taylor, 1997) Ecofeminism has faced some criticism for perpetuating the male/female binary and for essentializing the experiences of women without looking at deeper systems of such as racism and classism (Davis, 1998), yet the work done in this field is asking larger questions about how certain identities are perceived and treated in relation to the Earth.

Clearly, many marginalized narratives have not often been welcomed, reflected, or supported in ways that create empowering spaces within traditional paradigms of education, leadership or sustainability. Can change still happen from within these systems? Perhaps, as many have been shifting towards alternative paradigms.

Shifting Paradigms

Both critical pedagogy and sustainability education have done much to challenge the dominant narratives in education and society, laying the groundwork for my proposed solution. Examining these intersections and approaches has helped me to see leverage points for change,

issues that still need to be addressed, and why sustainability educators have a responsibility to change these narratives.

How does critical pedagogy present counter-narratives and support transformative learning in higher education? How is it limited? The use of critical pedagogy in education has been one way in which to challenge and reframe dominant narratives. Critical pedagogies recognize, rather than deny, that systems of oppression and multiple identities (race, class, gender, etc.) inform and intersect with education. At the heart of critical pedagogy is Freire's (1970) concept of all education being political. Critical pedagogies can also be seen as transformational pedagogies, for they create spaces where learners can critically reflect on their existing and new ways of knowing in order to create change, in themselves and in the world (Ukpododu, 2009).

Educators using critical pedagogies often encourage personal storytelling to be utilized in both academic writing and classroom practice, which runs counter to traditional educational thought. Critical educators have discussed the importance of telling their stories to students in order to change the power dynamics within the classroom (hooks, 1994). Methods of teaching and learning found in popular education are also are practiced, such as sitting in a circle, creating group norms and engaging in dialogue, all of which are intended to bring more voices to educational environments and create environments of shared leadership (Wiggins, 2011).

Concepts within critical pedagogy that are especially relevant to the problem are found within critical race theory (CRT). A succinct description of CRT was given by Yosso (2006): "CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses" (p. 70). Critical race theory directly confronts dominant stories to bring light to the systems of oppression

they are embedded within. Solorzano's (1998) much cited description of CRT in education elaborates on this by focusing on: *the centrality/intersectionality of race, challenges to dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice, the importance of experiential knowledge* and *interdisciplinary approaches* (p. 122). CRT also challenges the ways in which academic research has traditionally been done (Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Huber, 2009). An essential component of CRT is the act of *counter-storytelling*, which provides people of color with a space to tell and uncover what has been hidden. The stories can help individuals find space for their voice, as well as strengthen communities to resist the "majoritarian" stories related to their abilities, "cultural deficiencies" and other negative stereotypes reinforced by the mainstream (Bernal, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical pedagogy also supports discussion and acknowledgment that a white identity has been normalized and privileged, yet mostly unexamined (McIntosh, 2008). This idea has not come easily, and discussions around white privilege can result in: denial and backlash; increased white guilt; separating students and educators into categories of oppressor/oppressed; and an inability for white students to articulate what their culture is (Allen & Rosatto, 2009). Focus on white privilege can also have vastly different outcomes for students who do not identify as white, or students who identify as multiracial (Montecinos, 2004; Srivasava & Francis, 2006). On the other hand, critically examining "whiteness" can support transformation in all students as a way to break down the notion that being white is to be *normal* or *cultureless*. It can also open up larger discussions about other narratives that have been privileged and normalized, such as heteronormativity (Tatum, 2000).

Critical theory and pedagogy is not without its own criticism, however, even from progressive educators. Some have argued that the language of critical pedagogy can be opaque

and inaccessible, and that actually practicing critical pedagogy can be incredibly challenging (Wiggins, 2011; Elenes, 2010). While critical pedagogy has brought more stories into educational discourse, it is also resoundingly anthropocentric. An ecological frame through which to challenge dominant narratives can be found in the field of sustainability education.

What are some ways in which sustainability education and theory both counters and reinforces dominant narratives? What makes the field of sustainability education unique in academia is its emphasis on changing the dominant paradigm of education from one that is mechanistic and linear to one that is ecological and cyclical. This brings with it an emphasis on interconnection, systems, processes, patterns, feedback loops, and flows of information (Bowers, 1999; Capra, 2005; Sterling, 2001; Wheatley, 2006). Non-human life is brought into the narrative as essential members of the community. This challenges dominant Western thought that places "nature" outside of human experience, and focuses more on a biophilic relationship with the Earth (Cajete, 1999).

This still leaves sustainability educators with the challenge of confronting dominant cultural assumptions and marginalized identities through this lens. Bowers (1999) stated that "a cultural approach to environmental education must start with the reconceptualization of the dominant paradigm that underlies the mainstream education" (p. 172). It is not just mainstream education that needs to be reconceptualized; there are also the dominant paradigms and narratives within environmentalism and sustainability. While diversity in thought, relationships and experience is integral to sustainability education, is there also a hesitance to discuss more specifically *how* different identities impact concepts of sustainability?

Many stories from indigenous peoples and communities are found in the field of sustainability education, showing a shift towards counter-narratives. First and foremost, this is

important because the voices and lives of indigenous peoples have been devalued, silenced and

marginalized for thousands of years through colonization. Contrary to dominant storytelling,

indigenous peoples are all around, not a thing of the past. Embedded within the multitude of

stories from indigenous peoples is the importance of inter-generational knowledge, traditional

ecological knowledge (TEK), non-written communication, and oral storytelling, all of which

provide non-dominant perspectives (Nelson, 2008). These stories have the ability to provide a

more holistic representation of indigenous peoples, by indigenous peoples. At the same time,

care must be taken to ensure that these stories are not subtracted from their context or,

conversely, used to perpetuate the image of the "ecological Indian" (Bonilla, 2010; Ray, 2013;

Martinez, Nelson & Salmon, 2008).

Understanding and cultivating a sense of place is one example within sustainability

education where both dominant and non-dominant narratives are entwined. Orr's (2011)

discussions on place, residents and dwellers are embedded in mainstream environmental thinking

and white privilege, for there is a moral judgment of what places are valid, along with a lack of

examination of the systems that affect where, and how, one lives. A connection to place does not

always imply something positive; places can bring feelings and memories that are marred in

conflict (Pena, 1998). Grunewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place, on the other hand, provides

more opportunities for different stories of place to be heard. The emphasis here is on diverse

understandings of how to sustainably live in a place, and acknowledging the systems that have

affected how one views or lives in a place (Grunewald, 2003).

Why should sustainability educators, specifically, have a responsibility to address

this problem? Education as change is one of the guiding ideas within sustainability education.

Sterling (2001) describes this as "a vision of continuous co-evolution where both education and

society are engaged in a relationship of mutual transformation" (p. 32-33). That vision requires

educators to constantly question and reflect on how they are supporting mutual transformation.

In order to do this, sustainability education must turn its talk around diversity and multiple

perspectives into action. Capra (2005) discusses how diversity is needed to make a system more

resilient; yet Taylor's (2014) report shows that environmental and sustainability fields are largely

homogenous. Is this not a contradiction?

        Bowers (1999) stated that educators who do not introduce students to ecological modes

of thinking and design are reinforcing an exploitative, industrialized relationship to the Earth (p.

167). Similarly, if educators do not reflect narratives that have been marginalized, they are also

reinforcing the dominant narrative. It is incredibly challenging to find a place wherein difference

is accepted but not categorized, where finding commonality across constructed borders does not

veer towards obliviousness to systems underneath. Similarly, there must be a balance between

the needs of self and the needs of community. Is my frustration with a lack of different narratives

more of a personally crafted barrier, keeping me from what I can learn? Should the greater

sustainability education community be concerned because a dominant narrative is found within

it, and that some individuals feel marginalized by it? I believe it is a bit of both. If sustainability

keeps reflecting an unbalanced image, there might be less opportunities or willingness for those

with different identities to enter these fields and create change from within.

Visioning a solution

        For the past year, I've been working with a local charter school that aims to change the

narrative of African American youth, particularly in the educational system. A major element of

this is by making student identity and culture an integral part of the learning process. While this

work is still in its early stages, the underlying philosophy is based around the concept that image

and representation have a profound effect on the learning of individuals and communities. This involves not just a change in image from the outside looking in; more importantly, it is about a shift from internalized oppression to empowerment and liberation. Kazanjian (2011) discussed how students with marginalized identities "must become self-empowered with a critical consciousness to prevent the media culture from directing their understanding of and participation in the world" (p. 378). I would add to this that *all* students, as well as educators, need this to prevent dominant narratives from guiding their learning and practice.

This led me to wonder; what can happen in an educational space where marginalized identities are not peripheral, secondary, devalued, or invisible? How can this be done in a way where the goal is not normality or sameness, but instead to ensure that different identities are all seen as vital components of a larger system? I believe that the field of sustainability education is a place where this could happen. Sustainability education is already engaging in a reframing of dominant narratives; a repositioning is now needed.

Solution: Repositioning towards counter-narratives

Through a repositioning of dominant and marginalized narratives, sustainability education can continue engaging in the process of change towards an ecological, transformative, and liberating space in education. Ideally, these would be spaces where marginalized identities could be presented holistically, challenging dominant narratives and systems of oppression while also building empathy and community. Most importantly, this shift will help to create spaces of empowerment and leadership cultivation for those whose identities have been marginalized in sustainability and educational fields, supporting opportunities for different leadership styles to emerge (Ferdig, 2007; Wheatley, 2006).

This repositioning is not about inserting narratives; it is about *de-centralizing* the power of the dominant narratives by focusing on marginalized narratives. Rather than trying to shift the margin to the center; the very notion of a "center" must be disrupted. As others have pointed out, the process of marginalization has been one of oppression, but the "margins" can also be places of transformative resistance, change and collective visioning (Grunewald, 2003; hooks, 1990; Anzaldua, 1987).

Framework

This solution is informed and inspired by: Solorzano's (1998) application of critical race theory in education; Tatum's (1999) discussion around what is needed to create inclusive and empowering educational environments (identity affirmation, community building and leadership cultivation), and Sterling's (2001) paradigmatic shifts towards an ecological paradigm in education (perceptual, conceptual and practice) (p. 53). Guided by these ideas, I have created a holistic framework, focused on four interconnected ways in which repositioning can take place: **affirmation** (identities past and present), **value** (respect, care, love), **engagement** (dialogue, participation and collaboration), and **transformation** (resisting, visioning and changing narratives). These concepts can be structured as guiding questions for educators in self-reflection, curriculum design and praxis– *What identities am I affirming? What narratives am I valuing and caring for? What narratives are being engaged with, shared, questioned and acted upon? Who is being supported in their transformation or empowerment and how am I conceptualizing transformation? S*tudents can also use this framework to reflect on their own experiences and learning.

This framework includes examples of some direct, practical applications as well as conceptual, theoretical and emotional explorations. While many of these examples are specific to

marginalized racial and cultural identities, the larger concepts and questions can be applied to other identities. Similarly, much of my context is centered within a formal sustainability education program at a university in Portland, but these leverage points can be utilized in other settings. This framework is intended to encourage a non-linear, ongoing process of change, uncovering and shifting narratives continually.

Affirm. Wheatley (2006) discusses how our world is co-created through observation, which is affected by what one chooses to take notice of (p. 37). While many have pushed for a "diversification" of sustainability and environmental fields, this cannot happen without focusing on who and what is deemed to be missing. By repositioning focus to counter-narratives, educators are directly engaging in identity affirmation. Educators must also be willing to continually reflect on what stories and identities they are affirming. This involves an ongoing process of perceptual shifts (Capra, 2005). Are you only discussing narratives about people of color within an urban or "low income" context? Are all of the speakers invited to your class from a white, middle class background? Have you made room for yourself and students to express their identities? These choices are not often made intentionally, and are likely an outcome of the power of dominant narratives. However, one must be willing to take responsibility in the role they play in reinforcing or challenging this power.

Within curriculum and context, sustainability educators are already embedding narratives from indigenous communities into the field, but there is often a lack of stories from other marginalized communities. One way in which sustainability education can affirm some of these identities is by focusing on narratives from environmental justice (EJ). In the 1980's, the field of environmental justice emerged from communities that have borne the weight of racist and classist environmental policy in the US. Environmental justice recognizes that the environment is

not something "out there" which one can visit, but rather the place in which one lives every day. In EJ, civil rights and environmental rights are synonymous. The effects of environmental degradation are often first felt by the urban and rural poor, immigrants, refugees, and communities of color who have been historically pushed into "less desirable" areas (Bullard, 2005; Anguiano et al., 2012). Scholars and activists in the field confront what mainstream environmentalism has tip-toed around; that marginalized identities and their places have been treated differently by dominant culture. Sustainability educators can also look for opportunities to affirm the narratives around *places* that have been marginalized. This could include discussion around how some spaces have been coded as "white," and others have been coded as "not white" (Finney, 2014; Guthman, 2008).

EJ narratives provide examples of communities who have been marginalized, who are empowered and engaged in collective action for sustainability, which disrupts the dominant narrative (Lanza, 2005). The work of activists in environmental justice also provides examples of emergent leadership outside of traditional organizational structures. One must make sure to avoid assumptions that all people of color or low income communities working in environmental and sustainability activism are also working in EJ (Finney, 2014). This only continues the problem of condensing and essentializing identities.

Many authors and community activists have also been working to bring more attention to the historical and current narratives of people of color and immigrants involved in farming. These stories can provide not just an alternative to the dominant narrative, but a different way for those with marginalized identities to critically examine their own relationship to land and place (Bowens, 2015; White, 2011). Similarly, stories coming from grassroots initiatives, particularly related to indigenous land rights issues, bring perspectives of communities who have been

displaced or separated from their home lands. These stories also directly challenge globalization, industrialization, and capitalism (Mander & Tauli-Corpuz, 2006).

Affirming marginalized identities does not just happen within curriculum and content; it takes place in direct interactions with others. For educators, this equates to a responsibility to acknowledge the different identities within the learning community. This means that one cannot question or judge the identity that another asserts. From a personal perspective, I've been in many hurtful situations where my identity was denied by another ("you're not *really* Mexican," "you don't count," etc.). I believe that to deny someone of their identity and their agency in the matter is an act of violence. This is as much an outgrowth of the compartmentalization and empiricism enforced by dominant thought as it is about racism and bias. An identity is not a neat, tidy package that can be essentialized. Even as I discuss the "white, middle class" identity, I also acknowledge that it is a construct.

Explorations of power, privilege, and oppression have been utilized as one way to unpack the complexity of identity in both sustainability education and critical pedagogy. Before engaging in this kind of work, individuals need to be provided with opportunities to assert and reflect on their intersecting identities. To do this in a way that feels safe and inclusive for all students is incredibly challenging. An example I believe can be learned from was found in a workshop I took part in with KairosPDX, for elementary educators in Portland who are committed to culturally relevant pedagogy. In this workshop the group engaged in an activity called "cultural artifact sharing." All members were given the homework of bringing something that represented or informed their cultural identity, and shared a brief story about what this artifact means to us. Members shared artifacts such as photographs, family heirlooms, symbolic objects, and food. Individuals were able to present and affirm the parts of themselves that they

comfortably, or uncomfortably, connected to, on their own terms and in their own words. "Culture" took on connotations of race, ethnicity, nationality, place, family, and interests. While this community already appeared "diverse" from the outside, there was now a better understanding of what was going on at the individual level. The activity also opened up a conversation around how strength can be found through difference, as opposed to just our shared links.

Value. Simply affirming an identity does not mean your work is done. Within my solution, marginalized narratives must be inherently valued and regarded. In describing her experiences with multicultural initiatives in higher education, hooks (1994) said that she found "a will to include those considered 'marginal' without a willingness to accord their work the same respect and consideration given other work " (p. 38). This kind of shallow, non-critical insertion of stories, combined with narratives of cultural deficit, is all too common in dominant discourse.

A counter-narrative to this is found in Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth, which views marginalized cultures and identities through a completely different lens; CCW looks at the assets that communities of color utilize for resilience. Through this lens, those with marginalized racial and ethnic identities are able to see the cultural strengths that they bring to discussion, practice, and leadership in sustainability. In many ways, this is already aligned with sustainability education's shift towards a holistic education, for it sees value in qualities that have been deemed unimportant by traditional educational systems. The difference is that CCW is not reluctant to discuss specific cultural identities. Connected to this is the work that has already been done by many educators of color within their communities, such as African American communities utilizing an Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy (DiAquoi, 2014). CCW is ultimately about empowerment within marginalized communities, not about appropriation by the

dominant culture (Yosso, 2005). Educators have to be responsible with regards to counter-narratives. In discussing boundaries, Vandana Shiva (1997) said that "'removing boundaries' has been an important metaphor for removing restraints on human actions, and allowing limitless exploitation of natural resources" (p.26). Much like ecological thinking supports recognizing and working within limits, there must be an understanding and respect of cultural boundaries in order to avoid exploitation.

Supporting and expressing empathy, caring, and love are also integral to the concept of "value." Connected to this is Sterling's (2001) perceptual shift towards ecological thinking, which requires one to broaden their areas of concern and acknowledge interconnection (p.53). Biophilia is an example of an expression of love and care wherein one embraces this interconnection, valuing the Earth and all living beings (Cajete, 1999). Caring is not an independent act; as Noddings (2005) stated, it is a "way of being in relation" (p. 17). To care for and to value another involves an acceptance of care directed back at you. When one's identity has been marginalized and devalued in educational and sustainability narratives, a caring relationship cannot be nourished. Valle (2015) said that "perhaps the most revolutionary act is an act of love because it reminds us that communities are built on social relationships rather than economic transactions" (p. 81). Coming from a place of love and empathy can help support the trusting relationships that are needed for engagement.

Engage. Affirmation and value alone cannot address the problem; active participation, dialogue, listening and collaboration with each other is an essential part of the process. Cajete (1999) describes this as coming to an understanding that "community is 'constructed' through cultivating relationships...that community requires participation and work" (p. 202). Engaging with marginalized narratives and communities requires work in establishing trusting

relationships. It is through relationships with other living beings that understanding and knowledge is co-created. Conversely, engagement means that an acknowledgment and respect for differences is needed.

While the dominant narrative of sustainability might be perceived as white, middle class, and privileged, this does not equate to a lack of diverse communities engaged in sustainability work. However, students and educators might need support in seeking out opportunities to engage with marginalized narratives, particularly if those connections have not already been established. This is where *active listening* comes in. Sustainability educators can help to create space and enhance skills for listening within the classroom as well as within the larger community. Actually *listening* to individuals and communities who have been marginalized is an essential part of repositioning narratives. Sustainability initiatives have often taken a prescriptive approach to what is "good" for a community, before even asking what it is that a community wants (Slocum, 2006). This removes a sense of agency, and continues the cycle of marginalization.

Interdisciplinarity and *experiential learning* are also key in engagement. The constraints and bureaucracy within educational institutions has siloed "disciplines" from each other. One way engagement can take place within higher education is by seeking out specific cultural studies departments and attempting to build relationships from within. However, reaching outside of academic constraints is likely to be a more immediate option. Within a local context, the LSE program integrates community based learning hours into most of its coursework. This provides an avenue for hands-on experiences with organizations involved in sustainability and education. However, this can also be an opportunity to engage with those organizations that have emerged from and are working within communities that have been marginalized.

One local example of an organization that utilizes the above concepts of engagement is the Vanport Multimedia Project (VMP). The VMP is a place based, community generated, social sustainability storytelling project, which emerged out of the desire of both Vanport flood survivors and members of Portland's black community to tell and share these stories. The project also supported community members who were interested in recording these stories, by organizing free video and audio production workshops for the interviewers. The recordings were then shared with the community at free screenings throughout Portland. From these screenings grew wider community involvement, partnerships, and discussion related to Vanport's role in black history, present, and future in Oregon, as well as environmental racism, displacement and gentrification. Another organization doing collaborative work is the Portland Harbor Community Coalition, which is a collective of individuals and groups (including Groundwork Portland, Wisdom of the Elders, and Right 2 Survive) asserting often marginalized perspectives related to the Portland Harbor Superfund site and cleanup. My experiences with these organizations have provided me with empowering spaces in which to actively engage with those who have repositioned their narratives, who welcome and reflect different approaches to sustainability.

Transform. Sustainability educators must consider whose and what transformation they are supporting. Transformation can come in many different ways: revolution; the emancipatory education proposed by Freire (1970); transformative resistance (McClaren, 1994; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), or a change in self-perception. Because transformation is a process that has personal and communal manifestations, there are countless ways in which this can occur. Change cannot be forced, as not everyone is prepared or willing to take this on. Educators can help to create supportive environments to do so, but it is ultimately up to each individual what to do with that. Sustainability educators are already discussing and supporting the kinds of transformation

that can occur in order for communities to become more sustainable. The following examples are just a few ways in which marginalized narratives can be repositioned as the foundations of processes of transformation.

Decolonization is a concept that is grounded in indigenous communities, with a focus on acknowledging and opposing the violence of colonialism, supporting grief and healing within communities, working towards sovereignty, and creating a new future (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Villanueva, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). Raza and Chicano studies educators have also been working towards decolonization in order to re-build connections to oft-denied indigenous roots (Villanueva, 2013). While decolonization works towards cognitive and values-based shifts, it also aims for actual physical shifts, particularly in the form of indigenous land reclamation. Discussing decolonization in the field of sustainability education provides another example of ways in which marginalized identities are engaging in transformation, yet care must be taken to not simply use it as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonization can be a deeply uncomfortable idea, for it truly "unsettles" and implicates both dominant and marginalized identities (Tuck & Yang, 2012); in this sense, it might be one of Mezirow's "disorienting dilemmas" that sparks a transformative learning experience (as cited in Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17). Sustainability educators in particular can also utilize decolonization narratives in critical discussions related to place; how can sense of place take colonization into account, for instance?

Much like the margins and the edge, borders have the potential to be transformational spaces. *Border pedagogy* focuses on the areas where different identities, cultures, and ways of thinking intersect (Kazanjian, 2011). Educators engaging in border pedagogy challenge students and themselves to both recognize and resist barriers in order to step outside of constructed spaces. This means students need to have many encounters with different narratives, histories,

and experiences (Kazanjian, 2011). Again, in crossing borders and boundaries one must be respectful and cognizant of limits. Yet, as hooks (1994) stated, crossing these borders can be worth the risk, as it is a better alternative to the "continued attachment to and support of existing systems of domination" (p. 131).

Connected to this is Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) *mestiza consciousness,* grounded in the identity of a Chicana residing on the borderlands of the US and Mexico, wherein multiple identities are engaged and dualistic thinking is dismantled (Elenes, 2010). Anzaldua's new consciousness embraces ambiguity, requiring a kind of "mental flexibility" that helps one understand and adapt when entering a new system or paradigm (Meadows, 2005). As Elenes (2010) discussed, this concept can also help in "getting to the same side of the river," to a place where unequal power relationships can be transformed (p. 693).

While transformation might require one to have already gone through some of the work involved in affirmation, value and engagement, it is by no means a final step, much as affirmation is not a first step. Individuals and communities will likely be entering this framework with different skills, backgrounds, and understandings. Non-linear processes can be more ambiguous, which can make them difficult to implement in certain settings. Enacting this framework in a traditional, higher education setting or a K-12 public school will likely be challenging due to institutional constraints. In predominantly white, middle-to-upper class settings, this framework might require additional external supports to ensure balance.

Conclusion

Crafting this solution has been both a humbling and confusing process for me; having never formally taught in a classroom, who am I to say how this should take place? The solution, much like the problem, is entwined in many interlocking systems. Despite my doubt, I believe

that this repositioning is needed not to just make sustainability education more inclusive, but to make discussions around sustainability more accessible, critical, honest, hopeful, and applicable. The implications of this repositioning can hopefully include: less prescriptive methods of outreach and engagement to communities; more spaces of empowerment and leadership for students with marginalized identities; wider discussion and dialogue around the dominant narratives of sustainability; and continued reflection. This repositioning also requires a commitment to anti-oppression and anti-racism in order for deep change to take place, which I have only briefly touched on in this paper.

As mentioned previously, this framework for repositioning is intended to be applicable to many different narratives that have been marginalized. For example, the dominant narratives of able/"whole"/"natural" bodies in environmentalism has been explored (Ray, 2013), but how can sustainability educators take part in repositioning these narratives through this framework? Why is there such little attention given to narratives of Asian American and Asian immigrant communities involved in sustainability (Sze, 2004)? Where are the narratives from rural communities? How can I continue working to expand my scope at a global level? I'm left with so many questions, inspiring deeper inquiry. I also feel that this framework can be utilized in different academic fields, as well as non-academic settings such as community based initiatives and workshops. The framework might have to be adjusted for different settings, in order a provide a grounding in ecological thought and literacy.

The immediate audiences for my project are the students and educators in the LSE program at Portland State, formal and informal sustainability educators in the region and beyond, as well as by those working within non-profit and grassroots organizations. I plan to directly share this paper with different communities and individuals, craft a version of my framework that

does not assume a background in ecological thinking, and create a resource guide for educators

seeking out marginalized narratives in sustainability. In many ways, I also wrote this paper for

myself, reflecting on the kinds of narratives I would have liked to have been exposed to more in

my years a student. This framework can help me to put my words into action, be responsible in

my work and interactions, and come from a place of love.

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