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Classroom Counterspaces: Centering Brown and Black Students in Doctoral Education

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Abstract: Campus counterspaces exist as spaces where Brown and Black students can promote their own learning, and where their experiences as Brown and Black people are considered valid and critical knowledge. Drawing from Anzaldúa's borderlands theory, this paper reveals that classroom counterspaces recognize the complexity of Brown and Black identity, push back against whiteness, and support Brown and Black students' vulnerable and honest perspectives on the academy. These findings highlight areas where instructors can rethink their pedagogical approaches to create classroom counterspaces, and suggest that classroom counterspaces also push against the hegemony found in current U.S. higher education.

Paper: Introduction

The culture of doctoral education in the United States reflects a series of values that often position whiteness at their center. These values include the belief in western epistemologies at the expense of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives (Patel, 2016; Smith, 2012), and the exclusion of minoritized identities and marginalized positions under the guise that these factors play no role in the research process. Institutions with these values place Brown and Black students at the margins. To address this, Brown and Black students often create counterspaces. Campus counterspaces, broadly defined, are spaces that allow Brown and Black students to center their own learning, view their experiences as valid knowledge, and create positive academic environments for themselves (Ong at al., 2018; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). I employ Anzaldúa's (2012) borderlands theory, along with her concept of *bridges* (2002, 2009), and Tarin et al.'s (2019) concept of *islands,* to theorize and understand the role of classroom counterspaces for Brown and Black graduate students. Bridging occurs when students feel comfortable bringing their identities into conversation with their academic work. The converse occurs when students feel that their identity/identity-informed work separates them from their peers/faculty, essentially making them islands.

This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study of a graduate-level course designed to represent both a counterspace and a borderland for doctoral students. The analysis revealed that classroom counterspaces are spaces where instructors recognize how the complexity of Brown and Black student identity informs the classroom experiences, where instructors push back against whiteness in both course content and class dialogue and where instructors support and encourage Brown and Black students' vulnerable and honest perspectives on the academy.

Borders, Not Hats: Recognizing the Complexity of Brown and Black Student Identity

A vital element of classroom counterspaces is recognizing the complexity of Brown and Black student identity. In predominately-white classes, Brown and Black students felt compelled to choose which element of their identity (e.g. racial, student, gender) they brought into the classroom, treating identity/ies as an interlocking whole made up of different elements that become more or less salient in different contexts. In the classroom counterspace, the need to choose was absent. Students could bring all their identities into the classroom. Rather than choose what 'hat to wear' when engaging in classroom interactions, Brown and Black students could address both the intersections and differences of their identities in academic spaces.

Pushing Back Against Whiteness Through the Use of Academic Content

The role of classrooms in socializing graduate students to Eurocentric theories and contexts (Campbell, 1969; Gonzales, 2018; Bourdieu, 1988), and western-based research practices (Masta, 2018), meant that Brown and Black graduate students often position their academic work in relationship to whiteness (Masta, 2018; Tarin et al., 2019). This type of positioning makes bridging problematic as Brown and Black students must then make difficult choices around their engagement with the course material, peers, and instructors, often leading them to become an island.

I Am Not Alone: Being Vulnerable and Honest and Angry About the Academy

Classroom counterspaces provided Brown and Black students with the opportunity to express vulnerability, honesty, and anger. Brown and Black students are rarely afforded the luxury of expressing these particular emotions, for fear of being labeled or stereotyped. Therefore, being allowed to demonstrate emotion(s) in the classroom gave Brown and Black students a sense of belonging not experienced in predominately white classes. Brown and Black students could be upfront about their experiences, share their struggles, not gloss over those struggles, and publicly state how racism and racialization influenced their lives.

Conclusion

While initially determined by Brown and Black students themselves, there is growing evidence that instructors, through careful planning and execution, can turn their classrooms into counterspaces. This paper suggests that classroom counterspaces are one strategy that could address the ongoing marginalization that occurs toward Brown and Black graduate students. However, this work raises other important questions about the future of doctoral education. How does the classroom counterspace model extend to other marginalized identities or social contexts? How might the classroom counterspace model influence policy and practice within departments, disciplines, or institutions? And lastly, can any model designed within the hegemony of institutional whiteness truly combat marginalization, or do these models just provide temporary relief for a deeply entrenched problem?

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