

H.E.A.R.T. Podcast Episode 1 Part 1

In this first episode, we'll be discussing intersectionality and its use in teaching practices. We'll be taking this journey together alongside professors Jessica Harris, and Saran Stewart in which they share how their personal experiences and educational foundations guide their work. Take it away, Milagros!

Thanks, Omar. I'm thrilled to be introducing Dr. Saran Stewart, who is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on access and equity, post-colonial theories, decolonizing, methodologies, and international and comparative higher education. With us today, we also have Dr. Jessica Harris, who is an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on critical race theory in education multi-racial reality and the intersections of race, gender, and campus, sexual assault. Both of these scholars are advancing the field of higher education through their research, using intersectionality as a framework, which makes them perfect for our first episode this season.

Saran and Jessica, thank you so much for being here with us today. I'm really looking forward to hearing your perspective on how intersectionality can be a lens from which we enter and in that tire education and anti-racist teaching, especially since you both use this lens to do your own research. So, let's get started.

Jessica, can you tell us a bit more about what anti-racist teaching means to you? Sure. Um, you know, this was difficult for me to answer because I just teach in the manner that I teach and I do, I would say yes. Um, you know, my teaching is anti-racist but more so my teaching is informed by a critical race theory lens.

As you mentioned, Milagros. Um, a lot of my research, all of my research is informed by critical race theory. And so, my teaching is very much informed by critical race theory as well. So, what that really means for me is that, um, my teaching it centers, how racism is endemic to education, right. It centers settler, colonialism, and anti-blackness.

It really pushes back on these comforting white majority, majority male stories. Right? So, a lot of the curriculum that students might see is centered on whiteness and, and white men. And so, it's really pushing back on, on that, um, that understanding that that's where knowledge lies. It also really pushes back on the black, white binary.

Right? I think a lot of times, um, because of anti-blackness because of, um, you know how institutions were founded on the transatlantic slave trade. We tend to focus. We being educators may focus, tend to focus on, um, anti-blackness and black students, faculty, and staff, and that is absolutely necessary. But I also think it's really important to push back against that black, white binary and focus on settler colonialism and native students and native realities and Asian students and xenophobia and so on and so forth.

So, I think CRT is inherently anti-racist, but yeah. I also think anti-racism has become a buzzword more recently. And so, I just want to kind of, I want to say, yes, I am. Anti-racist in my teaching, but more so I'm really focusing on, um, the tenets of critical race theory and infusing those tenants into my teaching.

Awesome Jess. So happy to see you. Um, so you know, the thing, I think that's strong through Jess and I, to be quite honest with you, when we think about answering this question is that we had our grounding at the same institution. And so. We had to seem kind of ideological, philosophical underpinnings kind of rooted.

So, I can see some of our answers are going to overlap. The answer is, is teaching, um, is really cemented for me in particular, in a decolonizing frame, looking at emancipatory ways of understanding, knowing delivery content. So, it's a dual focus in terms of really focusing on what is not through capitalist lens.

And that's where a lot of my anti-racist work is going to literally be connected to anti colonialist work as well. And then this reframe is in some more decolonized space. And the reason for that in particular is having taught outside of the U.S. for so long. To a predominant I've told my students this semester that I've only ever taught in my academic career, all black students, ironically, um, as an adjunct faculty with the University of Denver, I've taught a mixed group of students, but my majority of my academic career is that, and I cone that as a privilege, but it also lets me understand what I've been grappling with recently is I'm trying to really deflect on what we considered the colonial gaze that each of us being taught in Western colonial, um, institutions are going to be pervasive in this rhetoric. And the constant challenge for us in doing this work is situating our work or ethics or moral into equity.

Anti-racism, um, decolonization, critical race focus. And so, we're centering those works, but it's a constant pushback. And I would argue in doing this work, you're also constantly regulating yourself and the work that you do. And understanding the means in which you're doing it, because for me in particular, it's the unlearning of education that has become ever-present in this anti-racist work and anti-racist teaching with our students.

Um, and it's really interesting in coming back to teach in the United States. And it's significantly different to be quite honest with you. I'm teaching a predominant homogenous group, even though it's a historically what we would consider a marginalized group. It's not in their context. So that's a whole different centering and recent turn for how this work is done from a global perspective, from a post-colonial de-colonize perspective, but it all is intertwined in the current essence of when you're in predominantly white, global, Northern capitalist societies.

It is required of you. If you really want to be about this equity work. Yeah, no, thank you for that. And you know, one of the, um, things that I want to ask you is a question that I once came across, um, In a book chapter by Gloria Ladson-Billings. And that question just really stood with me because I had those questions when I was coming across the work.

So, I appreciated that she actually titled the chapter, the question everybody was asking her, which was, "yes! But how do we do it?" So, I'm going to ask you this, like you've broken down what it means. Take me inside of your classroom. Take us inside of your classroom. Can you, um, either share some principles that you enact, or maybe just give one example, like concrete as possible.

What does it look like in action in your classroom? Um, let's start off with Saran. Sure. So absolutely bar none the only way I've been able to do this work is to do self-reflexive journaling. And it doesn't matter if I'm teaching, um, hierarchal in there, um, modeling structural equation, statistics, qualitative research methodology, or.

Comparative higher education. It does not matter. It's a tool, an academic tool I've used and a number of scholars use it as well. Where I assign, um, all the readings I asked the students. To journal throughout the semester where they just suppose their lived experiences and integrate, and later in salient quotes that resonate and that they have dissonance with so that they can grapple with this thing called "academic jargon" across the spectrum of courses.

the, the whole purpose of that is to also introduce them to authors. Um, I love to do it in STEM fields in particular, but to introduce them to authors that are non-whites. And the reason for that is to break through the rhetoric of this anti-blackness curriculum that is pervasive throughout in particular global and other institutions, and even former British, colonial institutions as well, and the reason.

And so, in doing that, that then, in many ways we have seen students do and it takes a couple of required journals, right? They're grappling with the jargon, the academic rhetoric, trying to really understand it. And then trying to map on their lived experiences. I've seen how they're better able to understand the reasoning, the purpose, how they situate themselves.

But most importantly, that they can do this, that they are part of the narrative and not excluded from the narrative. So that's one example and one tool that I've used to kind of really situate the students, writing language, um, especially when you dealing with non-native English speakers. Um, also trying to grapple with, um, impostor syndrome in the Academy.

Um, as I've taught 90% of my students across the seven years, um, have all been first-generation students. And so, this tool is breaking down the myth of what is, um, higher education writing, higher education overall, to simplify to its bare bone content, to how it relates to the self. So that's one, one example.

Thank you that's fantastic. Jessica, what are your thoughts? Yeah, like saran said, we overlap a little bit, um, with the reflective exercises and I really want to stress the point that it doesn't matter what class you're teaching, that we shouldn't be thinking about. The anti-racist teaching. Or, you know, pushing back on, uh, normative understandings of whatever's in the curriculum.

Right? So, one of the things that I do do, regardless of if I'm teaching student development theory, if I am teaching critical race theory or racism in higher education, um, or a stats course, which is so not my lane, but if I were teaching that I would start out with students reading the first week something about settler, colonialism, something about anti-blackness and how it relates to higher education. Right. So right now, I usually have students read an

article by Glenn from 2015 about settler colonialism as framework, which isn't about higher education, but really having students bring that back into.

Okay, so this might be more general about us society, but how does this map back to our work as practitioners, as educators, as researchers? And then I also always have them read Laurie Patton Davis's um, Dr. Lori Patton Davis's. Post-secondary pros, which is a CRT to really map, um, map how anti-blackness really was the foundation of the higher education system in this country, um, and other countries as well.

Um, and so I start with that. Um, I also think it's really important. I think the Saran mentioned this, but again, pushing back with the curriculum. So, who's who, like, not only what themes and what identities am I putting into my syllabus pretty into the readings, but also what's scholars. Right? So, people can be writing about, uh, native students or about multiracial faculty, but those individuals can still be white CIS, hetero men.

Right? And so, it's coming from a specific perspective. And so being really intentional in not only what the topics are in the class, but also who is writing about these topics. Right? Um, and also just to get a little bit more. Into that it's also what institutions, what journals, right? That we're not just, um, upholding whiteness and white supremacy by putting in only articles that are in the review of higher education or AERJ, which are very much these top tier journals, but have very much been influenced by whiteness and white supremacy.

Um, and having a conversation with students about why I do this and how I do this and what they're reading. Um, the one, the one other thing, two other things I will say one is that I am also intentional in putting in readings about whiteness and white students and white faculty, because I think that the absence of, of whiteness in the curriculum is then inherently anti-racist right.

But we need to be critiquing whiteness and how that operates on the college campus. Um, and the other thing I will say too, is that I've become more and more intentional about. About, I guess, infusing different forms of racism and forms of, uh, you know, how white supremacy manifests. So not only are we talking about settler, colonialism and anti-blackness, but we're also talking about xenophobia.

We're also talking about mono-racism, which affects multiracial individuals, racist nativism, and so really getting students to think a little bit more deeper about. Not only how do these systems intersect and influenced me, but also how might I be upholding these systems? Right? And being privileged by some of these systems.

That's amazing. I mean, what you both are doing just sounds like one, I need to take your classes. I have to figure out how you can enroll, audit, but also, um, I'm curious about what the response, what's your experience with student response? And what kind of range of responses do you receive, um, with the type of teaching that you're doing?

Um, so I'm going to ask Jessica first, since she just went, um, last, so you mentioned a few things there about, you know, the curriculum and that you explain, you know, to students, not just the, what, the themes, the core ideas you're going to cover, but the who. And the

why of those who, um, and in addition to that, really trying to deepen and expand or broaden ideas about what racism is and all the variations in which racism can show up.

Um, what kind of responses have you received in, in your teaching experience? Yeah. Thank you for this question. Um, because it allows me to reflect on my own privilege and passion. Um, So at the moment. So, I've been at UCLA now five years and the response has been lovely. Like it's almost to a point where students are like, I want more, they really pushed me.

So some of the reason why I've added in, okay. So, let's talk about xenophobia and racist nativism. And these other forms of racism is because these students are demanding. It. They're demanding it. And it's also that there's just such a diverse, racially, diverse group of students that I have in the classroom, which I am so blessed to have.

And I'm know I'm blessed to have that because I also taught at another institution before UCLA, University of Kansas. I'll put it on blast, but u\University of Kansas reflects so many other institutions that we have in the U.S. uh, being, predominantly white, historically white, uh, settled in their curriculum of whiteness, um, and very comfortable being there.

And so, I had so much pushback my first year of teaching and it was everything that I read it. I would say it as Academic Deja Vu. That's how I would describe it where I'm like, Oh, I've read this in the literature. I've read that white students pushed back against women of color or people of color faculty members in the classroom and say, Oh, my gosh, this person just always wants to talk about race.

They make everything about race. They're not articulate. They don't know what they're talking about. I can't. I can't really learn anything from them because they're not as smart as a professor should be. Right. I experienced all of that at the University of Kansas. One, because yes, it was a predominantly white cohort of students, but also because of that was nobody else was pushing back against the understandings of, of, uh, whiteness and racism within the program, within the institution, within the world, within the country.

And so, UCLA is very different. Um, it has. It's issues as every institution does, but I'm very, very blessed to have students who are clamoring, chomping at the bit to, um, consume critical ways of knowing to consume how do I be anti-racist in my future practice or my future research. Um, and so I've been met with a lot, a lot of support and love and.

Um, so much more positivity from students. So, I'm very, very blessed because I know that that is a very huge outlier experience. Yeah. And before we transition to saran, um, if I could just ask a quick follow-up, um, which is in one setting, you're seeing, you know, you're kind of like the sole or the one or the one month, few who are offering this type of teaching or offering this type of curriculum.

And so, the response, some of the response you're getting is also because it's not an expectation. Context wide, right? It's not an expectation everywhere. Whereas the context changes and I'm sure, you know, you didn't say this, but it sounded I'm inferring. So, I'm, I want to confirm it feels like there's an, a culture around you where that is almost like

expectation and, and people want more because there's an expectation that that's the learning that's going to be happening.

So, I'm curious about, if that's true. If you could share that or maybe clarify that I misunderstood. And then if you don't mind sharing how you respond to that. So, I'm hearing a little bit from the UCLA response is that I give them more, they ask for more. So, I give them more and I am learning. It sounds like you're saying I'm being pushed to learn more.

And I'm curious, you know, how did you handle the pushback that you got when you went to University of Kansas? Cause that's a different context, but way more common for, for many anti-racist teachers. So, I'm just curious to hear more about that. Yeah. Um, yes, I was nodding the whole time, so yes, everything that you said.

Correct. Um, and, um, you know, it's interesting cause I'm on the tenure track now and, um, you know, in the first two years I had a lot of anxiety about my teaching. And to be honest, the first year I did have some major pushback from students and it was way more about my identity. Right? And it was actually from people that held the same identities that I did.

[Right. So, women of color, mixed race, women of color. And I thought that that was. Fascinating. And I'm still doing a lot of work around like, well, what does that mean? And, and what does that mean for higher education? Maybe it means nothing. Um, but responding to the students at University of Kansas was really interesting.

Cause I wasn't on the tenure track. I did have a lot of anxiety cause I was like, these students hate me and they're so rude to me in the classroom, but it took them, it took them about 10 weeks to warm up. And then, you know, on my teaching evals, I had one student specifically be like, "I hated this professor in this class, in the beginning.

And now I like understand that that was because of my privilege. Like this class taught me that." Right? And I think that that again is kind of an outlier experience. 10 weeks is not going to make a student like have these mind-blowing, um, understandings, but I just trudged through. Cause it was the only way I knew how to teach.

And if I was truly embodying CRT as embodied theory, I wasn't going to turn back. And of course, I had the privilege of that because I was out of there after a year. Like I had stepped, stepped foot in Kansas and was like, we're doing this for one year and no more. Right. And I'll just say finally, one of the things I live by.

Um, because of CRT is something that Derrick bell wrote about and he asked me a question like Gloria Ladson-Billings, PS, racism is here to stay now what? Right. What do we do about it? And so, he makes this, this argument that it's here to stay. It's here to be, it's going to be here forever, but that doesn't mean that we're going to stop trying to deconstruct it and push against it.

Right? We all know he makes us kind of this analogy. We all know that we're going to die. But that doesn't stop us from living and living life to the fullest. It makes us want to live more. And so that's very much, um, how I view teaching is that I know I'm not going to solve all the issues. I know that there will be the absence of racism after I've taught this course.

But I do know that there's some sort of change that I've made that I've chipped away at something. Thank you so much. Saran, what are your thoughts about, um, how students have responded? You know, like what, you know, to the work that you've done, you talked about that reflective journals and what kind of, and you talked about two different contexts, one context being homogeneous, where you were in Jamaica and you know, you really talking about.

What would be here, a minoritized population, but they're very much the norm. And then now you're in this context where it's, you know, racially diverse classroom. Can you speak to me a little bit about what kind of responses you've gotten? Milagros? Yeah, Jess and I got some twin twinning life. So basically, and I've wrote, I've written about this, right?

I've published this in the, or. The book that we did with Professor Tuitt, and, Hanes Davidson, um, about the critical, inclusive pedagogies around the globe. And essentially, I wrote that in my first semester returning home, it was my first semester, first month teaching that, um, master's students. And I forgot what it was.

I believe it was, um, The Master's in Educational Measurement students. And I was teaching them around the areas of educational research. Right. It's based on my own course. And the, the class representative came to see me, my office, Oh, is my first time I kid you not she's like, don't just do it. "I've come on behalf of my class to let you know that, um, your status teaching it's too foreign.

We, we, we are not built for this. This is too far in minded", right? All this me, me, anti-racist, I'm tired of. What's like, what's you talking about film, critical race, sports and research and philosophy of the mine on group work. We came here to take notes and for you to lecture to us, she kind of let me know that. Whoa, did the students really approach Dr. Stewart to share that they disagreed with their teaching style? That's interesting. Have you ever had that take place Milagros? Actually Omar, it's quite common. There are a number of published articles in books that report the challenges that bypass faculty experience, especially at historically white colleges and universities.

For example, there's this fantastic book that covers this topic well, entitled, presumed, and competent their intersections of race and class for women in academia. And there's also a really great article entitled *Teaching in the Line of Fire*, is a reality, especially for black women in the prophecy area, um, that we need to name and make sure we continue to address.

So, I'm glad that Dr. Stewart raised this issue with that. Tanisha is no, um, complete in our second Master's in Canada about to do her PhD. And she's one of my research students. Right. And I kept that day though, when she left the office, I felt so abysmal that I called my mentor. And said to him that, what do I do?

How do I continue to do this work? And essentially, he said, you know, you gotta trust the process. Right. And I constantly was like, well, this clearly is not the process because there's so much pushback and immediately kind of pushed against what is normative and the culture of the institution versus what you thought was going to be liberating.

And emancipatory. And one thing that reminded me similar to what Jess had said is that I really didn't know any other way to teach. It was the way in which I knew would have centered around equity, around critical race theory around, um, an anti-colonial colonialist perspective. And I knew that there would be constant pushback.

But I kept on keeping on, and I've seen the fruits of that labor, right? Seven years old, you know, these students are doing amazing things, right. And they're critical change agents and critical scholars. And so. I'll read about one of the students who actually I've written about them, and they were like truth be told I'm going to have to read a small quote from what they said. Truth be told. I was very skeptical about the titles of the documents and even the size of some of the documents teaching in the line of fire, your blues. Ain't like my blues, every shutter I ain't sleep. And who am I. Every title. I came across, made me envision and bought my life and what I might read about it, it was as if I was awakened by the new knowledge and insights that I was extracting from these documents, the blanket that was over my eyes vanished, and I no longer wanted to stay for my thoughts and questions about race, color, or class.

And so, what I found was at the complete, the risk of getting horrible evaluations, not being tenured. There is something to say about faculty who go about this work really just. Doing it in the pursuit of equity and justice and social justice work that you just keep going on. Right? Um, and I don't have an answer that is the right thing.

Cause I don't believe it's for everyone. I'll be very honest about that as well. But I've seen in. In the Jamaican context, this very revolutionary revelation of doing this work. When there's resistance met at the front end. Here, it's an interesting bag because it's a diverse, much more diverse pool of students that I am dealing with, um, versus a very homogenous full Jamaican Afro Caribbean.

Um, first-generation set of Masters students right here. It's a mix. Um, and what I phoned here is really interesting in terms of there is a diversity of on the standing that the black white binary cannot just be the pervasive binary, right. Pervasive way in which you go about your pedagogy. Um, and so inclusion takes a whole different set of steps were pushing against comfort zones and comfort being uncomfortable is not a thing. It is seen as, um, a threat in some cases. And so, I'm still trying to debate what that means here. But I'm persistent in the work of constantly showing what does, what should equity look like?

And also understanding that when we do this work, we ourselves are work in progress. And I don't believe that we were ever taught that. I think we assumed that the scholars who were teaching us knew all the answers and therefore they must hide it. Right. But I really quickly learned that that is not the case.

We are all a work in progress in this work, and we must constantly try to grow in it as well, so.

Thank you so much for joining us. Part two of our conversation with Dr. Saran Stewart and Jessica Harris will be released next Wednesday, February 10th, available wherever you listen to podcasts. This podcast is made possible with support from the Office for Diversity and

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It takes a village and it takes heart. Thank you.