

## Article

# The Value of Teaching Critical Race Theory in Prison Spaces: Centering Students' Voices in Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to address the value of a humanities-based education, specifically focusing on a critical race theory course taught within a prison classroom. The perspectives shared are from three incarcerated students as well as their course instructor regarding the continued debate over whether vocational or academic courses are more beneficial in prison spaces. The case for vocational training has always been supported. Yet, the value of academic courses for incarcerated students, particularly within the humanities, is still questioned. Thus, this paper nuances and explains the value of a humanities-based course within a carceral setting. The voices and experiences of the three incarcerated co-authors are centered in providing the rationale for what courses like critical race theory can offer them besides just a basic focus on rehabilitation or recidivism. From their experiences with course material and discussions, a case is made that the intellectual and personal agency gained from humanity-based courses are both meaningful and relevant for incarcerated students.

**Keywords:** critical race theory; prison education; pedagogy; humanities; incarceration; recidivism

## 1. Introduction

A growing debate continues about the value that college courses have within prison spaces (Castro and Zamani-Gallaher 2018; Ginsburg 2019; Gould 2018). One prominent argument supports prison education as a part of the rehabilitation process as well as improving recidivism rates (Nally et al. 2012; Esperian 2010; Karpowitz and Kenner 1995; Gaes 2008; Gray 2010). However, solely focusing on recidivism as the most important metric of prison education is misguided (Graves 2015; Hartnett 2011). As Ginsburg (2019) notes, the value of an education goes beyond whether or not incarcerated students return to prison after release, because centering recidivism over all other metrics simplifies a rather complex phenomenon: The reasons behind recidivism and incarceration in the first place (Alexander 2012; Pfaff 2017; Welch 2007). In addition, there exists a large push for vocational training over humanities courses in order to provide tangible skills that might be used in procuring employment after release (Mastorilli 2016; Phelps 2011; McCorkel and DeFina 2019). Even among the 200 college in prison programs in the country (Gould 2018), the goals and aspirations of each program differ. Just the mere presence of post-secondary education programs does not equate to quality higher education for incarcerated students: The method of instruction and content delivery matter greatly. The variety of educational programs offered tell a complex story within prison spaces. Some programs value rehabilitation, others value vocational skills, some only offer remedial courses, and very few offer college courses beyond what is offered at the associate's level (Davidson 1995; Gould 2018). We, however, argue that the benefit of humanities-based courses is that they can foster critical thinking about power structures within American society, which are vital for incarcerated students. It is our hope, then, that this paper will serve as an instantiation of the value of humanities

based courses by providing incarcerated students' experiences in a critical race theory course taken within a carceral setting.

## 2. Problematizing Benefits of Higher Education within Prison Spaces

The link between prison-based education and reduced recidivism continues to be a prominent theme in prison education research (Davis et al. 2013; Henrichson and Delaney 2012; Lagemann 2016). Karpowitz and Kenner (1995), through the Bard Prison Initiative, produced a report using government data to argue that "prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism" (p. 4). By providing a cost-benefit analysis showing a positive net return when comparing grant expenditures to the costs of re-incarceration, Karpowitz and Kenner sought to prove the financial value of providing education within a prison context. In addition to the Bard Prison Initiative findings, the RAND corporation study (Davis et al. 2013) presented data showing that incarcerated adults who took part in prison-based education programs had "43 percent lower odds of recidivating" when compared to those who did not participate (p. xxviii). These statistics showing the benefits of education in reducing recidivism, continue to play a dominant role within exigent literature (Duke 2018; Fogarty and Giles 2018; Pompoco et al. 2017).

However, a growing chorus of scholars has begun to push back against situating recidivism as the prized metric for providing education inside prison spaces. For example, Ginsburg (2019) argues that aligning the interests of higher education with correctional departments is deeply problematic as it does not account for the power structures and racist history behind the penal system. On the same accord, Castro (2018) provides a compelling argument that the language surrounding reduced recidivism is inherently racist and is a form of state violence that harms people of color disproportionately. She argues that focusing on recidivism as the prized outcome does little to account for the systemic bias in our current legal system, which targets and imprisons Black and Brown bodies disproportionately when compared to White bodies (Alexander 2012; Stevenson 2015; Nellis 2016). Furthermore, not addressing the racial discrimination within the criminal justice system ignores the connections between our current prison system and our history of legalized slavery in the U.S. (Blackmon 2009; Wacquant 2010). Instead of critically analyzing racist structural practices embedded within the American economic, political, and social landscape, recidivism places the blame on individual choices (McCorkel 2013; Centeno and Cohen 2012; Garland 2001; Wacquant 2009).

Understanding the legacy of structural racism embedded within the prison context, a different path is necessary to navigate the benefits of prison-based higher education. Gould (2018) calls for a more robust understanding of the "ripple effects" of higher education in prison spaces (p. 392). Research exploring these "ripple effects" of higher education have been and continue to be explored. For example, Wilson (2004) chose not to center institutional literacy where incarcerated students were only taught to read and write. Instead, Wilson provided a socio-cultural context for understanding how power works within literacy programs, showing the interrelatedness of agency and resilience in student outcomes that comes from such literacy practices. In a similar vein, Ioannidou et al. (2019) used Wilson's framework to teach a prison-based literacy course that focused on learners' individual needs and backgrounds instead of a corrective approach that pigeonholes the learner within a deficit framework. They argue for helping incarcerated students understand that literacy and language exist within a socio-political context and that their voices and perspectives from within prison can be used to "claim a better place in the world" (p. 601). By focusing their class on students' experiences, they found the students to be more responsive and reflective, as the instructors created opportunities for incarcerated students to express their thoughts and perspectives within the classroom space. Berry (2017) further demonstrates that the experiences of incarcerated students, their voices, and perspectives are important in understanding the benefits that, in his case, literacy had in his prison-based course. These ripple effects that higher education can have within prison spaces of increased agency and responsiveness center the experiences of incarcerated students rather than solely focusing on recidivism.

### 3. Critical Race Theory: Centering Student Voices Within the Carceral Setting

In the spring of 2019, I taught a course in prison, through the Education Justice Project (EJP), entitled: Introduction to Critical Race Theory in Education. In this course, we explored together the foundation and central tenets of critical race theory (CRT). CRT provides a framework that explains the ways in which race and racism are both pervasive and permanent within U.S. society (Bell 1992; Crenshaw et al. 1996; Delgado and Stefancic 2013, 2017). This theoretical orientation began first as critical legal studies advanced by law professors such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. They theorized how race and racism explained not only why legal recourse to systemic racism was elusive, but how a racial hierarchy informed and dictated all parts of society (e.g., social, cultural, economic, political). This included the law, education, jobs, and of course, mass incarceration. As noted previously, analyzing and interpreting mass incarceration without interrogating issues of race continues to promote a post-racial society where blame is placed on individuals instead of on institutions such as the judicial/penal system (McCorkel 2013; Alexander 2012).

It was within this course that incarcerated students had the opportunity to share about their schooling experiences, as counter stories, through a race-based lens. One main activity for the course was writing and reading out loud their lived educational experiences in which students had to answer the following prompt and questions in a four to six-page positionality paper.

- The goal of this assignment is for you to begin to unpack your experiences with race through storytelling. Remember to refer to the readings and class discussion throughout your paper.
- What racialized and cultural experiences in your life have shaped how you understand race within the U.S.? Think about your everyday experiences and main events in your life.
- What are your prior lived experiences within schooling (K-12) as it relates to the themes discussed in class?
- What beliefs and convictions do you hold regarding race and racism?

It was through this experience that the incarcerated students had the opportunity in class to be the experts on course content and for their lived experiences to be the evidence that explains the nuances of race and racism within U.S. schooling. Listening to these papers read out loud also had a different effect on the listener as we created a common space for the stories to take root. We read a few every class period during the first half of the semester. It was through this shared listening experience, where counter stories pushed back against majoritarian narratives labeling Black male students as academically unfit, sharing racist experiences of attending White majority schools near migrant farms, and pushing back against the narrative that South Side Chicago education was under par, that we eventually decided to continue to write and share these stories within a larger context of publication. After the spring 2019 semester, we spent the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020 in a writing seminar course that met every two weeks to write, give and receive feedback on writing, and spent time revising manuscripts.

The major premise undergirding the writing seminar was based on a CRT tenet that purposefully centers the experiences of people of color as a source of knowledge, especially since these voices are regularly discounted within a White hegemonic structure. Centering these experiences confront majoritarian narratives that substantiate ideologies rooted in ahistorical notions of why prisons exist within society and the deficit labels placed on those who were formerly or are currently incarcerated. Therefore, this paper centers the experiences and counter stories of those experiencing incarceration as valuable, instructive, and necessary to challenge both ahistoricism regarding mass incarceration and deficit frames held by society about incarcerated people's potential and scholarship.

### 4. A Methodological Journey: Navigating Co-Writing with Incarcerated Students

Harrell, Villarreal, and White all took my CRT course in the spring of 2019 and continued with me for two additional semesters in our writing seminar. After receiving the proposal for this paper, we sat down and discussed the different possibilities of co-authorship. Within EJP, a college-in-prison

program, there is precedent of co-authorship between incarcerated students and their instructors. Other EJP students, while incarcerated, have co-written articles with full affiliation and names accredited to the published pieces. While listing co-authorship provides the necessary credit for intellectual contributions, the complexities of consent within a carceral setting require special attention. We spent time in class to discuss together the pros and cons of co-authorship with full affiliation listed. We also discussed the danger of tokenism, whereby researchers could use the names of incarcerated adults on research articles without them intellectually contributing to the writing. To address these concerns, we discussed the writing process and what contributions each author planned to make to the overall paper. However, the nature of co-authorship within the carceral setting is challenging. Having access to meet with Harrell, Villarreal, and White was not possible without proper planning and approval. Communication and writing had to be screened by prison administrators in charge of programming and time constraints with face to face interaction was common.

COVID-19 further impacted the writing and editing process as we were no longer allowed face to face interactions within the prison, which was both understandable and necessary. EJP while quickly setting up a system of communicating with students, due to prison requirements of reviewing all forms of communication, the turnaround time to receive and give communication was limited to one page, two sides and took three to four weeks to get a response. However, I continued to send in as much feedback as possible, and continued to receive their handwritten replies throughout the editing process. With the additional stress of a global pandemic while being incarcerated, I acknowledge and honor their commitment to their scholarship and their willingness to continue the publication process. As Harrell writes,

The current pandemic that's transpiring had drained all my academic motivations from me. During the initial days and weeks of this institutional quarantine, I was consistently engaged in furthering my academic pursuits. As the weeks progressed and the prognosis of the health and well-being of our fellow countrymen became grimmer and grimmer, my default setting of being a pessimist kicked in and I didn't see the benefit in continuing with my studies. Fortunately, this past week allowed a glimmer of sunlight to peak through the dreary reality that academic suspension and social distancing had established. I was given a much needed boost. Now it's about regaining momentum and remaining consistent. It's not the preferred method of writing that I'm afforded but it will suffice. Without access to our computers it has given me a renewed appreciation for handwritten material. There's no cut and paste or easy editing, it's a meticulous endeavor to put it nicely.

Harrell's voice provides a valuable lens into a space where I am an outsider. Their experiences present a counter story of resilience that is often missed because their voices are largely missing from research publications.

Therefore, the primary methodological tool of counter storytelling, used in this paper, treats the perspectives of those experiencing incarceration as sources of knowledge (Delgado 1989; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Decuir and Dixon 2004; Lynn and Dixon 2013; Ladson-Billings 1998). Counter storytelling methodology functions as an explanatory tool useful in naming and explaining the ways in which majoritarian narratives continue to harm people of color by illuminating systems of racial inequity (Lee and Lee 2020). Highlighted in this paper, then, are three individual counter narratives that are instructive in understanding the "ripple effects" of higher education, particularly humanities-based courses, within a carceral setting that does not focus on a deficit frame of recidivism. Their voices, collectively, argue for a renewed perspective on higher education courses inside prison spaces, not as a tool of rehabilitation or lowering recidivism, but one of widening a person's perspective and understanding of the world leading to both intellectual and personal agency (e.g., growth, empowerment, personal worth) (Lee 2019; Kilgore 2017; Novek 2017).

## 5. Incarcerated Individuals Are Worthy of More than Just a Vocational Training: Harrell

The humanities in prison are many times viewed and/or perceived as oxymoronic. This can be attributed to the belief that there are no viable employment opportunities for someone who is well versed in historical facts, sociological/psychological issues, or an avid purveyor of the arts. Why would someone who has a criminal conviction in his/her background concern themselves with useless or non-commodifiable information? Would they be spending valuable time, not to mention tax payers' money, to ponder metaphorical depictions of a renowned piece of art or to discuss categorical imperatives, or engaging in rhetorical discussions dealing with social constructs? There are restrictions and limitations for employment opportunities for those who possess a felony conviction so why waste your time studying or learning about the humanities. But is learning about the humanities a waste of time?

Harrell, above, exposes a common discussion regarding teaching humanities inside prison spaces: It is a waste of time.<sup>1</sup> He questions the notion that just by being incarcerated and labeled a *felon*, means that learning in itself and the intellectual pursuit of ideas is meaningless. He writes that what seems to be most important for some prison education advocates is to prepare incarcerated people for the already limited employment opportunities available to formerly incarcerated people. Harrell counters these prescribed identities placed on incarcerated students. Yes, there are absolutely restrictions regarding employment after release, but he questions whether that is a good enough reason to not allow those incarcerated the opportunity to pursue knowledge and their intellectual quandaries. What is useful or practical for incarcerated students continues to be narrated outside prison spaces. The use of tax payer money for programs that are not commodifiable, those with criminal convictions needing practical job skills instead of *lofty* knowledge, and the reality of limited opportunities upon release means that humanities-based courses are a waste of time. By naming these common themes in society's discussion of education in carceral settings, he sets the scene to debunk them and re-center the narrative on the experiences and voices of those experiencing incarceration first hand.

Harrell continues in his writing to debunk these dominant themes in society in viewing what types of courses should be made available in prison spaces.

As a resident of a carceral facility, I can only attest to my personal lived experiences. In the facilities that I have resided in, it is obvious that vocational courses receive the most esteem, from both sides of the spectrum: From the incarcerated individuals as well as the administration (correctional officers included) . . . [perhaps] many outside observers believe that incarcerated individuals are not capable or worthy to do anything other than a vocational occupation. As an incarcerated individual, it is extremely disparaging to think that you are viewed as only being capable of fixing an automobile or erecting a wooden structure or mopping a floor. There are so many things that are within the capabilities of those who are incarcerated, but public perspectives many times only relegate us in the realm of physical/manual labor. The mere fact that you are incarcerated prohibits you from being able to think critically. This is where the waste of time thought is prevalent. Since we are incapable of critical thought then we should solely stick with specific vocational occupations.

Here, Harrell exhorts the reader to not stereotype those who are incarcerated. Having a felony conviction does not mean that all people incarcerated are the same. Applying a one size fits all mentality to those experiencing incarceration and dictating to them what they are capable and not capable of dehumanizes and disparages incarcerated people and solely views them as manual laborers. Harrell also states that the mere fact that you are incarcerated does not prohibit you from being able to

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<sup>1</sup> Due the restrictive nature of carceral settings, the contributions of Michael Harrell were retyped from his original writing with permission and input.

think critically. He challenges the notion that incarceration should be the sole factor that defines what a person's capabilities are. Society's negative view of incarceration and anti-Black and anti-Brown views of those in prison continue to feed into the stereotypes that twice condemn those experiencing incarceration. First, within the actual prison environment and then after re-entry, being limited to only vocational jobs which strips them of their intellectual capabilities and capacities.

In fact, Harrell argues next to reconsider the assumptions that society places on carceral education and what incarcerated people truly need when they are released from the prison setting.

Vocational training is potentially beneficial for individuals who are preparing for re-entry. This would prepare an individual for an occupation in a particular field. But incarcerated individuals are worthy of more than just a vocational training. I assert this because, what vocational training cannot and does not do is prepare individuals for *the real world*. The *real world* is what incarcerated individuals call society beyond the physical confines of the carceral settings. Vocational training does not prepare you for re-entry into society, but the humanities does. Courses in the humanities have the potential to give an individual the ability to engage critically with topics, individuals, and situations. I postulate this notion based on my experience with multiple classes from both disciplines. The humanities afford you the luxury to think critically and equip you with the possible tools to converse and interact with nearly anyone in association to a variety of topics. Vocational classes possess the potential to pigeon hole you into a narrow field, while the humanities has the potential to broaden your perspective.

How society views those who are released is crucial when considering the lives and opportunities afforded to incarcerated people when it comes to education offerings inside prisons. Harrell debunks the common view that vocational skills alone makes the most sense based on society's view of incarceration. Harrell also argues that these assumptions harm incarcerated people as vocational programs do not offer the frameworks required to understand the society in which they will eventually re-enter. He argues that vocational programs do not prepare formerly incarcerated people for the real world in which they need a socio-political-historical understanding to navigate life. What is needed is to be able to critically think about issues, people, and situations present in everyday life. This argument is salient as Harrell reconstructs the parameters of what is truly needed to be successful after release and from his perspective as an incarcerated student; vocational courses alone fall short of what is needed.

There is a greater purpose in what can be gained from humanities-based courses than just notions of rehabilitation and recidivism. In the next two sections, Villarreal and White take center stage as they discuss their experiences and what they gained from taking a humanities-based course focused on critical race theory in education. Their voices are centered and their lived experiences become the evidence necessary to understand the ways in which this course was valuable.

## 6. Remembering Is Painful: Villarreal

All I ever wanted as a child was to excel in school to become a scientist. I wanted what every other American kid wanted when they grew up: To be successful. No matter how hard I tried, there was seemingly always a foil. Something stood in my way. Some would argue that perhaps the encumbrance was due to a policy, an unfortunate turn of events, a school bully or a rogue teacher. But deep inside I know exactly what it was; it was my proletariat class, the geography of South Florida, my family's occupation . . . but most tangibly it was my Brown skin.

Villarreal and I have talked quite extensively about his experiences within U.S. schools and the impact that these experiences have had on his life. The excerpt above is from a summary written in December 2019 about what he learned from the Introduction to CRT in Education class during the Spring of 2019. He recounted to me how his understanding of race and racism played such a dominant

role in his experiences at school, in the town his parents were working in as migrant farm workers. The obstacles he faced were numerous.

Remembering is painful. Looking back at the decades of my life, I had not realized how much systemic violence I had undergone until I took a class in critical race theory. I began to analyze some of the tenets in CRT and came to understand that I had firsthand knowledge of how the institutions of the United States; namely that of education, are not designed for people of color. I realized that I was at a disadvantage when I attended my first school in Dade County, Florida when I was about 8 or 9 years old. Being the offspring of immigrant parents, a first-generation Mexican American, my family was forced to chase the different harvest seasons of grain and tomatoes . . . The Mexican tomato pickers were not exactly held in high social regard around the agricultural area especially in public schools . . . [and] it was my hands that betrayed my family's occupation. That stubborn, dark greenness that deeply stained our hands. It got under the finger nails and into the skin. This came from your hands rubbing against the tomato plant as you worked. It was nearly impossible to remove these stains.

Villarreal and I discussed in class and afterwards how difficult it was due to the labels that the migrant workers' children received in a school that was majority White at the time. The stains of his hands were a prominent theme that symbolized the caste system between the towns people who lived there all year and the migrant workers who only came during the harvest season. The green stains were an identifier, a scarlet letter, and were life shaping. Critical race theory promotes the importance of Villarreal's voice and his lived experience as a Mexican American who experienced first hand the ways in which race and racism continue to be endemic within U.S. life. Sharing his own narrative, receiving acknowledgement of his racialized experiences, and reading matching course content, momentarily, created a space that moved our classroom time beyond the borders of the prison. Within the classroom, Villarreal's story provided the inner-workings of racism within public schools and within his own lived experiences, making him the expert of the course content. The following are two short stories selected from a portion of his paper that he read out loud to his peers about his experiences at his school in South Dade, Florida during the harvest season.

I recall the countless incidents of blatant discrimination geared toward me by students and school officials. Like the time I tried to befriend a White student, Kevin, in the cafeteria. He made a scene of it, called me a *Dirty Mexican*, and said that I could not sit at his table. In fact, I should not even be in the cafeteria. As I left, someone threw an open juice carton at me which hit me in the back of the neck.

One time during a lice outbreak at school, a nurse came to our homeroom class to examine the students. When it was my turn, she refused to check me because she claimed that my hair was greasy. Mr. D., my teacher, and the nurse argued about something just out of earshot. I watched the nurse shake her head repeatedly, whatever that conversation was about, Mr. D. gave up on it and checked me himself. I know for sure that the nurse was lying, my mother would wake me up early every morning before anyone else in the house so that I can shower before school.

These two stories were descriptive experiences that explained the way that race works within social spaces even at young ages within official institutions such as public school. Reading and sharing these experiences in class out loud, Villarreal would stop on occasion to catch his breath and suppress tears. I remember sitting there watching him, wondering how best to proceed; I did not know the ramifications of tears within prison spaces. I waited to see if he would continue on only to hear his peers in class reassure him. Many told him to take his time. One peer next to him put his hand on his shoulder. They waited patiently until composure took root again. Villarreal, with the class' support, finished his narrative and received a supportive response from others. The majority of class



were racially Black and when they heard Villarreal's story, they connected with it. Their responses and questions for him provided a depth of understanding that honored his experiences with white supremacy. The ways in which white hegemony plays out within everyday life was not lost on the majority of the group. They have shared and experienced similar stories in their own lives. Creating purposeful space within class by taking the time to elevate and honor incarcerated students' narratives is vital towards the students' intellectual and personal agency. Furthermore, these stories were not just anecdotal data points, but played a central evidentiary role as it relates to and extended course content. It is also important to note that these stories do not tell themselves. As instructors, we have to purposefully create room for these stories to marinate and help curate them within the classroom space. It has to be a structural component of the course.

Villarreal shares of the impact that this assignment and the opportunity to read it out loud had on him:

The following semester would be the most impactful to my life, I took critical race theory ... In this class, I began to understand the framework of U.S. governmental institutions. I completely understood how my own life had been adversely impacted by this structure not created for people of color. That semester I had a myriad of aha moments that put my life into context; my upbringing and my disenfranchised youth which ultimately led to my present day circumstances. The most pivotal and significant moment was a poignant one in which I had to read out loud a paper I wrote regarding my lived experiences which then highlighted my stance on race in the United States. I detailed the account of my family's migrant farm work in the fields including my experience of picking crops starting at the age of 9 years. Using the tenets of CRT, I wrote the paper with much more understanding that I had in community college. These tenets gave rise to my comprehension of the systemic violence my family and myself had been exposed to because of being [formerly] undocumented. CRT allowed me to take an introspective look into my life which resonated to my core. While writing this paper, I felt a heaviness of heart but thought nothing of it at the time.

However, when I finally got my opportunity to read this paper to my EJP peers and professor, something remarkable occurred. It became increasingly difficult to continue reading after the second page. I began to breakdown, before I knew it, I was reduced to a frail mass of tears. I had not expected that level of emotionality as four decades of repressed social injury materialized in those powerful moments within that academic space EJP had provided. I began a transformative journey from victim to survivor. I had finally found the platform from which to tell my story not only to my peers but potentially to the academic world and beyond. Later during the following semester, I was invited as a guest speaker to share my paper in another academic space called Language Partners. In Language Partners, EJP students teach English as a second language to an immigrant population of incarcerated students. My story resonated with the students of Language Partners and by this time I was definitely coming from a survivor's point of view as opposed to a voiceless victim. I was empowered.

Villarreal wrote the above excerpt specifically for this paper to describe his experiences with being able to not only share his story, but also have multiple audiences that empathized with his experiences. Villarreal would periodically talk to me in the classroom, sharing about his lived experiences. Particularly, how he never had the opportunity to share these stories about how race and racism were ingrained in his daily life. When I think about the value of a humanities course, specifically teaching CRT within a prison context, I think about the power of an explanatory framework that takes oppressive or marginalized moments in life and transforms them as evidence that convicts white hegemony. Sharing his newfound understanding of these experiences and sharing them with a wider audience was central to Villarreal's personal and intellectual agency. His life story was evidence of a school system complicit with white supremacy, and, in sharing his truths, he had the opportunity to



momentarily go beyond the border that is the prison system. In that shared space, he was the expert of his own lived experiences and could share that expertise with others.

## 7. Cognitive Dissonance: White

The majority of my students in the CRT course were Black. Villarreal was Mexican American and White was one of two Caucasian students in the course. On the first day when the course was introduced, we went around to share why they chose to sign up for the course and what they hoped to gain from it. White was clear about his positioning in society and his positioning within the prison. He noted that he was a minority in the prison and had, over time, negative encounters with incarcerated Black men. I paused after listening to him and wondered if he misunderstood the course description. CRT describes the insidious ways that white supremacy holds power within the U.S. and governs through a racial hierarchy that dehumanizes people of color, particularly Black and Brown bodies in the U.S. (Bell 1987, 1992). Yet, White noted that he was interested in learning more about the topic. I welcomed him and thought not too much more about it as I was also new to the prison classroom space. When sharing their positionality papers, White signed up for one of the earlier time slots and was one of the first to present his positionality which meant that he did not get a chance to do more class readings before he shared. He shared the following (partial excerpt):

I was raised in a small, rural, Illinois town of about 1000 people surrounded by farms. It was mostly very poor, with a lot of dilapidated homes with littered junk yards and with rusted remains of old trucks and cars, and some lower middle class and cleaner houses sprinkled in. The town and its schools were all Caucasian.

My only real experience with Blacks prior to the 7th grade was in sports. At one tournament we attended in a poor part of St. Louis. We left our stuff in the dressing area after changing like always. It was an almost 100% Black competition with almost all the spectators being Black. Our small team was all White, just like our tiny town. When we returned to the dressing area following the competition, all of our clothes and property were stolen. None of our stuff had ever been stolen at any of the other tournaments we had attended previously . . . I left this tournament with a negative opinion of Blacks from urban communities. It was like the experience confirmed all the bad stuff about Blacks I'd heard discussed between adults.

White's experiences growing up shaped his world view. I have had many conversations with him over the last few semesters as he has continued on with me in the writing seminar that focused on manuscripts for publication. We have discussed in length his lived experiences and the way they have impacted his understanding of race. Particularly, how having isolated repeated life experiences can cause racial stereotyping. Limited experiences with Black people other than at sporting events can cause serious events to stand out versus if society was more integrated he would have had a wider variety of experiences with people from different racial backgrounds. He further stated honestly his beliefs and understanding of race as the assignment prompt required.

I would prefer to see all races and classes be able to receive equal education. However, at the same time, I question why the scores of students from schools in urban areas are so far below that of students from rural schools that are close to or as poor as the urban schools. At my grade school, we were poor with old books. Some of the high schoolers drove tractors to school. There were no kids sporting expensive Air Jordan's. There were drugs but not a lot of hard drugs. There were no gangs, just cliques. Yet, we all received at least a fair, average education. Everyone could read, write, do basic math and more. So, why do Caucasian kids get a fair or average education while kids of color receive a lesser level of education in schools that are equally poor?

Because no race is inherently more intelligent than another, there has to be an explanation for such drastically different achievement between similarly impoverished children of different

racism and environments. The number one reason Blacks are the most discriminated against race is because Blacks more closely resemble our primate ancestors than any other race. I remember watching the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno one night. He was doing his photo jokes segment. He showed two photographs simultaneously: A head shot of a silver back mountain gorilla and right next to it Weezy from *The Jeffersons* with graying hair. You had to do a double take to tell which was which. It appears that Whites, Asians, and Latinos are more closely related to one another than to Blacks with branches further from the trunk of the genetic or evolutionary tree than that of Blacks.

I remember this moment well. White was seated to the left of me and, at this time, I wondered in my mind if I should have read these before they shared them out loud to the rest of the class. Taking stock of the room, I could feel the eyes pressed on White's every word. When he completed his response, one of his classmates said, "Tell us more about what you think." In central Illinois, I am predominantly in spaces where people of color are the minority, yet in this setting White was outnumbered. One of the rules I established after a person shared from their paper regarding their experiences and understanding of race and racism is that the peers in the classroom could ask the author questions, but no comments. The reason for this instructional move was so that no one felt judged by comments after they shared vulnerably about what they thought, rather questions could help clarify ideas and portions of their text. Unfortunately, the questions did not help White explain his view in a different way than what he expressed and there was tension in the room. I remember dismissing for a longer than normal bathroom break shortly after and touched base with White to reassure him that his grade was not contingent on him necessarily agreeing with the tenets of CRT, but instead based on him critically engaging with the text and assignments throughout the semester.

What was useful about this assignment was that I was able to get a clear picture of where White stood regarding race. When trying to teach critical race theory, it was important to develop a discussion structure that allowed students to construct and rework their perceptions and possible biases continually throughout the course. Listening to their peers could help broaden their perspectives and perhaps help them to go beyond their own stated positions. The readings coupled with discussions in class helped problematize, push, and stretch concepts, as they shared and listened to their peers' text connections. White also had to wrestle with course content all semester as he thought about new ideas and evidence when compared to his own lived experiences and views. He writes toward the end of the semester:

Critical race theory has opened my eyes on racism and inequality in the United States and changed my opinions regarding their effect on education and all aspects of life in our country. When I looked at my positionality paper, it is so narrowminded and misinformed I am embarrassed . . . My three biggest takeaways from critical race theory in education are (1) that racism by Whites truly is permanent and the only chance at equality is to wrest political control from the Whites, (2) that the history and scope of institutional racism by Whites against minorities, especially since the abolishment of slavery, has been drastically more widespread and ruinous to its victims and every aspect of their lives than I had previously understood, and (3) that critical race theory and its application to education and other areas, and it being taught, gives me hope that it will enlighten others as it has me, and allow them to see how unjust the system is to minorities and to poor Whites. The more that people come to understand how the system is designed to keep the rich wealthy and the poor impoverished, the more they will seek reforms. I am really glad I took this course. It has changed my understanding of education and of racism and its effects drastically.

This was not what I expected as the course instructor. I remember several times reiterating to White that he could disagree with course content, but that he had to make the case and provide evidence. Instead, it seemed that the evidence pushed his thinking in the other direction. I continued this ongoing discussion with White in subsequent semesters. I was curious to know at which point he

began to change his mind. He stated that reading Bell's (2004) work in *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, pushed back against his views of how racism works.<sup>2</sup> In this book, Bell is not only explicit about how race works in America but also provides ample evidence that shows how racism played out in Black children's experiences in schools. The amount of evidence provided could no longer be simply pushed away and White had to think about it in relation to his own deeply held views. He is on a journey to reconcile what he has learned with what he has experienced in his life.

He writes this next excerpt specifically for this essay, reflecting further on his thinking one year after taking the original course:

The humanities course I completed in the Education Justice Project that has helped me grow the most was titled, Critical Race Theory in Education. For our first assignment, we were to write a positionality paper on our lived experiences growing up concerning race and racism. I was raised in an all-White, small, rural, Illinois community in a time when stereotypes of and prejudice against minorities, especially Blacks, was far more common and overt than it is today. Thus, I had opinions that reflected those stereotypes. Additionally, Illinois prisons are typically 85% Black, and because many if not most Black inmates behave in manners that are socially unacceptable, it is common for other inmates to dislike them. Critical race theory forced me to examine my upbringing and why I held such stereotypical opinions and it taught me facts about structural racism and its goal of keeping Blacks and other non-Whites impoverished, uneducated, disenfranchised, and incarcerated or enslaved that shocked me. I was forced by critical race theory to re-examine who I was and I found that I am not the racist that my upbringing and experiences in prison made me to feel like but am one who dislikes on the basis of actions rather than race.

I include the entire excerpt to show how White continues to process and make sense of what he has learned with his socialized experiences growing up and how he views himself today. Complexity within a person's belief systems regarding race is the norm and White exhibits this complexity in his writing. He can clearly articulate a system that awards advantages based on race, yet, his conflation of race, class, and neutrality continues to linger. One thing I have always appreciated about White is his honesty in how he sees things and reading his thoughts help further my own understanding of how he makes sense of different humanities-based concepts that critical race theory offers within a prison space.

## 8. Discussion: The Value of CRT (Humanities) in Prison Classrooms

The value of humanities, particularly CRT within prison classrooms, cannot simply be measured by institutional metrics that focus on rehabilitation and recidivism. As Harrell, Villarreal, and White discuss in their writing, the value of a humanities course is that of intellectual and personal agency that is not regulated by the prison institution. Pursuing knowledge, having a space to share their thoughts, receiving feedback on work, and not being reduced to manual labor alone has benefits that outweigh what a reduced recidivism rate can provide. Harrell's treatise that incarcerated individuals are worth more than just vocational education and that humanities-based courses, through focusing on power structures, can better prepare incarcerated people to understand and engage society upon release is compelling. Villarreal's personal empowerment as he took a story that cast him as the victim and repurposed and reframed it using CRT as an explanatory framework to re-orient his identity as a survivor is a powerful testament to humanities within carceral settings. Finally, White's continued working and reworking of central tenets of CRT with his own personal lived experience and what that means for him is a paradigm he continues to process and work through.

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<sup>2</sup> (Bell 2004).

While some may argue about whether or not intellectual and personal agency is worthwhile in a prison space, I would argue that it is more important than I could ever know personally. Being an instructor who comes into the prison to teach and being able to leave at the end of the evening while all my students remain is a privilege that I must continually remind myself of. My goal in teaching this course and supporting incarcerated students to pursue their intellectual ideas challenge the traditional constraints of a prison system and society's deficit view of incarcerated people. Creating space for incarcerated students to pursue personal agency by engaging in intellectual pursuits provides a commentary on their worth as scholars and humans. Harrell, Villarreal, and White all have meaningful contributions that describe the values of personal agency gained from humanities-based courses, and we should listen to their wisdom about the value of academic courses within prison spaces. As Delgado (1989) writes, "[counter stories] enrich imagination and teach that by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone" (p. 2415). Their counter stories of resilience and agency provide the "ripple effects" of how humanities based courses benefit incarcerated people that goes beyond merely recidivism or vocational training alone.

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