Critical race ethnography of higher education
Racial risk and counter-storytelling

TERESA RAMOS

ABSTRACT
The Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI) joins a long history of critique, challenge and transformation of higher education. EUI courses are an important site for the creation of non-traditional narratives in which students challenge ‘business-as-usual’ in higher education. For under-represented students, this includes inquiry and analysis of the racial status quo at the University. In this article, I provide a student’s perspective on EUI through my own experiences with EUI research as both an undergraduate and later graduate student investigating race and racism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I). Using ethnographic methods and drawing on critical race theory, I provide two examples of EUI research that critiqued the University’s management of race. The first example is a collaborative ethnography of the Brown versus Board of Education Commemoration at U of I – a project that I joined as an undergraduate (Abelmann et al. 2007); and the second is my own dissertation on ‘racial risk management’, a project that emerged from my encounter with EUI. I discuss both projects as examples of Critical Race Ethnography, namely works based on empirical research that challenge institutions’ racial composition, structure and climate.

KEYWORDS
critical race ethnography, higher education, racial risk, reform

My EUI
Large research universities generally do not value undergraduates as producers of knowledge or as scholars in their own right. In the spring of 2003, my third-year at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I), my college years seemed to be passing by in much the same way that my years
in the Chicago Public Schools had: I was getting good grades with moderate effort. Few courses really tested my drive, focused my ambition or inspired further pursuit. My first Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI) course, however, was different. My first EUI class was, in fact, the first EUI class. We were twelve students co-taught by EUI founders Nancy Abelmann and the late Bill Kelleher. For my classmates and me, EUI proved to be both powerful and cathartic. The course taught us about the university and asked us to interrogate our own experiences in the institution. Our professors really listened to what we said, were interested in our research findings and pushed us to investigate further.

In that first EUI class, I learned that what a first-generation college student knows about college choice and college success is very different from what a fourth- or fifth-generation college student knows. I realised that those students were embedded in a college-going culture that gave them access to often-unrecognised privileges that students like me did not enjoy. I was not, for example, aware of all of the subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions between small-liberal arts colleges and the Carnegie-classified ‘Research One’ Universities. (The Carnegie Foundation has since changed their classification – the U of I today is considered a ‘Research University with very high research activity’). All I knew was that the U of I was the highest ranked public school in the state, and, at that time (but not today), an affordable ‘best-buy’ school. My first EUI class began with an examination of the University’s mission. I immediately wondered: how many undergraduates know that the University’s central mission is research? Do they know what that means for their instruction? These questions were the basis of my first EUI project in which I asked specifically: What does the typical university student know about the research mission and design of the University? I found that although many students appreciated that research was valuable, most of them did not think much about that value in relation to their own academic lives.

For me, that EUI class was a turning point. At the time, there were many things about the university that I was angry about. As a Polexican, a Polish-Mexican Latina, I was often able to pass as white – but my consciousness was different. With Ramos as my last name, I had experienced what it felt like to be racialised, namely to be looked at through the lens of race-related images and stereotypes – and to be broadly reminded that I was not white. My experience of race on campus, as in my life generally, was complicated. I was angry both about the lack of diversity and about the persistence of
institutional racism at the U of I, but I nonetheless loved the U of I. I knew, though, that I was missing something. I wanted more from college. I wanted that egalitarian, enlightened, rigorous academic experience that colleges sell in their brochures. I found, instead, that traditional college classes were too often full of directions – not direction – about material that needed to be memorised. Too often my teachers were graduate students or faculty members with little pressure or desire to excel in teaching and little support to do so. In fact, some courses asked really very little learning of me, much less was there an expectation that I engage in original inquiry – that expectation seemed reserved, at best, for Honours students (the U of I has a separate Campus Honors Program).

That EUI first class, however, did invite me to the research table. As a course focused on the university itself, I was asked to draw on my own interests and experience to query the institution, to conduct empirical research and create ethnographic accounts that would allow me to talk back to the university. In a higher education system that historically vests faculty members with the production and dissemination of knowledge, EUI thus presents a challenge to the very structure of teaching and learning. This can be liberating and empowering for students and, I think, for many academics as well. By allowing for student experience-driven interests and a creation-driven research process, EUI not only targets research on the university but also invites intervention into the business-as-usual of teaching and learning at the university. EUI allowed me to create knowledge about a topic that was meaningful to me – race and racism at the university. EUI made my research part of the research of the research institution; I was beginning to understand what it meant to be attending a research university.

I was particularly excited that my EUI research would have a life after the class ended. I would have the opportunity to enter my work into a digital repository (IDEALS, see Introduction to this issue) through which future students would be able to cite my research easily and use it as the starting point for their own projects. Because EUI records the research process (including questions, hypotheses and findings) and not just the final report, I knew that future students would be able to see the questions that I had originally asked and the ways in which I had pursued answers. In reviewing my initial questions, I knew that they would perhaps be able to challenge my underlying assumptions. I loved that the journey of inquiry mattered. It was also satisfying to imagine that students in the future might share aspects of my college story.
How is EUI racially relevant?

My experience with EUI was not uncommon. Over the years – as an undergraduate and later a graduate student and teaching assistant in EUI courses – I have seen how underrepresented minority students, in particular African Americans and Latino/as, use EUI as a tool for institutional counter-storytelling. A central strategy of Critical Race Theory (CRT), counter-storytelling refers to the use of empirical, experiential knowledge by marginalised and underrepresented individuals and groups to disrupt dominant ideologies (Matsuda et al. 1993; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Ladson-Billings 1995, 2003, 2006; McMorris 1999; Parker 2003; Yosso 2005). Critical Race Theory is a U.S. scholarly movement devoted to understanding the shifts in racial formation through analysis of the intersections of race, racism and power in everyday life. Critical Race theorists describe counter-storytelling as a method of speaking truth to power and pointing out the ruptures in dominant racial narratives in the U.S., namely those of race-neutrality, meritocracy and equal access to opportunity. I think of EUI as creating a space for students to engage in counter-storytelling informed by their racial experiences and validated by their empirical ethnographic research. I use Critical Race Ethnography to refer to this research practice: namely an investigation that emerges from counter-storytelling and is substantiated through ethnographic research. In this way, EUI is consonant with CRT in that students learn to think about their experience at the University not simply as unique and personal but as collective experience shaped by the institutional structure of higher education, and moreover by the education leading up to their college experience.

EUI captures what Critical Race theorists call racial formation on campus. Racial formation refers to the ways in which race is constantly shifting and meaningful to us all (Delgado and Stefancic 2001: 2). As Ian Haney-Lopez, a CRT scholar put it, ‘To risk losing sight of racial experience and conditions is to risk losing sight of the shift of racial formation, of the way in which race is duly reconstituted and revitalized’ (Haney-Lopez 1996: 117). Through their EUI research, students have asked questions about race on campus that really matter to them: Why are students segregated? Do Latinos self-segregate? Are students using cultural centres for academic support or social support? Are students who transfer from other colleges to finish their degrees at the U of I able to fully integrate into the university’s social and academic life? If housing assignments are random, why do some residence halls have such large populations of people from one racial group? EUI queries reflect
students’ honest feelings and assumptions about the campuses they experience daily.

One EUI researcher, for example, explored the processes whereby residence halls become segregated (Novak 2008). Even though students are allowed to indicate a preference for certain residence halls and the official university policy is to assign roommates randomly, some students nonetheless imagined that housing officials intentionally segregated students. Novak initially thought that such segregation might be the unintentional result of a housing policy that gives preference to those who pay their deposit more quickly, such that well-to-do, presumably white students would be housed together. Instead, Novak found that, when it came to housing preferences, some incoming students sought and received guidance from friends and networks from their home communities and high schools in ways that led to clustering of students from the same home communities. (These communities were racially segregated due to a long history of ‘white flight’ from urban centres, like Chicago, into the suburbs.) His indicative but still inconclusive findings suggest that segregated residence halls on campus were the result of informal self-segregation: namely, students opted to stay in their comfort zones.

More importantly, Novak debunked the myth that the university was directly engineering racial segregation through assigned roommates. Although ability to pay a deposit was not a factor in racial segregation, Novak’s research shows how a seemingly race-neutral university housing policy of allowing students to choose residence halls maintains historical segregation and reinforces the racial status quo on campus. The outcome of the policy was the same – segregated student housing. Important to note is that white students self-segregate in greater numbers than people of colour (Tatum 1997). Interestingly, many of the students Novak interviewed said they would welcome a housing policy that encouraged more interracial interaction.

The EUI inquiry process often led student researchers, like Novak, to debunk not only their own assumptions but also popular myths about how race operates on campus. In just this way, EUI students often investigated the informal and de facto causes of huge campus issues. For some issues, students are the ideal researchers. I like to think of Novak’s findings, for example, as having the power to inform university policy and perhaps transform the very culture of the campus. Indeed, I think of EUI as inspiring students like me because of our hopes that the University might use our
research to effect more socially just policies. In fact, EUI asks all students to make recommendations to the University on the basis of their research findings. In my case, I was particularly excited about EUI’s potential to produce qualitative research designed to understand better the workings of racism and discrimination on campus and that could in turn inform policy and programmatic change.

Critical race ethnography of the university: racial risk, radical reform

Nine years and numerous EUI courses after that first EUI course, I graduated from the U of I with my doctorate – mine is the first EUI dissertation. The years in between that first EUI course and my final dissertation proved an unexpected journey through the nooks, crannies and stadiums of the public university. Here I will review two of my EUI research projects through the lens of critical race ethnography. The first was a collaborative ethnography produced by a team of EUI faculty and students, the Ethnography of the Brown Commemoration (EBC). This project set out to document events planned to honour the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that made racial segregation of schools unconstitutional. The Brown vs Board of Education Jubilee Commemoration at the U of I, which was an extended campus dialogue about race from Fall 2003 to Fall 2004. The second example is drawn from my dissertation research focused on student activism against the U of I’s ‘racial risk management’ policies and approach.

EBC

The Ethnography of the Brown Commemoration (EBC) began my experience as a critical race ethnographer. In 2003, EUI was commissioned by then Chancellor Nancy Cantor to do an ethnographic examination of the Brown versus Board of Education Commemoration at the U of I. Ours was likely the most extensive commemoration of the Brown decision by a U.S. college campus. All disciplines in all colleges were invited to compete for funds from the Chancellor’s office to support presentations, workshops, lectures, art installations, speaker series, or any mediums through which to talk about the impact of the Brown case on their discipline, specialty, industry, or endeavour. Every college participated except the College of Engineering.
Across many disciplines, faculty discussed the interventions that were a result of Brown; and, that year, preeminent American historian, John Hope Franklin, was the keynote speaker at commencement.

Although commissioned by the Chancellor, the ethnography that emerged was very much driven by the students. Four undergraduates (including me) and two graduate students, guided by four faculty members, conducted the research. I attended as many Brown Commemoration events as possible, choosing from the rich menu on the basis of my passions and interests. Conducting ‘observant-participation’ (Vargas 2006) at these events, I was at once engaging in or sometimes even leading the discussion, and asking and answering questions.

The final co-authored report provided a glimpse into the effects of sustained and focused programming on the subject of race and diversity in higher education: ‘Documenting some of the year’s most tense, humorous, frustrating and productive moments, the EBC report provides an honest look at a major university’s attempt to alter its culture, and to do so through repeated – sometimes painful – encounters with uncomfortable truths about race and diversity on campus’ (Abelmann et al. 2007). The report offered seven recommendations and among them one suggested that programming like the Brown commemoration should become business-as-usual at the University: ‘Dialogues on race and racism should contribute not only to a stronger multiracial campus community, but also to a multiracial society. Toward this end, programming that articulates with concerns of the Champaign-Urbana community should be encouraged’ (Abelmann et al. 2007: 3).

My dissertation on racial risk-management

My dissertation was born in large part through the findings and trends of EUI researchers over the project’s early years. In particular, I noticed that although a number of EUI students made well-informed policy suggestions about race-related issues to the university administration, very little seemed to change. I wanted to understand how it was that students continued to face, year after year, the same segregation, isolation, and sometimes even outright hostility. More broadly, I wondered why attempts to institutionalise anti-racist/sexeist/classist diversity initiatives so often failed to create a more welcoming campus climate. Over the course of my research I became interested in this persistence in spite of the sincere efforts of many faculty and mid-level administrators to address the concerns of under-represented
students. Among those making such efforts were many mid-level administrators of colour – some who had once been active student organisers themselves.

Since the mid-1960s, after the Civil Rights Movement, many administrators at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), such as the U of I, have made commitments to racially diversifying the student body, often in response to legal mandates. However, despite more equitable laws and policies in higher education, outcomes for underrepresented people have not met expectations. More African-Americans and Latinos have post-secondary degrees today than before the Civil Rights Movement, but those communities are still suffering from higher levels of social and economic hardship than their white counterparts. Indeed, by the 1980s, most university students still came from mono-racial (i.e. all-white) rural, city and suburban areas. In spite of these patterns, most Americans think of racism as a character flaw or an undesirable set of behaviours (Williams 1992; Rodiger 2001).

In order practically to assess how and why racism persists, I decided for my dissertation to examine key moments of racial conflict at the University. I saw these moments as instances of racial rupture – namely moments in which there was a break in the normative understanding of how race operates in society, that is in colour-blind, colour mute (Pollock 2004), politically correct and seemingly insignificant ways. I understood these moments as revealing the logics of the university and in particular the privileged knowledge of those who are racially marginalised. I theorised that rupture occurs when unrecognised privilege is made apparent or called into question. At the U of I, this rupture took place both through public acts of racial intolerance and through the counter-storytelling of students who experience race differently from the dominant understandings (such as when a student calls out hidden privilege or reframes a seemingly race-neutral event as racially significant).

My EUI doctoral research project, ‘Managing racial risk in the U.S. university of the twenty-first century: racial theme parties, administrative management, and strategic resistance’ (Ramos 2012), indeed emerged from an attempt to understand why anti-racist student organising and activism had failed to institutionalise anti-racism programming and policies. Through my research I came to understand both protests against racism and the administrative management of protest as attempts to control and minimise racial risk. Borrowing Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s understanding of racial formation as the ‘process by which social, economic, and political forces
determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings' (1994: 55), I define racial-risk management as the complex navigation of legal, financial, and other risks associated with racial formation on campus. Activists and administrators often do not agree on how race is meaningful on campus. For those seeking to transform the university, risk is the danger of maintaining the racial hierarchy and status quo on campus. In contrast, for many administrators, managing racially complex situations on campus is tied up in concerns over legality, reputation and financial loss (e.g. in the case of negative press or potential litigation).

In 1992, for example, students held a sit-in at the U of I's administration building to protest the lack of a change in the outcomes for under-represented students. Students demanded better services and support. They also demanded space for Latina/Latino Studies at the University as a way to reform the university. Their demands for reform called on the University to examine and deconstruct the normative and exclusive structures of racial business-as-usual, in order to improve it. Administrators over-responded with police action and a public threat to arrest students. Students were carried out of the building in handcuffs. At that time administrators saw students of colour as a threat to the fabric of campus structure. Unlike administrators, student protestors saw racial-risk in the business-as-usual of the university, namely, racial aggression, segregation and exclusion from access to the privileges and benefits of full participation in campus life and networks.

The management of racial risk in today’s university is very different – much more subtle. Yesteryear’s risk was inclusion; today’s risk is inclusion that threatens financial loss. Managing racial risk in today’s U.S. university entails foremost the complicated navigation of liability. In this case, liability is much more than just what the university is legally obligated to do or not do; it is also an analysis of the risk of liability. That is what the university may or may not be liable for given their response to racism. In this case and others, administrators are concerned with how stifling racist action on campus might infringe on a student’s right to free speech and lead to costly litigation. The University’s ‘business as usual’ management practices are not innocent management strategies.

One high-level administrator took me through the process of how administrators decide when to act or not against racism on campus. In one of our interviews he said, 'the institution worries about regulating behaviour and then having someone sue and then having to pay them damages for
a successful lawsuit'. This is an example of the racial risk-management I examine in the dissertation. Specifically, I argue that the University does so in a variety of ways: by shifting, spinning, or framing a racist incident as racially insignificant, or as significant in other ways that can be construed as coincidental rather than fundamental. I became particularly interested in university responses to racial incidents and in what struck me as one very surprising university response to them: a ban on alcohol. I was interested in this ban and in other similar measures as a way in which the university denied the persistence of racism. Banning alcohol in response to racist incidents is but one form of racial risk-management strategy.

Students’ counter-stories bring attention to the ways in which the administration effectively excused or denied racism by blaming alcohol. In a letter published in the Daily Illini, The Independent Student Newspaper of the University of Illinois since 1871, on 4 November 2008 (the day that Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election). Hannah Kim wrote:

Alcohol No Excuse for Racism

When I first came on this campus three years ago, I never thought it would be a big deal that I was a minority. I thought that, by now, racism was not as prevalent, especially on a college campus where there would be people my age.

However, I was wrong. In fact, nothing has changed except for the fact that people now blame their inappropriate behavior on the fact that they were inebriated at the time they called me a ‘gook,’ or said that I should ‘go back to China.’

Being drunk does not give you the right to call out racial slurs.

Alcohol does not make you a racist; so don’t use it as an excuse. Handle your tongue before you handle alcohol.

Here Hannah expressed her frustration that alcohol is used to excuse the racism perpetrated by white students. Hers is a counter-story to the dominant campus narrative of a welcoming campus climate for under-represented students. Kim described the way in which students used alcohol to displace racism, to not feel guilty about racism because after all it must have been the alcohol that was talking. Students could blame drunkenness to get around the consequences or guilt associated with racism. Although Kim did not
place this practice within the racial history of the campus, my work shows that this pattern was long-standing and reinforced in University responses to racist incidents. For many of the students and alumni I spoke with, campus bars were white spaces – that is spaces predominantly inhabited by white people but also symbolic of white cultural values associated with the collegiate experience. One African-American alumnus I interviewed, Theodore, told me that black students realised that when administrators talked about the ‘student experience’, they were talking about white students. He said, ‘they weren’t talking about us’. Clearly distressed, he continued, ‘When they talked about “student experiences in the bars”’ – and he paused and looked into my eyes, ‘Black people didn’t go to the bars! That didn’t happen like that for us. We just kind of exist[ed] alongside the rest of the pristine campus’. When Theodore stressed that African Americans were not welcome at the bars, he was telling a campus counter-story.

Theodore recounted the response to an explicit act of racism against a black student at KAMS, a college-bar located on campus, ‘There was a black woman who lived above KAMS who was experiencing racialised harassment and had enough, and people decided to move on it’. They strategised and they decided, ‘We’ll shut it down. We’ll make an economic statement’. They did. This strategy was particularly effective because Kams was the primary campus sports bar for many fraternity and sorority members, athletes and alumni. I asked him to tell me more.

They wrote ‘Nigger Bitch’ on her door and we had to take over Kams. Everyone went inside. They ordered water all night. And those of us who were too young to get in stood outside … in January. And the white kids stood across the street in front of the psychology building mad and cold because they were underdressed because they did not expect to be sitting outside while we were protesting inside.

Appreciating that money talks, the students had staged an economic protest. They thus made visible the exclusion of students of colour from one of the campus’s primary centres of recreation. There was nothing that white students or police could do to stop this form of protest.

I believe that racial risk management is not only as a way for university administrators cover themselves, but is also a pedagogical act. With these actions the university is providing students with a highly problematic model for dealing with racist conduct: deny it or at the very least call it something else. My greatest concern is that the neoliberal university of the twenty-first
century handles racist actions as economic risks to be managed, rather than as moral dilemmas that demand university leadership. One of my recommendations to the University was to provide that leadership.

**Conclusion: on the benefits of collaboration between students and faculty**

In my EUI research over the past decade I have been an observant participant (Vargas 2006) in student-centred movements that critique, challenge, and transform higher education. My EUI career motivated my dissertation research as well as my current employment focused on education systems reform and educational-culture transformation for Advance Illinois, a statewide education policy, advocacy and reform organisation. Like EUI, Advance Illinois disrupts the status quo with its efforts to transform the public education system in Illinois better to engage and prepare all students for college, careers and democratic citizenship.

EUI challenges some of the foundations of the research university by introducing and valuing the student perspective, a voice that has often been ironically marginal in education policy, pedagogy, and reform. I believe that EUI has the potential to transform the University from within if faculty and administrators take student research seriously as meaningful feedback. For the many students who are destined to play ‘catch-up’ in college and who have not had access to consistent and collaborative teaching, advising and resourcing, EUI’s inquiry-based learning provides a space where students can put themselves at the centre of the university’s mission. My own trajectory is living proof. What EUI gave students like me – students awake to the experience of racial rupture – was a space in which they could translate that experience into narratives that could inform the future of the university and tools for critiquing and instigating reform in the institutions of our lives beyond college.

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**Teresa Ramos** is the Director of Outreach for Advance Illinois, a statewide education policy and advocacy organisation promoting a public education system that prepares all students for college, career and democratic citizenship. Her primary roles include community engagement and coalition building in support of public education. Teresa is
Teresa Ramos

a Polish-Mexican Latina who grew up in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago and attended Chicago Public Schools.

Contact: 5561 W. Ardmore Ave, Chicago IL 60646
Email: tramos@advanceillinois.org

Notes

1. For more on consciousness as it relates to the experience of African Americans and people of colour in predominantly white settings, see W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk and ‘Double Consciousness’ and racial identity formation, the idea that African Americans must continually reconcile the way in which they understand themselves with the way that white people see them, namely through the colour of their skin.

2. Several EUI classes introduced a piece by Peter Ewell (1998) ‘Who do you think you are? The art of the institutional reality check’, which teaches students to consider differences between what, how, why and who the university tells itself it serves and who it serves in practice. In interrogating what the University says about itself, students are set up to do an exercise in counter-storytelling, when their experiences differ from what the University claims. In this regard, I think that the EUI project encourages students to question institutional racism as it impacts them in their everyday lives, and in my case, within the department of anthropology at the U of I.

3. This is especially disturbing in light of Maya A. Beasley’s book, Opting Out: Losing the Potential of America’s Young Black Elite, in which she explains how the lack of diversity in STEM fields, as well as a few others, is a threat to the long-term viability of the Black community.

4. See Fortier, this issue, for a discussion of racial climate and university programmes aimed to improve the experience of underrepresented minority students on campus.

5. See Abelmann et al. (2007) for more on this use of ‘Business as Usual’.

6. For example, after years of systematic exclusion of people of colour in higher education, Affirmative Action policies were designed to facilitate inclusion. Now after several attempts to limit that inclusion through anti-affirmative action lawsuits (see, for example, Grutter v. Bollinger, Gratz v. Bollinger, Regents of University of California v. Bakke), universities are threatened with severe financial loss if they become the target of any legal
action. This move effectively coupled progressive inclusion with financial risk. This risk limits their action to foster greater inclusion on campus.

References


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