# COUNTERSTORY PEDAGOGY

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# Counterstory Pedagogy

## Student Letters of Resilience, Healing, and Resistance

*Adriana Aldana*
*with student contributors*

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To my students, whose questions, dreams, and unwavering spirit inspired this book and make the classroom a place of endless possibilities.

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# PREFACE

In fall 2019, I purchased a printed copy of Carolina De Robertis' (2017) epistolary anthology, *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*, looking for teaching inspiration. The book is a collection of letters written by prominent activists, journalists, poets, novelists, and political thinkers. This collection of "love letters" was a collective literary response to the shifting political landscape and hateful rhetoric that became the norm after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. I was seeking inspiration on how to weave moments of hope into what often became emotionally distressing dialogues about racism, nationalism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in the classroom. How could I facilitate meaningful discussions about the harm of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and cis-heteropatriarchy while uplifting students' sense of agency in creating social change? Was it possible to promote critical awareness of inequality without fostering hopelessness?

I have been confronted with similar questions throughout my teaching and social work career. As a master of social work graduate student, my dissertation advisor—who also served as my practice internship supervisor—asked me to consider how we could integrate more "inspirational" content and experiential activities into a community-based intergroup dialogue on race and ethnicity for

youth in Metropolitan Detroit. He was rightfully concerned that the program design a fellow intern and I created would leave adolescents feeling despondent rather than empowering them to envision and pursue social change in their communities. He suggested, "Make sure to end each dialogue session on a positive and motivational note." Sure, I sarcastically thought, we can wrap up a discussion about the pervasive nature of racism with a "you can do it!" attitude.

Early in my teaching career, I was again reminded of the need to balance content about oppression with pedagogical strategies that encourage students' sense of sociopolitical agency and optimism. I was setting up for a graduate class, a course on critical race theory in social work, when a student walked in and politely greeted me by stating, "Hi, professor! How will class depress us today?" The student and I talked a bit while other students trickled in. In that conversation, I learned that while most of my students—as people of color—had some prior knowledge and personal experiences with racial discrimination, they were overwhelmed with their newly refined critical awareness of the insidious nature of structural racism. Social inequality, it seemed to them, was even worse than they had experienced or observed. The odds were stacked against them, against most of us, in ways that seemed impossible to change. My advisor's recommendations from years before rang in my head: "End . . . on a positive and motivational note." But how? How could I inspire students when I too felt jaded and dissillusioned by the 2016 election and what it meant for our country? The urgency of these questions and the challenge of fostering hope amidst harsh realities continue to resonate today, especially in light of the ongoing social strife and political divisions within American society.

My advisor's request and the graduate student's remark have become a lifelong pursuit of being intentional not only in what I teach about oppression, but how I teach it. In preparing for the spring 2020 semester, and inspired by De Robertis' (2017) book, I incorporated a letter-writing assignment in a course I was teaching on social justice. Reading the collection of letters in the book gave me comfort. The letters showed me that I was not alone in my feelings.



The letters inspired me to pay closer attention to all the big and small ways people were calling out, resisting, disrupting, and challenging oppression. The assignment's primary purpose was to enable students to practice the feminist idiom, "The personal is political." As anticipated, using the epistolary essay as both course content and a writing assignment facilitated students' engagement with the social justice issues from a place of agency rather than despair. On the last day of class, students shared their epistolary essays with each other. We witnessed one another's narratives, memories, and visions for the future. The vulnerability, connectedness, and reciprocity of spirit shared that day exemplified the co-learning environment created throughout the semester.

At the end of the semester, I decided to compile the student letters into an ebook to offer students as a parting gift and a consolation for the lack of a traditional graduation ceremony due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I wished that the ebook containing their letters would serve as a memento for students of the learning community we built together.

I replicated this process in 2021 in a different course on youth empowerment, but this second time around, I was struck even more by the wealth of knowledge expressed in the collection of student letters. These letters are worth publishing, I mused, which is why I decided to edit this book, as a testament to the brilliance of students in both cohorts. This collection of letters bears witness to their persistence in facing adversity, ongoing healing, and resistance to systems of domination. My contribution to this collection, three bookend chapters that speak to the pedagogical power of letter writing as a form of counter-storytelling, is my radical act of hope. The hope is that showcasing these student letters can inspire the creation of more inclusive educational spaces in our classrooms and scholarship that uplifts the voices of diverse learners.

INTRODUCTION

# Letter Writing as Resistance: Towards Counterstory Pedagogy

Throughout centuries, notions of race have influenced global social and political dynamics, with racism pervading everyday life in ways that often make it invisible and appear neutral (Babacan and Gopalkrishnan 2020). Like many other institutions, higher education has been experiencing a racial justice reckoning that demands we account for how our education practices are inclusive and equity-focused, celebrate diversity, and promote social justice. Although culturally affirming pedagogy has long been integrated into higher education, the multicultural frameworks often used are increasingly seen as outdated and ineffective at creating equitable outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the United States of America (US).

Similarly, in the global conversation on decolonizing curriculum, there's an increasing acknowledgment not only of the importance of Indigenizing pedagogy but also of incorporating anti-racism strategies that examine the intersections of colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy (AdvanceHE, n.d.; Azzahrawi 2020). As a higher education professional, I believe we are well poised to develop anti-racist pedagogical practices that center the knowledge

of Black, Indigenous, racialized students of color, and other historically marginalized students. Integrating a growing body of work on critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and counterstory methodology, this book offers an example of integrating letter writing as a form of counter-storytelling pedagogy.

The primary purpose of this book is to showcase a collection of student letters that serve as examples of counter-storytelling in higher education. In this introductory chapter, I offer some background information on the pedagogical and theoretical frameworks that have informed the integration of letter writing in my teaching. However, before I discuss my pedagogical philosophy, I want to introduce myself by disclosing more about my positionality as an educator. I also want to offer a brief description of the historical context of the university and the master of social work (MSW) program that serve as the backdrop for the development of the epistolary assignment that led to the creation of this book.

## BACKGROUND: POSITIONALITY AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

I am a cisgender Chicana, Mexican American, born and raised in the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County, California (Tongva and Chumash territory). I am the daughter of working-class Mexican immigrants of mixed racial heritage due to colonial mestizaje in Latin America. I recognize that my identification as a mestiza, a racial classification system that refers to a woman of primarily mixed Indigenous American and European ancestry, is a settler colonial construct. Critiques of the dominant narrative about mestizaje as a nationalist ideology underscore how it has minimized the role of race, racism, and white supremacy in Mexico as well as other Latin American countries.

In identifying as a mestiza, I aim to subvert the whitewashing of mestizaje by honoring the Indigenous American and West African



ancestry not fully known to me because of the legacy of colonization while also recognizing the privileges my Southern European (primarily Spanish) ancestry affords me. I also acknowledge that I occupy a liminal social location within the racialized social order in the US, given my mixed-racial ancestry. Thus, as an educator, I am mindful of the privileges that come with my racial-ethnic ambiguity and lighter skin despite also being racialized as a woman of color who is of Mexican ethnic origin.

I was the first in my family to navigate the American public school system successfully. As a first-generation college student with no career path in mind or guidance from my family, I gravitated towards undergraduate courses that helped me make sense of my lived experience as a woman of color. Consequently, I inadvertently majored in Chicana/o studies and psychology. I earned a joint doctorate in social work and developmental psychology, engaging in participatory action research that examines how youth understand and challenge racism and other forms of inequality in their community. My scholarship aims to counter the dominant deficit models of adolescence in mainstream developmental research that frame young people of color as being perpetually "at risk."

I now teach and work as an associate professor in the Department of Social Work at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), located on the Tongva Nation's land. The CSUDH campus, as part of the California public university system, is a land-grant institution. The university opened its doors in the affluent city of Palos Verdes in 1965. In that same year, the Watts Rebellion (often referred to as the Watts riots), one of the most prominent racially motivated demonstrations during the Civil Rights era, erupted after the arrest of a young African American man by a White California highway patrolman for suspicion of drunk driving. Within days (August 11–17, 1965), thirty-four people died, more than one thousand were injured, and an estimated four thousand community members were arrested. A gubernatorial investigation concluded that the uprising resulted from long-term racial disenfranchisement, including unemployment and inadequate housing and education in

the region. At the time, Governor Pat Brown acknowledged the community outcry and turned to higher education to restore hope to the community. Thus, according to the CSUDH (n.d.) historical narrative, the governor relocated our university from Palos Verdes to its present location in Carson to provide greater access to a college education for folks living in the neighboring communities.

The 346-acre campus, situated within the city of Carson, is in the South Bay region of Los Angeles County. We are near Watts, Compton, and South Los Angeles, all inhabited by primarily working-class African American and Latinx residents. Today, the university is classified as a Hispanic-serving institution and is a leading institution within the state in awarding degrees to Black students. As a settler of color with ancestral Indigenous ties to North America (primarily western and northern Mexico), I am honored to continue developing my relationship with this place and strive to live up to our institutional promise to serve as an educational opportunity for the surrounding community.

The university's historic origin and the sociopolitical context in which it operates give relevance to my academic department's focus on critical race theory (CRT). Founded in 2006, the MSW program at CSUDH sought to design a graduate program that intentionally centered an anti-racist approach to social work. The founders of the MSW program wanted to offer adult learners a more contextually relevant, critical, and racially conscious education than most social work programs in the US typically provided at that time. Critical race social work education aims to disrupt the status quo by countering the color-evasive approach predominant in our profession that perpetuates service-oriented models of practice that inadvertently uphold systemic inequality (Avila, Aldana, and Zaragoza 2020; Campbell and Baikie 2012). Relatedly, a CRT-informed approach encourages social workers to provide more than "services" by attending to racism as a structural force shaping the lives of their clients and communities of practice.

Since joining CSUDH in 2015, I have taught the Critical Race Studies in Social Work Practice course along with courses



on community-based participatory action research, social welfare policy, social justice, and youth empowerment. I have also developed programmatic CRT-informed assessment tools, facilitated anti-racist workshops, and designed enrichment opportunities for students, faculty, and community partners. Teaching within a CRT paradigm, centering student voice through counter-storytelling methods has deepened my commitment to student-centered pedagogy and enhanced my understanding of how race shapes my social location in various educational settings.

### *An Invitation for Critical Self-Reflection*

My ancestral mestiza lineage, which impacts my social positioning within a racialized society as discussed above, is only one example of the ways that settler colonialism and white supremacy extend beyond the current US borders. The sociopolitical and historical impact of European imperialism, colonialism, and chattel slavery were not confined to the Americas. As manifestations of white supremacy, they constituted a global enterprise that intricately shaped economies, public institutions, and power structures across continents, reinforcing the domination of non-European societies and having lasting legacies worldwide (Acharya 2022; Anghie 2007). Moreover, globalization serves as a vehicle for the proliferation of Western norms and the influence of white supremacy on racialized global hierarchies (Babacan and Gopalkrishnan 2020). Today, these interconnected systems reinforce a complex web of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, migrant labor exploitation, and other forms of racialization shaping the trajectories of various marginalized ethnic-racial groups across the world. Understanding the global interconnectedness of these systems encourages us to interrogate the historical forces that continue to influence our roles in the educational landscape. It prompts us to explore our personal histories and the often race-neutral histories of our educational institutions.

In recognizing the far-reaching impact of settler colonialism, white supremacy, European imperialism, and slavery, I invite readers

to critically reflect on how these historical forces may have shaped their positionality within their educational context. As educators, we must critically reflect on our institutions' historical origins and the sociopolitical contexts we teach. Do you benefit from Whiteness or other hegemonic positions of power? Are you perceived and treated as racially, ethnically, or culturally "other" in ways that inhibit your livelihood? Or perhaps, like me, you occupy a liminal, in-between space that holds access to some forms of racial privileges while also positioning you as a target of racial-ethnic discrimination? This introspection is foundational to effectively employing counterstory pedagogy. By recognizing the historical legacies woven into the fabric of our educational institutions and our positionality within it, we can better understand the complexities of power, privilege, and oppression that shape our teaching environments. This critical self-awareness lays the groundwork for more impactful and equitable pedagogical practices, aligning with counterstory pedagogy's transformative potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning spaces.

## PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

### *Teaching with Critical Race Theory*

There is increased interest in anti-racism educational strategies within social work programs in the US and institutions of higher learning worldwide. Interest in using anti-racist educational strategies stems from the imperative to dismantle systemic racial biases in education, fostering inclusive practices and equitable learning environments that empower individuals to challenge racism. In the late 1970s, CRT emerged as an anti-racist response to the color-evasive legal pedagogy occurring in law schools in the US (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). Its development within legal scholarship makes it uniquely relevant for addressing racism in social work practice and



policy (Razack and Jeffery 2002). However, since its inception in legal studies, CRT has been applied to other disciplines, such as education, public health, and social work.

Due to the widespread presence of color-evasive racism globally, many well-meaning educators, social workers, and other helping professionals may overlook the role of race unless prompted by extensive lived experiences, pedagogical intervention, or professional training that probes them to interrogate racism. Through its core tenets, CRT examines how race and its intersections with other identity markers are social constructions that lay the groundwork for marginalized groups' systemic and institutional oppression. Given the social construction of race, it is not a universal or static demographic category. Therefore, understanding race requires sociohistorical knowledge and critical analysis of the racialization of various racial and ethnic groups within its national context. It is, therefore, crucial to clarify that CRT is about an intersectional analysis of racism and other forms of oppression limiting social justice processes, practices, and outcomes. An overview of CRT's genealogy depicts the ways that CRT—and its branches like TribalCrit, LatCrit, AsianCrit, DisCrit, QueerCrit, and WhiteCrit—has critiqued and expanded upon early theorizing about racism within a Black and White racial binary to explicate the intersections of racism with settler colonialism, cultural nationalism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, and other forms of subjugation (Solórzano and Yosso 2001). These branches do not oppose CRT or one another but instead offer a constellation of critical perspectives that provide a complete portrayal of the patterns of racialization and the permanence of racism.

A CRT perspective enables me to critically examine the ways color-evasive racism contributes to various forms of inequality. As an American educator, this means intentionally centering an analysis of racism as I examine its intersections with other systems of dominance—such as colonialism, sexism, cis-heterosexism, classism, and nativism—and how these systems shape disparities in education, economics, health, and mental well-being. In the US, scholarship on the relevance of CRT to education, social work, and other

professional schools has proliferated within the past decades (Abrams and Moio 2009; Constance-Huggins 2012; Ortiz and Jani 2010). Globally, scholars have extended the use of CRT beyond the US to scrutinize postcolonialism and power dynamics in regions such as Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2021; Arudou 2013; Gillborn 2006; McLaughlin and Whatman 2011; Möschel 2014; Warmington 2020). The interdisciplinary and transnational adaptation of CRT has enhanced researchers' ability to examine how racism overlaps and reinforces other forms of oppression.

The field of education has advanced the conceptualization and praxis of critical race pedagogy in a way relevant to the educators seeking to create more anti-racist and inclusive learning environments. For instance, educational scholars in the US and internationally have proposed anti-racist pedagogical strategies that not only recognize the pervasiveness of racism, privilege, and settler colonialism, but also centers the significance of cultural identity, intersectional analysis of oppression, development of reflexivity, and liberatory teaching practices (AdvanceHE n.d.; Jennings and Lynn 2005). Accordingly, the integration of CRT in higher education, and social work more specifically, requires intentional integration of CRT-related content and liberatory pedagogical strategies. Although we did not initially call our educational approach at CSUDH critical race pedagogy (CRP), we have since come to recognize the evolution of our integration of CRT into our MSW curriculum as more than its inclusion in the course content (Aldana, Vazquez, and Hosea 2022). The development of CRP at CSUDH is underscored by two common threads: critical reflexivity and centering the perspective of students of color. We recognize that dominant color-evasive (often considered race-neutral) educational norms may inadvertently constrain student-centered approaches for students of color, and other marginalized learners, by potentially disregarding diverse cultural perspectives, ways of knowing, and learning styles that may differ from the Western, Eurocentric educational paradigm prevalent in society. Thus, for CSUDH MSW program, critical reflexivity includes a continual assessment of the



gap in praxis. In other words, how true is the program to its CRT commitment in both the explicit and implicit curricula?

Teaching within a CRT framework, my pedagogical objectives reflect an overall commitment to promoting social justice through educational practices that empower adult learners to address racism and other forms of oppression through their professional development (Aldana and Vazquez 2020). To this end, I aim to foster skills necessary for students to: (1) think critically about the social construction of oppression, (2) reflect on social identity and intergroup relations, and (3) apply theory to research-informed practice. Achieving these goals is not without its ethical dilemmas. Learning about oppression and intergroup relations can be emotionally distressing and cognitively taxing, especially for students who have experienced discrimination and intuitional bias (Berila 2016). Therefore, I seek to balance two National Association of Social Workers' (2021) ethical obligations: promoting knowledge about oppression and enhancing clients' (i.e., my students') capacity to address racism and other systems of domination. Centering students' perspectives using counterstory methodology enables me to better prepare them for anti-racism praxis grounded in their lived experiences.

### *Counterstory Methodology in Education*

Counterstory is critical race theory's rhetoric and writing method (Martinez 2020). Rooted in CRT, counterstories, also called counter-narratives or voices of color, challenge dominant ideologies by centering race and racism in one's critical social analysis. Critical race scholars have provided a persuasive rationale for using counterstory as a research method (Martinez 2014; Solórzano and Yosso 2001). Accordingly, critical race scholars utilize various narrative inquiry methods that hinge on personal and reflective writing. Social science research, as well as scholarship of teaching and learning, based on narrative inquiry may include autobiographies, autoethnographies, introspections, self-study, digital storytelling, and testimonio (Albert and Couture 2014; Schrum 2023). I utilize these

various methods of narrative inquiry and storytelling in my work. In this chapter, I will employ testimonio to discuss the theoretical and pedagogical influences of counterstory pedagogy.

Testimonio is a written account of life experiences typically expressed by a person from a marginalized group in society to shed light on sociopolitical realities (Prieto and Villenas 2012). Testimonios originated from Indigenous and other marginalized oral traditions in Latin America but have been further developed by educational researchers, predominantly Chicanas and Latinas, in the US. A key characteristic of this narrative approach is that knowledge production and dissemination serve as an act of geopolitical resistance against imperialism (Reyes and Curry Rodríguez 2012). Testimonio parallels and complements other Indigenous storywork methodologies in decolonizing research efforts (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo 2019). As a methodological, pedagogical, and reflexive approach to social justice education, testimonios aim to promote social change through consciousness-raising (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012). Its synergy with decolonizing methodologies and social justice ethics underscores its potency as a pedagogical tool for dismantling hegemonic teaching and learning norms.

As a methodological approach to narrative inquiry in educational settings, counter-storytelling aligns with critical race pedagogy's emphasis on validating students' experiential knowledge. Counterstory is committed to social justice through transformative responses to dominant ideologies and narratives by leveraging counter-narratives that amplify the marginalized perspectives of students of color (Harper 2009; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; Lueg and Lundholt 2020). More specifically, the use of testimonio—as counter-narrative work—in academic writing emerged from LatCrit scholarship, a theoretical branch extending from CRT with a specific focus on the experiences unique to people of Latin American descent in the United States (Huber 2010). Pedagogically, testimonios engage learners in transformational and dialogic reflection to build counter-narratives and oppositional knowledge. Coleman (as cited in



Albert and Couture 2014) asserts that experiential learning primarily involves making meaning of one's experiences. Thus, rather than merely comprehending information, learners must be capable of interpreting their experiences and constructing practical knowledge.

Engaging in critical inquiry with one another through our counterstories, narratives, and testimonios allows students to generate new knowledge collectively (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012). Counterstory as a pedagogical tool helps students examine how dominant narratives often affect our sense of self and social positionality. Critical storytelling is an empowering pedagogical methodology for co-learning and building collective critical consciousness (Flores Carmona and Luschen 2014). Engagement with crafting counterstories, like narrative and testimonial writing assignments, facilitates students' examination of their complicity (often unconscious) in the dominant narrative through membership in privileged groups.

Often in sharing our counterstories and discussing how they are similar or different, we can identify the patterns of microaggressions, systemic oppression, and dominant narratives across communities or social groups. This happens through the act of thinking, the act of writing, the act of sharing, and the act of listening throughout the counter-storytelling process. For instance, the act of writing gives space for reflection, critical awareness, and making connections. Sharing one's story can be more emotional and, at times, healing. For the storyteller, telling one's story can help release emotional stress or embodied trauma. The act of listening also offers many benefits. In listening to others, we may be able to broaden our perspective, build empathy for others, or connect our different experiences with those of others. Integrating technology and media tools, such as images, videos, and audio recordings (i.e., digital storytelling) to create and share counter-narratives can enhance student learning by promoting critical reflection, communication skills, and creative self-expression.

Much of the literature on counterstory represents compelling narrative inquiry studies involving adolescents or undergraduate students. More literature is needed to understand how adult learners

in graduate programs learn through engagement with counter-narratives. In my previous work, I have noticed that CRT and counter-narratives provide a means for graduate students to surface their experiential knowledge, integrate those experiences with an understanding of relevant disciplinary concepts, and allow for collaborative critical consciousness building (Avila, Aldana, and Zaragoza 2020). The existing literature has outlined the implications of counterstory methodology for education (Martinez 2020). Nevertheless, more research and pedagogical scholarship that explicitly articulates classroom practices or writing activities that use counterstories as a pedagogical tool for adult learners in higher education are needed.

*Letter Writing as a Counterstory Pedagogical Tool*

Epistolary writing is the expression of ideas or sentiments in the Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and James Baldwin's "A Letter to My Nephew." Both epistolary essays speak to anti-Black racism in the US. In essence, epistolary writing—as a form of counter-storytelling—emerges as a versatile literary form, ranging from fictional prose to real-life correspondence, and extends beyond to autobiographical reflections.

There is a growing interest in the use of letter writing as a pedagogical tool (Rahim and Hashim 2015; White, Wright-Soika, and Russell 2007; Erasmus 2021). In educational settings, instructors have adopted letter writing as a method to encourage students to articulate their thoughts, engage with course material, and express personal experiences. However, few pedagogical studies exist to date. As one recent example, Rahim and Hashim (2015) present an exploratory case study that examined the employment of epistolary writing in facilitating students' reading engagement. In this study, three students wrote a letter to their instructor to express their understanding and interpretation of the course text. The case study findings indicate that the students appreciated their voices being considered throughout the teaching and learning process through the letter-writing exercise and accompanying discussions. As an interactive and personal



form of expression, letter writing transcends conventional academic tasks, providing a dynamic platform for students to connect their lived experiences with academic content. In doing so, it enriches the learning experience by encouraging dialogue, reflection, and a deeper engagement with course material.

Drawing upon feminist pedagogies, Conway and Cummins (2016) propose that epistolary writing is conducive to dialogue, or a critical dialogic exchange, because letter writing invites students into a private space that gives them time to express themselves before sharing their ideas with others. Thus, reflective letter writing initiates a relational space of engagement with one's ideas in personal reflection and further develops the critical analysis of one's beliefs through a dialogic exchange that supports self-disclosure and the naming of the social world(s) we inhabit. Indigenous educators and scholars have also theorized the methodological resonance of letter writing for Native youth and other racially marginalized students (Cisneros 2018). Scholarship on epistolary writing as pedagogy and methodology speaks to letters' potential as a communicative genre that facilitates dialogue and critical self-reflection that disrupts academic power relations.

Epistolary essays also harness the power of dialogic learning, where letters serve as a collaborative critical inquiry exchange medium. Through a back-and-forth exchange with educators or peers, students actively participate in co-constructing knowledge, honing their communication skills, and fostering a collaborative learning environment. Furthermore, the perceived audience (to whom they address their letters) in epistolary writing adds significance to students' work, motivating them to invest earnest effort in their writing and promoting greater motivation and accountability. Writing assignments can create a brave space for students to articulate their realities and feelings related to racism and other forms of oppression (Pawlowski 2018). Epistolary writing, as a mode of counterstory inquiry, allows students to courageously assert their unique perspectives and challenge the hegemonic narratives that historically marginalized their voices. As such, letter writing has emerged as a

vital mode of critical pedagogical inquiry that enhances counterstory education while fostering a deeper understanding of social justice issues.

## WHY COUNTERSTORY PEDAGOGY MATTERS

Counterstory pedagogy matters to students of color and other marginalized learners because it validates their lived experiences and acknowledges the importance of their voices. As a form of counterstory methodology, letter writing allows students to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and social critique in their own words. For students who have often felt marginalized or unheard in traditional educational settings, counterstory pedagogy provides a platform for them to share their stories authentically. This validation fosters a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging motivates students to engage more actively in their learning process (Morrow and Ackermann 2012). Perhaps more importantly, it provides intellectual space for them to examine the most oppressive aspects of society without losing sight of what matters most—their capacity to engage in social change.

Counterstory pedagogy enhances collective learning and classroom experiences by promoting critical thinking and deeper reflection on oppression and social justice. For instance, storytelling methodology and narrative assignments help me frame students' personal stories as relevant to learning about social justice in my courses. In teaching, I aim to guide students in connecting theory and their lived experiences by providing optional reflective prompts for them to consider. I emphasize that it is their story, and they should not feel obligated to respond directly to my prompts. Moreover, my courses are often structured to ask students to critically reflect on their race, ethnicity, and other salient social identities through narrative inquiry and reflective writing. Through autoethnographic writing, counterstory pedagogy can also nurture students' intra- and inter-cultural



empathy and compassion by exposing them to diverse experiences and struggles (Camangian, Philoxene, and Stovall 2023).

When students read and listen to each other's personal letters, they gain insights into the lived experiences of their peers. This process fosters empathy and understanding, as it encourages students to step into the shoes of others and recognize the impact of intersecting systems of oppression. As a result, students build stronger connections with each other, and the issues discussed in the classroom. By listening to counter-narratives, students can gain a more nuanced and compassionate perspective on the lived realities of others. This empathetic understanding is crucial for developing socially conscious and culturally competent individuals navigating a diverse and interconnected world. This epistolary pedagogical process cultivates a deeper understanding of the complexities of privilege and oppression, fostering students' capacity for a more nuanced approach to solidarity building and collective action.

In the context of higher education, counterstory pedagogy plays a transformative role by challenging traditional power structures and promoting inclusivity. It enhances educators' ability to dismantle the hierarchical norms of knowledge production that have historically privileged dominant perspectives while excluding marginalized voices. Embracing counterstory pedagogy encourages us to continuously reflect and reevaluate our instructional methods to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments with our students. Tapping into personal narratives and lived experiences, letter writing empowers students to challenge dominant discourses, center marginalized voices, and critically examine systems of oppression.

By embracing counterstory pedagogy, educators can create more inclusive and empathetic learning environments that challenge dominant narratives and pave the way for a more equitable and just society. As higher education institutions continue to embrace the power of counterstory pedagogy, they can catalyze positive change and contribute to a more inclusive future for all.

## ENGAGING WITH THIS BOOK

My primary motivation for publishing this book was to showcase the richness of experiences and reflective learning that resulted from engaging students in letter writing as a form of counter-storytelling. Therefore, this text is, first and foremost, a compilation of powerful epistolary essays authored by graduate students. Reading this book cover to cover is unnecessary. Instead, as an anthology showcasing student writing, readers can jump from letter to letter, seeking essays that speak to their interests. The epistolary essays, or student letters, speak to various social justice issues such as educational inequity, immigration, poverty, racism, racial profiling, addiction, and many other social problems.

The letters are organized into three thematic sections, which allows readers to navigate selectively, seeking essays that resonate with their interests. Part 1, "Childhood Resilience," presents letters that reflect themes related to overcoming adversity at an early age. The second collection of epistolary essays, "Intergenerational Healing," includes letters often addressed to family members or reflect the emotional processing of intergenerational experiences of systemic oppression and trauma. The third collection of letters, "Envisioning Resistance," includes epistolary essays that imagine new racial and social justice possibilities.

In addition to this introductory chapter, this book opens with a pedagogical case example of employing epistolary essays as a tool for counterstory pedagogy and transformative learning. Co-authored with two former students, the case example offers insights into creating a brave space for critical self-reflection and healing in the classroom. My co-authors offer personal narratives about their learning experiences with counterstory pedagogy and letter writing. On the other hand, I provide an overview of the strategies used to transform the virtual learning environment into a transformative space for critical self-reflection and courageous self-disclosure through letter writing. This case example may be particularly valuable for



educators seeking practical guidance on creating an inclusive learning environment for counterstory pedagogy.

The book ends with a personal epistolary essay dedicated to my students and a concluding chapter on the lessons learned from engaging in counterstory pedagogy. The closing letter captures gratitude for my (past, present, and future) students' courageous engagement with counterstory pedagogy and offers them words of encouragement when feelings of imposter syndrome, perfectionism, or writer's block get in the way. In the final chapter I review what I have learned from integrating letter writing with CRT's counter-storytelling methodology, or what I have named counterstory pedagogy in this text. While rooted in my experiences as a social work educator, the lessons learned provide adaptable ideas for educators across various disciplines who want to engage with narrative inquiry.

Educators who want to learn more about integrating counter-narrative instructional approaches into their classrooms can read the pedagogical chapters to learn more about this approach. Instructors may also find it valuable to assign the entire book or select certain letters to read and discuss with their class. For example, the letters included in this book are also likely to interest instructors seeking to include diverse perspectives on education, diversity, justice-oriented healing, and narrative inquiry. This collection of epistolary essays may be a welcomed literary reflection of student readers' experiences. In other words, students reading the epistolary essays in this book may relate to the stories and perspectives shared in the collection of letters. I also hope that this collection of letters inspires other students to write their counterstories. The book provides exemplars of pedagogical strategies and student writing that show the promise of centering students' epistemic agency through counterstory pedagogy and letter writing.

The significance of counterstory pedagogy lies in its transformative potential for marginalized students. By validating their lived experiences and amplifying their voices, this pedagogical approach addresses the historical silencing of marginalized perspectives in traditional educational settings. For students who have felt silenced or

unheard, counterstory pedagogy serves as a powerful tool, providing a platform for authentic expression. This book serves as a testament to the potential of counterstory pedagogy, offering a compilation of powerful epistolary essays authored by graduate students. Whether read cover to cover or selectively, this book is a valuable resource for educators and learners seeking to foster diverse perspectives in education, justice-oriented learning, and narrative inquiry.

## Counterstory Pedagogy: A Case Example

*by Adriana Aldana, Taylor Hosea, and Stephany Ramos*

An underlying assumption of our anti-oppressive and anti-racist approach to social work is that we have the power to disrupt dominant narratives and practices that perpetuate bias and inequality. Therefore, acquiring knowledge, skills, and epistemic agency to engage in critical reflection-in-action has been essential to our professional development. Social workers draw from interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives to prepare for anti-oppressive practice with diverse populations in various educational, health, and community-based settings. Engagement in critical self-reflection is necessary for transforming knowledge into social action that disrupts social relations and societal structures that perpetuate oppression (Freire 1970).

Transformative learning is a pedagogical perspective that aims to build learners' capacity for engagement in the praxis of social change through critical reflection and action, or critical consciousness development (Freire 1970; Jones 2009; Mezirow 2006; Van Schalkwyk et al. 2019). In this chapter, we provide a pedagogical example of using epistolary essays, or letter writing, as a tool for counterstory pedagogy that fosters transformative learning in a graduate social work course.



We offer a brief overview of the transformative learning approach to adult education. In our narrative account of teaching and learning in the course, we explore the role of critical self-reflection, creative expression, and vulnerability in counterstory pedagogy. We conclude by discussing the pedagogical strategies that aid in transforming the classroom into a co-created space for collective learning and healing.

### PEDAGOGICAL PROMISE OF EPISTOLARY WRITING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

As a form of counterstory pedagogy, letter writing holds immense potential in transforming education because it is a powerful tool for amplifying marginalized student voices. Initial conceptions of transformative learning by Jack Mezirow (1978) suggest that adult learning requires acknowledging and reassessing the nature of the paradigms that shape how we think, feel, and act. Mezirow's understanding of transformative learning evolved to describe a learning process that changes fixed frames of reference to make one's interpretations more discerning, inclusive, reflective, and emotionally permeable to change. The transformative learning process, therefore, involves examining a prior interpretation to (re)construct a new or refined understanding of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action.

Since then, transformative learning has been conceptualized as acquiring knowledge and skills that interrogate taken-for-granted perspectives. Often transformative learning involves critical analysis of dominant societal assumptions that lead to critical self-reflection and new ways of being in the world. Accordingly, transformative learning theory consists of two primary premises. Firstly, transformative learning involves reassessing one's beliefs, worldview, and unconscious biases. Secondly, the integration of critical theory shifts the level of analysis to the interrogation of social and structural levels (Brookfield 2011; Mezirow 1991). This type of learning requires reevaluating the knowledge and values upon which our beliefs and

prejudices are founded (Taylor and Cranton 2012). To participate in democratic discourse, students must also develop intergroup communication skills, empathetic listening, and a sense of agency that motivates them to engage freely and fully in social change. Per these theoretical premises, adult students' increased self-reflectiveness is expected to encourage a process of self-actualization. In turn, critical self-reflection leads to a sense of agency, increased professional competence, and the development of sociopolitical abilities.

The critique, refinement, and application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory have expanded our understanding of its pedagogical application. For instance, Cranton (2002) suggests that there are a variety of teaching strategies for transformative learning, such as exposure to varying perspectives, engagement with autobiographies, and creating a safe space for the expression of and listening to diverse student perspectives. Other pedagogical approaches include explicitly naming assumptions, using reflective journaling, and engaging in strategic planning discussions (McGonigal 2005). Essential to all these approaches is creating spaces for experiential learning and linking students with each other to exchange ideas and serve as peer support. Facilitating transformative learning requires intentionally creating opportunities that enable critical inquiry—often in less-than-ideal conditions for learning across differences.

Stemming from CRT, counterstory pedagogy challenges dominant narratives by centering the experiences and perspectives of those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized (Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Martinez 2020). Epistolary essays, or letters, are an excellent way to engage adult learners in the transformative process of self-reflection and experiential knowledge creation. Learning from letters is a longstanding instructional approach within rhetoric and writing studies. Epistolary pedagogy, in general, seeks to understand how this unique approach can transform learners' experiences into personal knowledge, shifting the focus from simply acquiring information to making sense of one's own lived experiences. In contemporary settings, epistolary pedagogy transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries and offers students and educators numerous benefits, such



as fostering intercultural exchanges and nurturing reflective practices. Building on the growing scholarship on the pedagogical power of letter writing, we have offer pedagogical case example. We hope to illustrate the pedagogical promise of epistolary essays and the implications of using them in inclusive teaching-learning experiences.

## BACKGROUND

In what follows, we provide background information about the course and the assignment to describe the context in which transformative learning occurred using a narrative inquiry approach. As part of critical race methodology, there are three types of narrative investigation: personal, third-person, or composite (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This case example will employ a mix of composite and individual/personal narratives that discuss our experiences teaching and learning with letters. We do not intend the composite narrative to homogenize our experiences or gloss over power differences in social locations across intersecting social identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.) or formal educational role (i.e., instructor, student). Instead, our narrative exemplar aims to weave together themes across our subjective experience to articulate the co-creation of a transformative learning experience. We aimed to ensure credibility by employing "narrative exemplars" that depict patterns within our shared experience for others to assess their validity and determine how they might apply them to their endeavors (Lyons and LaBoskey 2002).

### *The Course: Youth Empowerment for Community Change*

In 2017, the California State University, Domingue Hills' Master of Social Work (MSW) program developed new advanced elective courses that expanded the curricular offerings. The MSW program faculty involved students in the decision-making process through the Graduate Association of Social Work (GASW, a student organi-

zation in the program) to create an online survey to poll all students' interest in potential elective topics. Under Adriana's supervision, students administered the online survey and produced a report for 2018–2019. Faculty discussed the results of the elective topics poll and related report that the GASW student representative drafted at a curriculum meeting. Upon deliberation among faculty members, the MSW program decided to create three new elective courses: (1) Youth Empowerment for Community Change, (2) Grant Writing, and (3) Health and Aging. As a result, Adriana developed the MSW 576: Youth Empowerment for Community Change course (hereafter referred to as Youth Empowerment). The Youth Empowerment class of 2021 serves as the instructional backdrop for the pedagogical case example offered in this chapter.

The Youth Empowerment course aimed to discuss and identify best practices for preparing adults to empower youth to challenge racism on their terms. The course content focused on building students' capacity for critical reflexivity and awareness of positionality and learning models of youth empowerment. Early course readings and discussions about paternalism (as characteristic of white supremacy culture, see Okun 2021) and adultism helped students problematize the dominant professional intervention models prevalent in the MSW curriculum. As a result, most students demonstrated a shift in their professional mindset. Students' motivations shifted from wanting to "help youth who do not have a voice" (instructor pedagogical journaling notes from the first day of class) to being an "adult ally" who "creates opportunities for youth to make change in their community" or "feeling hopeful about advancing racial justice in collaboration with youth" (student responses in Zoom chat in the second-to-last week). In general, assignments prepared students to design and facilitate workshops/programs that empower youth to address racism and other forms of systemic inequality in their communities. The final assignment, an epistolary essay we discuss next, was intended as a reflective essay in the form of a letter to youth.



*The Assignment: Letter to Youth*

The epistolary essay assignment, Letter to Youth, allowed students to practice critical self-reflection addressed to youth at the end of the semester. For this assignment, we defined "youth" broadly, to include young person or persons in the student's life (past, present, or future). In other words, students could write a letter to:

- A child or adolescent self or previous generations of young people
- Young person(s) currently in their life (e.g., family member, client) or the current generation of young people
- An imagined child or adolescent descendent or a future generation of young people

The assignment guidelines, and instructor, prompted students to examine their lived experiences while integrating course concepts. This assignment allowed each student to reflect on youth empowerment and other course concepts and how they related to their personal, political, professional, or educational experiences. Assignment guidelines encouraged deep thinking and honesty about one's intersecting identities and ideological beliefs to deepen students' understanding of social justice and the role of social workers. The instructor notified students that they would read the letters out loud to the rest of the class. The instructor recommended that students write a draft, unfiltered letter, before revising for this course assignment (for a sample of the assignment guidelines, see appendix A, or download a copy from the book's website).

In addition, students were also encouraged to share some form of creative expression (e.g., picture collage, poem, art) to complement the reflective letter. The assignment guidelines and instructor recommendations were open-ended enough that they left most of the creative decision-making in the hands of the students. The only formatting requirements were a two-page maximum and that the letter reading and sharing of the creative piece (i.e., oral presentation of the essay) was approximately five minutes long. A grading rubric

(see appendix B, also available on the book's website) assessed student learning and performance.

The next section provides personal narratives to depict our teaching-learning experience with the course and the letter-writing assignment. First, we provide a composite narrative of Taylor and Stephany's collective experience in the course, followed by their individual learning experiences. Then Adriana reflects on her role as the instructor and her use of epistolary writing as a counterstory pedagogical tool for transformative learning.

## EPISTOLARY WRITING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Before we discuss our (Taylor and Stephany's) individual experiences with the letter writing assignment, we must address the social context and classroom dynamics that shaped the learning environment and the brave space we co-created as both teachers and learners in Dr. Aldana's class. When we enrolled in the Youth Empowerment course in the spring of 2021, we were well into adhering to local social isolation protocols and university guidelines for remote "alternative instruction" that were in place at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this advanced elective course was offered virtually via Zoom video conferencing platform rather than in person. The course design included both asynchronous and synchronous instructional modalities. Dr. Aldana designed synchronous activities to help students engage with course content and each other outside of the virtual classroom.

Despite the class being conducted online, we felt a sense of belonging in the virtual learning space we co-created. Following a transformative approach to learning, the course description and objectives for student participation set clear expectations for co-creating a learning environment that disrupted the notion that teaching and learning were mutually exclusive. Instead, our class adopted a



"teaching-learning" perspective, which orients students to develop a collaborative process for critical inquiry, consciousness-raising, and disrupting dominant models of learning and community practice that emphasize the one-way flow of information (Finn 2020). In this class, as part of a cohort-based graduate program, establishing trust with one another was relatively easy since we were in our final semester of the MSW program. Moreover, most students had some familiarity with Dr. Aldana, either as former students or as informal mentees.

With explicit guidance from the instructor, we leveraged existing relationships to co-create a space that encouraged self-reflection and vulnerability, as well as being brave and taking risks in the classroom. On the first day of class, she invited us to reframe "class time" as a "sacred space for learning." She acknowledged the various difficulties of learning from home amidst a global pandemic, such as competing responsibilities (e.g., childcare), lack of a private space to study, and unreliable technology that made it difficult to concentrate "in class." Using guided meditation, we took time to ground ourselves and bring our full (physical, mental, and spiritual) selves into the virtual classroom with every breath while envisioning a sacred space that would serve as the container for our teaching-learning.

The guided visualization exercise described above is one of many examples of incorporating mindfulness practices into the transformative learning praxis we observed in this course. Mindfulness is the ability to be in the moment while showing compassion and being non-judgmental (Alexakos et al. 2016). Additionally, mindfulness practices have been found to aid students in gaining an awareness of emotions and how emotions connect to the body, and this understanding helps increase self-awareness and promotes the transformation of self in a non-judgmental environment (Birnbaum 2008). Mindfulness was incorporated into our classroom setting through various exercises such as mindfulness meditations and activities that encouraged us to be present and feel the interconnectedness of our emotional and physical states. Engaging in mindfulness exercises in the classroom helped promote an inclusive learning environment and, as a result, enabled us to be emotionally vulnerable, revealing our

deepest emotions and making our final assignment of letter writing and creative expression in the classroom community feasible.

From the onset and throughout the course, we made sure to honor our role as social workers, who we are as people outside the profession, and the experiences that come with those various social roles. For example, one of our first asynchronous assignments was to post an "introduction video" in the class Flip video discussion board. We, including the instructor, shared our names, pronouns, and a song that inspired us while growing up. We could also view and respond to our peers' video posts as we posted our videos. Engaging in this activity not only served as an icebreaker (before the first day of class) but also began to set the expectation for the reciprocal exchange of ideas and personal anecdotes through the instructor's participation.

Throughout the semester, we practiced self-disclosure as an exercise in critical self-reflexivity and as part of dialogic learning. Self-disclosure is often discouraged in social work practice, especially regarding setting and maintaining professional boundaries in clinical settings. Nevertheless, developing pedagogical methods to help students engage in self-disclosure can be beneficial to developing their professional identity (Segev and Hochman 2022). Many of the class activities and discussions involved sharing our personal experiences about the course reading and other required content. We often first shared our thoughts and memories in pairs and small groups before proceeding into a more extensive class discussion about emerging themes. Through self-disclosure of her positionality, lived experiences, and intellectual growth, the instructor modeled vulnerability while still centering the experiential knowledge of her students. Creating a classroom culture of self-disclosure and vulnerability early on helped to set the stage for the final assignment (i.e., reading epistolary essays in class).

Transforming our mindset, especially the beliefs and attitudes that uphold dominant ways of thinking, involves vulnerability. Questioning one's knowledge and underlying assumptions can feel disorienting and emotionally risky. Emotional vulnerability is taking emotional risks and showing one's true self, including imperfections;



this form of vulnerability has been found to enhance relationships with others through the exchange of mutual vulnerability and trust (Ozment 2018). Through our instructor modeling emotional vulnerability, we, as students, knew from the beginning of the semester that this was not only a safe space but also a brave space in which it was appropriate to take emotional and intellectual risks. Our instructor promoted this type of classroom environment by actively participating in activities that required emotional vulnerability before asking students to do this themselves.

*Individual Narratives of the Learning Experience*

**Taylor's experience learning through vulnerability**: My experience in writing a reflective letter and developing a creative piece to go with my letter was indeed transformational. I wrote a letter to my younger self addressing socialization messages and the concept of self-love. By writing this letter, I reflected on my experiences with gender socialization and other forms of conditioning into oppressive social roles. I realized that I had internalized various cisheteronormative socialization messages and, as a result, grew up thinking I needed to act, look, and be a certain way. In this assignment, I could be kind to my inner child, and I felt the overall experience was healing and cathartic. The assignment gave me creative freedom to express myself, knowing that the virtual classroom was a space where my emotional vulnerability was encouraged and supported authentically. Thus, the co-creative learning environment made the successful completion of this assignment possible for me.

Also, hearing my peers' letters and viewing their creative pieces added to this transformative experience. Listening to peers read their letters and observing the creative components of their assignments, I realized that although many of our experiences were different and the letters that we wrote were different, I was able to see similarity in the amount of vulnerability and support displayed by everyone in our class. Dr. Aldana practiced emotional vulnerability in the classroom along with us by sharing relevant and personal anecdotes, which set

the tone for our class. The classroom became a space where emotional vulnerability was encouraged and was part of everyone's co-learning responsibility (Lerner and Fulambarker 2018). Her approach reflects scholarship that argues that instructor modeling of emotional vulnerability in a classroom environment increases student engagement and retention of information and better prepares students for post-college life (Yair 2008). Creating a space for the sharing of our letters required both courage and vulnerability to share and listen to one another's stories. Being in the virtual classroom on our final day of class was an experience I will never forget. It was one of my most impactful experiences during my MSW program.

**Stephany's learning experience**: As we embarked on our journey through youth empowerment, our instructor tasked us with writing a letter to past, present, or future generations. The instructor created a safe space by modeling her experiences through her letter. Through this experience, I tapped into critical hopefulness by dedicating the letter to a future great-great-grandchild. Reflecting on what life was like for me as a child and hoping for things to look different in the future—not focusing on reaching a page limit or referencing an article or two, but an opportunity to be raw and uncut. Letter writing goes beyond what a Eurocentric capitalist institution deems as an educational assessment of learning. For me, letter writing allowed me to break away from white supremacist standards of academic expression. As a form of reflective thinking, letter writing taught me how to utilize my individual experiences in praxis. I learned that self-disclosure of the challenges that I have endured could help co-create an open learning environment for others. I learned that unpacking the impact of oppressive systems on my life can empower us all to recognize how our oppression is interconnected. As a social worker, I realized that creating an open space for open dialogue is vital to building community, surfacing patterns of inequality, and amplifying our collective voices.



## FACILITATING COUNTERSTORY PEDAGOGY: EDUCATOR REFLECTION

As a critical race educator, I (Adriana) aim to decenter the dominant Eurocentric nature of social work professionalization by diversifying course content and teaching-learning strategies. Including epistolary essays from diverse authors as required readings is one strategy that I use to counter the reliance on scholarship that perpetuates dominant narratives and to reveal hidden stories of oppression and resistance not often included in social work curriculum. This intentional shift to include epistolary essays alongside seminal theoretical scholarship legitimizes the experiential knowledge of communities of color, fostering a more significant connection between students and the professional curriculum. Meanwhile, designing epistolary essay assignments offers students a powerful medium to develop critical thinking and epistemic agency that may disrupt traditional disciplinary discourses.

I also seek to engage students in transformative learning using instructional strategies that are informed by the writings of Paulo Freire (1970) on anti-oppression pedagogy and praxis. Central to my teaching philosophy is the idea that social transformation requires co-creating a teaching-learning environment that centers on students' experience and knowledge (Finn 2020). My teaching interests have focused on designing experiential courses exploring the relationship between privilege, oppression, and human behavior. Inspired by the concept of voices of color, or the tenet of counter-narratives, in critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2023), I utilize various forms of storytelling to foster classroom discussions and design assignments highlighting the significance of students' personal stories. In this course, therefore, I was enthusiastic about designing an elective course that aligned with my professional interest and practice in creating opportunity structures for students to engage in dialogic inquiry to address social change.

Counterstory pedagogy, like transformative learning, centers students' lived experiences and recognizes that these experiences are essential starting points for dialogic inquiry, which changes one's knowledge and ways of being in the world. As Taylor and Stephany's narratives demonstrate, engaging in social justice learning grounded in sharing and interrogating our lived experiences requires vulnerability and trust. Felten and Lambert (2020) argue that human connections are vital to a successful college experience. Therefore, I designed the course to include two weeks of experiential activities and discussion questions to build community and trust within the classroom. Nevertheless, I recognize how invaluable students' preexisting relationships with each other and their familiarity with me were to the development of optimal learning conditions.

As an educator, I also prioritize creating spaces for students to learn to analyze dominant power structures and build their sense of agency. I utilize several culturally sustaining pedagogical practices to revise course expectations collectively with students. This practice helps the course go beyond the inclusion of diverse content in my reading selections and develops an environment where students are co-creators of knowledge. These actions further enable students to use what they learn in class (in terms of course content and teaching-learning processes) to address oppressive policies in their professional practice. The epistolary essay was a natural extension of my pedagogical approaches to teaching.

In integrating letter writing into my teaching practice, I have found that writing an epistolary essay, as opposed to research papers or other forms of academic writing, enables students to critically reflect on and express how oppression and social justice have affected their lives. This expression validates learners' voices who have experienced marginalization within educational spaces. As part of counterstory pedagogy, letter writing is a powerful educational approach that empowers students, enhances their learning experiences, and improves higher education. Its value lies in its ability to surface hidden or overlooked narratives, foster transformative learning experiences, and promote epistemic agency. Through letter writing, students are



encouraged to critically reflect on their experiences and identities concerning larger societal structures. This reflexive learning process allows students to examine their biases, privileges, and assumptions, fostering personal growth and self-awareness. I typically use dialogue facilitation strategies to debrief the sharing of letters and identify implications for their educational and professional development. It helps students become more conscious of their role in perpetuating or challenging oppressive systems. Presenting alternative perspectives and narratives challenges students to question the dominant ideologies they may have internalized. This process of critical inquiry fosters a deeper understanding of complex social issues and encourages students to become agents of change in their communities.

Over the years, I have become adept at challenging students to critically examine how they uphold systems of oppression and the repercussions of unexamined biases on their social work practice. Yet, I often left the class feeling unsatisfied with my ability to help students develop psychosocial tools to process the cognitive dissonance, grief, frustration, or guilt that often arises when examining our role in the social systems that create inequality. Learning about matters related to social justice often surfaced strong emotions, controversy, and power differences within and among students (Mishna and Bogo 2007). For instance, in the classroom, adult learners may exhibit internal cognitive dissonance and affective turmoil as they come across new information that counters preexisting beliefs, attitudes, and personal experiences. Practitioners underscore the significance of developing self-reflexivity and capacity for sustained ambiguity in seeking an evolving sense of self and conflict in dialogue with others (LeBaron 2002). Beth Berila (2016) explains that we can assist students in learning how to navigate fraught emotions that surface when learning about injustice more compassionately by incorporating mindfulness approaches to anti-oppression education. Thus, my instructional approach has evolved to integrate contemplative pedagogy as well. Including contemplative and mindfulness practices in class offers students strategies to use anytime to ease the stress of racialized and historical trauma.

Letter writing helps them connect their lived experiences and the theoretical concepts discussed in class. Engaging in letter writing enables students to share their experiences of sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression, presenting alternative perspectives that challenge normative representations of their communities. Additionally, letter writing encourages students to explore how intersecting systems of oppression structure society to create collective struggles. Like so many students that day, I was moved to tears listening to students read their epistolary essays on the final day of class. Tears of sorrow and grief in hearing students emotionally recount past trauma and moments of discrimination—often in other educational spaces. Tears of joy and pride at recognizing the resilience and tenacity of my students. I was repeatedly humbled to learn how much each student had accomplished despite the various institutional barriers they had to overcome along their academic and professional journeys. Bearing witness to students reading their letters out loud to one another has been one of the most humbling and rewarding moments of my career.

## DISCUSSION

This chapter aimed to engage in a critical reflexive exploration of our teaching-learning experience using epistolary writing as a counterstory pedagogical tool that fosters transformative learning. Transformative learning theory has been pedagogically applied across numerous disciplines in higher education and professional schools—including social work, health, and other helping professions. Transformative learning theory provides educators with a pedagogical approach that enables students to critically examine how dominant systems of oppression, including white supremacy, shape what we know and how that knowledge shapes our practice. Mezirow (2006) suggests the following conditions for optimizing adult learning in educational settings:



- access to comprehensive and accurate information
- freedom from coercion, immobilizing fear and anxiety, and self-deception
- equitable opportunity to participate in various aspects of discourse

Optimal conditions enable students to approach transformative learning with an openness to multiple perspectives. Thus, students must be poised for empathetic listening and suspending judgment momentarily to engage in dialogic exchanges that build more profound understanding and new meanings of preexisting knowledge. Accordingly, students must be able to assess information and arguments from multiple perspectives. As part of the process, students build greater critical awareness of the context and societal factors that inform assumptions and beliefs, including their own. The optimal conditions for engagement are only sometimes realistically feasible in applying transformative learning approaches in higher education. Moreover, misinterpreting transformative learning theory can also result in the pedagogical misapplication of this approach and limit its effectiveness in practice (Hoggan and Kloubert 2020). Nevertheless, transformative learning theory provides educators with foundational pedagogical aims and commitments to build instructional strategies for student engagement.

As a transformative learning tool, letter writing allows for self-reflection, an exercise in epistemic vulnerability, and an intersectional analysis of power (Conway and Cummins 2016). Engaging in letter writing and creative expression, and sharing these publicly in a classroom, was a transformative teaching-learning experience for all of us. As writers, the epistolary essay provided a foundation for exploring what was in our hearts and sharing our personal wisdom with others. As learners/listeners, we gained new insights into society and found a sense of belonging in the lived experiences of others.

Letter writing allows everyone in the course to tell their story, with no limits on one's retrospective analysis or creativity. The creative freedom gained through letter writing allows an individual to tap into

the "nitty gritty" of self-reflection needed for transformation. How one appears physically or outwardly to others may not reflect what an individual is going through internally or what an individual has gone through in the past. Being able to share oneself more holistically through letter writing was liberating. That is why self-expression through letter writing can potentially transform learning spaces. It invites us to shed expressions of ourselves we have been conditioned to present in "professional" or academic spaces. Common pedagogical approaches to transformative teaching-learning require active engagement with communities (within and beyond the classroom) different from what the students have known. In socially integrated spaces, differences may include students' social position in the classroom and in relation to systems of power (Jones 2009; Mezirow 2006; Van Schalkwyk et al. 2019). Although participants in this course had some level of familiarity with each other, sharing letters brought out sides of ourselves we often don't share with others. We were learning about each other's histories and vulnerabilities in ways that shifted our collective awareness.

Another example of how engaging in this assignment was transformative for student participants is through the experience of hearing the letters and viewing the creative pieces. Engaging in writing letters and the experience of sharing them in a co-learning space is one way to ensure that all students' voices are heard (White, Wright-Soika, and Russell 2007). Bearing witness to the art created by others, as we did on our final day of class, can promote a transformative process and participation in creative processes for the individual who has created the art or a creative expression piece. Art can challenge and transform peoples' worldviews because we can re-envision what we previously had known, thus leading to a transformation (Foels and Bethel 2018). On our final day of class, each student read their letter and shared what they selected for the creative aspect of the assignment. Hearing our peers' letters and being emotionally vulnerable with one another in a communal classroom space added to our experiences with transformative learning.



## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a pedagogical tool, letter writing is congruent with an anti-oppressive and transformative education. Transformation theory in adult education involves teaching learners to think critically about one's assumptions and perspectives and to develop reflective judgment in discourse regarding beliefs, values, feelings, and self-concept (Hoggan and Kloubert 2020). In this course, transformative learning strategies—such as critical questioning techniques and situational dilemmas to engage students in interactive, experiential, and reflexive class lessons—set the stage for the final assignment. Each class session should aim to include a combination of active learning strategies, a short lecture or didactic explanation of core concepts, and a discussion. Active learning opportunities to prepare students for self-expression and creative writing, which is necessary for meaningful letter writing, might involve activities such as simulations, games, and gallery walks of student art. These various learning strategies are also appropriate for graduate-level coursework because they foster higher-order thinking and skill development.

In previous decades, educational principles in social work promoted "safety" in the classroom to engage students in learning (Holley and Steiner 2005; Hyde and Ruth 2002). Creating a "safe space" that minimizes conflict or provides instructional strategies to "manage" conflict that may arise in the classroom is often recommended. These recommendations support the notion that classrooms can exist in a vacuum, free of societal forces. Critiques of the "safe space" metaphor indicate that it limits genuine dialogue, cross-cultural learning, and critical self-reflection (Arao and Clemens 2013; Redmond 2010). In its place, these pedagogical models call for instruction that moves beyond the false sense of security towards interactions that invite ambiguity, discomfort, and tension. Much of the scholarship has emphasized the role of instructors in managing and structuring conflict (Boysen 2012; Meyers 2003; Mishna and Bogo 2007). Research has overlooked how students contribute to

an educational exchange that fosters transformative learning. This chapter illustrates that setting expectations for students to engage with course content and each other through courageous vulnerability can help create a brave space for transformative learning.

Facilitating storytelling must include creating a space that allows students to share narratives equitably. Historically, sharing personal stories in classroom settings has often involved tokenizing students with marginalized racial identities (Razack 1998). Therefore, it is necessary for instructors to continually assess the power dynamics at play as students share their stories, narratives, or epistolary essays. Moreover, unraveling complex layers of identity and sharing narratives requires courage, vulnerability, and risk-taking. It is also essential to be transparent about the need for vulnerability and invite students to envision class as a "brave space" requiring engagement with conflict and accountability across group differences (Arao and Clemens 2013).

Transformative learning focuses on creating the foundational insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action in a democracy. Scholarship on transformative learning with adult learners suggests that transformative learning may also include change on a broader scale, such as social change (Jones 2015). Transformation theory purports that adult education must be dedicated to effecting social change and modifying oppressive practices and norms. Indeed, the epistolary essay enabled social work students to reflect on how they may have internalized oppressive cycles of socialization. Students were able to examine how this socialization might impact their practice with young people. Accordingly, as a transformative learning tool, letter writing enables adult learners to participate more fully and freely in reflective discourse and acquire a critical awareness of institutions and socioeconomic structures. Thus, instructors must engage in self-reflective work about their social position in society as it relates to the course content and an ongoing part of their pedagogical praxis. Otherwise, we run the risk of silencing student voices.



We see the role of the instructor not as imparting information to students but rather as a facilitator of experiential learning that surfaces students' tacit knowledge. This practice aligns with a critical race pedagogical approach to education that centers on the experience and cultural wealth of students of color (Aldana and Vazquez 2020; Delgado Bernal 2002; Yosso 2005). It also reflects the power of testimonio as a pedagogical tool for transformational and experiential learning (Albert and Couture 2014). Using storytelling and centering students' narratives helps disrupt what Paulo Freire (1970) refers to as the banking model of education.

## CONCLUSION

Lessons learned in transformative spaces are part of a lifelong journey of self-discovery and professional development. Striving for social justice requires learning the knowledge and skills necessary for working through the various kinds of power dynamics that arise from working in a diverse society. Transformative learning enables adult learners to engage in critical self-reflexivity about one's relationship to power (LeBaron 2002) to transform personal manifestations of internalized oppression. Thus, we must frame transformative learning as an opportunity to disrupt hegemonic ways of knowing and being.

The epistolary essay can be a literary and pedagogical tool that helps educators and students counter dominant narratives created by systemic oppression. Letter writing can be a private and public space for critically excavating our values and beliefs. Writing a reflexive letter can reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world we perceive and how we interpret it. Sharing our letter writing with others opens new opportunities for transforming what we know in relation to others.

EPISTOLARY ESSAYS PART I

## Student Letters on Childhood Resilience

All of us encounter various trials and unforeseen challenges throughout our life. During our formative years, societal expectations and structural barriers can test our capacity for resilience and shape the course of our future endeavors. Childhood resilience is a child's ability to adapt positively and cope with adversity, challenges, and trauma (Masten and Obradović 2008; Greene et al. 2004). In other words, it is the capacity to bounce back from difficult situations and thrive despite adverse circumstances or systemic oppression. This part of the book includes student letters that reflect different aspects of childhood resilience or instances when my students confronted adversities at a young age. Through five heartfelt epistolary essays from Taylor Hosea, Jennifer Bratton, Sara Ruth Robles, John Cruz, and Karis Wortham, we delve into the profound experiences that have molded their resilience and the wisdom they impart to their younger selves.



In her letter, "Dear Younger Self," Taylor Hosea eloquently employs the metaphor of a butterfly's transformation to reflect her journey of self-discovery. Her letter emphasizes the importance of trusting the growth process, resisting societal pressures, and embracing authenticity. Taylor's resilience shines through her vulnerability as she encourages her younger self to find courage and hope during life's metamorphic stages. "Dear Shy Girl" presents Karis Wortham's reflection on her shyness as a young Black girl. Her letter beautifully captures the essence of resilience in finding one's voice and embracing personal growth. Karis encourages her younger self to speak up, seek support, and never let her ideas and feelings go unnoticed, thus discovering the transformative power of one's agency. Both of their letters encourage embracing authenticity and finding one's voice.

"Birthday Girl" is a poignant letter in which Jennifer Bratton helps her younger self contextualize her family's struggles with addiction. Through personal reflection, Jennifer illustrates the influence of supportive relationships and resilient coping mechanisms on her journey as a teenage parent. Despite challenging circumstances, her resilience is evident in her ability to find strength in her family's support and learn from her past mistakes. Similarly, "Dear Younger Sara" reveals Sara Ruth Robles's heartfelt expression of pride and gratitude to her younger self for the resilience that guided her through life's challenges. Her letter celebrates the nurturing relationships, coping skills, and growth mindset that motivated her career in social work.

In "Past Me," John Cruz pens a candid and introspective letter to his former self, acknowledging the privilege that shaped his early life. Reflecting on the impact of personal choices and familial safety nets, he discusses how his experiences led him to pursue a career in social work to use his racial and class privilege to advocate for underserved communities. Through resilience, John learns the importance of empathy and vows to use his voice to make a positive impact. Collectively, these five letters illuminate the multifaceted nature of childhood resilience. Each student engaged in critical meaning-making through letter writing to articulate their inner strength, defying adversity with unwavering determination. These letters show the

power of supportive relationships, nurturing families, and the wisdom gained from facing life's trials.

Their letters underscore the significance of self-love, authenticity, and embracing uniqueness as potent tools for building resilience. These narratives remind us of the importance of designing coursework that allows learners to name their strengths and highlight the lasting impact of supportive environments and social factors that promote resilience. Students named nurturing relationships with caregivers, family, and peers essential to their resilience, as well as other protective factors such as resource access, stability, and a safe environment (Resnick 2000). Additionally, their epistolary essays speak to the pivotal role of understanding one's privilege and using it to advocate for marginalized communities, bringing positive change to the world.

Engaging in retrospective accounts or letter writings that reflect on the past, informed by current experiences, offers adult learners a powerful means to emotionally process and navigate current oppressive, discriminatory, or exclusionary experiences. This reflective practice allows individuals to draw connections between their past and present, fostering a deeper understanding of the impact of societal structures and empowering them to navigate such challenges with newfound insight and resilience. In what follows, the letters from Taylor, Jennifer, John, Sara, and Karis serve as a testament to the transformative power of childhood resilience and the unyielding potential of students of any age to overcome challenges, flourish, and aspire to change the world.



## DEAR YOUNGER SELF | *Taylor Hosea*

> "We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."
>
> —Maya Angelou

Dear younger self,

I am writing this letter many years from when you would even read this. Actually, now that I think about it, it's virtually impossible to write back to your past self, but quiet that overly analytical brain and humor me because these are things worth hearing. Butterflies have different stages in their life cycle. Although we see butterflies in their final stage, typically flying in all their beauty, the butterfly has not always been this way. It has undergone a transformation, just like you will, my dearest, younger self. You must trust this process at every stage, just like the caterpillar trusts that one day it will emerge from its chrysalis and be a butterfly.

At the stage of life when the butterfly is still a caterpillar, it is very vulnerable because of its inability to fly and its larva-like body. Much like a caterpillar when we were younger, we were more vulnerable—in every aspect of the word. But don't let harsh tongues and mean glares from the world stop you from moving past this stage of your transformation and into the next.

You will be told by people you care about, cartoons you watch, and storybooks that you read that you NEED to look a certain way, act a certain way, and be a certain way. But don't fall into these traps of socialization with your younger self. I know it's hard, but true happiness is found in being your most authentic self, so try to stay true to who you KNOW you are despite the world telling you to be someone different.

The next stage of life is when the caterpillar retreats into its chrysalis to transform into a butterfly. This stage of the butterfly's life is longer than the others because the butterfly has retreated into

its chrysalis, and the outer shell of its chrysalis hardens to protect the butterfly from predators while transforming.

Like the butterfly, your exterior will harden to protect you from others. Junior high and high school will harden your exterior as a source of protection—just like the butterfly's chrysalis has hardened. Although I understand you are doing everything possible to protect yourself, do not shut the world out during this time because although it can be harsh and scary, it is full of joy, kindness, and love.

The next stage of the butterfly's life is when the adult emerges fully transformed. This stage of the butterfly's life is much like the stage of life you are currently in as I, or we, write this letter. Through our experiences in life and our experiences in our MSW program, we are slowly emerging from our chrysalis as the beautiful butterfly.

*Figure 1. Original Acrylic Painting on Canvas of Butterflies, reproduced with permission from Taylor Hosea.*



Although we may not feel ready to flap our wings and let go of the branch just yet, I know we will someday get there. Courage and hope will get us there.

Younger self, please stop reading this letter for a second, pause, and hug yourself. While embracing yourself, know that you are worthy, and you are enough. Your body, mind, and soul are beautiful because they are unique, just like you, just like the butterfly. Life is a process of transforming our younger self, and just like the butterfly, you will also transform.

In self-love,
Taylor

## BIRTHDAY GIRL | *Jennifer Bratton*

Hello Jennifer,

It's your eighteenth birthday! You're about to finish your junior year of high school and be a senior next year. What a fantastic time this must be for you! I know you are still living with your grandmother. I hope Dad's addiction doesn't spoil your birthday; just have patience with him. He's doing the best he can. You will understand that one day. Addiction can destroy families, but you can start the healing process once you understand it from a social worker's perspective. Please find your neighborhood's nearest Al-Anon meeting when you get a chance. Start looking for a job, and please take school more seriously. I suggest you talk to your guidance counselor and ask for help. You should get more involved in leadership at school; you're a great leader who loves talking to others. Use your gifts! I know you have always wanted to be a writer. Get a notebook and start journaling; this can help you express the feelings that you keep bottled up.

Hey, I need you to do me a favor. Start loving yourself, look in the mirror daily, and tell yourself something good about yourself.

You must build up your confidence and focus on your strengths. You are amazing, smart, beautiful, and full of life. I need you to know that. One day, you'll need to show your kids how to love themselves, which starts with you. Yes, Jennifer, one day you're going to have kids. Just try your best not to have them right now. You have many goals you want to accomplish, and having kids will slow you down. Make sure you keep reading. You'll read a lot in college, trust me. Another thing is don't be afraid to take chances. Get out of your comfort zone.

Make sure you give your Grandma Ola a big hug, and spend more time with her. Reach out to Grandma Lillian in Louisiana, try to get out there, and see her often. Your grandmothers can give you much of our family history that you'll need later when assessing your life. Stop being mad at your mother. She's doing the best she can, too. Someday, you'll be married, and the phrase "for better or for worse" will have a new meaning for you. Try to remember that your parents are people too. They make mistakes. Love them anyway.

Go to college! One day, you'll realize that you love helping others and chase that passion daily. Feel free to leave South Central. It will always be your home. Travel the world and go places you've always dreamed of. Stop thinking you're an outsider and embrace your friends; they love you. Spend more time with your baby brother. He idolizes you and watches everything you do. Learn to model positive behavior. It will help him out later in life.

This part may be difficult for you to read, but I promise you'll appreciate my advice. When you get older, spend as much time as you can with your mother and father. Take them out, love on them, and learn to appreciate them. They have made sacrifices for you, and they have always taken care of you. They won't be here one day, and you will miss them endlessly. Watch out for your brother Kenny. Make sure he takes care of himself. When you both are older, he'll need you.

When you start looking for a husband, find someone who looks at you like you're the most amazing thing in the world. You deserve the love you've always dreamed of, and if you listen to me, you'll be



healthy, healed, and happy. Never forget how wonderful you are, Jennifer, never.

## DEAR YOUNGER SARA | *Sara Ruth Robles*

Dear younger Sara,

As I write you this letter, I am honored to share all the milestones you will accomplish in your life, the bravery you hold within your soul, and the resilience that shines bright through your spirit. I hope you feel my love and strength wrapped around this letter as you read this. I am so proud of the woman I have become, and I owe a lot to you and the soul that never stopped believing. You were born with a gift to brighten a room and spread love to individuals who need it most. As a little girl, you went from wanting to be a history teacher, to a doctor, or just helping others in general, but little did you know where that determination will get you in the future. The opportunities you will experience are precious chapters of your life that should not be taken for granted. I write this because I did. You will reflect on these experiences and assess how they made you who you are today. Our parents will work endlessly to provide you with experiences full of growth and will never leave your side. Thank them because they are why I am at this point in my life today.

Our father always told us to "Leave it on the floor" and "Live life with no regrets," but I hope this motto continues to push you to leave your mark in this world. The world can be scary and dark, but I promise you that your voice will empower others to find their resilience, but most importantly, it will empower you. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future." Your power to change this world goes beyond the stars and the moon. As you grow older, you will take your place in history to be the change agent this world needs. Your voice will carry across the globe, your

presence will be welcomed at the table, and your knowledge will benefit communities.

I cannot lie. Things will be hard, and you will doubt yourself along the way, but it is important always to remember where your roots are planted. You are going to fall and fight, you are going to question every decision you make, and you will question those around you, but never forget the beauty of this world. The long line of ancestors who fought hard to get you to where you are today. Make them proud! The village of people who will enter your life at different stages to nurture your soul, make them proud. Your parents, who have demonstrated endless love, make them proud. Your grandparents, who did everything they could to enrich your life, make them proud. Be proud of the young girl you are and the presence you hold. Be proud of the decisions you make and the love you share. Be proud of your roots and the foundation it is seeded upon. Be proud of the feet that march you toward your destination. Be proud of the heart that burns deep in your soul. Be proud of the hands that will create change and the eyes that see the grace in life. Be proud of the voice that carries across rooms. Be proud of yourself.

I want you to know that I am extremely proud of you, little Sara. That bright light never stopped, and the soul determined to make a change continued to do so. We did it, and I write this with every amount of love that runs deep within my veins. You are on the right path, and this world is going to need you. Stay grounded and ask for help. I promise you that my spirit will guide you along the way. You are meant to be here. Go forth with steadfast love and compassion, hold your head high, and move mountains.

With love and gratitude,

Future Sara Ruth Robles



## **PAST ME** | *John Cruz*

Dear past me,

If I were to visit you in a time machine, you would be shocked to see where you are currently. You have just received a master's degree in social work. This would have blown your mind. You would not understand why I chose to pursue a social work degree. However, you may find it surprising that you were the reason I chose this field.

I know you were not a bad kid—although you made stupid choices, were easily influenced by your peers, were immature for your age, and felt insecure. However, you need to understand how lucky you were. Because of your privilege, you avoided many adverse incidents other kids like yourself may have encountered. You don't know what that term means, so let me explain it. Privilege is a unique unearned advantage over other groups of people.

You had one of the most supportive families a youth could ever want. They gave you a voice when deciding important events in your life. Many parents did not provide other adolescents a role in making their own decisions. Let me give you an example. Remember when the dentist always referred you to the orthodontist and strongly recommended that you get braces? Many parents would force their kids to get braces. However, your parents did not force you. They talked to you about the issue and gave you a choice. Although you would regret not getting braces later in life, they respected your decision and gave you a voice. They listened to your voice and let you make your own decisions. Not all youth are lucky enough to have a say in making decisions.

Many adolescents who come from different backgrounds than you do not have the same luxuries you do. Other youths would have been very thankful to be in your position. While other adolescents had to worry about being treated fairly in the community, policies that may negatively affect them, and lack of resources, you were ungrateful for all your privilege. You lived in a selfish bubble and did not think about others' suffering. You had no interest in using your privilege to help advocate for underserved communities of color.

I wish I could explain that lifting weights and being born into privilege does not make you badass. However, I know you will not listen to anyone but yourself, and you will learn the difficult way. On May 16, 2009, your life will change forever. This was the night you decided to drive under the influence and wreck your car. The artificial veil of toughness dropped instantly after you crashed your car that night. You cried all weekend uncontrollably, and the weekend you spent in city jail felt like an eternity.

I know this experience was traumatizing for you, but it could have been worse. What would happen if you did not have as much privilege and had to endure that situation? If your skin color was darker, it was more likely that you could have worried about suffering physical harm from the police. If you did not belong to a family with a higher socioeconomic status, your chances of being arrested again would have increased. This experience taught you that you were not invincible. Although you were still a few years away from deciding to pursue a career in social work, this negative incident pushed you in the right direction to becoming a better human being.

Sincerely,

Present me

## DEAR SHY GIRL | *Karis Wortham*

Dear shy girl,

I'm so glad you're reading this! I know there are times when you question yourself. You start to feel like something is missing or wrong with you. You are so quiet, but you sit back and notice everything. If you ever think to yourself: Does anybody see me? What is the point of speaking? Why would anyone listen to a little kid like me? I want you to know, shy girl, that I see you and that there is power in your words. Your voice matters and is important in this world. Don't let



anyone tell you otherwise. When girls like you can speak their truth, things in this world will change. This is the truth—I promise you.

I know you probably think what I'm saying is crazy but listen to these words: Your youthful voice today is special. Right now, you get to see the world with fresh eyes. The world's negativity and hate have not jaded you yet. You have yet to be introduced to the stress of being an adult. Enjoy being young—you may not see it yet, but it's a gift. I know you have hope and a vision for the future, not just for yourself but for the people around you.

Just do not stop speaking up for what you believe in!

You have ideas on how you want to feel seen, heard, and equal. Don't let those ideas go by the wayside. Some might say you are just a child and cannot make your own choices. Fight that. Fight with everything you can to make sure your voice is heard.

Shy girl, do not keep these things inside of you!


*Figure 2. Childhood-Self with Elementary School Teacher, reproduced with permission from Karis Wortham.*

If you keep those feelings inside, they will eat you up inside. If you worry about needing to know more, do some research. If you are worried that you are the only one feeling this way, start asking your peers. Maybe they're shy like you. If you can't remember it all, start writing these things down. Do not forget how you and your peers feel in these moments. You will look back and be so glad that you did! You'll make an impact, shy girl. Just remember to keep trying. Take a deep breath. You got this.

From,

A former shy girl

EPISTOLARY ESSAYS PART II

## Student Letters on Generational Healing

Throughout history, marginalized communities have faced trauma, adversity, and systemic oppression, leaving enduring imprints to this day. Growing research informs us of how trauma can be passed down intergenerationally through epigenetics, where environmental influences can modify gene expression and affect future generations' mental and physical well-being (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018). However, there is also potential for resilience and healing that transcends time and place. In professional training programs, such as in social work and education, writing and storytelling can serve as a pedagogy of care that focuses on wellness, healing, and fostering courageous conversations (Varga-Dobai 2023). Thus, our livelihoods are interwoven with our ancestors', creating an intricate web of interconnected stories. This section showcases epistolary es-

says that reflect elements of intergenerational healing from Jasmine Carrillo, Julia Elise Childs-Heyl, Adriana Ocampo Torres, Jasmin Pruitt, Adriana Barba, Jocelyn Milena Ibarra, and Pamela Valdez. These letters explore how historical trauma, such as colonization, slavery, and forced migration, can shape the collective experiences of communities and their descendants. Through the letter-writing process, students practice reflexivity to transform memories of familial wounds of the past into sources of strength and growth across generations.

Letters looking back one or two generations emphasize the need to confront the legacies of past injustices and foster restoration and transformation processes within families and communities. For instance, Jasmine Carrillo's letter, "Papi and Grandma," reflects on the complexities of ethnic-racial identity development and the impact of cultural assimilation on her family's journey in the United States. Through reexamining her grandparents' experiences as immigrants, Jasmine finds healing and a sense of purpose in advocating for marginalized communities. Likewise, in "Dear Abuelito Ruben," Adriana Barba writes to her late grandfather, contemplating the privilege of passing as a White man while acknowledging his systemic struggles as a Mexican migrant worker. She confronts the complexities of racial identity within Latinidad and the responsibility to dismantle racially oppressive systems for future generations.

Julia Elise Childs-Heyl's poignant letter, "Dear Dad," addresses her deceased father, his experiences with anti-blackness, and their shared intergenerational commitment to racial justice. She explores the significance of race in her interracial family's history in shaping her passion for creating a more equitable and just world. In contrast, Jocelyn Milena Ibarra's letter, "To My Familia Querida," captures the tension between her family's expectations, patriarchal gender norms, and her pursuit of justice and equality. She reflects on the significance of obtaining her master's degree and how education can be a potent tool to empower women of color.

Letters to future generations speak to the importance of continuing a legacy of empowerment and pursuit of justice. In a letter to her newborn niece, "Who Will You Be?" Adriana Ocampo Torres explores her hopes for the next generation of women in her family. Adriana emphasizes the importance of self-love, advocacy, and dismantling oppressive systems such as racism and sexism to create a better future for all. Similarly, Pamela Valdez's moving letter, "Mi Niña," addresses her unknown future descendant, expressing the need for an intergenerational journey of healing and self-love. She examines the impact of systemic oppression and the importance of raising her voice against injustice for the well-being of future generations. In the letter "Dear Andrew," Jasmin Pruitt expresses her deep love and dedication to her son. She acknowledges the challenges he may face due to his skin color and encourages him to remember his worth, greatness, and the rich legacy of his Black ancestors. Jasmin urges Andrew to advocate for himself and others in the fight for equity and racial justice, emphasizing the importance of standing up for what is right and continuing the fight for a better future.

In these letters, we witness a profound exploration of how systemic racism and historical injustices have deeply affected these students and their families. They highlight how historical injustices, systemic oppression, and family experiences intertwine to influence the paths taken by these individuals. More importantly, the letters reveal how inherited trauma and resilience intersect to shape the participants' identities and values, motivating them to challenge the status quo and advocate for change. Through their stories, we witness the transformative power of healing as these students strive to imagine a world where future generations can thrive unburdened by the traumas of the past. Intergenerational healing emerges as a beacon of hope, a bridge connecting the present to a more just society.

## PAPI AND GRANDMA | *Jasmine Carrillo*

Dear *Papi* [Dad] and Grandma,

It's Jasmine. Your granddaughter, whom you say is loud and "always talking back." The one you call *mala* [bad] and *malcriada* [misbehaved]. Usually, you wrap up comments like this with the advice I didn't necessarily ask you to offer me. You tell me that you still love me regardless of my loudmouth. We have an interesting relationship because you did not always talk to me this way. I have amazing childhood memories with you both. When I think of my childhood, I always think of Papi and Grandma, my dad's parents. However, I don't think of my mom's parents, *mi Abuelito y Abuelita* [grandfather and grandmother]. As a matter of fact, I don't have very many memories with my mom's side of the family, a whole half of me.

Do you remember when I started "talking back"? When I consistently started getting into trouble in high school? Your perfect granddaughter was hanging out with who you called "troublemakers." My parents would vent to you about the daily battles with me. This time in my life is critical. I was in the middle of battling with my identity and self-discovery. A significant issue at this time was my Latinidad. I was not "Latina enough" for my friends who looked like me. My Spanish was broken, but my English was perfect. My friends called me "whitewashed" and wondered why I knew more about English music than Spanish music. So, what's the problem, right? The problem was that a significant part of my identity was blurred. What does this have to do with you? Let's take this back to when you migrated from Mexico to the United States. You both arrived in Los Angeles during the late 1960s, right before the start of the Chicano movement. Chicanos were finally beginning to speak out against the injustices they were facing, and those in power were not too happy about that. Although you two had not met yet, you both were experiencing similar struggles with racism. You both got caught in the middle of this empowering yet frightening historical moment as you were trying to find this so-called "American dream."



How do I know about this history? Well, you know that minor in Chicano studies I got. This is how I learned about our history because these are conversations you never had with me. My fascination with Chicano history and social justice grew as I continued my education. These things validated my experience and filled the gaps in my identity. I started to hang out with my mom's family more often, dramatically improving my Spanish and understanding of Mexican culture. During this time, I was pretty upset with you both. I wondered why you took my culture away from me and why I needed to struggle with my Latinidad before hearing about your immigration stories. I also wondered why you told my dad not to let me interact too much with my mom's family. The more I read and studied, the more I understood your experience. I now realize that assimilation into American culture stripped you both away from your Mexican culture. Your assimilation was a means of survival in the United States. It wasn't a personal attack on me or our Mexican culture; you both did the best you could with what you had. You were both coming to the United States trying to learn English and make a living in the middle of a social movement that you did not completely understand. My resentment for you both changed to gratitude. My education allowed me to validate your experience and my experience. Your means of survival tuned into my master's degree. Your crossing of the southern border and struggle for American citizenship led to the privileges I have today. Now, I plan to utilize my privileges to give back to you and others. My current fight is to put culture back into our stories and support people of color who have also lost so much at the hands of oppression. This loud, passionate, and assertive granddaughter of yours desires to continue your fight without letting go of the generations of resiliency in our blood. Your experiences are valid and important.

Your sacrifices have given me a purpose in life, so I cannot thank you enough. More importantly, when I look back at my life, I have memories from both sets of grandparents contributing to my purpose and fueling my passion.

*Con mucho amor* [with lots of love], Jasmine

## DEAR DAD | *Julia Elise Childs-Heyl*

Dear Dad,

I'm writing to fill you in on some things that have been on my mind in the seven years since you left the earth. The last time we spoke in the physical, Obama was president. Donald Trump was still considered some rogue reality television star. Kim Kardashian wasn't bailing people out of jail. Oh, and I certainly wasn't a social worker. I am not sure what you would recognize about the world we live in today, but then again, I'm not sure what I would recognize about the world we were living in when you passed.

Dad, what I have thought about endlessly is this ancestral commitment to what is right and what is just. I suppose this is what academics call social justice. That was always the Childs family's way, even with our collective transgressions. Real, recognize real! There are a lot of skeletons in our bloodline, but we never once lied or hid them. Though you made plenty of mistakes that caused harm, you never once pretended you did not. At times, it feels that life with an ancestral connection is a life of atoning for what happened in the previous lifetime. I didn't imagine becoming a social worker the last time we sat together, Dad. But, after seeing brothers who looked just like you on Skid Row, my awareness regarding the connectivity of the human experience expanded.

What if you had worked with an impactful social worker the first time you went to jail? Or after your first arrest? Would that have made you a more present father? A man who was gentle, who mastered the ability to transmute his trauma into love? Would you've been able to walk me down the aisle? I think about these questions sometimes, on quiet nights when I wish I could call you. I may never know the answers. Such uncertainty has taught me to live in the solution. The solution to what, you ask. I suppose it's anti-blackness. Isn't that at the root of all evil in our society? It is what had your grandmother in shackles, your grandfather silent and brooding after years stolen by the legacy of slavery. It is what shot Ahmaud Arbery dead by white supremacists in Georgia yesterday (February 23, 2020). It is woven into the fabric of our nation, but you know that better than me.



Dad, a big part of living in the solution begins with me. This year was difficult for my mental health, but you already know that. I talked about it with you plenty. I felt so unprepared for what came my way. To be honest, I still do feel so. This commitment to what is right and what is just isn't about financial gain or a career path. It is an essential element of my being that I am continually in service to. Additionally, it is caring for myself, first and foremost. In practice, this has meant I didn't get to do things the way I necessarily wanted to. I didn't always show up in the ways I hoped to. I suppose the point is that I did it anyway, even when it looked messy and felt uncomfortable. In turn, this is the point of being in service to what is just and right for all people. It is showing up and fumbling, showing up and struggling, it is showing up, regardless.

I learned to show up, no matter what, from you. It was hard answering the phone call that your health had unexpectedly declined. I didn't want to show up. I didn't want to show up because I knew showing up meant losing you. I did it anyway. Thank God I did because you passed two hours after I left the hospital. This is to say, sometimes we show up, and we may lose. We may lose something near and dear to our hearts that can never be replaced. Yet, we also may gain something we never expected, something infinite and timeless, the energy that serves as a building block to the ultimate path. Ancestral wisdom, hope, and an opportunity to be a part of a legacy. Just like that, the marathon continues.

I love you infinitely,

Julia

## WHO WILL YOU BE? | *Adriana Ocampo Torres*

Dear *sobrina* [niece],

I have many questions about your future as I hold you in my arms. Who will you be? What great things are in store for you? What hardship will come your way? How will you change the world? How will this world change you? What can I do to protect your spirit?

I will have to learn that I can't fight your battles or learn your lessons for you. I need to remember that you have lessons to teach me, too. You look at the world with wonder that I once had and have lost. Everything you see is a new adventure. I must honor your journey the way your grandma has done for me.

Tu abuela has taught me to dream big dreams, impossible *sueños* [dreams]. She has trusted that I will return to tell the *cuentos* [stories] after every grand adventure. Because of tu abuela, I have known freedom and dreamt *sueños mas grandes* than your *abuelita* [grandmother] could have ever imagined. Your grandma also likes to see the world through my eyes and adventures. I want you to know *libertad* [liberty] but worry about the future. By now, I have probably bored you with my stories of the global pandemic and how the whole world came to a complete stop. I am still trying to make sense of it because we lost so much. I want you to know the love, kindness, and laughter I have experienced even during this idle and disorienting time.

I will teach you to love and be kind unconditionally and never let anyone take you for granted. Do not dim your light to make others comfortable because you will shine bright, *corazón* [heart]. I hope that within you lies the fire and strength of all the women before us. The women did not let the impossible stop them from dreaming big. Who chose to see beyond the limitations of this tumultuous, ever-changing world and the naysayers. As Kendrick Lamar says, "I got royalty in my DNA," and so you do you, *sobrina*.

*Con amor y esperanza* [With love and hope],

*Tu tía* [your aunt] Adriana



## DEAR ANDREW | *Jasmin Pruitt*

Dear Andrew,

I am dedicating this letter to you. Having you as a son has brought so much purpose into my life, and I am eternally grateful to be your mother. You are beautiful, inside and out, intelligent, extremely funny. You possess such an infectious smile and laugh, and love to cuddle. As your mother, I want the absolute best for you. Those who know you love you, but unfortunately, not everyone will see you how I see you. Some will be threatened and judge you unfairly because of your skin color. I want you to know that your skin does not define you. It saddens me that boys and girls who look like you are often treated unjustly.

Know that you are so much more than the labels people attempt to place on you. You come from kings, queens, inventors, creatives, activists, and social change agents. Always remember that your greatness can never be contained. Even though people will mistreat you because of their ignorance and fear, I want you always to treat yourself and those you encounter with dignity and respect. Remember to treat others how you would like to be treated, regardless of race, class, sexual identity/orientation, religion, or physical ability. No matter the differences between you and others, we are all part of the human race and deserve to be treated humanely. I am not suggesting that you allow people to mistreat you. I want you to advocate not only for yourself but others. It is our responsibility to address inequity for ourselves and others, for we are all connected.

I will never fully understand what it means to be a Black male, but I will always fight for what is just for you and those oppressed and marginalized. The fight for equity and equality is a long, ongoing one, faced with many barriers. Never falter when it comes to doing what is right. Always speak up whether you are in a place of power or when being oppressed. Remember your greatness and that you have a purpose. So many before us have fought for our current victories and privileges.

We must continue the fight for a better future for all.

I love you immensely,
Jasmin Pruitt (aka your mommy)

## DEAR ABUELITO RUBEN | *Adriana Barba*

Dear *Abuelito* [Grandfather] Ruben,

I've been thinking about you a lot. I never met you, but all the older *primos y primas* [cousins] say you were really sweet. They say you bought a dog for everyone to play with and that you would buy everyone their favorite cereal. That's like seven different types of cereal! Anyway, you seem like a good *abuelo* [grandfather] to have. Unfortunately, you died four years before I was born. I know you were a Bracero, part of the largest migrant labor programs in United States (US) history. It's amazing to think of how that one government policy between the US and Mexico changed the trajectory of our lives. Without it, my mother wouldn't be *en este lado* [on this side of the US-Mexico border], without her residency card, facilitated by you, and my father wouldn't be in the country either. So, my existence is connected to the signature you put down on that contract to move from Jalisco to the US.

I wonder about your experience working in the fields and how you built a life here. How did you manage to sign a mortgage and apply for residency status for your nine children? Did you speak English well? Did someone help you? How did you navigate this strange place? But then I remembered your photos. You were a tall, blue-eyed, blond, European-looking man. In this country, with power connected to Whiteness, coincidentally, you had a leg up on your compadres. During Operation Wetback, those years of raids and mass deportations (1943-1954), were you overlooked? Did they assume you were one of the *jefes* [bosses]? Did this save you from the



effects of DDT raining on your overworked shoulders?[1] No, because I could've had this conversation with you in person today instead of you dying a painful death from stomach cancer years ago. It could not save you because race is made up.

You see, abuelito, there are systems put in place here, and we have been fortunate at times to align with what is thought to be ideal in this country. It pains me to say that we are fortunate because we did not choose this, just as others do not choose to be hurt by these systems. Remember my *hermana* [sister] Angelita, named after your mother? She was undocumented for the first twelve years of her life until Reagan granted her "amnesty." Another signature guiding the fate of our family, a flick of a pen made her a valid person in the United States instead of an "alien." Before that, she was scared, but she knew from a young age how perceived Whiteness granted safety versus violence in this country, her blue-green eyes and milky skin an invisible armor. She did not stick out like others from her birthplace; all she had to do was not speak, and everything would be fine. If she knew this as a child, did you as a full-grown man? Did you think this place was fair? If I tried to make you conscious of these systems, would you feel the same urgency I feel to dismantle them? Or would you call me *malagradecida* [ungrateful] if I rejected what helped our family all these years? I hope you wouldn't call me ungrateful, but *perdóname* [forgive me], I don't think I'd care if you did, because it isn't *justo* [socially just] that all people don't have access to things that can build a prosperous life. Access should not rely on coincidence. I want to think that you would agree.

I know you worked hard and took an opportunity that ultimately placed me here . . . now. Your decision did not go in vain. I am the first person to earn a graduate degree on both your and my father's sides of my family, *y te doy gracias* [and I thank you]. My education brought awareness that the signature on your labor contract and hard work is not all that helped you succeed. I see the power behind a

1 DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) was a synthetic chemical used as insecticide banned in the US in 1972 because of its harmful environmental impact (US Environmental Protection Agency 2024).

signature on a piece of legislation because our family's path has been shifted by policies, as well as the systems of oppression they can reinforce. With awareness comes responsabilidad, and that responsibility is being conscious of who does and doesn't benefit from society, sharing that consciousness with others, and working towards a better future *para todos* [for all].

*Con mucho amor* [With lots of love],
*Tu nieta* [your granddaughter] Adriana

## TO MY FAMILIA QUERIDA | *Jocelyn Milena Ibarra*

To my familia querida [beloved family],

My two-year journey in obtaining my MSW is coming to an end. Similarly to the other accomplishments before this one, I want to thank you. The ever-driving force behind me. The familial sacrifices to get me to a "better place" than where you were/are. If you had asked me at the beginning of this journey who this degree was for, I would frequently say it is a 60/40 divide between myself and you, mi familia. I am the eldest daughter, a first-generation graduate student, and the only one of the fifteen nietos [grandchildren] to pursue a graduate degree. The "golden goose" of the family, as my *primos* [cousins] like to say. A weight of responsibility I feel often. Though I may outwardly speak of the support you have given me, it is time to bring to light the other side of this coin. Your support comes with the idea that I will settle into a job, work in institutions where I must tiptoe around respectability politics, dress in a certain way, and tone down my individuality to cater to these systems, to be content that I am in a better position. I know survival has been our primary focus, and I was pushed to school for the benefits of it, not necessarily to make me better informed.

So yes, I have gained knowledge, and I now have opportunities to get a better job that can make me financially stable. However, hear



me out. It should not have taken three generations of us assimilating to American society to produce one of me. We were sold a lie. I know this is not what you were expecting; this is the other side of my "new" found knowledge. My ever-growing "opinions," critiques of almost every institution, and the many familial arguments because I am no longer silent. I also understand that much of your frustration with me comes from fear and misunderstanding.

I don't know how to tell you that your efforts to move us out of "not the best" areas have only contributed to our communities' gentrification. I want to occupy space in my hometown, not be forced away from it. Or let you know that when you decided to have me focus on speaking English, we were catering to a system of white supremacy that saw our Spanish tongue as less valuable. So many of the ways you have socialized me to navigate American society are also oppressing us. Socialization and assimilation in these ways cater to dominant systems of power. I am now directly trying to work against these systems of oppression for myself and others. I am telling you now because this may not look like how you envisioned my work and may not bring the stability you think it should. My efforts will be used to help create spaces for those who may not have any. For Black, Indigenous, people of color, queer individuals, disabled individuals, all generations, and all marginalized communities that are often overlooked. I fight for you, too—mi familia—to have opportunities to heal and be in spaces where you feel comfortable. I will help empower others and work on changing/dismantling systems that do not put us, our communities, and our lives first. While this degree may be something for you and me to celebrate, it represents much more. The next steps in my journey, and in my work, is to manifest the world I want to see.

*Con todo mi amor* [With all of my love],
Your *poderosa* (powerful) Jocelyn Ibarra

## MI NIÑA | *Pamela Valdez*

*Mi niña* [My girl],

*Hola mi niña, como estas?* [Hi, my girl, how are you?] I hope today you're well. I know you don't know me, and I don't know you, but I'll tell you all I do. I do it for you. I am a Latina obtaining my master's and the feminist sheep of the family. I hope more Hispanic women can more equitably receive access to higher education in your day. For now, I will tell you that obtaining my master's degree is something my grandmother probably wouldn't have ever dreamed of achieving.

To paint a picture, I took a whole generation and migration from my parents to be here. My mother became pregnant, had to drop out of law school in Mexico, and was pushed to marry my father to cover the slip. Because getting pregnant out of wedlock was looked down upon in her time. She had to give up higher education to survive because having an abortion was more shameful. To top it off, they came here with nothing and gave me all they could. In the community I grew up in and compared to my ancestors, I am in a position of power that many women could only dream of, even today. You see, there is great importance in obtaining higher education. For low-income immigrant communities, it is the ultimate way out of poverty. As a woman of color, earning an advanced degree means I can self-sustain myself and my children and not depend on my husband to provide for me. That is the reason many women before me stayed in abusive relationships. My parents always told me, "Estudia para que llegues hacer alguien un dia," or study so that you can become somebody one day. Obtaining a master's degree is a big deal for a woman of color. Not too long ago, the percentage of Latinas earning a master's degree was around seven percent of degree recipients. I hope that in your time, that percentage is much higher. Obtaining my master's has given me status and opportunities. But I recognize that this is not enough because boundaries will always exist for people of color. I'm sure this will be basic when you're a young *mujer* [woman]. As a Latina, I know two main systemic struggles



affect me. You see, I'm not only bound by sexism, but racism is also alive and thriving in my times. Racism continues to live through systematic oppression where brown communities don't receive the same aid and quality of treatment in schools, hospitals, infrastructure, opportunities, etc. Racism exists, and currently, laws are not applied the same across different races. Racism has led us to idealize whiteness and hate our brown skin and culture. I will tell you, though, that your brown skin is beautiful. One privilege I have is to have been born here. I never have to worry that my family will be separated because of deportation. How are immigrants treated in your time? Are we more welcoming to them? Or are we still traumatizing children by separating their families at the border for wanting a better life? I hope that I have worked hard enough that brown children don't have to worry about being separated from their families and can be happy.

It is for you, mi niña, that my mother and I have engaged in the process of healing our inner wounds. I do it for you, so you don't have to wait 56 and 28 years to start loving yourself. So that family and societal patterns where women are oppressed are broken. I'll tell you one thing: you come from powerful, resilient women who have endured pain, but I want you to know that you're not only strong by the amount of pain you can endure and how many insults you can take. Those patterns end with me, so you don't have to question your self-worth. So that, unlike the women before me, you can raise your voice confidently to the injustices of life. *Grita, mija*! [Scream, my child!] And don't ever let anyone tell you your voice doesn't matter! I will dedicate my life and profession so that women and children are heard and protected. So that brown children don't have to endure violence in their homes and in the community. I wonder does violence against women still occur? I hope that better laws that protect women will exist by your time. I hope people of color are thriving. Love yourself, and always remember that the one person you'll always have is yourself. Remember, *que eres fuerte, capaz, y chingona*! [you are strong, capable, and badass].

Your great-great-great-grandmother,
Pamela Valdez

EPISTOLARY ESSAYS PART III

## Student Letters on Envisioning Resistance

Academic and public scholars have written about the power of collective resistance against interconnected oppressive systems. Resistance involves envisioning a world where all individuals can thrive, unburdened by racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression. People and communities seeking to challenge the status quo have employed various peaceful strategies of resistance, such as educational interventions that reduce prejudice, policy advocacy, healing justice, and grassroots activism (Dornschneider 2023). These strategies encompass a wide range of creative and tenacious actions that strive to dismantle deeply entrenched forms of discrimination and inequality. In this final collection of epistolary essays, we delve into the inspiring and transformative letters written by five visionary students—Zachary Alvarado, Jonathan Farrell, Haiza Martinez, Stephany Ramos, and Jeralyn Bolanos—who encourage us to dismantle oppressive structures and pave the way for a more just future.



These letters shed light on the intersecting and systemic nature of oppression, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing the interconnectedness of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Their letters highlight that oppressive systems are not isolated but rather profoundly woven into the fabric of society, calling for intersectional approaches to resistance. In his poignant letter, Zachary Alvarado addresses urban youth who, like himself, have experienced the challenges and traumas of growing up in hypersegregated and underserved neighborhoods. He shares his experiences with police brutality and the lack of educational support in his local school system. Zachary's letter emphasizes the importance of rising above one's environment, pursuing higher education, advocating for the community, and guiding others facing similar struggles. Jonathan Farrell's letter, "Dear Fellow Humxns," emphasizes the importance of embracing change, understanding one another through active listening and intersectional awareness, and finding joy even in moments of crisis. With a message of encouragement and gratitude, Jon urges us to keep going and continue making a difference in the world.

Scholars have also highlighted the transformative role of love in resistance to oppression. They argue that love, when viewed as a radical act, can be a powerful force for challenging oppressive systems. Love in this context involves self-love, collective care, and compassion, which can foster resilience, solidarity, and a sense of interconnectedness, ultimately inspiring individuals and communities to challenge injustice and envision a more just and equitable society. In "Dearest April," Haiza Martinez passionately writes about the significant impact April, her young niece, has had on their family. Haiza encourages April to use her voice to stand up for justice, lead with love, and embrace her authenticity, emphasizing the importance of self-love and the strength that comes from being true to oneself.

Similarly, Stephany Ramos talks about the role of love in her vision for the future. In a letter, "Hello Amor," addressed to a future descendant, she expresses her hopes for a world where love and acceptance prevail, regardless of one's sexual orientation or identity. She reflects on the progress made in her time and the fight for the right

to love freely, while acknowledging the ongoing discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community. In her letter, Stephany envisions a world where equity and inclusion are paramount, and she encourages her future descendant to be a change agent for a brighter and more accepting tomorrow. Jeralyn Bolanos writes to her future great-grandchild to pass down a legacy of strength, resilience, and self-love. She reflects on her journey of breaking generational trauma and fighting for justice, urging her descendant to continue the battle against oppression. Jeralyn shares "self-love recipes" to use as forms of self-care during challenging times.

These five letters share a profound commitment to reclaiming agency and challenging oppressive systems through solidarity. They underscore the importance of intersectionality in understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of oppression. The letters reveal how envisioning resistance involves a journey of self-discovery, healing, and empowerment, catalyzing collective action and social transformation. As we immerse ourselves in their narratives, we witness a shared vision of liberation, justice, and equity. Their letters inspire us to continue the legacy of resistance, paving the way for a more compassionate, inclusive, and equitable world for future generations.



## DEAR URBAN YOUTH | *Zachary Alvarado*

Dear urban youth,

I am writing this letter to state your experiences are not isolated. I, much like you, was raised in a dysfunctional household in a marginalized community. Where police presence was felt every day, the echoes of pops were often confused for fireworks or gunshots, and the bell rings of *eloteros* [street corn vendors] and Vicente Fernandez were part of the ambiance of the community. I was there; this is what it was and what it is. I still remember what it was like the first time I witnessed police storm into households and destroy the tranquility of a home. I vividly feel my teachers' resentment and disregard for my education and the impression it left on me. I felt the pain of seeing my close friends fall into gang life or shoot up heroin in a parked car on the outskirts of the housing projects. At the time, these things felt normal because racism and oppression are ordinary. It is a part of every facet of society. Therefore, I thought everyone experienced these issues, but they don't! Those who can speak on their experiences have often been silenced by life.

I write to convey to you that the feeling of conflicted emotion that sits in your stomach is valid and real. Our people should not have to go through these ailments. This is where my first experience with social justice began, with the peace officers. Many close friends and family members were of Mexican descent and often did not have citizenship. Due to their immigration status and because the neighborhood was considered a crime haven, police officers broke into homes, often with no warrants. I remember the feeling of hating them and how they treated my friends and me. I had one officer tell me, "We're the good guys," as they pulled my friends forcibly out of the home they lived in. I remember hating them and wanting to fight back, but I quickly learned you don't fight the police. You hold them accountable.

I speak to you from a third generation Mexican American experience navigating through the LAUSD [Los Angeles United School District] school system. My father and mother wanted the best

education for me, but somebody should have communicated that to my teachers. They treated me as if I would fail or if I could not grasp the complex concepts of Algebra I. They quickly placed me in remedial courses and dedicated their full time and effort to the students enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Education program (GATE). The rest of my peers and I were left to fend for ourselves. Many of us resigned our aspirations to the belief that college and higher education were not in our future. On the other hand, I refused the pathological assumptions made about us and chose to stay after school, stay in lunch during tutoring hours, and push to prove my teachers wrong. That my education did matter and that I was not a lost cause.

Speaking from the perspective of my friends, I remember a discussion I had with the same friend who shot up heroin in that parked car about a decade ago. He shared with me, "I have nothing going for me. I have felonies, so getting a job is out of the question. My family views me as useless, and the homies give me burners [guns that have homicides on them] to put in work because that's my contribution. I have nothing going for me, and this needle is the only thing that gives me peace."

I recall all these scenarios and remember feeling perplexed, disturbed, bitter, and angry. I was angry at myself for not being able to help my community, but I was also furious with how my community was being treated. These feelings still burn inside me as if I were in that same environment just yesterday. If you can relate to what I wrote, you may also have these same challenges and feelings. But I leave you with these lasting thoughts. Your environment does not define who you are. You are worthy of better things, you do matter, and lastly, if you feel conflicted and passionate about our people's struggles, better yourself. Seek higher education, go into the community, advocate, and be that voice and shoulder to lean on for your brothers and sisters. Lastly and most importantly, be that guide never offered to you growing up.

Sincerely,
Zachary Alvarado



## DEAR FELLOW HUMXNS | *Jonathan Farrell*

Dear fellow humxns,

I wanted to take a moment to wish you a happy birthday. In celebration of today, May 4, 2020, I am writing you this letter because you are important to me. I wanted to take time to recognize you for your worth, laughter, sadness, desire to just be, and intention to help facilitate a better world for all. A world without pain, doubt, and judgment; where a person can stand unafraid; where we can live in a place and space of belonging and inclusion; and free of trauma, fear, and control. I want you to know that if it weren't for you, this world would not exist. Today is a day of re-awakening. Today marks the beginning of the next cycle of your life.

Today, you are a newer version of yourself: a new mother, sister, brother, daughter, son, husband, wife, fiancée, partner, educator, advocate, listener, facilitator, caregiver, and one who is open to receiving care. Today, you are about to embark on your next wondrous journey into the unknown. Today, you are an explorer in every sense, so explore and be unafraid because you have a friend to come home to in me. Whether we know each other or not, I see and hear you.

As you go out into this world, a warning: this life will not get any easier in the sense that you will have less to work on. This world is in a constant state of change, and that is why living hurts. As creatures of habit, we have a biological desire to remain comfortable, safe, and secure. The conundrum of happiness is one's pursuit of being happy is inherently stress-inducing. One's desire for comfort has been the cause of colonization, control, and war. One's desire for comfort takes comfort away from someone else, and, as we know, that isn't fair. Remember this when we are met with anger and resentment for what we do because those that we work with want what we want: joy, safety, and security. Keep going.

As change makers, remember change brings an inconsistency to our life that goes against our very desire to feel safe, secure, and stable. We must reframe change as a good thing, not just for others

but also for ourselves. We can do this by truly being present and communicating with one another. By actively listening and being willing to learn, we can let go of ourselves and share a true experience, if only for a moment. This very notion is intersectionality in practice. I would equate this approach to life like a cubist painting. What we see is disjointed; cut at weird angles of understanding. Even with an infinite number of insights and viewpoints, we will never really see the full picture of a person, and this is why we must never stop being curious about others and change accordingly. That is the dance of understanding one another; however, we must take turns leading. Considering our current sociopolitical climate, I know a lot of you are upset, confused, and angry, and this is a hard concept to swallow. Hell, I get it—I am frustrated too.

While the privileged are filled with joy, we are in pain, but I want you to know that this will change—it is how we go about it for the sake of our own sanity that truly counts. Keep going.

Speaking further about change, there will be an abundance of moments in our lives when we will feel instances of comfort and crisis. I wanted to take a quick moment to share with you the concept of infinite joy. Now, finding joy when times are comfortable is easy. It is finding joy in a crisis that is hard. Today, I invite you to think about the crisis in a new way. Don't push a crisis away; try to sit with it with an understanding that the crisis ends too. This idea reminds us that crisis is impermanent, that even conflict ends, and that is an upside. In a crisis, we are capable of holding joy, so keep going.

To the reader, you have already taught me so much through those you have touched, healed, and harmed, whether we have met or not. I thank you for that. Because of you, this world is a complicated and beautiful place, so keep going. And HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Your friend,

Jon



## LETTER TO APRIL | *Haiza Martinez*

Dearest April,

Hello beautiful girl! I am sitting here thinking about what a wonderful woman you will become, and I am overwhelmed with the endless possibilities. Being your *tía* [aunt] is an honor. I love you so much, baby girl. I remember it as if it were yesterday, the day you were born, and I got to hold you for the first time. You were so tiny and pink, and I loved you from then on. You were born into a family needing repair, and your little life was a light that we needed so much. Your love bridged gaps in relationships and changed the dynamic of our family. You were the change we needed and will be the change wherever you go. You were all love, and we all loved you more than words. Your brilliance showed through every step of your life. Every year your wisdom, talent, and intellect amazed us. Not just us but those around you. Your voice was always as strong and powerful as you were.

As I sit here thinking of you, I hope that when you read this letter, you are just as strong and powerful as you are today. I hope you have learned to use your voice to stand up for injustice and always for love and peace. You are a political being. Your voice matters, and don't let anyone take that away from you. At every age, you are a change agent. Take what we've taught you and lead with love. Being your authentic self, you will never go wrong when it's all founded in love. Love yourself, those hands and feet that will take you across this world to do wonderful, powerful things. I pray that you love yourself inside and out and that no one has silenced you or made you feel less than others. See your beauty, your power, your strength. Know that I am here for you *mija, apoyando te*, [my child, supporting you] motivating you and supporting you every step of the way. Your voice is important. Never be silent or silenced! I love you, mija. Keep shining . . . keep making changes around you . . . keep living a life of love.

With love,

Your *Tía* [Aunt] Haiza

PS
Here is the poem you inspired me to write . . .

**Soy Joven**

*Soy una historia*
*Fuerte, poderosa*
*y única*

*Tan joven sin apoyo*
*pero mi voz dinámica*
*soy importante*

*Soy una historia*
*desde el día que nací*
*fuerte, poderosa y única*

*Cada paso palabra escrita*
*en las calles de la experiencia*

*Somos una historia*
*tú y yo*
*juntos y unidos*

*El cambio*
*de generación en generación*

*soy una historia*
*fuerte poderosa*
*y única*

*No hoy nadie como yo*



## HELLO AMOR | *Stephany Ramos*

Hello *amor* [love],

It is an honor to dream of what you will be when you read this letter. Maybe a century from today! What I would give to see your beautiful brown eyes. I am your ancestor. I come from a time when individuals before me fought to let me love whom I wanted to love. The year is 2021, and small victories have granted me this opportunity. The opportunity to share a loving relationship with your beautiful brown skin ancestor Jaleesa, or as I call her mi reina, my queen. You would have loved to have met her. She's fearless and strong!

There are times when I dream that we all return to each other in some shape or form. I like to think that I am a tree that provides you with shade and refreshing air. I hope the trees are more beautiful and bigger than ever. Our love exists because of notable activists who have come before us. When I was your age, I was ridiculed for my sexual orientation. Love is love, and it has not been easy. We have lost family and acquaintances, but we would not have it any other way. Unfortunately, even in 2021, almost fifty-two years after the Stonewall riots occurred, we still face a lot of hatred and discrimination. I pray that things are different for you and that the Stonewall riots are something you might have learned about in school and still get celebrated during the month of June with a PRIDE festival.

How are things for you in school? I hope that the school system has changed its ways by now. Are your history books filled with deceit? Who are you learning about? Who are they excluding from your curriculum? See, I am from a time when the color of your skin, who you love, and your socioeconomic status became barriers and determined how you were treated. The way society socially constructs these identities has the power to determine your value and your worth. Where skin color gave you privilege if it was lighter or where you could be oppressed if you did not fit the "majority." Now, hopefully, humans are the majority, just people. I love to manifest equity for you.

I dream of justice for you and your people. Justice is to be served to any problem you may encounter; I hope your place, identity, and role in the world come with no problems. I hope that you are not treated differently because of who you choose to love or what you look like. *Espero que tu, mi amor, puedas gozar de tu vida* [I hope that you, my love, can enjoy your life]. That the world you live in honors your choice and amplifies your voice. I hope that you are not hindered by people's words or beliefs at your age. *Pero amor* [but love], let me tell you, you are so much more than what people try to present to you. You, my dear, are the future! A change agent for a brighter tomorrow. I am confident that your creativity and love have guided you toward greatness. I hope you are not given labels that don't match who you are. I was seen as a delinquent with no voice. I dream you live in a world where politicians do not dictate what they know nothing about. Are there politicians anymore, or is it more community involvement, and if so, do they strive towards equity? This has not always been the case in my day. But in your days, I have hope.

I do hope you will be a change agent in the world like your ancestors. I hope systems will be broken and rebuilt with stronger action plans toward inclusion. No matter what, you may not see the outcome right now, but you can help create a better place for the people who look, and everyone else.

Love,
Stephany Ramos

**PS**
*Eres capaz* [You are capable]!



## MY DEAREST GREAT-GRANDCHILD | *Jeralyn Bolanos*

My dearest great-grandchild,

As I sit here and write to you, I can't help but feel joy for the strong person that you are. I don't know you, but I do know that you come from a lineage of strong women. Women who endured pain, loss, grief, racism, sexism, and so much more. Women who fought for equality and resisted by fighting, crying, resting, and winning. I am writing to you from three generations back, and all I can hope is that you are even more at peace than I was in my world of injustice. My hope for you is that you have continued the battle of resisting, fighting for our people, healing, and resting. It won't be easy to combat the many injustices you face, but it is necessary. It's necessary to first look within and heal the wounds left by your mother, grandmother, and me.

Wounds that I wanted to heal so that you wouldn't have to feel and deal with them, but the battle was too big for me to handle. Right now, I am one week from graduating with my master's degree in social work. I am safe at home due to COVID-19. Do you know what that is? Have you learned about it? It has led to a lot of injustice against people of color, our people—"essential workers," they call them—but nothing is being done to protect them.

Let me tell you about my own journey, my own act of resistance to heal myself and fight the corruption around me. I am the first in our family to obtain higher education. This is something that didn't come easy, but it has been worth so much. As I started my journey in the program, I began to see patterns in myself and our family that needed to be broken. I went into my journey that allowed me to introspect and start breaking generational trauma that affected generations before me. I want to leave you with self-love recipes to use when you think life is too hard. These are recipes I used in my journey.

When you need comfort because you feel alone or tired in this journey of fighting for justice, for yourself, and for our people, take a blanket and a pillow and lay on your yoga mat. Put your AirPods

in your ears or whatever you're calling them nowadays and snuggle your pillow while you cry and watch Grace and Frankie. Know that the act of crying is an act of healing and self-love. Be a chillona [cryer], and don't let anyone criticize you for it. We are taught that crying is weak and can be seen as "too much," but be too much, be everything, and take all the space.

Now, when you need self-love, you will need one warm shower, one face mask, your favorite scented lotion, lavender and peppermint essential oils, and you will give yourself a massage. Love your body. Appreciate your body. Society will tell you that you need to be a specific size and look a certain way. You are perfect as you are. You will go into this world and show up authentically and confidently. That will really rile people up. Give yourself all the love, the kindness, and share them with the world. Be kind to yourself when you feel inadequate and think everything is too much to handle. In this recipe, you will need one journal, one candle, tissues, and Lizzo's albums.

Feel the pain, write everything, cry it out, but remember who you are. You are here for a purpose. You are here for a reason. Then, play all of Lizzo's albums. You are enough. You will always be enough. When you are facing times that feel too tiring to keep fighting, to keep advocating, to keep roaring your voice, you will need one thing in this recipe—sleep. There is so much power in sleep. In our culture, we are taught that we need to keep working. "We can sleep when we die," they say. No, sleep now! Rest now! It will make you stronger. I am leaving you with self-love recipes that will keep you fighting for yourself, our future generations, our community, and our people. Keep your roar, be too much, talk more when they say you're talking too much, resist when they try to stop you, and speak louder when they interrupt you. Cry in public. Love yourself entirely.

Your great-grandma,
Jeralyn



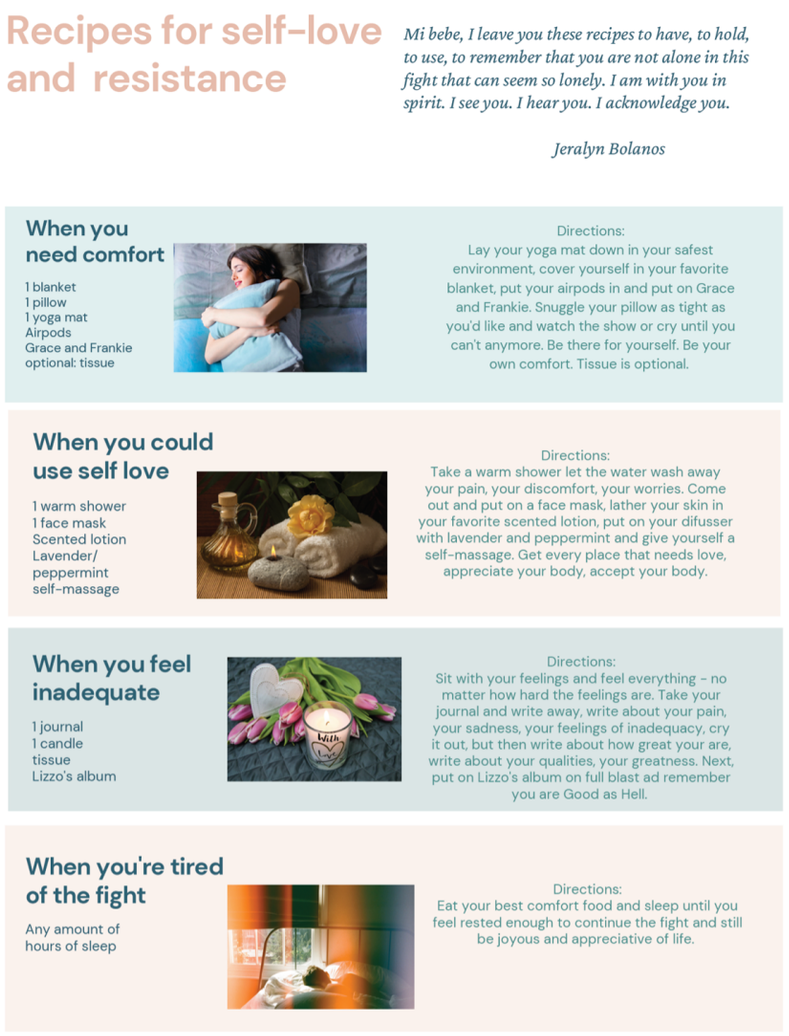


*Figure 3. Recipes for Self-Love and Resistance, reproduced with permission from Jeralyn Bolanos.*

# CONCLUSION

## Letter of Gratitude

Dear students,

I am writing this letter to express my heartfelt gratitude for the transformative learning journey we have embarked upon together. Your active participation and valuable contributions have driven the success of counterstory pedagogy in my courses. Your willingness to share your personal stories and engage in open dialogues about oppression, privilege, and social justice has enriched our discussions and deepened our collective understanding. I am delighted to be able to share some of your letters with other students and educators.

From the beginning, I sought to create a teaching-learning environment that centers on your lived experiences and knowledge, and you have truly embraced this approach. Being your instructor has taught me many valuable lessons. Firstly, I learned that teaching about critical race theory was not enough. Rather, I had to examine how I teach this content to influence the transformative elements of your learning experience more effectively. I have to praxis what I teach! I recognize how counter-narratives instigate us to move away from dominant cultural narratives to legitimize the knowledge



and experiences of communities of color. Therefore, deliberately I crafted activities, class discussions, and assignments that framed your personal stories as valuable contributions to our collective knowledge and learning journey.

Bearing witness to your lived experiences has been a profound experience. I am embarrassed to say that even with the best intentions and commitment to inclusive teaching, I have fallen short of comprehending the myriad of life circumstances and structural barriers that you contend with while trying to learn and grow. Reading your narratives and letters allows me to recenter your and my humanity. I can better contextualize your individual and collective needs as students who are learning and living within a racialized society. Your letters have moved me to tears as I have witnessed your courage in navigating the complexities of societal inequalities and your determination to create a more equitable world.

I get to witness your stories of resilience as you confronted barriers along your academic and personal journeys. I am humbled to hold space for such powerfully vulnerable stories in my classroom. Using counter-narratives and letter writing has proven to be a powerful tool for fostering critical self-reflection and empowering you to connect theoretical concepts to your own lives. Your thoughtful and insightful reflections have demonstrated a level of introspection that inspires me as an educator. I want to acknowledge the strength and tenacity each of you has shown in overcoming various obstacles throughout your professional development. Your resilience is a testament to your dedication to social change and commitment to challenging oppressive systems.

I hope I effectively prepared you to write letters that serve as counter-narratives to the dominant stories depicting students like you as "less than" or "not enough." To this end, I tried to scaffold your ability to critically analyze intersecting systems of oppression and reflect on your positionality. As we explored counter-narratives and engaged in open discussions about power dynamics, your willingness to critically interrogate your complicity in systems of oppression or privilege was commendable. It is not easy for people

to engage in radical honesty. Your vulnerability has created a brave space and trusting learning environment where we can all learn and grow together. Our collective inquiry into shared hardships and strengths has built a supportive community that encourages us to express our thoughts and emotions openly. Your willingness to listen, learn from each other, and uplift your peers has exemplified the power of collaboration and solidarity.

For future students embarking on a similar transformative learning journey, I want to offer you some words of encouragement. Writing, especially writing in academic settings, can stir up old schooling wounds, stress, and anxiety. Often, these feelings stem from internalized oppression in the form of imposter syndrome. Know that imposter syndrome is a familiar feeling. While your feelings of inadequacy may be unfounded (You are capable!), you are astute in sensing that institutions of higher learning were not traditionally built to be inclusive spaces for first-generation and non-traditional students. Your value as a person is not dependent on how you perform on an assignment. YOU ARE WORTH MORE THAN A GRADE.

I invite you to reframe the writing process. Move away from thinking of writing as a measure of your intelligence/capacity and shift your attention to how writing can be a liberatory practice in asserting your voice. There is so much power in writing! The power to heal through reflective writing. The power to advocate for oneself and others through persuasive writing. The power to step back and re-envision new possibilities through revising our work. Remember that your experiences and perspectives are valuable, and your voice deserves to be heard. Writer's block is a natural part of the writing process. If you ever find yourself stuck, take a step back, go for a walk, or engage in an activity that brings you joy before drafting your narrative or letter. Often, inspiration comes when we least expect it. Embrace your uniqueness and the richness your experiences bring to our discussions. Here are a pair of quotes that inspire me when I am feeling insecure about writing and help me push past the fear or writer's block:



> "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you… . To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but more I'm scared of not writing." —Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*

> "We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I have come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words that tell new ones." —Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Thank you, dear students, for being the driving force behind our transformative learning environment. I want you to know that you are a catalyst for change and a powerful advocate for social justice in our profession. The insights and critical awareness you have developed will undoubtedly shape your future endeavors. I do not doubt that you will continue challenging dominant narratives and advocating for a more equitable world. Your presence has significantly impacted me, and I am honored to have been your instructor on this journey. I look forward to seeing the positive change you will bring to our communities and the world.

With utmost gratitude and warm regards,

Adriana Aldana, PhD, MSW

In the evolving landscape of higher education, cultivating inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive teaching methodologies is paramount. As we navigate an era marked by increasing diversity and globalization, the traditional paradigms of instruction demand the integration of liberatory, anti-racist, and decolonial pedagogical practices (AdvanceHE, n.d.; Azzahrawi 2020; Jennings and Lynn 2015). Counter-narrative methodology and epistolary writing emerge as a transformative approach to teaching and learning that may disrupt conventional narratives to amplify marginalized voices and foster critical consciousness. The need for inclusive teaching methods is not merely a pedagogical innovation but an ethical imperative for institutions committed to the civic mission of higher education (Hurtado 2019). Accordingly, our classrooms should be generative spaces where students, regardless of background, engage in dialogues that challenge hegemonic structures and promote equity.

I have woven epistolary pedagogy and counterstory methodology to forge a dynamic and inclusive approach to education in pursuing anti-racist and anti-oppressive teaching. Counterstory, as a pedagogical tool, serves as a powerful conduit for students to scrutinize the impact of dominant narratives on their sense of self and social positioning (Avila, Aldana, and Zaragoza 2020). Employing letter writing, as a counterstory method, empowers students to share perspectives authentically, fostering belonging and motivation for active participation. As I discussed in previous chapters, I have found that combining the power of personal narratives with the transformative nature of letter writing yielded profound insights and enriched the learning experience for students.

In this conclusion, I reflect on the lessons learned from this integration, emphasizing the potential of epistolary pedagogy to enhance higher education. I hope the lessons learned encourage fellow educators to adapt and incorporate letter writing into their counterstory pedagogy to create dynamic and engaging learning environments.



## LESSON 1

*Amplify Student Voices*

I discovered a remarkable shift in classroom dynamics by incorporating letter writing into counterstory methodology. Students, especially first-generation students and those from marginalized backgrounds, felt empowered to share their experiences and perspectives. The epistolary format offered a safe and intimate space for self-expression, encouraging students to engage with challenging topics and critique dominant narratives. I witnessed a greater sense of belonging and agency within the classroom by elevating student voices through letter writing. To prepare students for counterstory letter writing, I incorporated various opportunities throughout the semester for students to practice self-disclosure through pair-share and small group discussions.

## LESSON 2

*Attend to Empathy and Intercultural Understanding*

Epistolary pedagogy proved invaluable in fostering empathy and intercultural understanding among students. Engaging in a dialogical exchange of letters with peers from diverse backgrounds, students developed a heightened appreciation for different perspectives and experiences. As students delved into the stories of their counterparts, a profound sense of interconnectedness and compassion emerged. However, as an instructor, I had to be proactively attentive to group dynamics during class discussions and activities to ensure inclusive and equitable participation across differences. My previous training in facilitating intergroup dialogues was invaluable (for more on this pedagogical approach, see Maxwell, Nagda, and Thompson 2012; Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig 2002).

## LESSON 3

*Feedback Cultivates Reflective Learning*

Letter writing in counterstory pedagogy facilitated critical thinking and reflective learning. Students were encouraged to analyze and synthesize information from the required course content, leading to deeper insights into complex social issues. As they composed their letters, they honed their ability to articulate thoughts coherently, building essential communication skills. Providing written feedback on letter outlines or in-class freewriting activities helped students prepare for the final letter assignment. I focused my feedback on the content of the letters rather than grammar or writing style. In my written feedback, I often posed questions that enabled students to (re)consider a deeper understanding of their identities and experiences, analysis of dominant narratives, and intellectual development.

## LESSON 4

*Offer Multiple Opportunities for Intersectional Inquiry*

Epistolary pedagogy complemented other discussions and activities that facilitated the exploration of intersectionality. The success of the letter-writing assignment hinged on enabling students to analyze the multidimensional nature of systems of oppression throughout the semester. It was also essential to underscore that intersectional self-reflection meant moving beyond counting one's multiple social identities.

Through letter writing, students uncovered the interconnectedness of various social constructs, such as race, gender, and class, and examined how these intersections shape their experiences and position them closer or further from power in any given context. This holistic understanding of intersectionality promoted a more nuanced approach to counter-storytelling, broadening their perspectives beyond singular narratives.



## FINAL REFLECTIONS

While the lessons learned from integrating epistolary pedagogy into counterstory methodology are grounded in my teaching experience, they extend beyond the field of social work. This approach can be adapted and applied to various subjects within higher education. In introductory literature courses, for example, students can write letters as characters from a novel, exploring their emotions and motivations. In history classes, students can imagine themselves writing to historical figures or ancestors who lived through that period to explore how the past impacts their current livelihood. In sociology or psychology courses, similarly to the case example offered in this book, letter writing can be utilized to explore individual experiences and societal implications of mental health or social structures.

The adaptability of epistolary essays, and counterstory pedagogy, reverberates widely, extending its impact even to student affairs or academic programs welcoming first-year students. Imagine introducing a letter writing assignment at the commencement of a student's academic journey. Such an endeavor could prompt them to articulate college expectations, apprehensions, and aspirations, fostering a profound self-awareness that can serve as a navigational guide through their college experience. This epistolary exchange provides invaluable insights for newcomers, bridging the gap between the present moment and the envisioned future. Years later, as seniors, through their own letter, students might reflect on their transformative journey, elucidating how academic pursuits intertwine with systemic barriers, personal growth, and professional development. This practice, beyond fostering a growth mindset, sets the stage for a supportive, interconnected learning environment where every student is encouraged to see themselves within the larger tapestry of their academic pursuits.

Integrating epistolary pedagogy into counterstory methodology has been a transformative journey, revealing the immense potential of letter writing in higher education. These key lessons learned from this endeavor are: amplifying student voices, fostering empathy, cultivating critical thinking, and promoting intersectional approaches. I encourage fellow educators to embrace the adaptability of letter writing and explore its incorporation into their pedagogy. By doing so, we can create vibrant and inclusive learning environments that celebrate the diversity of our students' experiences and perspectives, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation for knowledge and social change.

# APPENDICES

# Appendix A: Youth Empowerment Letter Assignment Guidelines

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this assignment is to practice critical reflection regarding the concepts discussed in class. Each student will write a reflective essay in the form of a letter. In preparation for this epistolary essay, the student will examine his/her/zir experiences in life. The student then writes about those experiences, exploring how he/she/ze has changed, developed, or grown from those experiences to offer advice to a young person in their life (past, present, or future).

This assignment grants each student the opportunity to reflect on the content of this course and how it relates to their (personal, political, professional, or educational) experiences working toward youth empowerment. Deep thinking and honesty with your intersecting identities and ideological beliefs will deepen your understanding of social justice and the role of social workers. Each student is expected to read their letter out loud on the last day of class.

The assignment is intended to develop and refine the following:

- Personal reflection and self-awareness
- Recognition and articulation of personal values and life experiences that may guide practice
- Critical and analytical thinking
- Effective organization and presentation of information
- Effective communication skills
- Writing in a clear and concise manner

You can find tips for writing a reflective essay at:
https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/complete-guide-to-writing-a-reflective-essay/

How to format a letter: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/personal_correspondence/personal_letters.html



## TASKS

Determine your audience (who will your letter be addressed to?). You may write to:

- A child or young person in your life (past, present, or future)
- Youth in general
- Your past self as a child or adolescent
- Take time to reflect on the course content
- Determine the topic/focus of your letter
- Plan, draft, and compose the reflections
- 2-page max. essay
- Format as a personal letter (APA format not required)
- 12-inch Times New Roman font, 1-inch margins, double-spaced
- Proofread and edit a completed draft
- Submit your narrative
- Oral presentation
- Practice reading/presentation
- 5-minute presentation of the letter in class

## GRADING CRITERIA (100 POINTS TOTAL)

You will be graded on the level of critical self-reflection that you convey in the letter.

- **Evidence of honest, critical self-reflection and self-awareness (50 points):** The letter may reflect what you learned from the course (i.e., readings, class discussions) or the group project (including all aspects of the planning, design, and implementation of the workshop), but it is not mandatory. Instead, you should write an honest reflection on a topic related to youth empowerment and social justice. Do NOT write a summary of the class content. An exemplary letter will demonstrate creativity, synthesis of ideas, in-depth reflections, and evidence of original thought on the topic. Main points should be well developed and reveal a high degree of critical thinking.
- **Writing style and organization/clarity/grammar (30 points):** The letter essay must meet all assignment requirements and evidence attention to detail; all margins, spacing, and indentations are correct;

the essay is neat and correctly assembled. An exemplary essay is free of distracting spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors; absent of fragments, comma splices, and run-ons.

- **Oral presentation style (20 points):** During the final session, students will read the letter in class. Students will be graded on the delivery of the presentation. Students should consider how vocal dynamics support content, as well as body language such as eye contact, gesture, and posture. Students who supplement the reading with creative expressions (photo, music, video, exhibits, etc.) will get an extra point. The presentation may include a general introduction, brief discussion of the positionality/standpoint used to write the reflection, and the reading of the letter. Thus, the oral presentation can be organized to include, but is not limited to the:
  - General introduction: What is the main topic/focus of your letter?
  - Discussion of positionality/standpoint: What lens did you use to reflect and write on the selected topic? What social identities shaped this lens?
  - Reading: Oral presentation of the letter



## Appendix B: Youth Empowerment Letter Rubric

| Grading Criteria | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adequate | Very Good | Excellent | Score | |
| Evidence of honest, critical self-reflection and self-awareness (50 points) | | | | |
| (35–44 points) The letter reflected honesty and some commentary on a topic related to youth empowerment and social justice. The letter was adequate regarding creativity, synthesis of ideas, in-depth reflections, and evidence of original thought on the subject. The letter's main arguments were vague and required more elaboration to demonstrate critical thinking for graduate-level writing. | (45–47 points) The letter reflected honesty and some commentary on a topic related to youth empowerment and social justice. The letter was very good regarding creativity, synthesis of ideas, in-depth reflections, and evidence of original thought on the subject. The letter's main arguments were somewhat developed and demonstrated some critical thinking for graduate-level writing. | (48–50 points) The letter reflected an honest analysis and commentary on a topic related to youth empowerment and social justice. The letter was exemplary regarding creativity, synthesis of ideas, in-depth reflections, and evidence of original thought on the subject. The letter's main arguments were well-developed and demonstrated a high degree of critical thinking for graduate-level writing. | | |

| Writing style and organization/clarity/grammar **(30 points)** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (20-24 points) The letter met most assignment requirements but did not consistently demonstrate attention to detail. The essay's organization and flow could have been improved with further editing. Although the essay was adequate, it had several grammatical errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-ons. | (25-27 points) The letter met all assignment requirements but did not consistently demonstrate attention to detail. The essay is well-organized. As a very good essay, it had minimal distracting spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors, and was mostly free of sentence fragments, comma splices, and run-ons. | (28-30 points) The letter met all assignment requirements and demonstrated attention to detail. The essay is neat and well-organized. As an exemplary essay, it was free of distracting spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors, and absent of sentence fragments, comma splices, and run-ons. | |
| Oral presentation style **(20 points)** | | | |
| (10-14 points) The student showed adequate presentation skills, with basic attention to vocal dynamics, body language, eye contact, | (15-17 points) The student showed adequate presentation skills, with basic attention to vocal dynamics, body language, eye contact, etc. The | (18-20 points) The student showed exemplary presentation skills, with attention to vocal dynamics, body language, | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| etc. The oral presentation somewhat-mentioned the student's positionality or standpoint. | oral presentation also provideda very good introduction to the letter's focus and mentioned the student's positionality or standpoint. | eye contact, erc. The oral presentation also provided an excellent introduction to the letter's focus and discussed the student's positionality and standpoint. | |
| **Extra Credit:** The student supplemented the reading with creative expression (photo, music, video, exhibits, etc.) | | | |
| | | **Total points:** | |

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## Author Biography

Adriana Aldana, PhD, MSW, is an associate professor of social work at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She earned her graduate degrees from the Joint Doctoral Program in Social Work and Developmental Psychology at the University of Michigan. Driven by a commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments, her research focuses on understanding how intergroup empowerment practices influence adolescents' sociopolitical development. Her work extends to the broader implications for anti-racism and community capacity building. As an anti-racist social work educator, Dr. Aldana actively engages in transformative pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of critical consciousness and equity in social work education.