

Seeing Ourselves in Others: The Power of Collective Stories

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Before I begin my keynote address this morning, I would like to take a moment to read Bowling Green State University's Land Acknowledgement:

The region in which Bowling Green State University and its campuses are situated inhabits the Great Black Swamp and the Lower Great Lakes region. This land is the homeland of the Wyandot, Kickapoo, Miami, Potawatomi, Odawa and multiple other Indigenous tribal nations, present and past, who were forcibly removed to and from the area. We recognize these historical and contemporary ties in our efforts toward decolonizing history and thank the Indigenous individuals and communities who have been living and working on this land from time immemorial.

Good morning and thank you all for being with me today. I see a lot of familiar faces in the crowd and can only continue to be moved by the support and community I have found here at BGSU. I want to especially thank Dr. Cordula Mora and her invitation to me last fall to give today's keynote address. I am so honored that you thought of me and am grateful we have had the opportunity to work together in the past, and I hope we continue to work together moving forward.

I also want to thank President Dr. Rodney Rogers for his opening remarks. I have attended four-year public and private institutions, as well as a community college, and I can say without a doubt that Dr. Rogers is unlike any four-year public university president I have ever met—in the best way possible. Whether it is opening the University House to incoming first-year students in the Multicultural Summer Link program, or standing in the Starbucks line asking questions, he shows up because he recognizes the importance of public engagement with our campus community.

I also want to acknowledge the labor—visible and invisible—that went into making this event possible. Thank you to the conference and events staff, the faculty, and the students participating in today's poster sessions. And finally, thank you to all of you here spending your morning with me. Without an audience, this keynote address would be pretty bleak.

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Amanda Anastasia Paniagua, and I use she/they pronouns. I am a short Chicana woman with dark brown hair with purple highlights and fair to medium skin depending on the time of year and amount of sunshine in Ohio. I am a third-year Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Administration Program and the Assistant Director for Belonging and Engagement in the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

I am also a proud first-generation college graduate and grew up in rural poverty just 30 minutes southwest of Bowling Green. And while I am in a straight-presenting relationship, I also identify within the LGBTQ+ community. I have invisible disabilities that I continue to manage so that I can be present and attentive to myself and others. And although I carry through my veins the ancestry of both the Indigenous Mexica and colonial Spanish, in some spaces, I present to some as simply white. But I know who I am, where I came from, and recognize how all these intersecting identities represent the tension between an individual's capacity for self-determination and the social structures around them.

And the reason I possess this intimate knowledge about myself, and society is because I had access to college classrooms to wrestle with ideas, concepts, people, and ways of knowing in the world that were at times familiar and unfamiliar. I had access to faculty and staff who looked like me or had similar lived experiences as me. But I also was challenged by faculty and other students who had different perspectives than I did. And I had access to student organizations and other co-curricular spaces to validate who I was, where I came from, and who I wanted to be in the world when my understanding collided with others and left me feeling broken and or hurt inside higher education institutions.

But most importantly of all, I had the opportunity to develop a vocabulary to describe my lived experiences which allowed me to look for myself in others. I chose to see how my story fit into the narrative of "us"—of our common humanity and the existential need to be seen, validated, and honored; not only to feel, but to also *know* that we *belong* in the spaces that we enter.

And so today, I want to talk about what it looks like to make the conscious choice to see ourself in others—not to focus on our story or to cast ourselves as the main character, but to see how we fit into what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “a beloved community” and how we can tell our collective story—in all its ugliness, messiness, and beauty, and can then, in turn, hold space *for others*.

If you have been paying attention to the news for the past four years, the social opinions and narratives about our human differences have shifted so dramatically in a way that I would have never imagined when I first left for college in the fall of 2005. I left excited, hopeful, nervous, and unsure of what the next few years would hold for me. A perpetual nerd and a naturally curious individual, I was excited to learn as much as I could about everything and anything.

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And learn I did. After my very first art history course, I walked up to my professor and asked him when our class would receive our textbooks for the semester. He looked at me rather confused and told me that I would need to purchase them at the campus bookstore. Ever the dutiful pupil, I walked across campus to find the bookstore and textbook in question before my next class that day. When I saw the sticker price of \$150.00, I held back tears as butterflies in my stomach began to flutter. \$150 dollars for *one* book? I knew I couldn't call my parents. They didn't have the money, and I certainly didn't have the money! My understanding was that everything was already paid for.

So, I went into creative mode. “Well,” I thought, “I can sit in the bookstore and read the assigned chapters.” But as I began to settle in, I became hyper aware of my own presence in that bookstore. I feared my presence of sitting in front of an already narrow book aisle would signal to others that I couldn't afford to buy the very book I was reading. Suddenly overcome with embarrassment and shame, I went to the only place that made sense to me at Mount Vernon Nazarene University: The Office of Intercultural Life. My parents and I met the director, Jim Singletary, when we visited the campus together a few months prior, and he had worked very hard to bring

me to the institution as part of his inaugural Americans of Color, International and Missionary Students (or AIMs). He put my Latino parents at ease about sending their eldest and only daughter to college and assured them I would be taken care of.

But I found myself crying uncontrollably in Jim's office that day. "I don't belong here," I blubbered through snuffles and tears. "I can't afford to be here," I said as I explained to him the cost of the textbooks and panicked about not knowing how I was going to pay for them. And I continued to vent about many other campus experiences as Jim listened quietly. "Amanda," he said in his deep and calming voice. "Take a breath. Take the day. Go to class, and then see how you feel after the day is over. You absolutely should be here. We need you." So, I took his advice, pulled myself together, and finished out the day. I didn't even return to my dorm until the evening, after a less than appetizing dinner in the campus dining hall which only served to remind me of just how homesick I really was, especially for my mom's cooking. Upon entering my shadowy room, I noticed the outline of a large obstruction on my desk. I flipped the light on and was amazed by what sat in front of me: every textbook for each of my courses for the semester was stacked in a neat pile. Jim was the only one who knew about my situation, which meant it was him who made sure those books got directly to me.

In that moment, I knew my life's calling: to be someone's "Jim."

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There would be no future Dr. Paniagua if it wasn't for Jim Singletary. I have been lucky enough to remain in touch after all these years and most recently celebrated with former students and our children in honoring Jim's legacy in 2022. (If Jim is able to attend, take this time to acknowledge him).

My first-year college experience with Jim attests to the importance of holding space for *others*. In my moment of existential crisis, Jim not only held space for me, but he *saw* me. He saw my struggle, my pain, and my trauma, and did not judge me or ask me to be any different in the moment.

He simply just let me *be*. Then he did what was within his power to alleviate that struggle. No questions asked, nothing expected in return.

If I may, I'd like us to travel back in time for a moment.

2024 marks sixty years since the passage of both the Civil Rights Act in 1964 soon followed by the Economic Opportunity Act of the same year. The following year in 1965, the Higher Education Act would radically expand access to both low-income communities and communities of color across the United States.

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And once on those campuses, these same students are responsible for some of the most radical activism seen in our nation's history rooted in the same tactics of the Civil Rights Movement throughout the south in the 1950s. The two founding members of the first Black Student Union at San Francisco State University recognized the power of community organizing and brought that same spirit to higher education spaces.

Jerry Varnado and James Garrett had a radical vision; open admissions at San Francisco State or the idea that anyone in the community who wanted to go to college, ought to be able to. Not only that, but any new admit would be personally tutored to ensure they did not struggle academically once on campus.

Varnado, when interviewed in 2019 stated: “when we say that students enrolled through a special admissions program it means that they did not have to fill out an application. All we needed was their name, address, telephone, and social security numbers, and the university would send them a letter of admission. That was all they needed to enroll, and some of them became lawyers, judges, and doctors.”

Garrett added in the same interview that the Black Student Union “also had to make sure to protect the students that we brought to campus ... we pulled Danny Glover off a street corner in the Haight-Ashbury district ... our thing was that we were not trying to choose ‘the talented tenth,’ as W.E.B. DuBois advocated in the early 1900s ... we went to find those people and

convince their families to let us bring them on the campus by assuring we would take care of them.”

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This spirit of self-determination and community building was on our own campus in November 1968, when *BG News* columnists Ronald Johnson and Larry Witherspoon stated, “a Black Students Organization offering conscientious Black students a time and place to make themselves relevant to the Black student body is imperative!” Following the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. earlier that same year, BGSU students and faculty organized to create the MLK scholarship fund to assist prospective Black students in attending the university. The first recipient was a local Fostoria area high school student the following year. Four years later, in 1973, La Union de Estudiantes Latinos noted the lack of space to explore their own identities stating “the relationship of this Anglo-American oriented University to the Chicano students has been to produce Chicanos with an accepted behavior and skills which will make us successful in an Anglo-American society. This adds a large amount of confusion ... on our part since we must accept the society which literally rejects us.”

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Together the Black Student Union and La Union de Estudiantes Latinos organized to make a host of demands to the BGSU administration in 1979 including that the institution observe the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday as an official university holiday. Ohio had already passed legislation in 1975 to honor the Civil Rights hero and the debate as to whether the institution should as well, continued until February 1981 when the official university calendar was changed to recognize Dr. King’s birthday the following year in 1982.

In addition to the demand for a university holiday honoring the legacy and life of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., BGSU students also demanded that the then ethnic studies program be departmentalized, or a more permanent academic space be made for the study of one’s ethnic and cultural identity. The students recognized then the importance of

systemizing scholarship within the academy to ensure it did not fade into oblivion if not enough students knew about and engaged with it. Those students made space for other students who would come after them including me. Last summer I completed my graduate certificate in ethnic studies here at BGSU. Both the intellectual stimulation and community experienced in those spaces not only kept me at BGSU but provided me rich theoretical frameworks to bring to both my study of and lived experiences within higher education administration.

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As a first-generation college student, neither of my parents earned a four-year college degree and even though I earned my bachelor's degree, when I went on to pursue a master's degree in 2012 at Kent State University, I was still a first-generation college student; I just didn't know it. For example, I didn't know that I shouldn't be paying for a master's degree. I didn't know what a graduate assistantship, teaching assistantship, or graduate stipend was, so I didn't think to ask about any when admitted. I didn't know that if I wanted to make a career in teaching at the university or college level, I needed to have teaching experience while in graduate school as well as peer-reviewed publications in my academic discipline. The "hidden curriculum" of my undergraduate years simply morphed into a new set of taken for granted assumptions and knowledge that I was assumed to already know or *should* have known and if I didn't, that reflected who I was as an individual rather than a reflection of the way higher education institutions can perpetuate inequity while simultaneously espousing to be the great equalizer of our modern society.

This very hard realization came through more lived experience when during my first master's program in art history I watched as my beloved thesis advisor—the only person of color in the academic department—did not receive tenure despite having unanimous support at every level of the review process. When her file came to the provost, he denied her an academic place at the institution. I only share what happened to her because I want to stress the ripple effect that occurs when decisions like these are made in organizations. By denying my thesis advisor tenure, the institution also denied us as graduate students; denied us access and community with a faculty member of color who not only supported us as

individual students in our social and cultural identities, but the diversity of our scholarship in the academic discipline itself. My interests at the time, and most likely not surprising to anyone who knows me, centered around the way nationality, race, and ethnicity were represented by the highly regarded 19th century artist, Mary Cassatt who is most famously known for her paintings of middle-class North American women in public and private spaces.

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Feminist art historians heralded her in the textbooks as a heroine of the modern North American era, but I was much more interested in her paintings of Spanish men and women in 1872-1873 because these were some of the first images in which I saw myself represented in the canon of Western art given my own Spanish descent. In digging deeper into the context of the time in which these works were produced, I discovered terms like “Hispanolisme” or the French’s obsession and fascination with all things Spanish in the 19th century.

During the 19th century, the United States was emerging as a global superpower and, as a result, North American national identity was constructed through a complex web of race, class and in Mary Cassatt’s case, gender. I argued in my master’s thesis that although Cassatt was a woman, she was middle-class, racialized as white and a North American citizen which privileged her position as an artist in Spain producing images of Spanish men and women who represented to North American audiences’ evidence of Spain’s “backwardness” and presumed “otherness” during the 19th century.

If it had not been for my thesis advisor encouraging me to look at postcolonial scholars and academic disciplines like sociology, anthropology, history, and literature to compliment the art history texts, I would have never been able to develop the scholarly language to talk about such complex socio-political contexts for the art produced by one of feminist art historians most beloved icons and to expand the discourse to consider the lived experiences of the artists’ models and what their social identities meant for the time in which they lived but also what it might mean for us looking at the art now and reading about it today.

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Although I was assigned a new advisor and went on to successfully defend my thesis, the experience of losing a close friend and academic colleague in the process left me feeling as though I did not matter to the institution as a first-generation, low-income, and Chicana graduate student and perhaps most troubling, that my scholarship and research did not matter to the academic discipline itself. I was angry, sad, *and* determined to understand the higher education system I was benefiting from and knew, deep down, given my multiple lived experiences, the system could do much better on behalf of its most marginalized students. So, in the fall of 2016, after having earned a master's in art history the spring prior, I enrolled in the Higher Education and Student Personnel program at Kent State University.

Fast forward to the present as I am now in my dissertation phase of earning a PhD in Higher Education Administration and my own scholarly research is examining the Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program which was created by the 1986 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act with the intent to build a pipeline for minoritized undergraduate students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in graduate programs with the eventual goal of earning a PhD which would, in theory, diversify the faculty ranks of higher education institutions. Today, we know the federal project to be the McNair Scholars Program.

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Although the program was and is still authorized to serve first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented students, the program remains understudied in the higher education research literature and the socio-political history of the program's creation is completely absent which I find to be fascinating considering the program's namesake, Dr. Ronald E. McNair's life and legacy which was tragically cut short in 1986 aboard the *Challenger* space shuttle. Dr. McNair was born in the segregated south and attended segregated primary and secondary schools. Even though *Brown v. Board* in 1954 had, in theory, required that public higher education institutions integrate, Dr. McNair attended North Carolina Agricultural and

Technical State because his home state's public institution would not admit Black students to their physics program in 1967.

Dr. McNair's brother, Carl, penned the late NASA astronaut's biography and in those pages recalled how the right people came into Dr. McNair's life at the right time. During his undergraduate studies, a mentor encouraged Dr. McNair to keep pursuing Physics. Even though he had graduated valedictorian from his high school, once on North Carolina A&T's campus, Dr. McNair realized his peers, educated in primary and secondary schools outside the south, had vastly more knowledge and technical skills than he did which made him doubt his ability to succeed in the field of Physics and he considered studying music instead. Dr. McNair, recalled in 1984 during a commencement speech that a trusted advisor simply said, "you're good enough." That was all Dr. McNair needed to hear at that moment and made the decision to stick with Physics.

Dr. McNair went on to graduate *magna cum laude* and attend MIT on a Ford Fellowship. Again, Dr. McNair's brother, Carl attests to the importance of having found faculty mentors willing to write recommendations on Dr. McNair's behalf with one going so far as to say if the Ford Foundation did not give the fellowship to Dr. McNair to study at MIT, then they shouldn't give it to anyone. While attending graduate school in the heart of Boston from 1971 to 1976, Dr. McNair experienced overt anti-Black racism in and outside the classroom. Leaving the south did not shelter Dr. McNair. He experienced isolation from his academic peers who would often organize study sessions without him. He experienced isolation from the wider Boston community. A group of white men once ran him out of a public park where he was practicing karate in peace.

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But no matter the interpersonal interactions, Dr. McNair remained determined to succeed and let his work and scholarship speak for itself. And it did. In 1978, he and 34 others were chosen out of 8,079 applicants to become members of NASA's astronaut program. This class of 35 was significant in that it was the first time in the organization's history that African Americans, Asian Americans, and women were represented. *JET* magazine featured Dr. McNair and his two colleagues, Major Guion "Guy"

S. Bluford, Jr. and Major Frederick D. Gregory on the cover to celebrate the historic moment.

“Being an astronaut is something that I’ve always thought about,” said Dr. McNair in *JET*. “But growing up in the South and wanting to be an astronaut was as far away from the normal course of things as you could get.”

The more I learned about Dr. McNair’s life and educational experiences in my research, the more I began to see my own lived experiences. Although we were born into very different environments and held very different social identities, I could relate to his feeling of how the aspirations he held for himself did not align with what society at large thought he was capable of. When he doubted his own ability to succeed in college, he had a mentor, like I did in Jim Singletary, to remind me that I belonged and that I was also good enough. And finally, just as I vowed to be someone’s Jim one day, Dr. McNair also regularly gave back by visiting schools and stressing the importance of education to young communities of color. Dr. McNair and I recognized the power of education and knew it was necessary to help others recognize its power, too.

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The rich legacy of the Civil Rights, student protest movement era, and life of Dr. McNair certainly inspires but, given the contemporary climate we find ourselves in, this history also leaves me with two fundamental moral questions about those of us working in higher education institutions: what do we owe one another? And what do we owe future generations?

I don’t have the definitive answer, but I do have a theory that I think is useful as we begin to think collectively about our campus communities. In 2005, the same year I graduated high school and went off to college, educational scholar Dr. Tara J. Yosso published an article titled, “Whose Culture Has Capital Anyway?” in which she described her theory of community cultural wealth which highlights six forms of social capital that racially and economically marginalized students bring with them to educational spaces: aspirational capital – or the ability to hope beyond their present circumstances; navigational capital – or the ability to move through

spaces that were historically designed without them in mind; social capital – or the ability to leverage kinship networks outside the home, such as within a church or other community organization; linguistic capital – or the ability to translate from one’s primary language to English and back again; familial capital – or the importance of close ties to one’s biological or chosen family; and finally resistance capital – or the ability to not only discern injustice when it is inflicted upon them, but the courage and boldness to speak out against it.

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I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Yosso last November and hear her talk about the context in which she developed and eventually published her theory. She was expanding upon French scholar Pierre Bourdieu’s scholarship which theorized that educational institutions reproduce middle-class norms and familiarity with middle-class modes of behavior, dress, speech, and extended networks which form the basis of a kind of social capital. Dr. Yosso had grown tired during her graduate studies and was, in her words, enraged, by the number of theories about communities of color that started from a deficit framework, or the idea that all these communities were lacking was the social capital in Bourdieu’s sense of the term. Dr. Yosso, instead, was interested in an asset-based framework that pushed Bourdieu’s scholarship. Using Critical Race Theory, Dr. Yosso layered how race, in this case whiteness, in addition to middle-class norms are simultaneously reproduced in education institutions. According to Dr. Yosso, it is not the case that communities of color are lacking social capital. Rather, it is that their modes of behavior, speech, dress, and way of being in the world—*their* cultural capital—are not as valued in those same spaces.

One of the aspects I love about Dr. Yosso’s theory is that although it was written for and intended to theorize about the experiences of communities of color in education spaces, one need not necessarily be a person of color or come from a lower socio-economic background for the theory to still hold relevance. Any person who holds a socially marginalized identity may see these six forms of social capital as transferable strengths that they have had to negotiate in some capacity depending on their own lived experiences.

So, what are some ways that we can all cultivate a community of cultural wealth and build upon these six strengths?

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I offer strategies to foster possibility and want to caution that these are not necessarily in a linear order, but rather are representative of what we should strive to do on an ongoing basis when possible.

Listen.

We must begin by listening to one another; to really hear one another's stories, lived experiences, and ways of understanding the world in which we all inhabit. And not listening to respond to the ways in which another person's story contradicts our own lived experience and reality, but rather to *hear* the other person; dare I say to try to see the world from their point of view and why what they say may hold merit for them even if we do not like or even agree with it.

Learn/Unlearn.

We must also take the time to learn *why* others have arrived at the conclusions that they have about the world. This might mean learning to unlearn what we thought we knew about the lived reality we experienced when we were much younger. Once we know something, we cannot unknow it. This is both the blessing and the curse of learning. Once I know that two and two equal four, it becomes very difficult to unknow that truth. However, if someone tells me that one and three also equals four, well now I have two different processes that arrive at the same conclusion, and I owe it to myself to investigate and understand that second process even though the process is not the same one I experienced in arriving at the same conclusion.

Reflect/Heal.

Learning to unlearn is a painful and sometimes traumatic process so I suggest that we must also dig deep and reflect on our own experiences and take the time for ourselves to heal from the deep unresolved pain and perhaps fear that we might be holding onto. Learning can be fun and freeing, but it also can be frightening to face new hard realities about the world that we might have taken for granted as mere opinion or conjecture. Lived experiences form the basis for perception about the world around us.

Education systems are not innocent or neutral in that process. Often finding out new information is simultaneously a grieving process because we must mourn the loss of knowledge that should have been provided to us much sooner.

Hold Space/Love.

Healed and centered, we must then hold space for others to come into their own understanding about themselves and others. This is perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of working in a higher education setting. Every moment is a teachable one. And every misstep or mistake is an opportunity to do better next time. Learning can be a radical act of self-love that prepares us to love others because we have taken the time to invest in ourselves and our own growth and can attest to the lived experience of coming into one's own 'ah ha!' moment. I can tell you right now that the current version of Amanda would most likely cringe if she heard some of the ideas from seventeen-year-old Amanda, but I would also be patient with my younger self knowing that she was on her way towards much better ideas about the world.

Listen Again.

As the adage goes, we were given two ears and one mouth because we should listen twice as much as we speak. In academia, this can be quite a struggle because our socialization in academic and higher education spaces often necessitates that we be armed with our arguments and ready to make them at a moment's notice, but I don't advocate for critique for the sake of mere critique. I think it is valid to ask clarifying questions to enter dialogue with one another. But true dialogue is a negotiation between listening and responding. I would challenge us all to respond from a place of care, concern, and radical love for truly understanding one another's argument to expand upon it; not necessarily to play an infinite game of who is wrong and who is right. I do not like to live my life in binary ways of thinking and would encourage us to all learn from the concept of fluidity and nuance that is so beautifully found in the messiness of lived experiences.

Share.

Share your story. Because it matters. Share your research and scholarship. Because it matters. Share space with others. Because it matters. Share, share, share in a world that would have us believe that love and care for

one another is scarce. Education and learning about ourselves and others is not a zero-sum game. Instead, it is the doorway to infinite possibilities as we continue to work toward our own beloved community.

Thank you.