

Transformational Healing & Critical Race Theory in Practice – Nicole Vazquez, MSW, MPP & Susana
Victoria Parras, LCSW, PPSC
Episode 42
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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talked with Nicole Vasquez and Susana Victoria Parras about critical race theory (CRT) in social work practice. Nicole brought the fire on [Episode 37 Critical Race Theory in Social Work](#) and I'm so excited and honored to have her back. Nicole is a critical race scholar, the former Field Director and Chair Designee at Cal State Dominguez Hills' MSW program, and currently runs Vasquez Consulting. She is a queer, Afro-Latinx, cisgender woman of Mexican American and Panamanian parents.

Shimon Cohen:

Susana is a justice, healing-based therapist in South Central Los Angeles, California, and a former school social worker. She is a mother, partner, daughter of Guatemalan immigrant parents, and on the path to liberation, healing and restoration. Nicole and Susana cover so much in this episode! They talk about the micro-macro divide and how that separation is challenged by CRT. They discuss how CRT provides a framework to be grounded in an understanding of positionality and power, and get into specific examples of how to apply the tenets of CRT to social work practice. Susana stresses the importance of interconnectedness and how she now practices in a way where she looks at how these tenets "live in the body" rather than only intellectually.

Shimon Cohen:

Nicole explains how to utilize CRT in having a historical and contextual understanding of the forces impacting people's lives, put together with practitioner humility, to work authentically and collaboratively with people rather than from a savioristic, paternalistic approach. They explain how CRTs critique of liberalism - individualism - shows us how liberalism blames people for their conditions, and take so much away from us, especially community and culture. We explore ways social work and social work education perpetuate oppression. We discuss how the social work concept of professionalism can separate us, and they explain how separation comes from colonization and white supremacy, and that connection and healing comes from ancestral/Indigenous ways. Susana talks about feeling limited by CRT and shares what she calls healing justice work. We also talk about if social work can truly be decolonized. Nicole and Susana's message is deeply transformative and uplifting. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UTK has a phenomenal social work program with the opportunity to do your bachelor's, master's, and doctorate of social work online. Of course, they also have excellent classes in person in both Knoxville and Nashville. UTK is committed to preparing social workers who will support human potential and dignity and challenge racism and all forms of oppression. Scholarships are available. Go to www.csw.utk.edu to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Nicole, and Susana, I am so excited to have this time with both of you on the podcast. So I'm super grateful to both of you for coming on, Nicole as a return guest and Susana as your first time on here, but hopefully not the last, and to talk about critical race theory and clinical social work practice, community-based practice. So thank you and let's jump right into it.

Susana Parras:

Thank you, thank you so much.

Nicole Vazquez:

Thank you.

Shimon Cohen:

What does it look like to use critical race theory in your social work practice?

Nicole Vazquez:

It's interesting, and I say this all the time, that critical race theory courses through my veins. So for me, it's not so much using it in social work practice, I have no other way to see the world. So it's how I live my everyday life. What CRT has done for me is it's provided an understanding of why things are the way they are. So that then I apply it to the work that I do. I'm not an LCSW; I don't practice clinical social work. But I will say that macro social workers have to employ their clinical skills in the work that they do. The last job that I had at Dominguez Hills as a field director, I worked with students, so I taught, you have to bring your clinical training and your clinical lens into the classroom in order to be an effective facilitator, instructor, and you have to bring it as an administrator when you're working with clients. Again, I was the field director, so I'll say that, in terms of how I bring it to my work, it's like how I approach my life. And maybe that's a very general answer, but I'm sure we'll get into more detail as we go on.

Susana Parras:

Thank you. Yes, to everything that Nicole said in terms of it being a worldview, a way that you are oriented, that your body, your relationships, everything kind of shapes. So for me, really, any anti-oppressive, anti-racist, all those critical pedagogy and understanding around really the ordering of the world. And so I think for... Yes, I want to echo that, that I think it's really understanding how do these systems kind of live in my every day. So to really do the clinical practice, I mean, it's such an intimate space is that I understand these frameworks and these theories, but they necessitate us bringing them to life, depending on their context. So for me, it looks like really, I'll speak a lot in the schools. That's

really where I feel like I was able to apply and practice and approach CRT, and it really was through... I would always say it's helpful like a superpower, that when the person, that body and that human entered the room, and we began to story-tell or to just really just share whatever came up, then the context started to be painted.

Susana Parras:

So for me CRT is like this paint brush, and I just kind of start like... It allows me to just paint the context. So understanding positionality, my relationship in positionality to power. And so who is in front of me, and understanding their cords, their positionality and power, and then mine and so where are we in the web? I understand that to be very important in my clinical approach and practice, is because then I have to know how to move in that space, both emotionally, spiritually, and physically in that, and I'm more than happy to elaborate more, but I'll pause there.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I mean, I think just in what both of you said there, it brings up the fact that we make these separations, and right away, you're like, "No." CRT is a way to say there shouldn't also be that separation with life and with our approach as people and as social workers and our understanding of the world and practice, and I think that's really important. That's part of what I'm getting from what both of you just said.

Susana Parras:

Yeah, that's exactly right. Even as Nicole, you were saying being macro-oriented, right? Even just that, the separation of... I would be considered micro and you'd be macro. I never understood that and I still don't, so for me, it's been unlearning those binaries and unlearning those categories, which I understand can be helpful for things, but for the purpose of this work and our conversation is that it's not because it's all interconnected. So yeah, thank you for elevating that.

Nicole Vazquez:

Sure, yeah. I think for me, too, the previous podcast with Dr. Abrams and myself, we went over the tenets and this is more about practice, but I think we can talk about how the tenets helped to inform our practice. So like what Susie's talking about unlearning and relearning and divorcing ourselves from these binaries that... I mean, I think in order for folks to kind of start to think about how you integrate critical race theory, like what makes critical race theory so special and so different, right? It's things like the tenets help to make us more effective practitioners, for example, the critique of liberalism. For me, what the critical liberalism does is it helps me to question everything. Because liberalism is tied to this idea of rugged individualism, the pull yourself up by our bootstraps, the American way of life, right? And it's the critique of liberalism, it's critiquing that, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So it helps, for me, to question why do we have this micro, macro divide? Why is the organization that I work for, why do they have these practices? Why does the intake form look this way? Who is it marginalizing, because it's constantly... Because we have a dominant narrative, what CRT allows us to do is to bringing in another tenet, the tenet of counter-narratives, it reminds us of the necessity to elevate people from marginalized groups, people who have... Not people from marginalized groups, people who have been individuals who have been marginalized and oppressed, and continue to be.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, Nicole, I agree with what you were saying just there 100%. I think that it's been really helpful for me to understand, to really start getting more into what liberalism means. It's like CRT really brought that to the forefront for me, and once you start seeing it that way, it's like in the Matrix, I can't remember which color pill it is when once you take it, there's no going back.

Susana Parras:

Yeah.

Nicole Vazquez:

I have to watch that movie again. I feel like I completely missed a lot.

Susana Parras:

I think, wait, the red pill or the blue pill, oh, my goodness, it's such a good question.

Shimon Cohen:

But once you take it, you can't go back. I think that like... Because I teach, right? And one of the things that comes up is, if I'm providing like historical context, right, sometimes practitioners or students are like, "Okay, but what do I do with this?" And that's part of what I wanted to really get into in our conversation is let's start with that. Let's start with liberalism, right? Susana, you have this history of working in the schools, and then you have your current private practice. So how does the critique of liberalism play out in real life practice for you?

Susana Parras:

Yeah, I'll take another tenet. But I can come back to that, just because my mind was already going with something around the tenet, but it made me think of even, I think one of the questions around clinical practices and how they connect to CRT. I'm trying to recall that question, but it made me think of the storytelling and I know it's counter-narrative storytelling, the role of storytelling. But that piece, I think, is so important. Now it feel is like, "Well, everyone's story tells," also sometimes feels a little more diluted, and it kind of loses its essence. But I think just really remembering what storytelling is, for me it's vulnerability, it's nothing but vulnerability.

Susana Parras:

When I think about this tenet, it's so crucial the importance of these counter-narratives, but not just as the person who is has been historically marginalized, but really understanding what happens in that exchange, in that relationship, because we're all a part of this web, we're all a part of all of this. All of this touches me, it touches you, it touches Nicole, I mean, it touch as all the folks that we teach and work and all... Right? It's really that interconnectedness of that relationship that then when that is safe, and I don't think we need... What needs to be... Or know CRT to create safe, dignified space, I think that really can come in many ways is that then these counter-narratives start flowing. And through those really...

Susana Parras:

Because I had the frameworks of CRT here, and then I would hear the stories of the moms, of the students, of the kids and so they would say, "Fucking cops just always harassing me just when I come in,

I'm not doing shit. I just need to go to class..." Right? So even just that understanding, there's a counter-narrative right there. There's a refusal, there's a challenge, to a dominant kind of... So for me, it's then understanding what is that counter-narrative and then how I might connect it to it beyond just us two individuals in the world. It really just speaks to... It opens up the world, because their counter-narratives, and therefore our relationship really then speaks and puts a really big light on what's not okay, what doesn't work, which really begins to be, I think, more the status quo practices or racism, white supremacy in all these spaces, that just eventually creeps out.

Susana Parras:

Okay, the storytelling, but the storytelling for what? And for who? It's like, "Okay, it's important to tell stories, but what do we really mean?" And for me, those are really deep cultural practices, very sacred practices, they're pláticas. When you go to the neighbor's home and you start talking, right? That's a way of being in relationship. As I was hearing you, it made me think of just really... But I'm giving that words now like 10 years into this. When I was in it, it was really clunky, it was really clumsy, it was really like, "I don't know how to connect," because very intellectual, and so now for me, it's really more understanding how do these things live in the body, right? So how does the tenet of storytelling, right, how does that make me feel? What sensations come, or even just hearing the critique of liberalism? So certainly centering the body, I think, really speaks to me in how I bring these tenets to life.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah, I think too, what CRT does is we go into whatever space, whatever interaction we have with another human being, and we have counter narratives in mind, we want to elevate, but the tenets allow us to have some sort of foundation of understanding that person's lived experience. And what I'm hearing in what Susie said... Susana, when you talked about having... You said something about a dignified space, that just says so much there, right? You're coming into that space with humility, for one. So counter-narratives isn't about... And Susana, you also talk about your positionality, and how you come in in a position of power, right? And you know that and being aware of that, and keeping that in the forefront of your mind takes a lot of humility, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So you go into that space, thinking, "I'm going to center this person's narrative, their counter-narrative, their story." And now I can speak for myself, the tenets, though, helped me to understand however this person identifies, how history has marginalized and oppressed people from those groups, and... I'm not articulating myself very well. Because I think that we have to check ourselves when we're coming in with a position of power... I mean, the students that are out there, listening, and educators and social workers, you come in and we choose this profession, because we quote unquote, want to help people, right? We want to help those people who have problems, who have been through trauma, I'm coming in with my education, and I'm going to help you, so I'm going to listen to your story, and I'm going to listen to your counter-narrative, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

But what CRT does, for me, is helps me to understand that history and everything that comes with that person, all the history comes in with that person as they come into the space in whatever space you're working with them in. So that's why humility is so key when we're doing this work, because then I'm not someone in a position of power, saying, "I'm really going to listen to your story. I know you're oppressed, and I'm going to go into those communities and help those people as the savior, and to help

them because I have something to give you." You're coming into this space knowing the history behind it and with the humility of like, "We're going to work together to get you to a better place."

Susana Parras:

Yes, there's so much work to what you're saying Nicole. Just even before, what do you do with this tenet? There's so much pre-work that just goes, that's just all... I can't answer how do you do or what do you do with this, because it just depends on so many things, right? So I understand the... I get the impulse, right, because it really is a very deep curiosity, wondering and wanting to really apply and take this on, and also it's such a deep process and I think that really also should be centered in the how-to-do CRT in practice. Feels very much about being in community with folks who are doing it, right? Because there's no one way, just like everything, it depends. It depends on everything.

Susana Parras:

But to the critique of liberalism and how does one use it or how do I use it? Well, already I'm like, "Okay, just the critique of liberalism and the focus on individual rights, or on individualism." So that in itself is that I have to understand that that is the air that we breathe, that is part of the logic and the order of everything. So even in our field, that is about care, because I also think our field is about carcerality, so that's why I say care in quotes, that wants to be the center, or that wants to be what we're guided by, well, first, we have to understand what juices are we all in, what are we all marinating in? We're all marinating in the same juices of liberalism, right? So that does need to be critiqued, that is part of the issue of white supremacy, of capitalism, right, of imperialism, is that want to privatize, you want to commodify everything, and it's about individual gain and wealth, right? Even care, right?

Susana Parras:

So when someone needs help, well, you should have done something... That logic wants to be, well, this person should have done something to not be in these conditions, right? So we're never looking at the conditions, we're looking at what folks didn't or didn't or could do. Maybe they should get some more therapy, right? Or maybe they should do some CBT. It misses the conditions, right? And this is really the point. So that's not even me talking to anyone, that's me coming in with all this in here, and then literally, how does my body move when I understand that? I'm already working in the school system that is centered and founded on liberalism and individualism and all of that, right? It just is, it just is. So I already know, I already know the story, I already know how this story goes, right? Then I'm not fearful and how I move because I know what's right. Or not right. I know what is right.

Susana Parras:

Anyways, we can get all existential to this. But yeah, I think it's just really that that point of like, just allow for your process to be on your timeline, because you really have to allow this to just trickle and go deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper. I'm so deep that I saw that CRT is also limiting for me, right? There's more, that's one entry point. So, yeah, I'll pause there.

Nicole Vazquez:

As Susana was talking, I was thinking too, just that focus on individualism and the critique of liberalism, and what that takes away from us, right? One of the questions that you had us kind of ponder, Shimon, was how do we decolonize this work? And, for me, it's about going back to indigenous ways of knowing, how the critique... how liberalism, like Susana was saying, forces us to be individualistic, puts the blame on the individual. Therefore, when we think that way, then it's up to the individual, one person, to quote

unquote, right themselves or to get help. We are not islands amongst ourselves, we need community to work together, and that's what liberalism does, is it actively works against that.

Nicole Vazquez:

So decolonizing is another word that's unfortunately, I think, being thrown out there, because really, I mean, decolonizing the classroom or institutions, that means that we're not sitting inside the classroom, we're sitting outside on the grass, we're having conversations, we don't have grades, that's what decolonizing is if we're really want to talk about it. So what does decolonizing look like and what how can we practice it? I think it is going to require us to go back to Indigenous ways of knowing. And that goes back to what's been taken from us as people of color, as a descendants of... For myself as a descendant of Africans, descendants of Indigenous peoples here and that these are very communal communities, right? That we have always leaned on each other and worked together to solve problems.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah, I'll just give a little bit of background. My mom's from Panama. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather was from Martinique. So that's where my slave history comes from. My dad was Mexican American, his parents are from Chihuahua. So I have Indigenous roots here in what is now called the United States and in the Caribbean and in Central America. All of these things permeate internationally and globally as well.

Susana Parras:

I want to add too, yes, to echo and add, I was thinking about this question. Speaking of our processes, this word when I first heard it years ago was initially like, "Wow, just..." And I wanted to understand it and I wanted to wear it and do it and know, just really be in it. Now where I am is, when I saw your question, what I wanted to say was like, "We can't, because we are on stolen land," so I don't... That's it, we can't, because... We wouldn't even be in classrooms, we wouldn't recognize this world, that's how I would know that it shifted, is that I would be deeply confused. And so I go to Fanon, and I haven't Fanon, so I'm not even going to... I'm not even trying to perform knowing Fanon, but what I do know, and what I have kind of reflected and held or sat with is, Fanon talks about to decolonize, it means that it's replacing one order with another, that's going to require violence. And you're completely just what is... gutting it, boom, out, and then something else or just complete... Right?

Susana Parras:

Yeah, I sit with that in a different way, these days to understand that... Yeah, I don't know, I was in another Zoom event on decolonizing social work. I was like, "Can those two words go together?" And that was one of the conversations... or the point in that conversation... I think it was, oh, Mimi Kim was speaking from Cal State University, Long Beach. They were also deeply confused, like, "I don't know, can these two words be together? Decolonizing and social work?" So I love just the question. I love elevating contradictions and asking questions, and that the questions can be guiding and that we actually should be sitting with the contradictions, and it's not just one or the other. I wanted to add all that. So thank you, Nicole, for...

Nicole Vazquez:

Thank you. Sorry, just really quickly, I wanted to co sign on that, that shout out to Mimi Kim. Mimi's amazing. Mimi has been doing the work for a while, for a minute, before she was a social worker. Yeah. Sorry. No, go ahead, Shimon.

Shimon Cohen:

No, no, I love that both of you went straight to the decolonize question.

Nicole Vazquez:

It's because vocabulary gets co-opted. It gets co-opted. And Susana already talked about how stuff gets watered down. It's just the next thing to grab onto and then we still don't get anywhere.

Susana Parras:

Yeah. So now I started to then... I say like, "I'm a settler of color." I am a settler of color. So as someone who, the settlers came in and took over the land, right, and dispossessed and... So I am that too, I am not native to... I'm on Tongva land, and even that name is for those who are not native to that, right? That's a very also watered down name for non-Native folks. So even just that, of just sitting with that, yeah, I'm sure I could trace through my parents, through Guatemala and Indigenous, but I think it's really important too that just because I would be in the BIPOC category, that the power just really does interesting... It's very dynamic. And so it's that I also inhabit and embody a lot of power in spaces, and so a settler of color, being one of them, is that I'm not native to the lands that I live and work on at all, far from it.

Susana Parras:

But I'm going to take care of them, and I'm going to honor them, and I'm going to treat them with dignity, right? So it's very much about what's our relationship to the Earth, to the land, right, to really Native ways of seeing the world? And then what's the quality of our relationships? And really, in all our spheres, because I come on here as a social worker, but I'm not bounded to that role by any... I'm much more than that, right? And so all these things feel really important to name. So yeah, thank you, Nicole and Shimon for the question.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I mean, you just said so much that got me thinking that I'm trying to even figure out how to articulate it all right now, because I was thinking about one thing and then that part you said at the end, not being bound to social work, that resonates so strongly with me because I've felt this pull at different times where people are like... I know people who it's like, they're a social worker through and through, and that's their full identity, and they've never questioned or doubted or regretted being a social worker, and I do not feel that way, and I've never felt that way. For me, it's always been something that I'm like, "I'm me first." I'm me first, and everything that means, which I can't fully put into words.

Shimon Cohen:

And social work was something I got into because the combination of I had already been doing activism, and radical activism, and then I started doing some social service stuff, because it was an extension of that, but it also was like a job. We all need to have jobs. So it was a job that could fit my worldview. But then, and I said this actually in a talk the other day, and I know this is more about me interviewing you all, but I'm just going to say this part.

Susana Parras:

Please.

Shimon Cohen:

Because I said this in a talk the other day, it was like, I did organizing and activism and stuff before I became a social worker, and what social work education did for me, was actually train a lot of that out of me.

Susana Parras:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

And train me in very oppressive ways that I'm still unlearning. So a lot of what we're talking about, what you two are talking, I was like, "All this work we have to do before we're even with people." Right? If we're going to talk about clinical work, it's like, before we even hit a clinical session, we got a lot of work, right? And then the other thing I was thinking of is, I think the first time, and maybe I was kind of late to this, but I'm in my early 20s, I would say, like, 19, 20, 21, that's when I started learning about the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement, and started listening to John Trudell, and I even got to see him speak.

Shimon Cohen:

I remember him talking about colonization and what colonization does to the Earth, and all the toxic waste that's produced by mining, like uranium mining in particular, and what it's done to Indigenous people and that land. Then he talked about colonization of the mind and the toxic waste that's like anxiety and self-hatred. When I heard him say that, it was one of the most mind blowing experiences I think I've had, it completely shifted ways I think about the world. And just when you two were talking about that, it actually just brought me right back to that experience.

Nicole Vazquez:

That makes me think of The Nap Ministry. Nap as in siesta. So I wanted to put that out there for folks who aren't... If you just Google Nap Ministry podcast, that also just helped to remind me and it was a different way of understanding capitalism and what it does to us and how rest is so important and how it goes against liberalism, it goes against capitalism and how that is necessary. So I saw this as an opportunity to put that plug out there because it really helped put things in perspective for me, in terms of how I approach my work, how much I work, a reminder of what's important.

Susana Parras:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, thank you. I wanted to add, my spirit, my heart was just moving as you all were talking. That's really key is that for me and elevating both what you're saying, this piece of... Actually my social work education really did is, I ingested a lot of toxins through that. I mean, it really solidified a lot of things that I already was conditioned with before coming into grad school or wherever I landed in higher education. Yeah, for me it was also now and understanding again CRT being one of many entry points to doing anti-oppressive and really not just anti-oppressive for me, is really then I'm not about reforming systems, right? I'm not interested in reforming. I'm not interested in substitutes. So I understand that may put me somewhere else in relationship to my colleagues, right? Because that's saying, right, that's really kind of to your point of thinking about decolonizing, we wouldn't even have institutions.

Susana Parras:

And so for me, I remember saying it early on, but not really understanding why in the depths of it, but I came out of grad school knowing and the saying, like, "I need to work myself out of this profession." That's how I know when... I don't know, some change, transformation is... You don't need me, right? Or you don't need us through kind of the professionalized way. Because I think there's a way that... We come together because we're really offering care, we're really offering just a collective care that is so crucial to our existence, right? To our existence in institutions, to our existence in our homes, to our existence in anywhere that we are. And so for me, I love CRT, right? And I wear... I was never a Girl Scouts or did any of that, but a badge in that way of like, "Wow, yeah, I really took my time with this."

Susana Parras:

What CRT led me to was, I started just hitting, like a wall... I'm like, "Ah, there's something else, and I need..." And it was really that none of this belongs to us. All the toxicity, it is not mine, it is not ours. So when I think about healing justice work, that really kind of incorporates I think a lot of these things that we're speaking to, then we're really getting, I think, to the root of a lot of this. I appreciate being in spaces where, no, I'm not bounded to social work. Social work is a very harmful field, deeply harmful. I have friends, right, who don't practice and are deeply hurt and resentful and rageful at what these institutions and organizations have done, right?

Susana Parras:

Right now where I am, I'm working outside of the institution now and I worked in there. For the time that I did, over a decade, is now I'm understanding that I can help kind of build some kind of care for social workers who are still in systems, their health, right? This field takes people's health. It takes away people's spirit. You can't tell me folks who are working as child social workers, right, as protective services, yeah, there's some that stay, but that's not the majority, right? For me, there's a crisis we have in our field of how deeply unhealthy and harming these environments become. So rest, right? Collective care, just all those things that seems so basic, but actually challenge everything. So thank you.

Shimon Cohen:

I love how we start with... At least I had this intention of clinical practice, and immediately it's like, "Okay, we're not going to do that separation." And then we're in this deep conversation about decolonization and abolishing all institutions. I love it. And part of what I'm thinking about is, what are the conversations when you're practicing that bring all this together look like, right? Back to your example, Susana, when you've got a student who comes in, is like, "The effing cops," and all that. How do you create that space? Because you actually, and Nicole picked up on this, you said something about creating safety with dignity. But for you to do that, you had to do a lot of work to even get to that point, so that this person knows that you see their full humanity and their dignity, that they're even going to talk to you like that.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah, yeah.

Susana Parras:

Yes. Oh, you said it, seeing just their deep humanity. I think that's so much... Something I would love to somehow write about it more, talk about it more. But for me, therapy is just a phenomenal, magical healing space. Because for me, and I try to somehow express this to folks that I work with, but I don't

think that it will come through in the same way. But when I come into session, like, I am deep, my soul is touched and moved, right? I think that's a common experience and for me specifically, it's because I don't see myself apart from or disconnected from... Not an island, right? This young person actually who I'm specifically thinking when I when I said that... I mean, not biologically, right? But that was my brother at that age, that could my... that is my brother, right? I am connected to this other human being, right? Understanding the world in being reciprocal, mutual and collective, then I am connected to this person, right? They are a mirror, right, they are my mirror.

Susana Parras:

So I'm seeing them, there's a part that I see in myself when I see them. And so if I don't see myself in them, if I don't see myself as part of... whatever words want to be named, none of this shit works, right? The CRT, we could get to be talking about ethnics, we get to talk about anything, right? But it really is, all that oppression... All of this has deeply disconnected us and take... So that's how I do it, right? Is that I can say that. Is that when I begin to know and learn someone, because of that exchange, a dignified space, and you begin to tell me... And others come in... Now there's patterns, right? Because it's not just like the police officer who treats them a particular way. Now, it's the teacher, right? Now, it's that counselor.

Susana Parras:

And then I'm hearing all these stories, I don't do research in the way that it's known, but I am collecting a whole bunch of data and evidence, right? Because every story has a pattern, right? These are different folks who don't know, or probably will never know each other, that I've worked in hospital settings, in school settings, in home settings, in all these settings, right? And it's very much about somehow I did this to create this, and I am at fault and the shame and the guilt just immobilizes. So it's like, take this shit off of you, right? I have to take... That's a parallel process. I want to take that off of that 16 year old young man.

Shimon Cohen:

How do you do that?

Susana Parras:

What I say, so when I sit with them, it's like... And again, this is really like in building that relationship and building that safety. I'll begin to say things like, "I'm hearing that you've had this experience over and over, this is not the first time you've had this experience, right? How does that feel in your body?" And we begin to name sensations. Right here, it feels... I feel hot, I feel heat, and then we name that heat. And now we're like, "Okay, that heat, what is it trying to tell you?" Right? And then it'll come out. I shouldn't trust, I shouldn't trust them. Okay, that's the story that you're living from, right? That's a story. Let's identify that story. And when I say name that story to them. What I mean is, let's identify the dominant narrative, right? So racism as ordinary, there's the tenet, right? Like racism as ordinary right there, because they're telling you that at every corner there is a constricting experience for them.

Susana Parras:

It is not expansive to be in relationship with these folks at school, it's constricting, so constriction, we are defending, we're getting ready to do something, because this doesn't feel safe. So then I say that and I say, "I noticed that you can speak about that here. What allows for that? What allows for that? How does your body cue your signal to you that it's okay for you have shared?" Alright well, "I can breathe, or

I feel like I can just do..." And their body speaks so much. Okay, so that's a story. Let's think about how that story has shaped you, right? What that story has made you believe. Is that really who you are? Is this a part of you? And then now we're getting into this is a story that's been told about you, and that's been placed on you, but who are you beyond this narrative of being a kid who's in trouble and who's going to get suspended, because it's the kid that keeps acting out?

Susana Parras:

So understanding that the acting out has a purpose. So in session, we're learning purpose of self, right? And what I mean by that is just we all have these parts that come in, that can get us in trouble because of the conditions and environment, but that has a purpose and a role. It's it's protecting you in some way. So we have to keep protecting because we have to keep existing. So I say, "Okay, so that's a form of protection." So there's a story that is told about you, and about people that look like you. We know that that's not the whole truth, right? There's so much more, there's all these parts, and we spend a whole bunch of time learning our parts through art, through movement, through laughter. I have them nap, right, that's also... You need to rest, right? We say, "Nap." That's not an intervention that I can talk to my supervisor necessarily about, but I can learn how to navigate and how to word it as such.

Susana Parras:

So it's naming the story. It's naming the dominant narrative. It's using the stories that folks share with you, those deep morsels of experiences. And then seeing the patterns, the patterns, the patterns, there's binaries, there's values that we're forced to abide by. Who are you outside of these stories? Who are you outside of these values that are told by your parents, by your schools, by our community? Conditioning, and I use that word, your socialization, that's your wiring, that's how you're conditioned. What do we need to rewire? Is this what you want to have wired? I can keep going, I'll pause there. But those are some ways that I can recall in that moment how we're kind of moving and navigating through this.

Nicole Vazquez:

And that's the end of our podcast. That was beautiful, we should just end it right there. I was sitting here in awe. That's fucking beautiful.

Susana Parras:

And I can't do this without doing it for myself, right? I have to sit in my shit, and be like, "Oh, I didn't feel worthy of this care," right? I thought that because I wasn't like my brother who looked like this person, that somehow I was apart from this, right? And so now my impulse is to go towards people. So much of this is informed by, again, my positionality to power, and in my conditioning and my socialization. So every person that I sit with, they're my mom, they're a character in my story, they're my mom, they're my dad, they're my grandmother, they're my neighbor, they're my cousin, they're my brother. And so I heal myself through hearing them and how we're co-healing. And we're just sharing this medicine, right? It's just like, "Oh, when I hear them, boom." I'm like, "Oh." And that lights up something for me, just how it's happening to us right now, like our nervous system, it feels like we're co regulating each other. So that to me is powerful, right? Again, yes, CRT and beyond CRT.

Nicole Vazquez:

I have to reiterate for folks to know and understand that... And I keep going back to humility. Know that Susana goes into the space when she's working with a client, she's going into work with that client, not

for them, and not to help them. That is fundamental. Folks need to hear that, feel it, sit in it, swimming it, you need to hear that, you're not coming in to help these people and to me, that's what is so key. And also, when Susanna says that she does therapy, what I just heard is not what I learned in school, and it's not what we read in textbooks, right? But it's effective. I will bet you \$10 million that it's effective, right? But because she's coming from a place of that, of community, she sees the person in front of her as a fellow human being, that we're here to help each other, and I'm going to learn in... Same as an instructor in the classroom, you learn just as much if not more from your students as they do from you, and you have to go in with that level of humility and that's part of the work that Susana's talking about that's so hard for us to...

Nicole Vazquez:

Because it is, it's that unlearning of like, "I'm coming in because I have this degree, I went to X number of years of school and I've learned all this stuff. I've got my backpack full of tools and I'm ready to help solve your problems." No, that's not what it's about at all.

Susana Parras:

Yeah, at all. Oh, thank you, Nicole. At all. And to your question of what gives me hope, I taught for the first time at UCLA this past winter, that class gave me so much hope, all those students and I hope they listen, oh, my gosh. Because it's that, right, what we're saying... Thank you, Nicole, for that. Yeah, because I went in there... My partner, he says like, "I know some shit, but because I know what I know, I also know that I'm not shit, right? I ain't shit and I'm the shit." Right? That it's both at the same time. Because we learn so much, damn we don't really... I don't really know that much. It feels like that paradox that the more you know, the less you know type of thing. But it really speaks to that humility I think and it really just begins to kind of like... The shit just begins to crumble, right? All this conditioning that really forms every single part of us, right, our desires, like white supremacy, capitalism form our desires, right? Who we're attracted to, who we spent... Everything, right? Everything. Yes, we can connect everything to all of this, right?

Susana Parras:

You begin to then like, "Oh, my gosh, how can I be deeply complex, deeply paradoxical, deeply contradicting?" Because that means I'm deeply human. That's all that contradiction to me means is that I'm deeply human, because I'm both and, right? So I always walk in with the both and. It's this and this. That also looks like, yeah, I do this work, and look at my lack of melanin, right? I'm an able body, I speak... I'm not threatening. And so I really can move in spaces, and before that was really shameful. So part of that healing work is understanding like, "Oh, this shit was never mine," right? This shame and this guilty of taking up space, of like, "Oh gosh I wanna speak up, but I shouldn't..." We all have it. I didn't create this, so I'm going to spend the rest of my life, because I'm clear on that, this is going to take my whole life to unlearn, right?

Susana Parras:

So who to go in there, as a clinical expert, get the fuck out, right? That's what that makes you want to do. It's like, "No, no," because what do you need? And I'm here and I want to learn you, us, and then we can figure some shit out together. And no, I didn't learn that at grad school. So I'm coming back home, coming back home to like, "Oh, it's been in conversation and in community and care with each other." It's learning about just the wholeness of us. So thank you for uplifting that.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I mean, the connection part, everything you're saying is so powerful to me. And it's so important for this to get out there. And some of this has come up on other interviews I've done because, obviously, of who the folks are, who I have on here. But this idea of that professionalization separates. And in one of the terms, and I just have to say this, because I was thinking about it as you were speaking when you're like, "That person is this person to me and that person to me." And before I even became a social worker, right? My first job in social services was I did street outreach with homeless youth, right? And I did great with... I was cool with the youth, we were good. And a lot of it was because I had had some similar experiences to them, right? Without getting into all that.

Shimon Cohen:

But my issues were with actually the administrators and some of the staff, and they actually told me I was over-identified. That was the word. And we use that word in social work. We use it, over-identified. What does that even mean? It means you've probably had some similar experiences to these folks and what? You feel more connected to them? But we know that connection is part of that healing. So even that is like, "What are we doing? What are we doing?" I didn't even know what that word meant when they told me that, when I worked at that place, because I had dropped out of college, I wasn't a social worker, I had no training except what they trained me. And then they're like, "You need to have better boundaries, and you're over identified." And I didn't know what either one of those two things meant.

Susana Parras:

Yeah, yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

I didn't...

Susana Parras:

Same. Still working on the boundaries part too. Welcome actually. Absolutely.

Shimon Cohen:

But it's like, we're not... You want me to be a robot? It's like, "Fill out this form. Okay, now it's A, B or C. You picked this, so I say this." No.

Susana Parras:

Yes.

Nicole Vazquez:

I think that too, when you show up authentically which is what you're doing when you were doing street outreach, when you show up authentically, it means that you're giving your whole self, right? And when you show up authentically, and you've done that work, that critical self-analysis, that work that Susana is talking about, because there's a lot of work that goes into coming into a space confident as well, right? So it's one thing to be confident, another thing to come in with a power trip, there's a difference there. But when you've done the work and you walk in with humility, I think that those, for lack of a better term, those boundaries are going to be there because the other person's going to see you and respect you for who you are, because you're showing your full self.

Nicole Vazquez:

I think that I've had those experiences, right, where I show up authentically, and I don't have to worry about the boundaries. I don't have to worry about them asking me for my cell phone number, can I friend you on social media or whatever, because they know, they're getting enough or not enough, but they're getting what they need out of our relationship where they don't feel like it needs to go beyond that. I truly believe that. If you show up authentically, that over-identification or whatever, that's super problematic how we place these terms on authentic relationships.

Susana Parras:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

It's part of everything we're saying about this, about white supremacy, capitalism, liberalism, that we're all separate.

Susana Parras:

Yeah, as you were talking, right, I was just thinking, I really find myself speaking to more and more, not even seasoned social workers, these are also folks that have maybe been in the field one or two years, but again, deeply traumatized, deeply confused about what is it that they went to school for, because what they're in is something completely just disorienting and so it's just becoming just more and more and more and more evident. It's not working, just the way... It's not working, how we are being trained, but that then... I don't know, it feels... To what you were saying, I was thinking right before Shimon about the over-identifying piece. I was just thinking about that right before and I am so... Still have a lot of rage and resentment for a lot of spaces and a lot of spaces that made it, so it questioned me in that way, it questioned my intuition, it questioned actually the way that I knew to be, long before I went to grad school.

Susana Parras:

I knew how to just be and that was very much policed. So our values, our code of... All of that, which I know they're there, but I'm not invested to when I do this, it's not that I don't care. It's that I'm not... I'm not here for NASW, right? I'm not here for a board. I'm not here for the institution, right? And that's what I said in the last panel, I'm here for us, right? I'm here for you, I'm here for me, because that's where it feels like where it's at. So I really want to say that that was part of what gave me hope in this class where I would speak to this, right? Like, "What kind of social worker do you want to be? What values do you want to be aligned with?" Because our social work values in the ways that we're policed in them, they're very much white supremacist traits and characteristics.

Susana Parras:

So we did this in our class where we're like, "Let's look at white supremacist traits and characteristics." And it's perfectionism, it's the word... What is it? The value of the written word, it's all these things, right? And then we looked at, like, "Oh, these are practices. These traits and characteristics, these values, guide practices in my organization. In other classroom settings, in other spaces." And so it's like, "Oh." Then you begin to, like, "I've been embodying and deploying white supremacist traits and characteristics, and that shows up in me." And we have to be real clear, and real willing to do that work, because we missed that, that's deeply harmful to the folks that we work in, because yes, while I'm

saying that we're all human in this, I still have a position of power, right, that is afforded to me, that is not to the person across from me. That is a deep responsibility, I'm not going to mess with that, right?

Susana Parras:

And my profession or this profession is not about the values that I'm about, and so I already know I cannot find what I need in this field, right? But to your point, I'm here. I'm here, so now I'm going to look around and see who do I want to roll with, right? Who do I want to work with? Who do I want to fight with? Who do I want to organize with? Who do I want to create these practices with? And that's who I'm going to align with. So it gives me hope is continuing to align my values and be right with myself and my spirit and my body because I am what all this work is going to be reflected out of. So yeah, I want my shit to be quality, so I do love taking... I take pride in my healing and my partner told me something beautiful, we just celebrated 17 years. He's like, "I don't take your healing for granted." Because also my healing has also allowed for deep humanity in my relationship, right? Where I've been able to forgive myself and forgive and really be...

Susana Parras:

All the things we hear about abolition, I'm like, "Oh, shit, that shit's showing up. I'm practicing some abolitionist values without necessarily identifying as such," because I'm also not going to claim that just because it's the latest thing to do. And so we really... If we're about abolitionist, whatever we're about, then how do you practice and how can we support you in that? How can all our relationships reflect your reflective, right? Because that's so beautiful what you shared, right? That you connected, you were just so deeply human with them, they felt safe and dignified with you and then that was named, and then that was shamed and judged, right? It's over-identifying. How many times did I not second guess myself in session, because this person was deeply feeling heard and seen by me? And so now I'm like, "Oh, my god, I'm doing something wrong." Then I have to go to supervision and correct it.

Susana Parras:

Because it wasn't like, "Susie, no, you didn't do anything wrong." It's like, "Oh, well, maybe you want to think about boundaries." So there was already a dominant narrative that I was moving in.

Shimon Cohen:

The cop in your head.

Susana Parras:

Yeah. I'm like, "What the..." So I refuse, I refuse, I refuse all this. And so my healing is that, right? My healing is my refusal to this. You all allow me... These conversations allow me to stay afloat in this profession. My vulnerability, my tenderness, my softness, my humility, right? So yeah. Yes to all of this. More of this, please.

Nicole Vazquez:

I think it's a topic for a whole other podcast of what happens when people react to your authenticity. I think one is they're threatened, right? So when you get identified as over-identifying or not having boundaries, for me, it's one of two things, it's the person's threatened because you're more effective and doing whatever you want to call your intervention than they are, right? This youth relates more to Shimon than he does to the MSW or the LCSW, that's a threat to that person, right? And then the other thing, I think, reaction is, this doesn't... We're all trained in this institution, right? And in white

supremacy, and in capitalism. So what they're seeing you practice and what they're seeing you do is so outside the lines of what they were taught, and what we've been socialized to believe as what the norm is for our entire lives that's been reified for us for centuries, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

I mean, that's the other thing I think that CRT helps me with is it helps me to understand the history, so then therefore, I can understand people's behaviors. So if my supervisor is being difficult and telling me that I'm over-identifying or don't have the right boundaries, or whatever, it's helpful for me, at least to understand where they're coming from. And on some level, it's like, how could they think any different if this is the way they've been socialized, right? Because this is going outside, it's breaking the walls of convention. And we do have to be aware of how folks are going to react to that. We're seeing how people are reacting to it all across the country, people are directly targeting critical race theory. That's because they don't understand it, and they see it as a threat to them. Like I said, it's a topic of a whole other podcast, but...

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, and some of them don't understand it, but they know it's about breaking down racism. And so right then and there, they don't want to deal with it either and they want to shut it down.

Nicole Vazquez:

Well, it's about taking away their power.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. And they don't want to give it up.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

I mean, it just feels honestly even good to share that story about the over-identification because I don't think I've even ever talked about it publicly. Because that shame and embarrassment, and also like, "Well, what are people going to think?" But I'm done with that, I think that if anything the last couple of years has taught me and what I went through at the last place I worked was just like, "I'm done playing those games. I'm done. I can't do it anymore." It's just so destructive.

Nicole Vazquez:

Absolutely.

Shimon Cohen:

It's nice to be... It feels really good to be talking with both of you who bring your full selves and have the analysis and the approaches that you both have, because it's liberating, just the conversation feels liberating. And then it makes me know... I already know, but then it just makes me know even more about the power of the work you're doing every day. Which again, it's a total honor to have both of you on here, and I want to thank you again, and I want to thank you for doing the work.

Nicole Vazquez:

Thank you. Thank you, Shimon. I said yes, when you said it's liberating because I mean, if anyone who's listening to this right now just hears Susana speak, it's so liberating. I feel like Susana is able to articulate what we're all feeling and she's also able to articulate how to do it. And Susana, I just want to tell you what that does for me and I want to thank you for that.

Susana Parras:

Thank you so much. Thank you for the love and right back at you Nicole. When I knew I was going to do this with you, I knew I can be and embody because you provide very dignified and safe space for me and have for many years now. So, thank you. Thank you, sister. And I and also just... Yeah, I also want to give a shout out to ancestors, because I'll say this too, grief, grief work, grief process, just being human, and losing right now, not even people, right, but we all lose, right? And so we're always transforming and we're always grieving something that could have been or would have wanted. So all the possibilities that are no longer and all those futures that will no longer be, so I also a shout out to ancestors, to all the ancestors, to all those taken by the state, to all those taken by their own, that take their own lives.

Susana Parras:

I'm celebrating a two year anniversary of a good friend that died by suicide two years ago. And I'm also celebrating 17 years of a lot of imperfections with this other human being. And so I celebrate and give shout out and I'm very deeply rooted. And what allows me to do this is being deeply entrenched and submerged in cycles of life and death all the time, because that's what we're moving through. You all, this conversation is protection for me, it's support, and it's just dignified space to be in choice. So I look forward to what we will continue to create.

Susana Parras:

I didn't imagine not working in school systems or really in an institution, so it's been something to create my practice which is called Heal Together, and I deeply believe in and rooted in those values that we have to do this together. Thank you for doing the work. I love the name of your podcast.

Nicole Vazquez:

Gracias hermana.

Shimon Cohen:

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