MAKING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION JUST
By Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon

This text is Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon's 2017 AERA social justice award recipient lecture, presented April 30, 2017 at the 2017 AERA conference.

{ Watch the lecture: https://app.box.com/v/2017AERAsj }

While the audience arrived and took their seats, a music compilation played. The songs, listed below, and specific lyrics were selected by Dr. Bensimon, and referenced throughout her presentation. At the end of the paper you can find a complete list of titles with lyrics.

• “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye (1971)
  Written by Al Cleveland, Renaldo Benson, and Marvin Gaye

• “ICE El Hielo” by La Santa Cecilia (2013)
  Written by Alex Bendaña, José Carlos, Marisol Hernández, Sebastián Krys, Claudia Brant, and Miguel Ramírez

• “Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” by K’naan (2016)
  Written by Trooko, René Pérez Joglar, Claudia Feliciano, Riz Ahmed, Keinan Warsame, and Lin-Manuel Miranda

• “Quihubo, Raza” by Agustín Lira & Alma (2016)
  Written by Agustín Lira

• “We Shall Overcome” by Mahalia Jackson (1968)
  Written by Charles Albert Tindley

• “A Change Is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke (1964)
  Written by Sam Cooke

• “Glory” by John Legend feat. Common (2014)
  Written by John Stephens, Lonnie Lynn, and Che Smith

• “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy (1990)
  Written by Carlton Ridenhour, Eric Sadler, Hank Boxley, and Keith Boxley

  Written by Arrow Benjamin, Jonny Coffer, Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce Knowles, Alan Lomax, John Lomax, Frank Tirado, and Carla White
A few moments ago, you heard Marvin Gaye’s beautiful voice asking “What is going on?” “What is going on?” Marvin Gaye sang that in the 1960’s to raise consciousness about the evils of war and racism.

Now in 2017, “What is going on?” is the question that runs through my mind with varying levels of urgency every day—and I’m sure it runs through many of your minds each day as well. It seemed very fitting to me, then, to make that question also run through this lecture, which is titled “Making American Higher Education Just.”

In preparing this lecture, I debated how to best approach the topic of justice and injustice in higher education.

There are numerous historical touchstones I could have used as a starting point as well as a number of my own personal experiences and the experiences of colleagues, students, and the many people whose experiences I have documented in articles and books. But here is the starting point for me: Making higher education just requires equity-minded practitioners and researchers as well as philanthropists and intermediary organization leaders. All of them. Working together.

Believing jointly in the need for justice in education and in the essential value of racial equity.

This means having a shared understanding of the characteristics of equity-mindedness, including 1) being race-conscious in a critical way, as opposed to color-blind; 2) being cognizant of how racism is produced through every day practices; and 3) having the courage to make racism visible and discussable.

**EQUITY-MINDED COMPETENCIES**

*Equity-mindedness, including:*

1. Being race-conscious in a critical way, as opposed to color-blind
2. Being cognizant of how racism is produced through every day practices
3. Having the courage to make racism visible and discussable

Equity-mindedness as a way of seeing and acting has been the ideal that I and my colleagues at the Center for Urban Education have been working towards since our founding.
To put equity-mindedness into the most contemporary context of higher education and within the theme “Making Higher Education Just” I will talk very frankly about the techno-rational solutions that are "trending" as part of the college completion agenda in the United States—and the startling invisibility of race and racism in those so-called solutions.

I am using this term-- “techno-rational"--to describe structural solutions, sometimes referred to as "game changers", that overlook not only the complexity of community colleges but also the racialized nature of community colleges. In particular, I am asking, "What is going on?” to bring attention to the prevalence of racial invisibility in techno-rational solutions aimed at reforming the most urgent problems being confronted by community colleges.

I say this with full awareness that portraying community colleges as racialized is not the way we usually talk about higher education. In fact, race and racism as characteristics of higher education are typically absent from mainstream depictions of higher education. As long as we say nothing about the silencing of race, and I am including whiteness here, it will continue to happen. Thus, it is important that those of us who are given the opportunity to speak publicly use that privilege in the interests of justice. This has never been more true than it is in this country right now, no matter who you are or where you are in your career or scholarship.

One of the first books that I read as a beginning doctoral student at Teachers College Higher Education program was Joseph Ben-David’s “Trends in American Higher Education” (1981). Even though I read that book in a different century, more decades ago than I prefer to calculate, to this day I recall Ben-David's depiction of our system as egalitarian (1981).

Instead of seeing a highly-stratified system of higher education, Ben-David saw a system that was integrated by a tiered structure that, he assumed, made transfer from one institution to another and from a lower sector to one that was higher a natural and smooth process (1981).

Ben-David’s focus on the structural organization of higher education made him see a rational distribution of labor by sector and institutional types that from the outside appeared, fair, egalitarian, and free of “racial discrimination” (1981). He singled out for special praise the transfer opportunities available at that time to junior college students (Ben-David, 1981).

In contrast to Ben-David, contemporary philosophers, scholars of education, and sociologists, prominent among them Lionel McPherson, Shaun Harper, Greg Anderson, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Ana Martinez Aleman, Sylvia Hurtado, Laura Rendon, Lori Patton, Danny Solorzano, Tara Yosso, Alicia Dowd, Mitch Chang, Rob Teranishi and many more point to a system of higher education that is sustained by structures, policies, and practices that manufacture racial inequality.

Where mainstream white scholars see a higher education system that is adaptive to all kinds of students, critical scholars of color see and call attention to the production of racial inequality. Where mainstream white scholars and policymakers think in non-racial terms about structures, policies, practices, and people,
critical scholars of color assume an analytical orientation that accepts racism as endemic to higher education. Where mainstream white scholars see structure as a means of bringing order to disorder, critical scholars of color see a racial structure paired with a discourse of whiteness that must be dismantled.

However, as I will discuss further, this critical voice of scholars of color is invisible in the national reforms that propose to support the college completion agenda, particularly as applied in community colleges.

I realize that when I call for the visibility of race and for the capacity to understand race critically, I have something in mind that may not be self-evident to everyone.

First, as a caveat, I do recognize and accept that race is a socially constructed category. However, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva points out, race is socially constructed but it has a “social reality” meaning that “it produces real effects on the actors racialized as “black” or “white” (2006). In my work with colleges it is not unusual to be asked “why do you focus on race?” or to hear people assert “I don’t see race, I just see people.” I also hear that since race is not a biological fact we should not try to observe the quality of classroom interactions between instructors and students who are not white.

So believe me when I tell you that I am aware that noticing “race” based on skin color or other physical characteristics is imperfect. But I also know that refusing to see race or to pretend that it does not exist will not make racism go away.

K. Anthony Appiah cautions us that to talk about race intelligently, we must be clear about what we mean.

In this lecture, I am using the term “race” as a signifier, a label that refers to people who have experienced oppression and who share a history of oppression. I am using “race” to make the point that “black” and “white” circumscribe the social realities of scholars, funders, policymakers, leaders, instructors, staff and students. Black and white are present even when they are not explicitly named.

I use “race” in reference to Black Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders because they share a history of oppression based on assumptions that color and other physical characteristics, as well as language, are markers of inferiority that justified subjugation, exclusion, and discrimination. Though I use the term “race” to encompass communities with distinct experiences of oppression, I am well aware that the circumstances by which each of these groups became “American” are different. Nevertheless, these communities share the experience of becoming “American” by force, not choice.

Since 1999, when I founded the Center for Urban Education, my work has focused on making racial inequality in higher education “public” to practitioners, leaders, policy makers, and scholars.

My aim is to create awareness of the fine-grained details of racial inequality and build institutional capacity to institutionalize racial equity. I view racial equity as an essential quality of institutions of higher education. And I believe that practitioners and leaders need to develop the competence to perform racial equity routinely and
conscientiously. An aspect of the work we carry out at the Center for Urban Education is to create tools to support critical racial analysis of existing policies and other kinds of legacy artifacts that have been given the stature of master frameworks and carry the authority of “best practices.” Typically, these best practices are not "best" at all—they are not race conscious and do not consider that what may work well for white students may be harmful to students of color or might perpetuate inequality.

In the last couple of years, we have seen private foundations investing heavily in reforms to improve the delivery of remediation in English and Mathematics, to increase the number of students who transfer successfully from community colleges to four-year colleges, and to improve efficiency by streamlining the curriculum into degree pathways to reduce the likelihood that students will take courses that lengthen the amount of time it takes to earn a degree.

Alicia Dowd along with many others describes community colleges as gateways and gatekeepers of racial equity simultaneously. Our center works with many community colleges in California and Colorado and we view remedial education and low transfer rates as major obstacles to racial equity. Consequently, we have examined a variety of documents, books, and reports on these reforms with three interpretive questions in mind:

**THE QUESTIONS WE ASK**

1. Is race visible in the document? And in what ways is it visible?
2. Does the depiction of the problem and solutions reflect an understanding of the underlying causes that account for racial inequality?
3. Will the recommended reform(s) build the capacity of practitioners to produce racial justice in educational outcomes?

These are simple, straightforward questions and they are focused on answering one larger question: Who benefits and who might be harmed by reforms that do not acknowledge the social reality of minoritized students?
The documents that we subjected to the three critical race questions include a document titled Core Principles for Transforming Remediation Within a Comprehensive Student Success Strategy: A Joint Statement (2015) published by a consortium of organizations, including among others Complete College America, American Association of Community Colleges, Education Commission of the States, and others. We also examined the Transfer Playbook (Wyner et al., 2016), published by CCRC and the Aspen Institute and various documents representing Guided Pathways a popular reform that has attracted millions of dollars in foundation and government funding. These documents represent a set of trending solutions in education and are currently enjoying a great deal of momentum.

I call these documents “artifacts” in the tradition of socio-historical activity theory which posits that people carry out their work in activity settings and that artifacts, which can be documents as well as language, mediate practices. The set of artifacts we analyzed were created with the intent to mediate reforms--that is to say that they provide advice on how to perform remedial education and transfer in ways that are more responsive to the needs of students and their success.

From my perspective, transfer, remedial education, and curricular dysfunctions disproportionately impact Black Americans, Latinos and Latinas, and American Indians therefore it is important to ascertain whether these artifacts will actually rectify racial inequities.

At the outset, this set of artifacts make one important contribution in that they focus on what colleges need to do to improve the outcomes of students; the artifacts do not situate the problem in students’ motivation or cultural background.

That said, from a critical race perspective, this set of artifacts are problematic for a variety of reasons:

1. Race is conspicuously invisible in all of the documents. A word search using a variety of descriptors, including African American, Black, Latino, Hispanic, equity, inequity, race, racial, etc. essentially turned up the same result, “no such term found.” [slide] For example the transfer playbook has no references to Black, Latinos, or American Indians; no reference to race or equity. Instead, race neutral terms such as low-income and first generation are used a couple of times. Also, the term demographic is used repeatedly, as in “demographic forces.” I am aware that when there is discomfort to talk about race, individuals may resort to euphemistic substitutes to mean "race" without saying it. But to not name race directly can create harm out of good intentions.
In the Transfer Book (2016), while race is not mentioned directly, community colleges are seen as a natural supply of "diversity" that can help four-year colleges meet diversity goals.

The Transfer Book (2016) makes the point that most students entering a community college aim to earn a bachelor's degree but "for a host of financial and other reasons, many are unlikely to transfer". While I agree that finances may be an impediment to transfer, I don’t think it is the main impediment. Race and racism should be considered among "those other reasons" that block transfer (2016).

The emphasis of the Transfer Book (2016) is on articulation agreements, curricular maps, data, and specialized advisement. Procedures, structures, and practices are indeed important and they need to work efficiently. But transfer is not an assembly line process that can be made to work with machine-like exactitude by tinkering with structures. Articulation agreements, curricular maps, data, specialized advisement, transfer centers will not change the outcomes for Latinos, African Americans, and American Indians if practitioners do not ask "Who benefits from these structural arrangements by race and ethnicity?" "How can we create structural reforms that are race conscious?"
The word "data" is mentioned over 45 times in the playbook (2016). Yet the importance of disaggregating data by race and ethnicity to see who specifically is transferring and where are they transferring to is not mentioned. It matters a great deal to monitor whether Black and Latino and American Indian students are transferring to public and private colleges or to the for-profit sector.

The document on the core principles of transforming remedial education presents the crisis around remedial education as a problem of ALL students. While many students struggle with developmental education, the majority of students who are placed into and never complete developmental education sequences tend to be predominately students of color (i.e., African American, Hispanic, Native American). Therefore, the focus on “all student” solutions papers over race.

The only nod to race in the Transfer Playbook (2016) is the photo of a student who is black, she might be Black American, but she could also be international or Latina.

Neither a single photo or many compensate for leaving race out of the body of the document.

Like the transfer playbook, the core principles use code words that I assume refer to black, Latino, and American Indian students without specifically naming them.

The most troubling aspect of the core principles to reform remediation is the implicit faith that different kinds of structures and sequences will create better outcomes. While I do not dispute the need for structural change, race is a significant factor in the crisis of remedial education, and one-size-fits-all structural changes that fail to take race seriously will only benefit minoritized students who have developed the coping strategies to succeed in alienating contexts. But the students who are placed in remedial courses often lack the know-how to overcome alienating instructors and classrooms.
Another noticeable and regrettable oversight in the core principles of transforming remedial education is the significance of instructors’ beliefs, pedagogical competence, and capacity to understand the social reality of minoritized students. Changes to the organization of remedial education or to the methods of assessment and placement in remedial education courses will not induce instructors to discard the “folk theories” they call upon and through which they naturalize the failure of minoritized students.

If a prevailing belief among remedial education instructors is that students from particular racial/ethnic groups are “doomed to failure” and that there is little they can do to reverse the situation, it is doubtful that structural changes that are not race-conscious will lead them to view inequity as a failure of their practices.

Relatedly, but much more complicated, instructors lack the know-how to notice that the ways in which they interact with minoritized students can impose a self-worth tax (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). For example, syllabi full of rules seem to be common in community colleges. These rule-heavy syllabi suggest that instructors have low expectations of their students. They anticipate that students will violate rules, misbehave, and not act, as some syllabi put it, “civilized.” These syllabi list the many and different ways in which students risk failing or being asked to leave the class.

A syllabus typically is an instructional artifact that lays out a plan for what will happen in a course, what students will be asked to do. It is a guide. It is a resource. It is also a medium through which the instructor communicates with students the value and joy of a particular topic. Instead, some instructors use syllabi as instruments of discipline and admonishment. The language of rules paints an image of students as disruptive rather than as learners. In the context of race, such messages are harmful to students’ self-worth.

For the sake of brevity, I have spoken only about the Transfer Playbook (2016) and touched lightly on the Core Principles for reforming remedial education. The literature on how to do pathways also leaves race out.

The ideology reproduced through these documents is that race does not matter sufficiently to merit naming, analysis, or consideration of how transfer, remedial education, and degree attainment are in fact racialized.
Scholars who leave race out, particularly when race is integral to the phenomena being considered should take heed and counsel from Douglas Massey: Papering over Race makes for bad social theory, bad research, and bad policy.

“Papering over the issue of race makes for bad social theory, bad research, and bad public policy.”
-Douglas Massey

In reviewing these documents, I was surprised about the consistent omission of race and I wondered why. After all, the extent of racial inequality that has been created through the overrepresentation of black, Latino, and American Indian students in remedial education courses is well documented and well known. The fact that these students also continue to have the lowest transfer rates is also well documented and well known. So, what is going on? How could it be then that the social reality of these students is invisible in documents that aim to solve a racialized problem? Why is it that, still, 54 years after the adoption of the 1964 Civil Rights Act we are not able to engage in straight talk about how race and racism operate through the very structures that these documents aim to reform?
Here are some possible explanations.

1. Higher education is thought to be more liberal than other American institutions. It is possible that liberal ideology creates a false sense of confidence that in addressing ALL STUDENTS the interests and needs of minoritized students are included. It is possible that in positing transfer, remedial education, and “guided pathways” as a set of race-neutral practices, structures, and policies, the authors made a choice to appeal to universal interests and be more likely to get buy-in from practitioners, policy-makers, and leaders who don’t want to talk about race or complain of “race fatigue” or believe that we have gotten over “race and racism” so why bring it up. It is possible that the authors of these documents feel that “All students means all students” and there is no need to specify, “Black students” “Latino students” “White students.” They believe that focusing on all students is fair and objective. Unfortunately, “all students” often ends up normalizing the experience of white students. When data are presented for “all” students, racialized outcomes are covered up.

2. To help explain the problem with “race neutral” discourses I turn to Amy Gutman. In her essay Responding to Racial Injustice (Gutman, 1996) she makes the point that when well-meaning people believe that color-blindness means being racially just, they are assuming an ideal society that has gotten over racism. But we are very much a non-ideal society. We have very clearly not gotten over racism. Therefore critical race consciousness is the only appropriate and necessary stance to address the consequences of practices that disproportionately deprive Black Americans, Latinos, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders of the kind of educational experience that the well-to-do feel entitled to. To not consider the
role of race and racism in transfer, remedial education, and in guided program pathways is to mistakenly assume that the community college is already just and therefore race is no longer relevant.

I don’t think that the authors of these reports view the community college as the ideal model of educational justice.

So what is going on? Why was race left out?

- It is possible that these authors understand racism as overt individual and interpersonal acts that are easily labeled as “racist.”
- But in the present day the more sinister and insidious problem is structural racism that is produced through everyday practices that are carried out systematically. Structural racism is extremely challenging because most people do not see it and those who do see it are often dismissed for seeing too much.

A reform perspective on transfer that places so much faith in the structural design of transfer as the solution to low transfer rates and fails to direct practitioners, leaders, policymakers, intermediary organizations, and funders on how to examine these structures for racial bias and disproportionate impact on students of color runs the risk of “effectively maintaining inequality.”

The extent to which structures will be effective, fair, and just for students of color who experience the lowest rates of transfer depends greatly in the beliefs, values, and knowledge of practitioners. Most practitioners do not think of racial inequality as an enduring characteristic of their institutions and are typically unaware of their implicit biases. They are not in the habit of asking “Why is it that my practices year after year fail to create success for Black students, for Latino and Latina students, for American Indian students, for Pacific Islander students?”

RACE IS MISSING BECAUSE...

- ALL! students matter
- It is too risky
- We are over racism
- Racism is perceived as individual acts of discrimination
- Structural racism is hard to understand contextually
- Close academic networks are closed to critical race perspectives
- It is not what we know
I have described these artifact documents as “master frameworks” because they carry the authority of leaders in the community college agenda; they have the imprimatur of powerful funders; and they have a forum that enables them to influence what community college leaders and practitioners view as the right thing to do. Yet these documents do not answer the question of “What’s going on?” And they do not move us closer to making education just.

So what we have is a scenario in which the leading voices on the community college fail to assert racial equity as a goal; they fail to view community colleges as racialized institutions; and they fail to perceive the racial consequences of ostensibly race neutral reforms. With these failures, they make the work of racial equity advocates even more challenging that it already is.

In my article the "Underestimated Significance of Practitioner Knowledge" (Bensimon, 2007) in the *Scholarship on Student Success*, I speak about the problem of highly cohesive and homogenous scholar networks. Drawing on the work of organization scholar Karl Weick it is possible that the absence of race owes to the lack of variability in the conceptualization of transfer, remedial education, and degree pathways. Small scholarly and policymaking communities with close disciplinary and social ties may block the entry of critical race theories and perspectives. A review of the citations index of these artifact documents show no references to the works of scholars of color generally, and in particular to those who have a critical perspective.

For example, the work of Professor Laura Rendon on validation theory, which is of great relevance to understand the experience and needs of students of color, is nowhere to be found. The work of Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Carter on “sense of belonging” is also missing. The work of Tara Parker and Leticia Bustillos on remedial education is also missing. The work of Shaun Harper on racial climates and high achieving African American males is also missing. The work of Victor Saenz and Luis Ponjuan on Latino males in community colleges, also missing. The many critical and race-centric studies on community college transfer written by Alicia Dowd and colleagues—also missing. Should we assume that they are missing because the creators of these artifact documents are entirely unaware of them? Or is it because they are not thought to be relevant? Or perhaps it's because their critical orientation makes them somehow suspect. Again, I have to ask “What is going on?”

I do now that the consequences of a tightly knit and homogenous social network of scholars, policy makers, and leaders of intermediary organizations is that racialized problems when viewed through ostensibly race-neutral frameworks run the risk not only of perpetuating inequality but worsening it. For example, there is already evidence that reforms of remedial education that are not monitored for racial effects actually increase racial gaps.

In 1989, in a Chronicle of Higher Education article titled “An Elite Priesthood of White Males Dominates the Central Areas of Civil-Rights Scholarship” Michael Olivas asked, Why is it that when it comes to issues of Civil Rights, scholarship is dominated by white males who display a surprising pattern of self-citation. So here we are, three decades later and I am still asking how could it be that the body of knowledge informing reforms aimed at the sector that has been given the greatest responsibility for the attainment of racial equity systematically excludes the critical perspectives of scholars of color?

But it is easy for me to critique without offering an alternative for consideration. By way of introducing an alternative reform strategy that more directly addresses racism and the possibility of more socially just practices, I want to very briefly turn to an example from CUE’s work that illustrates the detrimental
Making higher education just requires research methods and reform agendas that will empower practitioners like James with the critical knowledge and tools that are necessary to dismantle the everyday practices that produce racial inequality.

Consequences of homogenous networks and the promise of racially conscious reforms when practitioners become aware of whiteness as a racial frame. A few years ago our center, with the support of the Ford Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, worked to implement the Equity Scorecard in Colorado colleges. One of the participating colleges was the Community College of Aurora. The chair of the math department, James Gray, was part of the team that we worked with. When we met James it was clear that he was a serious and dedicated chair and instructor. It was also evident that racial equity was not something that he considered. In fact, he mentioned that the state level discussion on the reform of remedial education never touched on racial equity and that it had not occurred to him to bring it up. Remedial math data in his own department when for the first time it was broken down by race and ethnicity showed that Blacks and Latinos were experiencing the greatest gaps in course success. Through the methods of participatory critical action research, we engaged James and his colleagues in a variety of inquiry activities to help them see that their practices were racialized. One of the inquiry activities was around hiring of math faculty. In answering the question: “How do you do faculty hiring?” And through a process of breaking the routine practice of hiring into its most minute details James came to the realization that in the 10 years he served as chair he had not hired a single African American and the reason for that had to do with the structure of hiring, which included explicit and implicit rules, the external community he relied on to identify candidates, and the artifacts that were integral to the hiring process such as interview guides. Through this process James realized that in relying on an all-white network of math department chairs he was effectively ensuring that there would be no African American candidates in the pool. The process of studying hiring as a racialized structured enabled James to make major changes that resulted in the hiring of black and Latino faculty. One of the changes was to ask each candidate to demonstrate how they would explain the syllabus on the first day of class. This simple exercise made it possible to differentiate among candidates that explained the syllabus as a contractual document and those that were able to explain the syllabus with the objective of connecting with students and reducing their fears about math.

Making higher education just requires research methods and reform agendas that will empower practitioners like James with the critical knowledge and tools that are necessary to dismantle the everyday practices that produce racial inequality. Institutionalized racism is a problem of practice that is more productively understood “locally” rather than at a macro level.

James learned to change the activity setting that constituted faculty hiring. But he did not learn to change his practices because he read a
report on the reform of remediation or the so-called best practices of remediation (and if he had I doubt it would have directed him to examine the racial makeup of his faculty, how he does hiring, or how he uses course level data disaggregated by race and ethnicity to assist individual faculty focus on racial equity). He was able to see how his practices were blocking the hiring of faculty of color because we created a structure and tools that enabled him and his colleagues to ask direct race questions of their own practices. Current reform initiatives in remedial education, transfer, or guided pathways, in addition to being color blind, completely neglect the importance of inquiry into everyday practices as a strategy for practitioner learning and change. In some cases the term “inquiry” is sprinkled here and there but inquiry is not a natural practice, and inquiry into one’s own practices as well as assumptions and beliefs is very complex.

I chose the title “Making Higher Education Just” because I believe it is a message we can all unite behind. It calls for justice at a time in this country when justice is in rather short supply. And it reflects the aspirations in the mission of the Center for Urban Education and in the research methods we use to partner with individuals like James to remove the barriers to racial inequity. It is not simply a theory or an idea, but a proven practice that fosters change, and—yes—justice.

The other theme running through my talk today related to music—to answering a question about what is going on in these times we’re living in. But that is just one song out of many that I chose to play today for you.

Besides representing artists who I enjoy listening to, the lyrics in those songs reflect other themes in my talk and in how I think about my work. Like Hamilton’s cast, I am making a case that scholars of color, like immigrants, get the job done when it comes to understanding racial inequity and “all you got to do is see the world through their eyes.” Metaphorically, La Santa Cecilia’s ICE—Water Frozen Solid is the “wall” that scholars and advocates of racial equity come up against when they bring up issues like the ones I have brought up this afternoon.

And of course, like Marvin Gaye, I have asked “What is Going on?” I wish someone could definitively tell me. Tell me why the people who are supposed to be leaders on these issues seem so blind to genuine positive change. Tell me why they leave race out. Tell me why they do not take heed from the scholars and advocates who struggle mightily to rectify racial wrongs.

Tell me why the imprints of scholars of color are so plainly missing from the networks that aim to reform what scholars of color have been reforming always.

Given the many other things happening in education and in this country right now, I suspect all of us will be asking “What is going on?” for years to come. But maybe the answer to that question is in another, related question that we can all ask ourselves just as often:

"What can I do to change what is going on?"

Thank you.
References


“What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye (1971)
Written by Al Cleveland, Renaldo Benson, and Marvin Gaye

Picket lines and picket signs
Don’t punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what’s going on

“ICE El Hielo” by La Santa Cecilia (2013)
Written by Alex Bendaña, José Carlos, Marisol Hernández, Sebastián Krys, Claudia Brant, and Miguel Ramírez

Ice, water frozen solid
ICE, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement
Ice, el hielo
Eva pasando el trapo sobre la mesa, ahí está
[Eva passing the rag over the table, there she is]
Cuidando que todo brille como una perla
[Taking care that everything shines like a pearl]
Cuando llegue la patrona que no se vuelva a quejar
[So when the boss comes she does not complain again]
No sea cosa que la acuse de ilegal
[Don’t let it be that she accuses her of being illegal]

“Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” by K’naan (2016)
Written by Troooky, René Pérez Joglar, Claudia Feliciano, Riz Ahmed, Keinan Warsame, and Lin-Manuel Miranda

All you got to do is see the world with new eyes
Immigrants, we get the job done
Look how far I come
We get the job done

“Quihubo, Raza” by Agustín Lira & Alma (2016)
Written by Agustín Lira

Texas y Utah y California
Wyoming y Colorado
Nevada y Nuevo México:
Todo estas tierras fueron robadas
[All these lands were stolen]
Y al presente nos encontramos rogándole al gobierno
[And today, we find ourselves begging the government]
“We Shall Overcome” by Mahalia Jackson (1968)

Written by Charles Albert Tindley

We shall overcome one day
We shall overcome, oh Lord, one day
If in our hearts we do believe
We shall overcome, Lord, one day

“A Change Is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke (1964)

Written by Sam Cooke

It’s been too hard living, but I’m afraid to die
’Cause I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky
It’s been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will


Written by John Stephens, Lonnie Lynn, and Che Smith

One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
One day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure
Oh glory

“Fight the Power” by Public Enemy (1990)

Written by Carlton Ridenhour, Eric Sadler, Hank Boxley, and Keith Boxley

Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power


Written by Arrow Benjamin, Jonny Coffer, Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce Knowles, Alan Lomax, John Lomax, Frank Tirado, and Carla White

Freedom! Freedom! I can’t move
Freedom, cut me loose!
Freedom! Freedom! Where are you?
Cause I need freedom too!
I break chains all by myself
Won’t let my freedom rot in hell
Hey! I’m a keep running
’Cause a winner don’t quit on themselves
What you want from me?
Is it truth you seek? Oh father can you hear me?
Hear me out