



Why I Love Fell in Love with Critical Dietetics: A Personal/Political Narrative

Keynote Address, 6th International Critical Dietetics Conference, Granada, Spain

Jill White, EdD, RD, Dominican University, Chicago, IL, USA

I am a child of the 1960's. I grew up during the Vietnam War and the Black Power Movement, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the rise of the Black Panther Party. Young men, particularly young men of color were dying on a weekly basis overseas and at home. In my first college life, I was a theater major and went from downstate Illinois to Chicago to study at the Goodman Theater. But as I became more politically conscious, the focus on individual ego and competition in professional theater seemed irrelevant to the reality of what was going on in the streets of Chicago. It was also the rise of the feminist movement and the birth of the gay rights movement. Because life seemed so tenuous, young people challenged every social norm. We experimented with alternative lifestyles and expressions, as young people in motion do. I dropped out of college and became a full time political activist. Through activism I found Marxism, which redefined the world for me. I began to see the class analysis of who profits from war, racism and sexism; that capitalism can only exist in conjunction with oppression. Exploitation **is** the source of profit and every institution is set up to perpetuate the rule of the few over the masses. As I have now been in social movements for over 40 years, I have also come to experience that repression breeds resistance and nothing is constant but change. I maintain my belief that humanity will move towards a society based on human interdependence, or the planet will not survive. I see myself as an organizer. I have witnessed the empowerment and transformation, particularly of women, when we create community and learn to lead.

Most of my adulthood I have lived as part of a multicultural family in the Chicago area, African American working class communities. I have four bi-racial children who have taught me much. I am now part of a blended family including 12 children and 28 grandchildren. I worked for years in a factory and clerical jobs. In the 1980's, the factories in Chicago began to close, many moving to countries with low wages, or the Southern states in the US called right to work states, where unions are illegal. My previous husband and I met and worked, at a General Foods factory. We had three years pre-notification that the plant was closing, and we knew his wages would not be reproduced when he left. I decided to go back to school for a degree. I was working as a secretary in a hospital nutrition department. My husband developed Diabetes and the nutrition information was becoming more and more interesting to me. So, I started a program to become an RD at the University where I now teach. I was in my late 30s, with four small children, so it was a challenge. But I loved the information and being an adult learner. There was daycare and support then for non-traditional students (I think the University saw this as a new market).

Rosary College, now Dominican University (DU), had traditionally been a womens' Catholic college. The Dominican Sisters were the original faculty, and probably some of the oldest women with PhDs. They were part of a very progressive order, and many of the Sisters had been active in the Liberation Theology movements in South America and Civil Rights in the US. I got a part time job running the kitchen for the Sisters.

It was like having 15 mothers for me and my children. They followed my activities on a weekly basis and the kids would come shopping with me for their food on the weekends. It was a very nurturing environment, very women-based, with a lot of positive praise. I was scared of the science courses, but these women taught me well with love and intelligence. I learned how to mentor and nurture as an educator from them.

Following my internship and Masters I worked for the next 15 years on the South Side of Chicago as a Pediatric Dietitian. This is a predominantly African American community. I had a great mentor in one of my co-workers who remains one of the most skilled community Dietitians I have ever seen. She knows how to relate to all people. She is creative in the ways she educates and she utilizes every kind of resources from empty cans to scavenged furniture. Today besides feeding 1000 people a month at her church food pantry, she runs the Head Start Nutrition Program at Dominican and mentors all kinds of students in diverse communities. Most of all, she can turn nutrition science into food. This woman attempted several pathways, but could never access the RD. Now she has completed the internship at DU and will hopefully take her exam this fall.

This was the beginning of the so called “obesity epidemic” in urban areas, which in many ways I feel became an attack on poor women and children of color. I was very frustrated with the lack of effectiveness with families I felt as a dietitian. I began to pursue other information than prescribing behavior modification, diets, and exercise. I started attending classes on eating disorders and discovered a whole other community and treatment philosophy based on size acceptance, intuitive eating and fighting body hatred. We hosted several speaking engagements and a workshop for dietitians and health professionals on using intuitive eating with children and families. But the hospital I was at hired a behaviorist to run the “obesity program” and I was so uncomfortable with his approach, I looked for a new job. I had begun teaching at Malcolm X, one of the Chicago City Colleges as adjunct in their Dietetic Technician Associate Degree Program. They offered me a full-time position as the coordinator for the field placement and I left the hospital to teach fulltime.

I loved working with the Malcolm X Students. These were predominantly women of color who really wanted to work in their own communities as nutrition educators. I learned so much from them as they took the

information we taught, and then translated it into food, and educational activities that could be brought to the neighborhoods. I networked everywhere: community, clinical, food service to find opportunities for them. I got a little grant and we hosted the first Diversity in Dietetics workshop (which continues today annually at DU). Unfortunately, after two years the Diet Tech Program was cut due to a state economic crisis. One of the Universities had begun a bridge program Teaching and Learning in Community College, and I began to take some education courses, which really confirmed my experiences and peaked my interest in teaching at the college level. I contacted the Chair of my alma mater. She hired me to teach two courses as an adjunct and helped guide me toward a Doctoral Program in Adult and Higher Education. I was able to bring a cohort of Malcolm X students to Dominican with me to move from their Associate to Bachelor Degree.

My Doctoral Program had a legacy of professors who had been leaders in social movements in Chicago in the 60s and 70s. I was able to travel to Brazil with a professor from Chile who had developed a course tracing Paulo Freire’s history and practice. Freire’s work opened another new world for me; how to use education to challenge *status quo*. I knew from the beginning of my studies that I wanted to look at the lack of people of color in Dietetics and that became my dissertation topic. I was inspired by my colleague at the Children’s hospital who had never been able to become an RD. What were the obstacles for someone so obviously talented with so much to offer? Another professor on my committee introduced me to Critical Race Theory, which was consistent with my experience and politics. It was becoming clearer and clearer to me that the field of dietetics was so dominated by white culture, based on valuing thinness and a medicalization of eating, that it was ineffective not only in communities of color, but with anyone. I learned the value and creative potential of qualitative research. Critical Race Theory looks for the counter story of the oppressed to challenge the narrative of the dominating majority. These came organically through my research interviewing African American nutritionists on their views of the intersection of race, their education, careers and experience within the profession of Dietetics.

When I finished my course work I was hired by my mentor at Dominican to write a proposal to start an internship program. From the beginning we agreed on the mission of making the internship available to those

who had previously been marginalized; non- traditional students and students of color. Our original program had to be a coordinated RD/MBA. It took two years for us to get a second track approved on Cultural Diversity in Child Nutrition. That summer I was also put into contact with Evelyn Crayton, from Alabama Auburn University Extension Program. Evelyn was the first African American president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics during the 2016-2017 term. She was on the Board of the ADA and was pressuring them to open a new pathway to registration that would accommodate the Extension nutritionists. These were predominantly African American women who traveled throughout rural communities in the South providing nutrition education. Many of them had years of experience and Master's Degrees, but had no way to access the internship to become RDs. We piloted a distance Independent Supervised Practice Program that was supervised by one of the DU staff. I told the ADA I would only agree to this if I could also open this opportunity up in Chicago to WIC and other community nutritionists there. We have expanded this program to bring in people with previous nutrition experience in New York, New Jersey and other urban areas. Through this work, we have probably recruited over 50 people of color into internships. But our dilemma is, many of them have yet to take, or pass the RD exam. This is what I am focusing my sabbatical work on this fall. Is there a cultural barrier regarding the test or test taking experience for these students?

Lucy Aphramor found me in Japan at a poster session of the International Conference on Dietetics, where I was presenting my dissertation work. She took my card and when the second meeting of Critical Dietetics took place in Toronto in 2012 she contacted me to attend. When I saw the website and the founding statements, I knew I had found home. Just the name, Critical Dietetics encompassed who I had become, a Critical Dietitian. My work based on Critical Race Theory embraces Critical Theory, and the new definitions of Dietetics projected in the Journal, Jacqui's book (Gingras, 2009) and work, speak to my views on food, feminism, body love and a belief in social justice. I taught the book in my Graduate Seminar Course to introduce critical dietetic thinking into the curriculum. The value placed on alternative forms of knowledge created a space for me to speak and publish my work. My first article and presentation was titled Teaching the Counter Story; An analysis of narration in

African American cookbooks using Critical Race Theory. It was embraced by the Critical Dietetics community. When I tried to publish my dissertation research in the Journal of the ADA, the editor told me it was not research. The Journal of Critical Dietetics published my work "Hearing the Voices": African American Nutrition Educators Speak about Racism in Dietetics, where I was able to tell the truth. This contributed to my tenure track acceptance.

I was able to travel to Australia and presented with Evelyn and another colleague at the conference in Sydney. The proposal was accepted for 2014 CD conference to take place at Dominican outside Chicago. The conference allowed us to introduce CD to dietitians and dietetic students in the Midwest USA. We required our 90 interns to return to school a week early to help with the organization and attend the conference. I had proposed a preconference People's Assembly on Food is a Right to be opened up to the Chicago community. Following Jacqui's suggestion, this became the Saturday afternoon plenary for all to attend. Through a grant from the American Association of University Women, we were able to provide buses to bring people to attend from several neighborhoods. We provided simultaneous Spanish translation, and a meal featuring soul food, Mexican cuisine, and a Chicago Blues Band following the Assembly. In my fall Seminar class I asked for written feedback from students, several of whom stated it was a "Life changing event" to attend the Conference and Assembly and hear about Food as a Human Right and the level of hunger existing currently right in Chicago. This spring we held a follow up march and forum downtown. We demonstrated in support of fast food workers fight for living wage, an end to food stamp cuts, and holding the food industry responsible for their effects on the environment and the world food system. My work in Critical Dietetics has allowed me to legitimize my social activism as an academic leader, by validating this work within an epistemological framework.

This fall my sabbatical project will try to gather evidence to challenge the current system that "gatekeeps" some of the most talented out of the field. I am learning about the concept of stereotype threat that associates underperformance on exams with the aura of prejudice and suspicion around one's abilities. Most women experience this. We are interviewing interns of color who have completed the internship to hear their perception and experiences with the exam. Apprehension has been

raised about the admittance of students to internships without high GPAs in relation to the RD exam pass rate. Currently programs are required to meet an 80% first time pass rate to maintain accreditation. The high standards and competitive nature of internship placement makes it especially difficult for historically marginalized students to secure a coveted spot.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experience of people of color with the Registered Dietitian Examination, to understand barriers to successful completion. A qualitative study interviewing former students about their experiences will be analyzed along with the literature on standardized testing for health professions and people of color. This will include discussions with Program Directors from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Utilizing the framework of Critical Race Theory we will look for the intersections of racism in hopes of producing a counter narrative to identify how barriers might be addressed.

My sabbatical is the beginning of my exit towards retirement from Dominican. I have now relinquished my Administrative positions as Program Director and Chair. I want to be available to organize resistance to the *status quo*. I challenge my students to become activists and advocates. I want to work on community empowerment projects to address access to food, and health education in Chicago. I am not willing to spend my time teaching students to help poor people eat “healthy” on a low budget, which, in my opinion, reinforces blaming the victims. No one chooses to be oppressed. Who knows better how to survive in poverty; middle class white suburban dietetic students, or inner city moms? The simple slogan “Food is a Right” rings well with all who hear it. Chicago has one of the largest food deserts in the US. Illinois has some of the richest farmland in the world. But one in 4 children in Illinois are food insecure. There should be no hunger in Illinois, or Mississippi, which has the greatest hunger and health disparity in the US. I challenge my students to answer the following question: do we have a food production problem or a food distribution problem in the US? Who is to blame? Who profits? When people ask me what is the solution to “childhood obesity,” I tell them full employment at a living wage. The problem is not ignorance or lack of cooking classes, the problem is poverty. As our final speaker last year stated, bringing a cart of apples to the South Side of Chicago is not the solution.

And poverty, health disparity, food access in the US cannot be separated from systemic racism. In my

community nutrition class I expose my students to a book called the New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander (2010). Jim Crow wrote the laws in the South after slavery and Reconstruction that legalized segregation and unequal access to education and all rights, including voting rights in the South. Many were still in place in the 1960s. The fastest growing industry in the US today is the private prison system. More people are imprisoned in the US than any other country in the world. The majority of them are Black and Brown. One in four African American males are in the system. Due to racial profiling under the guise of “the war on drugs”, with biased sentencing laws, these men are charged with felonies. Once you are a felon, you are no longer entitled to vote, to get school loans, to live in public housing, or to receive food assistance. In some States, you cannot even have anyone who is a felon live in your house and get public assistance or food stamps. What has this done to families in poor Black and Brown communities? It has created a new underclass system of disenfranchised people doomed to perpetuate poverty. According to Alexander (2010), there are more Black men convicted of felonies today than there were slaves at the height of US slavery. This is the state of the economic crisis in the US. Those at the top are in a recovery. Those at the bottom, continue to move to worse economic conditions. And it is reinforced by a violent racist police presence that terrorizes and murders youth of color on a daily basis and is sanctioned by the government. This month the Better Government Association named Chicago as the number one City in police shootings of all major US cities in the last five years. The majority of the victims were Black males. Chicago's so called Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) has found only one of nearly 400 fatal and non-fatal police shootings since 2007 to be unjustified. The recent murder of nine African Americans in a church by a right-wing youth was televised around the world. Since then there have been at least six Black churches set on fire. But there are rumblings in the ranks. People are organizing. Movements such as Black Lives Matter are rising. A recent demonstration in South Carolina by the racist KKK drew a large counter demonstration led by the New Black Panther Party.

And there are rumblings within Dietetics and new formations are being built. Members are questioning the collaboration of a professional organization with a food industry that is systematically destroying the local food systems in every country. Someone recently posted on facebook “Please do not write one more article on obesity in America until you can explain why salads are

\$7 and burgers are \$1. The map of McDonalds spreading around the world, is the same map of the rise of Type 2 Diabetes spreading across the world.” Another group is challenging the leadership and decision making process within the Academy. They are tired of being ignored and are demanding input into the decisions and the Field. Educators are leading the charge. We are the gatekeepers to the profession. Education can be a place that perpetuates or challenges the *status quo*. There are factions and politics and power struggles. Evelyn’s election very much parallels that of Barack Obama as president, in my opinion. Put in office to hopefully squelch rising dissent during the economic crisis, so people would be temporarily pacified, but constantly undermined and with limited power to make significant changes.

This dissent gives openings to Critical Dietetics as a movement and a philosophy. It is time to be active, to spread our message to all who will hear. Above all Critical Dietetics is a place where we can tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It is a place where we can experiment with new forms of teaching and learning. There is nothing more universal about human experience than food. Food is our medium. You have to love food to be a dietitian. To love food is to love the earth, nature, science, the human body, and the woman spirit of nurturing and community. This is why I fell in love with Critical Dietetics and the community it has created for me.

References

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colourblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: Newly revised 20th anniversary edition*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gingras, J. (2009). *Longing for recognition: The joys, contradictions, and complexities of practicing dietetics*. York, UK: Raw Nerve Books.
- White, J. (2013). Cultural dominance in dietetics: Hearing the voices, African American nutrition educators speak. *Journal of Critical Dietetics*, 1(3), 26-35.