

Shan Mukhtar story

As soon as I could express my thoughts and emotions about the world in which I lived, I did so through writing. I carried my love of writing into college, where I pursued a degree in English and trained as a writer of fiction. The stories I write are really rooted in the places I have lived and people I have met, so part of my writing process has always been to spend a lot of time just listening and looking at how people are with each other, how they move through a space, how they show emotion. This way of engaging with my surroundings eventually develop into a tangible skill in interviewing and observing in research settings. I say this to think when considering how we can or should do work, it's important to look at who we are as whole people who exist in the world within different types of families and as members of a variety of communities. For me, the places and the people among whom I live have been the greatest influence on the work I do.

I didn't think much about higher education as a political and social concept until I was one year into a six-year PhD program. At first, I was going to do a race and ethnic studies doctoral study heavily based in literature that drew from my background in English and had with no community-based component beyond the types of literature I was going to study. But as I got busy with the everyday life of graduate school, I started to experience both subtle and at times blatant inequities within the university environment. For instance, I observed a space where an overwhelming number of the administrative assistants were black women and almost all the department leadership were white (and largely men). This was despite the presence of multiple "diversity" offices and programs at the university. My eventual research study emerged out of my questions about how racism sustains itself on an institutional level, and how one could more effectively challenge this status quo.

For the doctoral study, I decided to do a case study of a majority-minority university through the lens of how it develops its diversity goals and programs. I wanted to know how universities and colleges define what racial and ethnic "equality" means, the effects these definitions have

on how diversity programs are implemented at that institution, and in turn how the racial and ethnic culture of the university develops. This is also where my background in storytelling came in. As I read existing works from the field, I noted that not much attention was paid to the social processes of storytelling, discussion, argument, and negotiation that went into creating diversity at the university. I felt these stories were important because when people find it very hard to talk about race and ethnicity, or even say the word *race*, they often tell stories to convey their experiences and meanings. For example, people on committees for hiring new faculty often talked around the issue of race and ethnicity by discussing whether the candidate had "merit" or whether they would be "hired for diversity." Studying and re-telling these stories of racial and ethnic diversity allowed me to use my experience studying literature and writing stories to create a more community-based approach to examining race, ethnicity, and racism in higher education.