

## The Borderlands

*During the closing session of a recent Advanced Organizer Event we shared our thoughts on building and maintaining vital anti-racism transformation teams in our institutions. We concluded our presentation with these thoughts on how US society is structured to perpetuate separation and oppression – and how addressing these structures is a core task of our teams.*

There is a center in US society that is considered normal: white, male, heterosexual, married, Protestant (Christian), Anglo-American, English speaking, upper middle class, able-bodied, educated, middle-aged and embodying a particular standard of beauty. It is the standard by which all are measured.

Around this center exist the rest of us – at varying distances from the center. Some of us are closer and some further apart. The borderlands surround this “center of normalcy.” Power, time, place, and position dominate their interaction.

The borderlands is a juicy place. It is a place full of possibilities, chaos, creativity, conflict, beauty. It’s the place where harmony and conflict exist – simultaneously. It’s a place that transcends and defies dualism, where rigid linear reality cannot exist; a place where multiculturalism and diverse identities mix and mingle in a constant ebb and flow of mess, mediation, and mitigation.

Our institutions are structured to rein force and maintain the center. When institutions ‘embrace diversity’ people of the borderlands must assimilate in order to come in to the center, though they will never fully belong there. The tension that results is troublesome for the center. It creates conflict that the center is not structured to tolerate. Thus, brining the borderlands into the institution means forcing it to conform, contort, and homogenize.

There is peacefulness in the borderlands but not peace. The power and privilege of the center causes separation, divisiveness, and ultimately destruction within the borderlands. The center demands conformity and sameness, making scarce the resources required to creatively and collectively resolve conflict. This is the daily experience of the borderlands.

The power of People of Color and other oppressed groups is in the borderlands. Coming to the center disempowers the borderlands and destroys its spirit.

Our institutions are defined by rigid boundaries, which isolate both institutions and the center. The challenge for anti-racism transformation teams is to make these boundaries more permeable and to move the institutions to the in-between-ness of the center and the borderlands.

Journeying through the in-between-ness brings the center to the borderlands, making permeable the walls and boundaries of the institution. It pushes the center out into the borderlands, making it part of its chaos and creativity, conflict and beauty.

In doing this, the borderlands becomes what is normal, diversity and justice become the standard. The borderlands becomes the Beloved Community for which we all yearn.

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