

Introduction

We Hold These Truths

Dismantling Racial Hierarchies, Building Equitable Communities

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“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. . . . Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”

—AUDRE LORDE

WHEN I WAS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, this quote from Audre Lorde served as an inspiration and guide for what I thought my purpose would be as an educator. I never had grandiose ideas that I alone could change the world, but I did—and still do—believe that everyone will have opportunities to influence their environments and the people who share their communities. Most important, this quote reminds me to question “the truth” and to ask, Whose truth is being told, and for what purpose? How is “the truth” being used as a tool to divide instead of unite? How is my truth different from what other people consider their truth?

Historically, what is commonly understood as “the truth” is often based on a narrative that perpetuates a hierarchy of human value as the norm. These dominant narrative tools are used to justify and sustain systemic and structural oppression. For change to happen, these commonly accepted ways of knowing have to be examined, dismantled, and rebuilt. This is one of the goals of the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) effort.

In 2016, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) joined the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s TRHT effort because we believe that by creating positive narratives about race, identifying and examining current realities of race relations in communities, envisioning communities without entrenched racial hierarchies, pinpointing levers for change, and engaging key individuals, we can contribute to efforts that seek to dismantle the tools that perpetuate oppression.

In 2017, after a competitive process, AAC&U selected ten college and university partners who agreed with this vision and wanted to host TRHT Campus Centers. In 2019, we announced the selection of a second cohort of institutions seeking to prepare the next generation of leaders to confront racism and bias in our society in order to build equitable communities.

The TRHT Campus Centers provide opportunities for critically examining narratives; existing economic, legal, and segregated structures; and the policies that fuel the false belief that there is a hierarchy of human value based on our differences. In addition, the TRHT Campus Centers promote healing through the use of Rx Racial Healing™ Circles, developed by Gail Christopher, the visionary and architect of the TRHT effort, as a core component for deep listening and building trust.

The narratives included in *We Hold These Truths: Dismantling Racial Hierarchies, Building Equitable Communities* not only represent the work of the first cohort of TRHT Campus Centers but also illustrate the power of what can be accomplished when you have a vision, even when the path seems unclear. These campuses are trailblazers toward a destination that many say can’t be reached, and those naysayers may be right. However, if given the choice, I will always opt to partner with those who seek to create new tools that strive to dismantle the master’s house. We are grateful that these campuses chose to join us on this journey. ●

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