

Scholarly Personal Narratives: Frank Harris III



Hello, my name is Frank Harris III. I'm a professor of postsecondary education and co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab at San Diego State. I've been at SDSU now for the past 13 years, and I'm just really honored and excited to be able to participate in this personal cultural narrative project. I'm just humbled that Dr. Zamani-Gallaher and colleagues at the University of Illinois felt that my story and that my perspective and experiences have something valuable to offer our field, offer our colleagues, and offer our students. So, I'm very excited about this.

I guess I'll begin by just sort of starting from some of my earlier childhood experiences. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in an area of town that was the Ninth Ward. In sort of reflecting on the Ninth Ward, I can say that it was comprised primarily of low-income Black families who had been living there for several generations. While it was a community that was filled with a lot of love and a lot of assets, it was also heavily impacted by systematic racism, as evidenced by chronic poverty, drug abuse, under resourced schools and so forth. A lot of things that we often hear about and write about as scholars of color.

I would say that the country got a first-hand glimpse of this in 2005 when hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. While the entire city was impacted by Katrina, nowhere were the effects of Katrina more harshly felt than in the Ninth Ward. This is where we saw federal, state, and city officials making intentional decisions to focus relief efforts on the more wealthy and the more affluent parts of the city, the parts of the city that tourists were more likely to be attracted to, and really did so while neglecting communities like the Ninth Ward. We saw that as just, and we can kind of juxtapose that, as kind of bringing some clarity or just kind of helping understand how experiencing living in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans was different from living in other parts of the city.

Just kind of reflecting on that experience and growing up in the Ninth Ward, and thinking about some of my earliest schooling experiences, it really did have a high impact on who I am, my identity, my identity as a person, my identity as a man of color, and ultimately my identity as a scholar. I'll say that some of my most formative years were spent in the Ninth Ward. Both my mom and dad grew up there and my grandparents had homes there that they had purchased in the 60s until they were eventually destroyed by Katrina. In thinking about the Ninth Ward and my experiences there, I really think about the matriarch of my family, who was my maternal grandmother.

She had her first kid when she was around 15 years old. She eventually married my grandfather not long after that. She did not have a formal education beyond like seventh or eighth grade. What I can say about my grandmother, while she wasn't a highly educated woman obviously, she was incredibly wise and very resourceful. My grandmother cleaned homes to make a living. She cleaned homes as a housekeeper. My grandfather worked as a janitor, so he cleaned local schools and local businesses, like

bowling alleys and movie theaters, and so forth, and eventually kind of was able to have a set of steady work that allowed them to take care of their family and so forth.

Together they had five children. Before purchasing their home in the Ninth Ward they raised all five children in the Desire Project housing community. Some of my earliest experiences, in many ways some of my most fond memories of my grandmother, my grandparents, was going to work with them at night during the summer to help them clean homes and help them clean businesses. My grandmother was a real stickler. She took great pride in her work. She really did it, just found a way to turn what could be perceived as very humbling work into something that she did with a lot of pride and a lot of dignity. I think when I reflect back on those experiences, I think that really had an impact, just seeing her work and see how hard she worked and how diligent she was. It really had an impact on my work ethic first of all, but it also taught me how to really value all work, to really value people regardless of how prestigious the work may be perceived, and some of these same lessons that I learned from my grandmother really shaped my identity as a person and as a scholar.

I lived in the Ninth Ward until I was about five years old. It was around this time where my parents made the decision for us to move to Los Angeles. I was an only child and my parents thought that living in Los Angeles would provide for a better quality of life, better work for them, and better schooling opportunities for me. It was my first time traveling on an airplane. I remember when we got to Los Angeles, we moved in with my Uncle Larry and he had been living in Los Angeles since the 60s. He had served in the military, so he was a veteran and was able to establish a life there. We lived in a part of town in Los Angeles that is now known as south central Los Angeles. I don't think it was called that at the time that we lived there in the early 80s. In many ways, it had some similarities to the Ninth Ward. At that time, it was a predominantly Black, working-class community.

Thinking about most of my schooling experiences in Los Angeles, it was very interesting. Around first, second, third grade and so forth, I was always in trouble. I recall always being in trouble and being sort of frustrated by that because I didn't really understand what I had done. I just knew I was in trouble all the time. My parents were always being called to the school. I was always being kicked out and sent to the office. I had really developed this identity and thought that I was a bad kid and that school wasn't the place for me or wasn't a space or context where I could thrive and be successful. I really remember that. I think at one point my parents just had gotten tired of me always getting in trouble, and being parents from the south, they thought that I needed more discipline, so they withdrew me from the local public neighborhood school and sent me to this private school that had a reputation for being both academically rigorous, but also instilling discipline.

This was the 80s where corporal punishment was still practiced in school, so I remember getting paddled, and getting punished, and all sorts of things. What was interesting, while I learned a lot and grew academically from that experience, I still continued to get in trouble. I was always being punished. I would get in trouble at school, and by extension, get in trouble at home. My relationship with educators, and then just the whole concept of education, it became very tense, one that I didn't really enjoy or appreciate. I just felt like educators were just adults who were just here to make my life and make things more difficult for me. That was just what I ultimately internalized. I didn't like them, I didn't trust them, and I didn't want to have any real meaningful contact or engagement with educators.

It was kind of this way until about fifth grade when my parents made the decision to move me back to New Orleans. They were dealing with some legal stuff at the time and thought at that time it was better for me to just go back to New Orleans, go back to the Ninth Ward, and live with my grandmother. For the next four years, I lived with my grandmother. It was her, it was several of my cousins, and we lived in the home that my mom and her siblings grew up in. It was my grandmother, it was several of my cousins that lived there, several of my aunts, so we were all just under the same roof. We didn't have a lot of space. We didn't have any money, but we had something that was far more valuable. We had my grandmother's love and we had my grandmother's guidance. She was incredibly hard on us. She made sure that we worked hard, that we did well in school. She made sure that we respected adults and respected our teachers.

She also made sure that we contributed to the household. We had chores that we had to do, we had to cook, we had to clean. No one got to live there for free. Everyone had a role to play and everyone had to contribute in a way that allowed us to have a successful and functioning household. That's probably the best way to describe it. My grandmother also taught us the importance of being independent. So as kids, even as young as fifth grade, sixth grade, seventh grade, if we wanted to buy something, then we couldn't go and ask her for money. We actually had to go out and earn the money. So, what one of my older cousins and I would do, is we would often mow lawns. We would go around the neighborhood dragging a lawn mower through the Ninth Ward in the hot, blistering, humid summertime, and we would just knock on doors and ask the neighbors if we could mow their lawn for a couple bucks. Eventually we would get enough people to say yes where we would get a few bucks and that allowed us to go and buy whatever it is that we wanted to get.

My grandmother also really instilled the importance of being resourceful. In some ways it was about being entrepreneurial, which is interesting because these are values that are prioritized in the academy. At the time, obviously, I didn't know that I would eventually become a university professor and I would have to rely on a lot of these same values and these experiences would shape and have some impact on my work today, all these years later.

But even in terms of being resourceful and being independent, if you wanted to go somewhere, if you wanted to go to the mall, if you wanted to go to the movies, we had to find a way to get there. Usually that meant public transportation. Those four years, from the time I was about nine or 10 years old, until my early teenage years, until I was about 13, really had an impact on my identity and who I was.

Also, at the time, just thinking about my schooling experience living in the Ninth Ward, and how it was vastly different from my experience in Los Angeles. In the Ninth Ward, first of all, everyone went to the same school, the whole community did, and all the public-school teachers were Black and all of the students were Black. I mean every single person, the administration, the teachers, the students, I mean it was pretty much an exclusively Black space. That was in elementary school and in middle school actually. Many of the school teachers there had been teaching in the community for 15-20 years, sometimes longer, so some of these same teachers were the teachers that they had, in some cases, my parents in classes, or my aunts and my uncles. So, there was this sort of kinship and this shared connection. Every teacher knew every kid's family, knew their siblings, and had some connection beyond the fact that they were just students in their classroom.

I think what happens is there was just this very deep and unyielding commitment to Black children and the Black community. These were the first educators in my life that I could recall that told me I was smart or that told me that they expected great things from me. It really, in many ways, changed my identity as a student and as a scholar. It ultimately shaped my identity for the rest of my life after that. I began to take school a lot more seriously and, ultimately, I thrived academically.

After being in New Orleans for about four years, I actually returned back to Los Angeles to live with my mother. By this time, her and my dad had divorced, and this is right around the time which I was starting high school. My mom had taken a job at UCLA and decided that I should attend Santa Monica high school, which at that time was a predominately white school in an affluent community. She did not want me to attend Inglewood high school. We were living in Inglewood at the time. She felt that Santa Monica would be a better school, better resource, safer from gang violence and things like that, so that's where I went starting in 9th grade. After having attended school with all Black kids and all Black teachers for the last four years, to come into Santa Monica was a complete culture shock. It really was.

One of the experiences that I often think about that I'll never forget was in my ninth-grade health class. The teacher was giving a lesson on alcohol abuse and he asked us to name some alcoholic drinks that we had heard of. Thinking about that now, that probably wasn't the most appropriate question to ask a group of 9th graders, but that's what he asked, and kids started shouting out random things like Cape Cod, and Long Island iced tea, and all these other popular drinks, things I had actually never heard of. One kid happened to yell out Black Russian, and I don't know what it was about that moment, but for some reason I decided to raise my hand and ask the teacher what is a Black Russian. I'm the only Black kid in the class, and the teacher jokingly said to me, "You know, like when you go to Russia." And the entire class just erupted in laughter that was directed towards me. Being the only Black kid in the class, I immediately felt humiliated, and ashamed, and embarrassed. I had a lot of experiences like this, similar experiences like this, not always with teachers, but certainly with other students during that time.

I eventually left Santa Monica high school after ninth grade and enrolled at our neighborhood school. At that time, we had moved from Inglewood to a nearby city called Gardena, and I enrolled at Gardena high school where I would eventually stay and complete the 10th, 11th and 12th grade. Once I graduated from Gardena, I enrolled at Loyola Marymount University where I completed my undergraduate studies. I had a really, really good experience at Loyola. It was a small school, so I was able to have good connections with instructors and so forth. I eventually developed a relationship with two faculty members, but there was one in particular who really took a liking to me. His name was Dr. Dean Scheibel. At the time, he taught the research methods class and had a reputation of being a really tough professor, but somehow and for some reason we just connected. He would often comment on my work and tell me what a good student I was, how great my ideas were, and I really need to think about going to graduate school, and so forth.

Eventually, I made the decision that I wanted to go, and he supported me. He wrote letters of recommendations and recommended programs, doing all the mentoring and things that you have to do to get a student into graduate school. I eventually enrolled at Cal State University, Northridge in a speech communication program where I eventually earned my master's degree. That's where I had some of my earliest experiences in teaching.

After finishing up at Northridge, I started working in student affairs for several years, working in a number of different areas and so forth. After working in student affairs for a few years, I kind of took a liking to the field and really enjoyed the work that I was doing and decided that I wanted to advance my career in student affairs and in order to do that, I needed to earn a doctoral degree. So, what I decided to do was enroll in the Ed.D. program at the University of Southern California. That's where I was working at the time in student affairs, so it was a program that was accessible to me in terms of proximity. There was a nice tuition benefit that came from being employed at the university, so I enrolled in the program with the goal of advancing my career in student affairs administration. It was there where I met two scholars who I credit for shaping my academic career. Those scholars were Dr. Estela Bensimon, who eventually hired me actually to work in her center, to work in the Center for Urban Education, so I got to work really closely with her during that time.

I also met Dr. Shaun Harper, who had recently come to the university and was directing the Ed.D. program. Shaun just reached out to me and he and I really connected. He eventually would become my doctoral advisor. He shaped my dissertation. They both had a tremendous impact on my career. They were the first two people to tell me that I had what it took to be a faculty member. I would say up until that point I never saw myself as someone who the academy would even want as a faculty member, who felt like I had something to contribute from a scholarly perspective. But the two of them really encouraged me, they challenged me, they did everything they could to sort of steer my career in this direction. Eventually, I sort of gave in and said, "Okay, fine. Maybe this is something I need to consider." I finished up my doctorate and I went on the job market.

At that point in my life, I was married and had two children, so I had some real limitations. I couldn't just pack up and move across the country or move to another state in order to pursue an academic career. I had some other considerations. I had some financial considerations that had to be part of the decision-making process and so forth. I only applied for jobs in southern California. Even at that point, I wasn't really sure if and how things would work out. I had some uncertainty. I really didn't know if programs or departments would see me as having something to contribute, would take me seriously as a scholar. I think part of it also is I had earned an Ed.D., I didn't earn a Ph.D. I had a lot of great methodological training, I had a lot of great scholarly training, particularly from working with Dr. Bensimon and Dr. Harper, but on paper, I didn't know if I would show well.

Eventually, I was fortunate to land a position at San Diego State University and this is where I've been for my entire career as a tenure track faculty member. When I came to SDSU, I came here and I was teaching primarily in the master's program of student affairs, so teaching a lot of the traditional student affairs' courses in somewhat traditional ways I would say. I was doing research on college men and masculinity, and this was a research topic that I picked up as a graduate student and pursued it as a dissertation topic. I had a lot of success doing that. I got to share my work with colleagues at NASPA and ACPA. For the most part, I did pretty traditional academic things. I went to ASH and presented my work at ASH. I made sure I was publishing in the right academic journals, the "right" journals, so you know, Journal of College Student Development and venues like that, and eventually I got to the point where it earned me tenure at San Diego State. I would say things were going, just sort of following the traditional path and doing the things that they say you "have" to do in order to be successful in the academy. You know, I did those things and I got to the point where I earned tenure.

There were sort of some critical moments I guess, or a critical moment, but I remember feeling after getting tenure, I started to feel very disenchanted. I started to really question the meaning and value of the work that I was doing. I felt a void and just felt like the work that I was doing wasn't ... it didn't light my fire anymore I guess is probably the best way to describe it. So, I started to really kind of think and reflect about what did I want to do. Did I need to make a career move? Was it time for me to reconsider and go back to thinking about administration? I mean, I really was sort of at a loss at that point and didn't really know what to say or what to do.

The year after I earned tenure, my brother, my academic brother, Dr. J. Luke Wood, we were fortunate enough to hire him here at San Diego State. That was a move at that same time, just my connection with Luke, and we had similar interests as researchers. He was doing work on men at the time, Black men. I had been doing my work on college men and masculinity and so forth, although I was kind of thinking about moving away from that. We just really hit it off as colleagues, I thought partners, right away. So, what I eventually ended up doing was completely reshape my research agenda and I really started to leverage my work on college men and masculinity and started to focus it on men of color in community colleges. This was an area that Luke had done some work in as well, so our interests just really converged in that regard.

We started a research center called M2C3, the Minority Male Community College Collaborative, and M2C3 eventually became what is known today as CCEAL, the Community College Equity Assessment Lab, and what that allowed me to do, looking back, is it allowed me to reengage some of my early work on equity. When I was a graduate student and when I was working with Dr. Bensimon, I was introduced to these concepts of equity and equity-mindedness and institutes for responsibility. Concepts that are far more mainstream now than they were then. The work that Luke and I decided to undertake allowed me to kind of think about and go back to some of that early work. Work that I wasn't as deeply engaged in, but work and concepts that had a real impact on my knowledge as a scholar, I would say.

Part of what we did with starting M2C3, we had to go out and, part of being a university professor is you have to get grants. We would spend all this time applying for grants because we had this new center that we were launching, and we really didn't have a whole lot of resources, so we would write grants. We would spend all this time writing grant proposals, and almost invariably those proposals would not be funded. I think that, you know he and I sort of joke about this now, but I think the first 12 grant proposals that we wrote were not funded, so we were zero for 12, literally zero for 12, in our first efforts to get our work funded and so forth.

Part of what we decided to do, and I don't know if this decision was as intentional or that we knew what we were doing at the time, but we decided to start working directly with colleges and just felt like let's just work with colleges. Not so much to get our work funded, but to just get the work out there. We felt like we had something to contribute and the best way for us to do that was just to go and start to work directly with colleges. So, working with colleagues, so many to name, and just started to kind of work directly with them. I would say that working directly with colleges, what that does is you start to see immediate impact of your work. You start to see policies, and institutional policies, institutional practices change. You start to see people change the way that they do their work. So that really energized me as a scholar for one. What it also did was it made me kind of question and rethink some of the more traditional ways of disseminating scholarship and applying scholarship.

I started to really kind of think and start to question, to be quite honest, some of these more traditional things, like going and presenting research, a research paper at a conference, publishing a research article in peer review journal, things that you have to do in order to be considered legitimate and in order to have some success, and to be honest to keep your job in the academy. But seeing how that experience was so much more different, with regards from an impact perspective than doing direct work with colleges. Now, recognizing that you still have to do the research in order to have something valuable to offer, so this lesson is not about questioning research or the value of research, but really questioning the ways in which the academy, sort of the strategies that are prioritizing the academy in regards to disseminating and using the research. So that has led to a lot of partnerships across the country, and just doing real deep, intentional work around institutional transformation.

I really love working with community colleges, first and foremost because if we're talking about students of color, if we're talking about building communities of color, then community colleges are really at the center of that work, because community colleges serve a high concentration of students from minoritized and underserved backgrounds and communities. So I felt like, we felt like I should say, Luke and I, felt like if we're really going to have some impact and be able to really have something to offer that can be value wide to communities of color, then we really needed to at least start our work and prioritize the community college in the work.

As I kind of think about that and sort of weave the whole narrative together, there's kind of three lessons that emerge for me that I think is important and valuable to keep in mind. The first is that being a scholar, being a professor, being an academic, being an educator regardless of how you describe it, is a tremendous opportunity and with that opportunity comes tremendous responsibility. I think it's important to never lose sight or take for granted the opportunity to have a positive impact on the lives of marginalized communities and the institutions that serve them. In my opinion, it's one of the things, it's part of our calling as educators, it's part of our calling as researchers and professors, as Estela used to say, to do research that makes a difference. I think if we're not doing that, then we're really falling short of our calling and our mission as scholars and educators.

The second lesson that comes to mind for me is that most of us at the academy who identify as scholars of color and who are trying to do transformational work, most of us, many of the valuable assets that we bring to our work, are our lived experiences. Our lived experiences and the lessons that were instilled in us from our elders, from our parents, from our grandparents, from community members, from teachers who taught in our communities who were committed to our communities. These lessons are not necessarily valued in the academy, but they're very important and they can really make a difference, not only in our own success, but in the larger impact and trajectory of the work that we do is important.

I would conclude by saying it's important for us as scholars of color to not measure our self-worth by the standards that our prioritized in the academy. We know that the nature of academia and the nature of the academy has a way of delegitimizing us and telling us that what we do as scholars, and who we are as people, that those things are not good enough. I say that we need to challenge that, we need to push back on that. We need to remind ourselves that that's a myth, that that's a misconception. I also think we need to redefine what it means to be a scholar. I really credit and thank folks like Estela Bensimon

and Shaun Harper, and even my grandmother who modeled that for me. What I try to do now is to model that and do the same for others.

Again, I want to thank our colleagues at the University of Illinois for this awesome opportunity to not only share our stories, but to reflect on our stories and think about ... I think opportunities like this put us in a reflective space and allows us to think about critical moments in our lives and in our upbringing that maybe we buried or maybe we'd forgotten about, people who made a difference. I think when we do that it brings a sense of life and appreciation for who we are and how far we've come. I'm humbled and grateful for the opportunity to do that and for that I want to say thank you.