




MELANY DE LA CRUZ VIESCA

Associate Director of Asian American Studies at UCLA
Los Angeles, CA

Fishbowl Exercise using Episode 1 of The Equity Lookbook

Can you explain your identity?

I am a child of immigrant parents who came from the Philippines on teacher and agriculture visas. I grew up in a rural working class town called Hollister that is known for its apricots and its walnuts. I remember being around five years old and working in apricot orchards, my dad would pick the apricots, my mom would cut them and I would be the one taking the pits out of them so they could be placed on trays to dry. My mom is famous for her apricot bars. They were at every party we had but I remember being jealous of my friends that didn't have to wake up at 5am during their Summer vacation to work on various apricot orchards. We grew up in a Mexican neighborhood and I attended public schools all throughout my education. In high school, I was a beneficiary of an affirmative action program, some type of educational opportunity program. A Latino man from UC Berkeley would visit me every quarter to make sure that I was meeting my a-g requirements. He provided me with application fee waivers so when it came time to apply for college, I was really thankful for those support structures. I was strongly encouraged and supported to seek a higher education by my parents. During the day, my mom worked at Teledyne Ryan Aeronautical McCormick Selph which manufactured advanced controlled pyrotechnic components and systems for the aerospace industry and automotive safety products for use in connection with airbags and seat belt safety systems.




At night, she would work in the San Benito Foods Tomato cannery and on the weekends, she would work at Casa de Fruta making chocolates. I grew up with my Filipino family speaking ilocano and very little English. My next door neighbor and caretaker Mema would only speak to me in Spanish. As a result, I struggled with writing in English, but I learned to fully understand ilocano and spanish. When I went to UC San Diego, I declared as a pre-med major, but quickly that idea did not pan out because I fell in love with Ethnic Studies and learning about communities of color. I ended up double majoring in Ethnic Studies and Urban Planning. Then I went to grad school at UCLA in Urban Planning. Once at UCLA, I found a mentor in Professor Paul Ong and began learning a lot about and doing research on closing the racial wealth gap. This has informed the work I do today in addressing and finding solutions to close the racial and women's wealth divides.



What do you know about what happened in 1992 in Los Angeles?

I was in Hollister in high school. I watched the uprising on TV. It was still widely discussed when I started college in Fall 1993. I began to dig into the perspectives of the uprising. The media attention was mostly focused on the beating of Rodney King and the acquittal of the four officers. It felt like our conversations were less about the riots themselves, why they were started, and more about the representations in the media and how this was the first time that such a thing was caught on video. Looking back, the uprisings were a response to the long history of police brutality and discrimination, unequal economic, educational, social, and political opportunities and much more. In 2020, I have been deeply moved and inspired by activists, in particular the youth, who are standing up against white privilege and to end racial violence against the black community. I didn't see that in 1992.

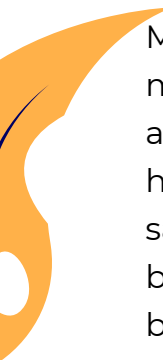





Are you familiar with Solidarity Economics?

Yes, a few historical examples include economic ethnic solidarity through informal or rotating credit associations through the Chinese benevolent associations based on kinship ties in the late 1800s and Korean nail salon workers to labor solidarity cooperative models used by the Black Panthers and Filipino farmworkers. More recently, USC Professor Pastor and UCSC Professor Benner are centering race and equity and how it intersects with alternative economic structures grounded in grassroots and community-based efforts, so disadvantaged communities have more access to capital and economic resources.


Could you identify who would be the Top and who would be the Bottom in Los Angeles using inspiration from the slogan, Tame the Top & Lift the Bottom?



My interpretation involves flipping the dynamics of power. Taming the top would mean a redistribution of economic and political resources from traditional systems and frameworks such as corporate welfare, government subsidies for policing, homeland security, elected officials, and more equitable funding towards social safety net programs. Those at the top have power and privilege to decide if they can be equitable or not, such as LAPD, elected officials, and the rich. Those at the bottom do not have this privilege, but do have people power and the right to organize in mass numbers in order to make a difference. Those at the bottom are largely immigrants, low-income, and communities of color.

Focusing in on females, do you have experience with movements that call for women to generate wealth for other women?

I am humbled to be a part of the Closing the Women's Wealth Gap initiative to help women build assets over a long term strategy. We have looked at so many different methods to achieving this end result. Since the Me Too movement and the Color of Wealth in LA report that I co-authored, the political will has grown immensely to change policies to help women build wealth and obtain financial security over a lifetime. On a scale of 1-10, I would rate the US at a 6 in terms of female leadership, I think that we have a long way to go.





Is there somebody in your life that is a contemporary woman that inspires you?

The director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA (where I work), Professor Karen Umemoto. She was part of the fight for ethnic studies in the late 1960s. She is very nurturing and supportive of all of her students and colleagues, spending endless amounts of time in her office discussing everything from academics, career path advice, and how to deal with life's challenges. I love how she goes above and beyond to mentor young women of color. Prior to joining UCLA, as a Professor at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, she worked with Native Hawaiian community leaders to transform the juvenile justice and disciplinary policies and instead offer alternative approaches that focus on healing and restorative practices. Currently, she is still out there protesting and she takes time to build cross team collaboration in community and university partnerships.

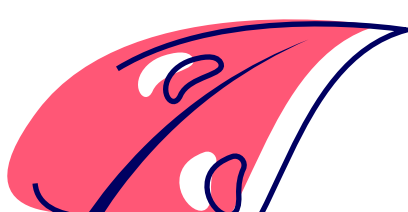

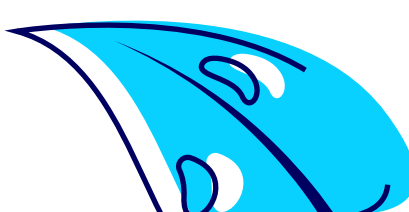


Do you know what an Evidence Based Research Model is and why we use it?

Yes, it is similar to Community Based Participatory Research as a means to demonstrate trends and disparities in your community with both numbers and personal storytelling to get a nuanced analysis and perspective of things at the street level that the grasstops are not aware of for when they create policies. This inclusive approach of integrating research, best practices, and community voices is critical for decision-making processes.

Do you know what convening is and why we do it?

Yes, I was a part of several extraordinary convenings with the Ford Foundation. We convened to address the racial wealth divide, share data/research and community-based coalition organizing, advocacy, and policy insights. It was one of the best ways to learn and develop a cross fertilization of ideas.







How would you define wellness in the community?

Wellness is being able to have access to quality healthcare, jobs, housing, education and food security, I see it as health, wealth, both physical and financial. I love experiencing wellness in Hawai'i. I love the spirituality of the Native Hawaiians and the care of culture, community and nature/land. I feel happiness and peace is very much part of the culture in Hawai'i. There are many ways to connect with mother nature, relieve stress and slow down. I love the Hilo side of the Big Island near the ocean beaches and the coffee farms.

Do you have an opinion on whether food policy is interconnected to wellness?

Most definitely, we are learning so much about this during the pandemic and how the essential workers provide us with food and nutrition. It's more important than ever, food policy at the local level to provide us with fresh vegetables and how they are impacted by the supply chain distribution. We have to really think about fair wages and equitable benefits to the workers in the fields of food and the agricultural industry, every industry involved along the way from farm to table.



Produced by Sergio C. Muñoz, Michelle Burton and Lisa Richardson

Sergio and Michelle are in service at *The Social Change Institute at Community Health Councils* in Los Angeles. This interview is a flower from our Leading For Equity Capacity Building Workshop created in collaboration with *First 5 LA* and *Pacific Oaks College*. Since beginning the workshops, we have initiated new collaborations with Dr Manuel Pastor at *USC's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity* and Dr Chris Benner at *UC Santa Cruz & the Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation*. Also with Melany De La Cruz - Viesca at *UCLA* and the *Closing the Women's Wealth Gap* initiative in San Francisco.

Lisa is the President of *Rise Communications*, the agency of record for *Community Health Councils*.

Connect with us

To be a part of our Leading for Equity collaboration:
smunoz@chc-inc.org

