

TEACHING ABOUT RACE

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DEFINITIONS

RACISM – a system of beliefs and practices (i.e. an ideology) embedded in the institutions and conventions of everyday lives, that legitimizes the power of one racial group and justifies it viewing all others as inherently inferior. Racism is simultaneously overt (in law, the economy, political participation and education) and covert (in the media, social mores, fashion). When threatened it responds with overt force (torture, police brutality, political imprisonment, murder) and covert manipulation (symbolic festivals, media, prominent ‘success’ stories). When threatened racism is expert at reconfiguring itself by appearing to have ceded important territory while in reality maintaining its power.

WHITE SUPREMACY – the ideology that places ‘Whiteness’ as the preferred norm, ‘White people’ as the ‘natural authorities’ and White knowledge (and White forms of knowledge production) as the most valid of humankind. This is often implicit and will frequently be denied by its perpetrators such as me, even as it’s being disseminated.

WHITE PRIVILEGE – the cultural, political and economic advantages conferred by being White that are taken for granted and unnoticed.

My perspective – comes from critical theory, particularly critical race theory – a body of work originating in legal scholarship that assumes the enduring persistence of racism and is skeptical of legislation’s ability to integrate the races. Essentially, any ‘advances’ in racial matters happen only if they satisfy Whites’ interests (what critical race theory calls interest convergence).

EUROPEAN-AMERICAN COLLABORATIVE CHALLENGING WHITENESS

Three categories of behavior impede dialogue and unconsciously perpetuate White Supremacist Consciousness are identified by the collective: **preaching, disdaining, and withholding**. Whites enact the first two

behaviors in their relationships with other White people. Striving to think and act with race cognizance, they find themselves zealously sharing their knowledge, correcting less enlightened White people in order to show them the proper way. That is, they *preach* their new-found gospel of enlightened anti-racism, often with self-righteous fervor. Implicit in preaching is a felt superiority to others as a “good white person,” and a *disdain* for less enlightened White people. Both preaching and disdain shut down dialogue. *Withholding* is a behavior Whites fall prey to in multiracial environments. Withholding is the self-imposed silencing of self with the intention of creating space for the racial other to speak. Withholding underscores the White center by implying that a white voice is so powerful it will overwhelm all else.

European American Collective Challenging Whiteness - White Epistemology

- Individualism and Separateness: self-directed learning, autonomous, independent thinking and choice;
- Dualism and Dichotomy – correct and incorrect, true and false, logical and illogical, freedom and oppression;
- Problem Solving and the "Fix-It" Mentality – productive life centers on immediately tackling and slaying problems and making everything correct;
- Avoidance of Difficult Feelings and the Realm of Affect – particularly around discussions of race.

MY TYPICAL MISTAKES AS A WHITE PROFESSOR

Maintaining Racism is all a matter of individual choice and I have chosen not to be racist – this perspective holds that whether or not a White person chooses to be racist is down to the moral strength or militant Christianity he or she displays in fighting the system’s efforts to make them think and behave as a racist. Whites can choose whether or not to be racist and those with good hearts will choose not to be. Success in anti-racist work is largely a matter of individual fortitude – how assiduously you gear yourself up to detect and fight the enemy (the “CRASH” perspective).

Never profess your freedom from racism. As a White person you are unable to escape complicity in racism. You can choose to fight this in yourself and others - individually and systemically - but you cannot decide not to be a

part of racism. Acknowledge your own collusion in racism and how it moves in you. As a teacher never suggest you are free of racism. If racism is a structural reality – bolstered by ideology – then all Whites have learned at an instinctual level all kinds of racist stereotypes (what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling – an emotional response embedded in institutions and practices). There is no point to deny this – it should be mentioned, almost matter of factly (not as a dramatic confession) since a racist society in which White supremacy is a dominant ideology would mean that of course Whites have racism embedded in them. Making yourself study why and how this process lives in you should be a teachable moment – best done right in class (eg. Not challenging students of color because you want to show solidarity, asking a student to speak for their race etc.).

I can teach about racism without having colleagues of color.

While it is certainly possible for Whites to teach other Whites about the presence of White Supremacy, White Privilege etc. and how to combat these, working with a multiracial teaching team is crucial for being able to model talking across difference and working through racial tensions (Chicago). The team should talk out how their racial memberships manifest themselves in decisions about process e.g. how you ask students to address you, what behavior you regard as respectful, your level of comfort with gumbo ya ya (Alice Walker's description of overlapping speech patterns amongst African American students), call and response, etc.

Thanking students of color for the gift of their racial heritage and knowledge – for teaching you about race

Thanking students for their heritage can easily come across as condescending and underscores the centering of Whiteness. It positions these racialized traditions as exotic others, different – and only emphasizes the 'naturalness' of White and Eurocentric perspectives. So don't expect colleagues of color to 'teach' you about racism & white supremacy - they have enough to do combating racism without taking you on as a learning project. This is your responsibility – you must conduct your own serious learning on this.

I can understand how you must feel

Don't ever suggest you understand how it feels to be the victim of racism. As a White person you can't - to students and colleagues of color race trumps EVERYTHING. Saying you're from the working class, have suffered under patriarchy, have experienced religious discrimination and can

therefore understand what students of color experience will come across as naïve and condescending. You lose credibility in an instant.

You must have misunderstood me, I'm teaching AGAINST racism!

Be prepared to be called a racist - it comes with the territory of this work. You may feel you're working with sensitivity and goodwill but as soon as you stir the waters with racial discussions you will inevitably inflame some people. As a White person and a representative (in the eyes of students' of color) of White supremacy you must expect to be mistrusted and not let that stop you. You must also expect White colleagues to accuse you of politically incorrect reverse racism. This is NOT a sign that you are somehow failing. It comes to every White person in this work.

Let me show you how I have read works on the Black, Asian etc. perspective on this

Before you open your mouth to show how you have read authors of color make sure you have truly engaged with scholarship of color and are aware of the major debates, disagreements and differences - you expect your colleagues of color to be well acquainted with Eurocentric analysis, ideas of the Enlightenment, the Greek basis to so much moralizing, Marxist critique etc. They have every right therefore to expect you to be similarly well versed in Africentrism, the debate between integrationism and critical race theory, differences between Civil Rights movement figures on leadership and strategy, the Ebonics debate, the case for Black Nationalism or alliance with broader social and political movements, etc.

Let's hear the Black, Asian, First Nation, Pacific Islander etc. perspective on this issue

Never ask a student to speak for their race - this implies that all people of a certain phenotype think and behave in exactly the same way. It would be infuriating for you to have to give the 'American' or 'White' perspective on something given the multiple ethnicities, religious, ideological, historical etc. groups and variables in American culture. So never assume there is a unitary Black/Latino/Asian or other perspective. After all, there is not a unitary White perspective or viewpoint on most issues.

Let's leave race out of this for a moment / put questions of race aside

Assume that for students of color race is evident in everything - how we name ourselves, what we consider as respectful behavior, how we think a good discussion goes etc. The freedom to say 'let's put race aside' is

something Whites have – they can ‘choose’ when to switch the racial perspective on or off.

As a Friend let me tell you what to do

This is the Preaching / Disdain mentioned earlier by the European Collective. It positions you as ‘holier than thou’ and also erroneously positions you as free of racism.

I Musn’t Criticize Students of Color or I’m a Racist and I Need to grant special dispensations

Holding back from challenging students of color out of a ‘concern’ for their wellbeing masks an embedded racist consciousness that says that ‘they’ can’t take a ‘strong’ challenge from a White person. Quickly granting paper extensions to students of color because they are students of color (without any attempt to assess their ability) springs from a White Supremacist judgment that because students of color are not as intelligent or strong as White students, of course they will need more time to complete their work. Colleagues of color will have no compunction about holding students of color to the highest standards.

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