

## **Teaching to Convince, Teaching to Empower: Reflections on Student Resistance and Self-Defeat at Predominantly White vs. Racially Diverse Campuses**

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### **Abstract**

A key challenge of teaching racism in the so-called post-racial era is to get students to realize that racism does, in fact, exist. When faced with these challenges, it is not uncommon for professors to dedicate much of their time to convincing students of the significance and persistence of racism. This is especially true when teaching at predominantly White institutions, where students likely do not navigate racism on an everyday basis. However, these methods may not be as effective when teaching racism at colleges where the student body is predominantly of Color, immigrant, and/or working class. Here, new challenges arise. One central challenge I have faced is teaching about the persistence of racism without disempowering students who do encounter racism in their everyday lives. In this paper, I reflect on these challenges and the strategies I developed to deal with student resistance at three different institutions. I also offer some suggestions on how our colleges and universities can create supportive environments for women and faculty of Color who teach racism. This paper is intended for college faculty who teach a variety of courses in which racism is addressed centrally as well as for college administrators interested in retaining women and faculty of Color.

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I recently read a review of a volume called *Covert Racism* (Coates, 2011). In it the reviewer refers back to the editor's comparison of covert racism to the movie *The Matrix* (1999). In the movie, if you take the red pill, the truth about the world will be revealed to you. If you take the blue pill, you can live in a fabricated world, where you are oblivious to the truth. The reviewer goes on to say that if she knew before entering graduate school what she would learn about racism, she might *not* have chosen the red pill. That story conveys what I've learned from teaching racism, first at a predominantly European American, upper-middle-class institution ("Flagship University"), followed by a community college ("City Community"), and then a four-year college ("State College"), where students are largely working class, recent immigrants, and people of Color. In most classrooms, it takes an entire semester just to get students to understand how racism works and to take it seriously. By the end of the semester, we are successful in getting students to choose the red pill, but then we send them off into a world where most folks are still on the blue pill. They now have to deal with seeing racism more clearly in their everyday lives and careers without the benefit of a professor and fellow classmates to deal with those situations.

In predominantly upper-middle-class, White institutions, it may be enough to get students off of the blue pill so they can see that racism still exists. Being able to see the world more clearly and gaining a sophisticated understanding of racism can make them feel more intelligent and empowered. They can then use their privilege to create change in the world. This approach may not work as well in more racially diverse and working-class institutions. When I moved from Flagship

University to City Community and State College, I quickly discovered that the methods I used to empower privileged European American students often disempowered working-class students and students of Color. In what follows, I will compare my experiences at these institutions.

### A Note on Terminology

I start most of my classes by detailing the history of "race" and whiteness. I draw heavily from the work of Allen (1994) and Smedley (2007), which illustrate how the category of "White" was created to divide English indentured servants and African slaves who regularly revolted under a common class identity. Using evidence from these scholars, I discuss how "race" was originally developed over several decades, first through punishments for interracial fraternizing and later through rewards attached to whiteness. Poor European Americans did not naturally identify as "White," but eventually began seeing the value attached to that identity and separated themselves from slaves. Later, Irish and Italians would don blackface to secure their wages of whiteness (Roediger, 1991). Prior to the invention of "race," there were no "White" people (Allen, 1994).

For these reasons, when I am referring to people, I use the term *European Americans* or "White" in quotations. If I am referring to institutions, I use the term *White* without quotations, as in "predominantly White institutions." Here, the term *White* is not referring to a socially constructed category of people, but a pervasive ideology of whiteness that permeates institutional culture and practices. I encourage my European American students to question their "White" identity. They are not just

“White” and, indeed, identifying in this way normalizes whiteness. Typically, we use ethnic categories to refer to Native Americans and Asian Americans rather than the terms “reds” or “yellows.” I ask my students to think about why we unquestionably accept the terms “black” and “white.”

Additionally, I address other more problematic ways that the term *European American* has been used. For example, some have used it merely as a means of political correctness or “optional ethnicity,” which often denies White privilege (Waters, 1996). This is not how we use the term in our class. After learning the history of the “race” concept, students understand this difference immediately. My goal in problematizing “White” as a racial category is to challenge students’ uncritical acceptance of “White” identity, which Allen (1994) sees as a key factor preventing working-class solidarity. I also try to show European American students how they, too, have a stake in dismantling racism and that by uncritically accepting their “White” identity they contribute to the maintenance of White supremacy.

### **Teaching to Convince: The Flagship Years**

I experienced a bit of culture shock when I came to Flagship U in 2001. I obtained my BA and MA in sociology at a predominantly working-class institution, where many students spent their spring breaks earning money for college rather than vacationing. I was able to gain some experience teaching through an intensive Teaching Sociology course. I developed syllabi, exams, taught some classes on “race” and racism (one of which was recorded), and received feedback from professors and classmates. I left that course with an impressive portfolio few other

students entering my future doctoral program had. None of that prepared me for the classrooms I would encounter at Flagship.

I began teaching during my second semester in the doctoral program. I quickly learned that I shared very little in common with the students at Flagship. Most of them spent their spring breaks in the Bahamas, Cancun, or Miami Beach. Their behavior in the classroom was also very different from what I had experienced. Most students addressed their professors by first name. They voiced their opinions freely and arrogantly. They would hold onto their opinions regardless of the evidence provided in class that contradicted those opinions. For example, when I discussed the social construction of “race,” I showed students the variety of racial classifications that existed around the world. I discussed cases of students from Morocco being racialized into new categories upon entering the United States. I covered the scientific evidence, which showed flaws in attempts to link biology and “race.” Regardless of all of this evidence, a “White” male student objected not with facts or logic, but with his personal opinion. He stated, “I believe that there are biological categories, Mongoloid, Caucasoid, Negroid.” It did not matter what evidence I had to offer him, he was not going to consider it. Others chimed in, pointing to the preponderance of African Americans in sports and entertainment. When asked to consider the racial differences in the players and the owners of teams or how other ethnic groups, such as Jewish Americans once dominated basketball, students simply did not want to hear it. I could not even get through a lecture. Students would resist me every step of the way.

In at least one instance, I was able to compare my experiences with those of a

European American graduate student. During my race, class, and gender course, I discussed what stratification was and what it looked like. I wanted students to see how big the gap between the richest and poorest had become. A student protested, stating that the data was skewed, since it juxtaposed the richest against the poorest. I explained to him what most of the class seemed to already understand, which is that by definition this is what stratification means. He insisted that an average of everyone's income would offer a more accurate picture of the United States rather than lumping all of the richest people together and then comparing them to the poorest. Again, I tried to explain to him the ways that we measure stratification. I also explained that in this case, we are not interested in the overall average of what people make in the United States, although I could provide those numbers for him as well. In this moment, what we were interested in was how big the gap was between the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent. I asked the class if this was clear and if anyone could assist us in clarifying the problem. I stressed that this was an important topic, and I wanted to make sure I was being clear. No one in this 70-person class said anything. Some of them rolled their eyes; some made sour faces. The student persisted in his objections, concluding that the numbers I was presenting were just biased.

What is remarkable about this situation is that my European American male colleague had the same student in a previous semester, and he presented an identical lecture on stratification. It was one we developed together. When he presented this same lecture to this same student, the student actually supported everything he was saying and helped to correct misinformed comments from other students who objected to the lecture. My colleague's lecture went smoothly and this particular

student was eager to learn from him. When I discovered that we had different experiences with this student, I felt demoralized but also began realizing that the issues I was facing in the classroom had more to do with resistance to learning about racism and inequality from a woman of Color than it did with my teaching abilities.

There were also students who found joy in harassing women and professors of Color. In my race, class, and gender course, students were expected to complete an analysis of the media that focused on the racialized, gendered, and classed portrayals of characters. I had gone over examples of how to do this, and we completed a content analysis as an in-class activity. Before students began their projects, they brainstormed ideas and received feedback on those ideas from their classmates. During this activity, a student raised his hand to loudly proclaim he wanted to do his project on pornography. After the laughter from the classroom had subsided, I told the student that if he was serious, there were actually quite a few studies on pornography and some of them did focus on the intersections of race, class, and gender. The student continued to make jokes.

Later, when he met with me in my office about the paper he was actually pursuing, he saw a friend of his walking by and yelled to say hello to her. He then proceeded to joke with his friend including me in the conversation. He asked me how you can tell if a girl was from the sorority to which his friend belonged. The answer he gave was that in said sorority, the girls wear their underwear around their ankles. The frustrating thing about this student and many like him was that he could write clearly about what institutionalized racism was and he knew how to get a good grade. At the same time, he was very disruptive in class and attempted to embarrass and harass me in

front of other students. I doubt that he exhibited this same behavior towards his male professors.

The kind of challenges I faced with this and other students reflect a problem that Vargas (1999) found in her study of what she called “other teachers”—that is, college teachers who do not reflect dominant perceptions of what a professor looks and sounds like, which is usually “White,” male, and nonaccented. Based on her interviews with professors of Color, she concludes that students often fail to exhibit what Goffman (1959) called “audience” tact with “other teachers.” In fact, instead of supporting the performer, who in this case is the teacher, students respond with resentment and hostility, or in my case, ridicule.

I had many more troubling experiences during my first years of teaching race, class, and gender at Flagship U. I spent entire days preparing for class, anticipating student objections and practicing my responses, meeting with faculty for suggestions, and coming up with creative activities. But no matter what I did, students constantly objected to hearing about racism, and my evaluations reflected that. I consistently scored in the sevens on a ten-point scale. The averages for my department were in the eights. A mentor of mine pointed out that those who teach about the realities of racism in everyday life often make students uncomfortable and that discomfort is what leads them to rate my teaching low. He had noticed that faculty of Color who center racism in their teaching received higher standard deviations than others, reflecting a skewed distribution with those who loved us and hated us. The students who loved me thanked me profusely for the course. They told me that I changed the way they thought about the world and they shared what they were learning with friends and family. Students

of Color thanked me for talking about the experiences they had every day. According to many of these students, race, class, and gender were covered in their other courses very superficially. For example, one student stated that faculty in her other courses pointed to racial inequality here and there but did not go in depth and integrate it into every topic as we did in our class. In their written comments, students also pointed out the strengths of how I integrated a variety of teaching methods from classroom activities, lectures, discussions, films, PowerPoint presentations, song lyrics, and other media to communicate the ideas. These students also signed up for my upper-level courses. Clearly, the sevens I was receiving in the numeric evaluations did not accurately illustrate the kind of teacher I was and the positive impact I was able to have on students.

### **Responding to Student Resistance at Predominantly White Campuses**

My experiences improved when I began teaching smaller, upper-level courses that focused on racism and sexism. I had the privilege of teaching the White Racism course, one of the only courses with that name in the country. It helped that by then, I had developed a reputation, and students more open to learning about racism and sexism were drawn to my courses. Also, the person who created the course had already done much of the work in building its reputation so that many students knew that this was a serious course on White racism, not prejudice against “White” people (though there were always a few who came into the course with that notion). By then I was also learning that many women and faculty of Color had the same challenging experiences as I had. I became familiar with studies confirming that women and people of Color face unique challenges in the classroom from students who do not see

them as legitimate professors, especially if these professors teach about racism (Baker & Copp, 1997; Essed, 2000; Tusmith & Reddy, 2002; Vargas, 1999; Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002; Williams, 1992).

I began reaching out to faculty at Flagship U about the experiences many of us seemed to share. We developed a workshop in 2005 with the support of the Women's Studies Program, the Cultural Centers, and the Sociology Department. Prior to the workshop, we asked faculty about the specific challenges they faced in the classroom and any successful strategies they had developed to combat those challenges. In 2008, I joined a faculty member on a Public Television show to discuss what we had accomplished and some of our ongoing struggles.

Faculty continued to face at least five common struggles: (1) Constant challenges to their authority, (2) disruption and disrespect from reactionary and/or hostile students, (3) threats, (4) perception by students that they were less qualified than "White" professors, and (5) problems in tenure and promotion due to skewed evaluations and greater time spent dealing with teaching issues. Some of the threats women of Color received were quite serious. One faculty member reported having a rock thrown through her office window by a student who was unhappy with his exam grade. This was after he had thrown his exam on the floor in front of her and wrote her a threatening email. Another faculty member reported a similar incident, where the student left a threatening message on her answering machine in which he said he was coming to get her. What these threats have in common with the other four challenges faculty face is that it takes a great deal of time and emotional energy to deal with them.

The time devoted to countering threats, challenges to authority, and disrespect takes away from valuable research projects faculty must pursue for tenure and promotion. This was summed up clearly by a faculty member at our workshop. She stated:

*I've taken measures to protect myself and document everything. However, it takes a great deal of time. Having to respond to student complaints, participate in a hearing with Judicial Affairs, and meet with my department head over such matters is distressing and robs me of precious time that could be spent on research.*

Likewise, an African American woman stated:

*I record and document everything. I keep all email correspondences from students. I contact the Dean of Students ASAP, and I inform my department head ASAP about any trouble that might be brewing. I create a file on what I call my "problem" children. I observe student behavior very closely, particularly their physical reactions. For instance, I notice whether or not a male student will ball up his fists when he speaks to me. Does he try to get in my personal space and tower over me when speaking?*

Teaching the smaller classes in my specific area of interest helped, but in order to make them work, I had to become what Vargas (1999) called the "walk on water professor." One of her participants summed the strategy up this way:

*The only way you get away with it [being the Other Teacher] is being more than*

*average, that is, being the walk-on-the-water different minority. Where it's obvious that you are so good and so different, that then you become the celebrity. But if you're just average Joe, forget it. (pp. 375-376)*

If I taught at night, I spent the whole day prepping and practicing my lectures. If I offered a statistic, I had to know everything about how the numbers were calculated and why. I went out of my way to practice the right responses to student questions. I discussed their comments with colleagues and researched everything I could to appear competent in the classroom. For example, I made sure to have a detailed response to a resistant student's comparison of controlling images used to justify slavery, such as Mammy and Jezebel, to the image of Quakers on oatmeal. Of course, this student was not raising this comparison so that we could have an intelligent discussion on how the images compared. Rather, he wanted to dismiss entirely the notion that racist images of African American women have persisted throughout popular culture.

Because there was so much resistance to learning about racism at Flagship U, I had to dedicate most of my time trying to convince predominantly "White" students that racism did still exist and that it was worth their time to know about it. On the first day of class, I would go over what White racism was and what it was not. I let them know what my expertise and qualifications were. I told them they had to be open to learning about racism as a system of oppression, one that largely benefits European Americans and disadvantages people of Color. I encouraged students to look over the readings and decide whether or not they felt they could get something valuable out of the course before deciding to stay. I learned that I had to be ultra-professional in class,

dress impeccably, and never let my guard down in order for students to take my courses seriously and to see me as a serious scholar. I would memorize my lectures and give rousing, inspiring speeches as students became more interested in creating change. I developed racism-centered social justice projects and went out of my way to support them by looking into issues they found important and having lengthy email conversations. I was also involved in my own social justice projects so that I could set an example for my students and inspire them.

In addition, I dedicated much of my time teaching about and researching the history of whiteness. I validated the experiences European Americans had with discrimination but clearly showed step by step every detail of how they became "White" and how their experiences differed from those who could not gain the status of whiteness. I discussed what it meant to be a "race-traitor" and how European Americans could use their privileged positions to create change. I made sure to be aware of every current event and scandal involving racism so that when students brought them up, I would know how to respond. I brought in a number of readings, films, poetry slams, and other materials to illustrate how contemporary racism works and that it persists for people of Color regardless of gender or class background.

Students raved about the course. For "White" students, learning about racism was empowering and freeing. Having opened their eyes to the way racism worked, they could better understand their friends who had experienced racial discrimination and why there was often anger over certain portrayals in popular culture. They began to understand that they also played a role in combating racism. They saw that they had agency. In fact, they often left wanting

more and were sad to see the class end. Many of them commented that they had been there for four years and this was the first time they had had a course like this one. Of the social justice projects, a “White” male student stated, “This is the most meaningful and inspiring class project I have done so far as an undergraduate” (student email). His plan was to present his project at a conference. I later wrote several letters of recommendation for him.

A “White” female student, who went on to graduate school, wrote me after teaching a class on racism. She stated:

*I taught the full hour ... using a lot of what you had taught me ... it was a really good experience and the students were very involved. They told the instructor later that they had really enjoyed my lecture/discussion and that I had shown them a lot of new ideas that they had never heard of or had thought about before. I just wanted to write and again thank you for all that I learned from you last semester. I am hoping to make a future out of studying white racism and basing my master’s thesis on it in some way. (student email)*

Another “White” female student pursuing her master’s degree emailed:

*I took your white racism class last spring and absolutely loved it! I am now working on my masters in Social Work and have a distinct interest in systemic racism. I am also co-chairing a student organization. ... I would like to do an event on systemic racism. ... I was thinking of some of your class lectures and how they really made me understand everything. (student email)*

Several semesters after taking my race, class, and gender course, I met up with a former “White” female student at a workshop on diversity. She emailed me later that day to say:

*Your course ... helped me to realize my passion for social justice, peace, equality, and the like. I began to realize my need to work against racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and all forms of oppression. I now consider myself a student activist and plan on pursuing non-profit, activist work after graduating. I honestly could not imagine where I would be had I not discovered my commitment to working for social change. And it is completely because of you and your course that I was able to find this passion. (student email)*

I was able to help students to this point by showing them through convincing examples and evidence how embedded racism is in our culture, institutions, and our minds. That style of teaching was still necessary as I moved to a more diverse college, but as I would realize, it could also have negative consequences for students of Color.

### **Teaching to Empower: The Community and State College Years**

When I came to City Community College, I came scarred by my experiences at Flagship U. Even though I was eventually a successful teacher, I knew I had achieved that success by being that “walk on water” professor, over preparing and exhausting myself by developing creative discussions and activities in conjunction with inspiring lectures. Because I still had to manage student hostility to learning racism and towards me as a woman of



Color, every time I walked into a classroom, I was nervous. However, I learned quickly that at City Community, I had to develop new teaching methods; ones that offered some hope and that focused more on people of Color rather than whiteness alone. This involved letting my guard down over time and talking about my own experiences as a person of Color. At Flagship U, I always had the fear that revealing my racial identity or class background would present the image that I was biased and students already thought that. It was better to keep them guessing.

The student body at City Community College is 40 percent Latino/a, 34 percent African American, 14 percent European American, 12 percent Asian, and less than 1 percent American Indian. I immediately noticed a difference in the students and felt more at home than I ever did in classrooms at Flagship U. Instead of the denial of racism that I experienced at Flagship, students at City Community listened to the lectures and thought carefully about them. They could volunteer examples from their own lives and connect them with the course material in a much more complex way than students did at Flagship U. They also knew a lot more about inequality. In fact, when I began discussing racial differences in unemployment rates, several students volunteered information on how the unemployment statistic underestimated the problem.

For many students, it was empowering to hear a professor validate their experiences and let them know that they were not crazy, paranoid, or overly sensitive. However, they did not need to be convinced that racism existed. They lived the inequalities. They needed to know that the money and time they were investing into their educations at a community college were going to get them somewhere. The

tactics I used at Flagship of drilling into students how racism persisted and that it was not dispersed by higher levels of education or income were not going to work at City Community. I became more and more aware of this problem by the end of my first semester there.

Toward the end of the semester, a student stated, "My mother told me that I shouldn't use my last name on job applications because people will discriminate against Spanish-sounding names and will think that I don't speak English. Is that true?" I answered her with the truth. There are several studies that show such discrimination exists. Earlier I had shared the findings of Pager and Western's (2009) study, which showed that European American men *with* criminal records had similar chances of getting callbacks for jobs as African American and Latino men *without* criminal records. I also discussed studies on "linguistic profiling," where employers, real estate agents, and lenders discriminated against applicants who were accented or *sounded* African American, Latino/a, etc. I had been so used to responding to denial of racism by European American students that my natural reaction was to lay down all of the evidence that proved the seriousness of racism.

I was also not used to students asking for my advice. I was accustomed to students dismissing my views and feeling as if they knew more than I did on the topic I was teaching. When I answered my student with all of the overwhelming evidence that proved racial discrimination, she looked disappointed and worried. It was then that I began thinking about self-defeat in the classroom. This self-defeat was manifest in students' exhausted appearances, as we continued to learn about the layers of inequality and racism in every institution. I could see it in the way they shook their

heads and looked down at their papers, as well as in what they said during class. One semester, after viewing a film and talking about the genocide of Native Americans, a student emailed me her thoughts:

*The last few classes were very intense and hard pills to swallow. I can't help but be very grateful that I didn't grow up in those times but at the same time is now an even better time? ... I deeply feel for all these people that had to be subjugated due to the white man's greed. People that came because they were themselves subjugated in their home. What they did to people was so wrong in so many ways and it's sad because they just all get away with it and deal with no guilt behind anything they did. ... It's an uncomfortable feeling when you can't do anything about what happens but just take it in.*  
(student email)

To counter this self-defeat, I tell students it's alright to feel anger and discomfort, because those emotions are necessary for any social change to occur. I also share my own struggles with racism and how I worked through them. I tell students it is important to find allies who will support them. I also try to give them hope. I share stories of people I know who try to combat racism in their places of work. I advise my students that racism is real, but they cannot live their lives worrying about every move they make and that this is something I am still working through for myself. In most cases at City Community, students have appreciated my candor. However, it is always risky for women and faculty of Color to open up, because they are often more scrutinized by their students than are European American male faculty (Sprague & Massoni, 2005). It is also painful and emotionally draining to recount those

experiences. It is time-consuming as well, since students will often unload their own problems and emotions onto women faculty. I continue to struggle with this where I currently teach at State College.

When I came to State College, I found myself in between the teaching world of Flagship U and City Community. The student population is much more diverse than Flagship, but it is a different kind of diversity than that at City Community. Forty-one percent of students are the first in their families to attend college and many of them are recent immigrants from working-class backgrounds. However, a number of students in my courses went to private schools and have many more resources than City Community students. Students at State College are certainly ambitious and driven, but they have more of a reason to be. More so than students at City Community, they are seeing their hard work pay off and do not face the same kind of challenges. Almost every faculty member in the Social Sciences Department at City Community had students who were homeless. State College students are progressing steadily through their classes and many of them are pursuing graduate school. In fact, after my first semester at State College, I wrote 17 letters of recommendation for 9 different students. A colleague of mine once summarized students at State College as the working-class immigrants for whom the American Dream is working. Thus, they are more likely to resist critiques of meritocracy and the system of U.S. racism than are City Community students. I saw this clearly my first day in the classroom.

While students at City Community analyzed how the statistics on unemployment underestimated the problem, students at State College immediately criticized the numbers, stating that unemployment has increased because people

do not want to take jobs that are beneath them. On that first day, three male students (two European Americans and one Asian American) volunteered that they had friends with PhD's, who refused to take jobs as adjuncts and collected unemployment benefits. Their friends were offered up as proof that unemployment is not the problem we have made it out to be.

The racial and ethnic make-up of State College's student population is also different from that of City Community. State College's students are predominantly "White" and Asian with a much smaller percentage of African American and Latino/as. While I have had a few vocal African Americans in class, on the whole they tend to be quiet during conversations on "race" and racism. However, I do notice them nod when I talk about racial inequality and after my first semester, I received a few evaluations where students thanked me for talking about "their group." From what my African American students tell me, they learn little about racism directed at "their group." I believe this is also a problem for Asian American students. I have noticed resistance, especially at City Community, to hearing about racism experienced by Asian Americans. I will address this in the following section as an issue of student resistance.

### **Responding to Student Resistance at Racially Diverse Campuses**

Women and faculty of Color on racially diverse campuses are not safe from challenges to their authority. Since coming to City Community and State College, I have had more than one woman of Color tell me that a student ripped up his exam and threw it at her. Two women I have spoken with have had students threaten them and had to call security and/or have plainclothes police in their classrooms.

When resistance and disrespect is voiced in the classroom, it usually comes from European American men. More often than not, these students are nonaccented and are not recent immigrants. I recall having disruptive students every semester who fit this description. In a social problems course, I had a student who, despite sporadic class attendance and incomplete work, felt entitled to dominate classroom discussions. For my own protection, I kept a file documenting his behavior and discussed it with my chair and trusted colleagues, who advised me to fill out an early warning form on the student. The following is a description from my folder on "problem students" and describes this particular student's behavior in my classroom:

*In one class, the student began explaining his position on the myths of homosexuality. He stated, "It's not like black and white. You can tell if someone is black." There was some reaction from the class at this point, because we had just finished the section on "race" and racism, where we discussed how you cannot tell someone's "race" just by looking at them and the complex experiences of racially ambiguous people. The student was not present for the entire unit on "race." I informed the student that we should remember "black" and "white" are constructed categories and we had an entire section on how you cannot tell someone's "race" by looking at them. He then stated in a disrespectful manner, "I wasn't actually finished!" The class laughed. I stated that it is important for me as the instructor to correct misinformation as it happens. ... After I made my statement, the student again stated in a dismissive manner, "Well, there's that." The*

*class laughed again at his remark and he continued making the same erroneous comments that he made before. The student also makes side comments to his classmates during class discussion. He acts frustrated when I call on other students before him, though the students I am calling on have not yet had the chance to talk. His hand is always up while others are still talking. When he is not disrupting class, he is texting or zoning out.*

What is astonishing about this resistance and disrespect is that it comes from European Americans even when they are the numerical minority in the classroom. What is even more troubling is that when I see this happen, all of the students of Color turn and listen to whatever the European American male objector is saying and few challenge him. They show him more respect than they show other students of Color. This is incredibly revealing about the way racism and power dynamics work in the classroom.

Resistance, then, functions to maintain White privilege in at least two ways. The first has to do with the situation I just described. The resistance often comes from a European American man, who dominates the conversation while students of Color defer to his feigned expertise on the subject. His voice is the dominant one and has the power to shut down conversations on racism and marginalize alternative perspectives, usually held by people of Color. Second, faculty constantly faced with this resistance may come to feel disempowered and choose not to openly address racism in their courses. When they do, they are faced with all of the challenges I have already laid out, which European American faculty do not face to the same degree and frequency. In the example of my

problem student, while I was supposedly of higher status as the professor in the class, he constantly questioned my authority and that reproduced his privileged position as “White” and male.

I have not yet disrupted this privilege in the classroom by calling attention to the oppression in the room. Rodriguez-Silva (2012) argues that people of Color avoid calling out racist situations as a means of emotional survival. Likewise, I fear that to do so would make me even more vulnerable in the classroom, especially with belligerent problem students, such as the one described above. I have, however, made mention of how European Americans and men tend to dominate discussions, even when the room is mostly full of women and people of Color. I have yet to point this out explicitly during the moments it happens in my classroom. I used to try to manage resistant students by listening respectfully to them and trying to reason with them. This only resulted in circular conversations between the two of us and excluded students who genuinely wanted to learn about racism. To encourage students of Color, I had to show them that they could disagree with these resistant European American students. Therefore, I now directly disagree with false comments made by resistant students and point to weaknesses in their arguments. When my students see me doing this, they feel more confident in challenging their European American classmates. It is as if I have granted them permission to disrupt the power arrangement.

Another kind of resistance I have noticed, especially at City Community College, involves a denial of racism directed towards Asian Americans. When I saw this happening in my Ethnic Groups class, I shared with students a scenario from their textbook. In it a professor of Ethnic Studies discussed how upset her students became

when they learned that Asian Americans were angry about the racism they faced. She pointed out that they did not have a problem reading about African American or Latino/a anger all semester. To this, a student stated that they expected African Americans and Latino/as to be angry. However, of Asian Americans, she said, “Their anger made me angry, because I didn’t even know the Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn’t expect their anger” (Feagin & Booher Feagin, 2011, p. 301).

I have not yet seen the same level of objection to learning about racism and Asian Americans at State College. However, I overhear students commenting on how there are too many Asians, and some students have told me that their friends tried to discourage them from coming to State College for this reason. State College is often compared to Berkeley due to its Asian American population as well as students expressing an uncertainty of attending State College because they hear it’s full of Asians. For the record, 38 percent of students at State College are classified as Asian or Pacific Islander and 36 percent are European American. They are no more taking over the college than are “White” students.

There are several tools I use to handle resistance to learning about racism faced by Asians in the United States. I tell the story of Yuri Kochiyama and her friendship with Malcolm X. Students read about Yuri’s experiences in internment camps and how that radicalized her, leading her to become active with the Black Power movement (Fujino, 2005). I also share poetry slams from Yellow Rage and a reading by Sandra Oh about Yuri Kochiyama that brings some of my Asian American students to tears. There is a history of silence about racism in the Asian American community, which stems in part from the internment experience. When we

do not address the racism Asian Americans experience today in the United States, we continue to perpetuate that silence. Internalizing the model minority image may be a survival strategy for Asian Americans, but we must remember that that image is in fact a myth. Rather than just teaching students the definition of the model minority myth, I give them a history of why it developed and how it continues to divide Asian Americans from other people of Color. For a summary of these and other methods see Appendix A.

Not all students are resistant to learning about racism, whether it is directed at Asian Americans or other people of Color. European American students at State College are very diverse and teaching them has been as enlightening as it is frustrating. For example, in my Race and Ethnic relations course, a first generation Ukrainian student recounted an experience she had in upstate New York. She was speaking with her mother in Russian and a European American man told them to “Go back to your country.” The student was nonaccented with light skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. She could pass as a prototypical “American.” This sparked a conversation about the hierarchy of whiteness and that for her, privilege operated differently. Much like Ferber’s (1999) discussion of Jewish identity, she could be seen as “White” and gain the privileges associated with that status or she could be the hated racial “other,” depending on the situation. We further discussed how White privilege works differently for European Americans who are recent immigrants than for those who are third or fourth generation. Later the student thanked me for helping her to understand her experiences and the behavior of those around her. She felt our class reinvigorated her commitment to social justice in her law career. In fact, I wrote this student a letter

of recommendation for law school, which she started in the fall of 2014.

The benefits European American students at State College gain from learning about racism are similar to those at Flagship U. They feel more empowered to combat oppression in any form. They challenge their friends, colleagues, and parents on their racism. This past summer a European American student emailed me that she and another student from the course had a debate about racism with their coach and two teammates on their way back from a trip. She stated:

*To be honest, most classes I usually forget a lot of what I learned after the semester but I took so much from your class! If you were teaching other courses I would totally take you again.* (student email)

Many of my Asian American students, especially those who have recently immigrated to this country, have thanked me for helping them to understand the history of racism in the United States. I have had numerous students tell me that before taking my course, they were confused as to why African Americans were angry about discrimination. They saw the United States as the land of opportunity and did not understand why people were complaining about racism. They also felt that they could now better comprehend reactions to racist incidents, news stories, and conversations they had with fellow students. Because a good portion of the students at colleges like City Community and State College are recent immigrants, they were not socialized by the U.S. system of racism. While it is important to teach students about countries outside of the United States, that should not replace teaching them about the harsh realities of racism in the United States. They must navigate this country and, at least

for my students, it has been beneficial for them to have knowledge of how racism developed and evolved specifically in the United States. If we are to continue teaching our students this information in what is often a hostile environment for women and faculty of Color, our institutions must take steps to support us. I turn now to a discussion of these issues.

### **Conclusion: What Our Institutions Can Do to Support Women and Faculty of Color**

In order to maintain the courage to teach racism, I have had to create my own support networks. I have done that by organizing faculty workshops and roundtables at my college and at meetings of professional organizations. During my first semester at State College, I organized a roundtable on teaching racism, which some faculty later dubbed the inaugural roundtable. I brought together women and faculty of Color who center racism in their teaching and European American faculty who not only teach racism but are also supportive and understanding rather than dismissive of the unique struggles faculty of Color experience. Later a European American woman present at the roundtables asked me to incorporate more tangibles into the discussion. One of my concerns with “tangibles” is that much of the focus tends to be on what faculty can do to better their teaching rather than on what the institution can do to support us. There is clearly a problem when “walk on water” professors who have a profound effect on their students still feel marginalized and disrespected.

I have laid out a few tangible ways that our institutions can make a difference in Appendix B. One step is for our colleagues, chairs, deans, and presidents to read about the challenges women and faculty of Color face so that when we discuss what is

happening in our classrooms, they will already have some knowledge on student bias and resistance. Often at new faculty orientations, we receive books about teaching. If we want to support faculty in teaching about difficult topics such as “race” and racism and send the message that the university cares about these issues, we should also give our new faculty books, such as Tusmith and Reddy’s (2002) *Race in the College Classroom*, which shares the experiences and advice of those “socially committed educators” who believe “that teaching responsibly in the humanities as well as in other academic disciplines, requires an honest and searching examination of race” (p. 1), and I would add racism. These lessons apply to faculty in all fields.

The essays in Tusmith and Reddy’s (2002) volume come from those teaching American literature, composition, biology, psychology, political science, curriculum theories, and many more. It would also be useful to bring in authors of recent works, such as Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, and Harris (2012) *Presumed Incompetent*, which presents empirical research on all of the issues women face in academia from student relations to interactions with colleagues, as well as barriers to tenure and promotion. This should be required reading for anyone who works in departments pertaining to faculty development.

Schiraldi (2013) also lists ten institutional strategies to support students in learning about privilege. He argues that the college should hold regular forums on controversial topics, such as power, inequality, and “isms.” I agree that such forums should be regularly occurring, however, it is usually faculty of Color who do the lion’s share of the work in leading and organizing those sessions. This work

should be recognized in some concrete way by the college. Chairs, deans, and other administrators should also hold their own workshops to learn more about the issues. These discussions should also critique some of the dominant pedagogical assumptions, which do not fit with the reality women and faculty of Color face. Vargas (1999) outlines several of these assumptions—one of them being that the professor is seen as the authority in the classroom and should try to downplay that authority to create an environment where students feel comfortable challenging him/her. She uses an example from her interviews to illustrate the flaw in this thinking:

*I think it's dangerous, for people like us, to sort of say, "Oh, you know, I am not the authority, you [students] are the ultimate authority and I'm going to facilitate. ... I think with the white male [professor], there will be that internal deference that the students would have even if he said, "Oh, no, we're equals." They would never think so. Because they have this internal deference to him. (Vargas, 1999, p. 377)*

It has always been surprising to me how European American faculty, both women and men, can understand racism in the world out there but not see how it affects faculty of Color in the classroom. As a respondent in Vargas’s (1999) study noted:

*I think they [students] get permission from faculty, from other faculty in terms of their behaviors as well. And if there is the sense that this is unimportant—faculty or administration—if they say this is unimportant, then the students absorb that as part of the culture. (p. 369)*

Faculty of Color feel obligated to teach courses that address racism centrally, because we know few others will take on the task. But like the reviewer who wished she did not choose the red pill, we did not realize how much we were taking on when we decided to make racism a central part of our teaching and research. It takes courage to engage in this kind of work. Not everyone is up for this task. Our institutions could support us by counting these courses as service the same way other special courses count as service, since teaching them requires a greater level of commitment. During some workshops on teaching, I have been asked by facilitators to create my dream assignment, assuming that I would have all of the financial support necessary. My dream for race and ethnic relations courses is to have funding for tours and talks to supplement the course material.

There should also be recognition of student bias in evaluations (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Irvine, 1982; Sprague & Massoni, 2005; Vargas, 1999). In all three of the institutions at which I taught, faculty seemed to recognize that evaluations might be lower or skewed in courses students do not like, such as research methods, or classes that attract a certain audience, such as honors courses. We should apply the

same consideration to racism-centered courses. Showing visible support for women and faculty of Color, as well as taking the study of racism seriously, would benefit not only faculty but also our students who want more courses like ours.

I often tell students that by the end of the semester, they are now ready to take the course, and I am ready to teach it. By then, we have developed a relationship and overcome the denial of racism. We discuss the great possibilities that would result if White Racism, Race Relations, and other similar courses were taught as a sequence with courses such as Black Feminist Thought. It might operate like a learning community, which allows the same group of students to take more than one course together. These communities seem to be gaining more and more support on college campuses. Learning communities centered on racism would go a long way in creating an institutional culture that supports teaching about racism. The experiences I have raised in this paper have been documented for several years now. It is time for our institutions to begin implementing some of the suggestions I and many other scholars have made in the struggle to teach racism.



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## Appendix A: Tools for Teaching Racism

**Tim Wise “Race is not a Card”**

Summary: I share Wise’s response to a question on internalized racism. He powerfully summarizes what it is and how it works, using a quote from Neely Fuller, “If you don’t understand white supremacy, everything else will only confuse you.” He tells the story of an African American cop who was known for his brutality to other African Americans. He shows how this is actually an example of White power, because this man is controlling “Black” people. He talks about the need for people of Color, European Americans, men, women, etc., to get together on their own and to resist the urge to call that separatism. Wise talks about how he deals with internalized supremacy and notes problems with what European Americans learn about “White” anti-racists. Likewise, the history of African Americans is most always told as one of victimization starting at slavery. He explores a multitude of other topics in his talk and the Q&A, such as affirmative action, power, President Obama, sexism, homophobia, and the ability to create change. Students cheer and clap during the video. They find more of his speeches on YouTube and tell me about them. I think they are initially shocked to see a “White” man speaking so honestly about racism.

**Dave Chappelle and Racist Humor**

Summary: The segment I do on Chappelle worked particularly well at Flagship U, where students rarely understood the larger criticism in his humor. Students who claimed to admire Chappelle were shocked to learn how little they knew of him as a person. Students at City Community knew more about Chappelle’s falling out with Comedy Central. Chappelle had an epiphany when he saw Euro-Americans in his audience laughing at his “Rick James” sketch and approaching him on the streets about the sketch. He said, “I realized they were laughing *at* me, not with me.” Chappelle has also spoken about his regret of the Pickaninny sketch and his use of the N-word in his comedy. I show students an in-depth interview with Chappelle on “Inside the Actor’s Studio” and compare his life course to Richard Pryor’s.

**Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, a film by Byron Hurt**

In this documentary, Byron Hurt, a former football player, talks about his love of hip-hop and how his views on the music evolved. He talks about becoming troubled by the misogynistic and homophobic content. He interviews famous artists and young artists trying to make it in the business, who feel they have to use misogynist lyrics to be successful. He talks to Tribe Called Quest, Chuck D, and other artists who disagree with that strategy. Students at City Community can usually volunteer examples of well-known songs and artists who do not condone sexism or violence.

### The Story of Malcolm and Yuri

Many of my African American students can give me Malcolm's entire biography but none of them (yet) can tell me about Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American activist, who had a close relationship with Malcolm. I discuss the history of Yuri's life as documented in Diane Fujino's (2005) *Heartbeat of Struggle*. Interestingly, students assume she married an African American, as if an Asian American woman this committed to civil rights, who was accepted by Black Panthers, had to somehow prove her authenticity, and having an African American partner will do that. In fact, she married an Asian American man and lived in Harlem with her six kids, who were also involved in Black liberation struggles, anti-war movements, and the Asian American movement. Yuri's story challenges the model minority myth and illuminates the often ignored history of Asian American activism.

### Poetry Slams: Yellow Rage and Slip of the Tongue

Slip of the Tongue is an award-winning short film of a poetry slam, which speaks to the internalization of beauty norms and exoticization of Asian women. I typically use this with slams by the group, "Yellow Rage." The one I use most often, "Listen Asshole," is among other things, a commentary on the everyday racism Asian Americans experience. The name, "Yellow Rage" is itself a disruption of racist stereotypes. I use these examples in addition to Yuri Kochiyama to empower Asian American students who may feel marginalized by the way racism is typically taught. I want all students to see examples of strong Asian American activists who have spoken powerfully on racism.

An Excerpt from "Listen Asshole"

"So what you tried 'Dim Sum,' and den some on the menu. So what you a fan of Lucy Liu. So what you read 'The Joy Luck Club' too. That makes you an expert on how I should look? Fuck you! What the fuck do you know about being Asian?"

## Appendix B: Recommendations

Send the message that the university cares about the issues of “race” and racism through:

1. Continued roundtables or other sessions on teaching racism and space for women of Color to share their frustrations and triumphs.
2. Discussion of readings, such as “Race in the College Classroom,” during new faculty orientation and how faculty can address “race” and racism in almost all disciplines. These forums should also critique dominant pedagogical assumptions.
3. Greater awareness among chairs, deans, and presidents about resistance in the classroom as well as barriers to tenure and promotion for women and faculty of Color.
4. Recognition of possible student bias in the evaluations of women and faculty of Color.
5. Greater institutional support for courses that deal with controversial issues and the “isms.” This could be achieved through smaller class sizes and funding to support learning in these courses (similar to the support often given to honors and other special courses) and the development of learning communities, where students take multiple courses on “race” and racism.