Notes of a Native Son: Considerations when Discussing Race and Privilege in the Teacher's Lounge

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Abstract

Issues of race, literacy, and self-disclosure link to a long-running debate about the types of assignments and texts used to engage student thought. At the heart of this debate are teachers who view writing and teaching as a performance that is deeply personal and linked to social consequences resonating beyond the first-year writing experience (Bizzell, "Composition Studies Saves the World;" hooks, Teaching to Transgress; Prendergast, Literacy and Racial Justice), and those who see teaching and writing as the acquisition of discrete skills that prepare students to participate in academic discourse (Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally). Yet, most teaching often takes place somewhere in between these rationales. It is the teacher's views about race, class, and gender informed by their experiences and shaped by their own educational background that continue to serve as a backdrop for their own resistance to anti-racist teaching. For me, race represents an under examined, yet salient component of one's teachings, the saturating force that influences the way one chooses to read and respond to particular educative moments. It is in those moments one should ask how does race shape, complicate or silence the interactions of others? This study uses autoethnography and critical analysis of recent research on race to propose a framework for thinking through attitudes toward student writing, toward the selection of texts, and toward teacher disclosures which are always already gendered, racialized, and classed.

In this article I examine my experiences as a writing program administrator at an historically black university and moments of resistance from faculty members who wished to avoid particular conversations about assignments, texts, and student performance that acknowledged the role of race and privilege in those contexts. The purpose of this reflection is to connect it to recent work in educational research and critical race studies and begin to stitch a tighter rubric for reflexively analyzing one's teaching decisions to ensure that they consider the complex way discussions of race marks one's teaching identity, shape's student interest, and enhances student literacies. As the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Racism Without Racists) and Imani Perry (More Beautiful and More Terrible) note, intention has become an obsolete mechanism for understanding and addressing racist assumptions and stereotypes that shape individual choices and reasoning processes. Given this understanding it becomes imperative that teacher training and collegial conversations about teaching develop a sophisticated approach to interrogating the intersection of teacher ethos and race.

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Mother would tell stories of no-nonsense teachers and professors who would push her to go to college and get a degree.

Father would tell similar stories as mother, though less specific about the course work, more general and focused on the philosophies, or lack thereof, that shaped teacher and coach responses to his work.

In all of their stories, bitterness hovered about—a stinging remembering of the subtle and sometimes not so subtle racism they experienced: questions about their intelligence, anger about their presence at institutions of higher education. While education would remain important in their lives and the lives of their children, the suspicion and bitterness would remain.

Decades later, their son would read James Baldwin's (2012) Notes of a Native Son *and come to understand some of the bitterness and suspicion that would characterize their view of education. He would reflect on his own experiences in Catholic schools under mostly white female teachers. Pink slips and detentions would accompany "A's" and "B's," and pretty good aptitude test scores. The bitterness would not come, just some suspicion of grade calculations and group assignment grades. Mild anger would come from receiving a "B+" while his partner received an "A," as the teacher would let him know in private he believed his partner had done the bulk of the work. He would smile and fume privately as he reflected on his partner's struggles with expressing his ideas about the interview they did together. With a knack for language, he had written the entire project as his partner reminded him of points he had forgotten from the interview*

and chimed in with ideas about the article they were composing.

In graduate school, he would continue to read Baldwin, and Bernstein, and hooks, and Freire, and Mahiri, and others. He would grow concerned about student reactions to his teaching style and challenges to his grades. He would develop rubrics and point systems, and still they would challenge. He would observe the students who came into the writing center seeking help, he would notice the treatment those of color received, kid gloves for the most part, subdued conversations about their aptitude would take place among other TAs following their departure. He would gather experience with time and changing job titles, experience in pushing students to think differently about their writing and their education. He would observe more and more the way commonsense stories about what one can and can't say in academic writing or on grammar quizzes would reign over student education. He would even witness bitter students, students in tears over failing freshman English due to two grammar tests. He would note their skin color and language, and would see their bitterness grow.

Critical approaches to addressing racial inequity require a sustained inquiry into the ways that white privilege normalizes and homogenizes teaching perspectives. Such perspectives allow troubling institutional logics to remain invisible and ever present in the way teachers assess students.

In many ways, these invisible logics produce contradictory responses to race. On one hand, students are expected to be treated the same, taught the same, and learn from the same curriculum. On the other hand,

students are also expected to distinguish themselves from other students by displaying creativity, originality, and self-awareness. However, there is no clear sense of the ways it is acceptable to be different, especially as a minority. As recent research has shown (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013), cultural gaps among teachers and students continue to grow. While desire may be present, many new teachers do not receive adequate training for addressing the realities of difference in the contemporary classroom. Since much of education is about distinction achieved through homogeneity—a troubling enigma in itself—difference remains an oddly visible and invisible concept, tolerated under the guise of core standards but not embraced as central to addressing the inequalities present in education and assessment.

My struggles with the high school English teacher in the narrative above, for example, poke fun at the ways institutional logic uses race to shape assessments of students. A member of the basketball team and fairly popular in my class, I was often quiet and unassuming at that time. Thus, many teachers viewed me as a slacker; that grade discrepancy wasn't the first assault on my abilities, but it was perhaps the most damaging, because there was no real provocation for responding to it. A B+ was considered an acceptable grade, and I would not find out that my partner received an A until months later. It is moments such as these that are difficult to discuss because they do not indicate a clear form of racism, or that race was even involved in the decision to lower my grade. It was my ability to be marked both different (varsity basketball player) and inconspicuous (quiet student in the back of the class) that adds to the ambiguity of the situation.

"Difference" (in this case racial and ethnic) in the development of curricular or classroom goals remains undertheorized and underexamined by teachers and administrators such as myself. What is produced as a result is a way of engaging difference that moves away from critical literacy and toward technocratic teaching that, despite several decades of research, maintains a troubling "playing field" for teachers and students. This remains a central concern for anyone advocating antiracist teaching or any type of proactive intervention in institutional or classroom policies. My modest goal is to reflect on my own experiences as a teacher and writing program administrator (WPA) invested in antiracist teaching, but very aware of the institutional constraints and habits of thought that push against critical teaching. I rely heavily on teacher narrative and analytical reflection as a way of thinking through problems and contradictions I have encountered in my role as a teacher and WPA at an historically black university (HBCU).

As an approach to this form of inquiry, I draw on the work of Joy Ritchie and David E. Wilson (2000), as I try to develop the critical language to articulate what I find suspicious, troubling, and educational about my experience. As they note, experience is not about the representation of truth but the interrogation of experiences that can be read against the critical discourses of others and the "conflicting theories that created them" (p. 17). I also draw from Keith Gilyard (1996), Derrick Bell (Delgado & Stefanic, 2005), and, perhaps most recently, David Kirkland (2013) who have demonstrated narrative and experience as a potent way of creatively thinking through intellectual and social problems plaguing individuals of color and others that are often hidden by the processes of everyday life. Similar to Kirkland, I relate to my subject matter and students in visceral and real ways that traditional academic

analysis cannot wholly capture. In fact, the title of the essay comes from a James Baldwin essay that notes a similar visceral connection to the concept of a "Native Son," Richard Wright's powerful novel of the same name. As a graduate of the HBCU experience, a second-generation college student, and graduate of the same urban and cultural experiences that shape many of my students, my concern for their interests and experience is connected to an understanding that benefits of the doubt are rarely accorded to students of color and the consequences of teachers' decisions are rarely considered for the way they maintain certain troubling "habits of thought."

My narrative reflections and analysis represent attempts to expose the habits of thought rooted in a system that supports white privilege. By habits of thought, I mean the ways we teachers and academics come to decisions about assignments and policies. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) identifies color-blind frames as fixed methods of interpreting information and as ways of presenting discriminatory beliefs about a group's character or behavior as the natural consequence of actions, not personal intent. In particular, he discusses abstract liberalism, naturalization, and cultural racism as the main frames through which people tend to justify and explain the inequities produced by seemingly impartial decisions. He suggests that the specific approaches to reasoning, which we often take for granted, cloak the discriminatory assumptions and troubling logics that maintain racism through practice. To counter such an embedded system of habit, those invested in antiracist teaching must develop approaches to inquiry that focus on moments and effects, rather than intentions.

I begin each section of this article with a brief narrated experience I had working as a writing coordinator and assistant professor of English at a southern HBCU. Following Gilyard's (1996) assertion that personal narrative may serve as an adequate form of data for critical inquiry, I try to move through my own narrative with an eye toward the intellectual mixtape or collage of texts that at once shaped my immediate feelings about a particular experience and my subsequent analysis of that event.

Teaching Moments

Homegirl must have thought grade-changing powers extended from the office walls, or she really needed to vent her frustration about the failing grade she received on a crucial assignment for her ethnic literature course. She would tell her tale of woe, asking for advice on how to handle the grade she felt (like many students before her) was given unjustly. Tissue would be offered, followed by a suggestion that sometimes life is not fair and the hope that she would pull herself together and move forward with her goals as she finished up the semester and prepared for a new one. She performed admirably in the Research Writing and Methods course, a course graded more on effort and processes than performance and interpretive ability. She would use her past success to suggest that her trouble in Ethnic Literatures was a mistake.

The confessional would be entertained for a few more minutes, as she provided the assignment sheet and the written portion of her assignment with comments. The assignment would read rather straightforwardly, and the reasons for the teacher's grade would become rather obvious, although trouble could be found in the assumptions embedded in the assignment itself. The student had not followed the directions provided. Replicating the type of troubling exploration of so many other

multicultural pedagogies, the students were asked to research and report on a non-African American culture or ethnic group. While culture and ethnicity seemed conflated and uncomplicated in some troubling ways, the student still chose to go "off-book," to interview an estranged parent about the parent's Muslim faith, even though Islam was not listed as an acceptable group to "research." The groups listed, such as Caribbean and Native American, and corresponding "cultural" events to attend on campus or in the community to enhance one's presentation provided a rather straightforward path to a passing grade. She produced a rather intriguing presentation that integrated portions of her parent's interview with interesting research on Muslim culture, but the assignment was ceremonially failed, perhaps rightly so, yet the commentary and assignment sheet remained troubling. The comments preceding the "F" on her presentation criticized it for not distinguishing between religion and culture, ethnicity was presented as something consumable and obvious.

Concerns would not be voiced to the student, only the recommendation that if she felt passionate enough she should ask for a grade review with the professor and the department chair. And even in this recommendation, feelings would remain conflicted. Imani Perry (2011) would frame these feelings by explaining that discriminatory logic often remains hidden and disconnected from the actions of individuals. Was the grade a reflection of student laziness or lack of a critical imagination on her teacher's part? In many ways, the handling of the assignment was correct. The student had not followed directions. Her failure to select one of the six ethnic groups listed on the assignment sheet, despite the assignment's explicit call for the investigation of these "cultures," violated expectations. But it also revealed

the messiness of categories about identity. Could one really understand difference as constructed, malleable, and porous without a difficult conversation about race and identity? Could one really engage an assignment that asked one to avoid this messy conversation? Silence would be solidarity, no snitching here. Questions and concerns developing out of the event would reverberate throughout the office in which the student shed her tears, shaping thoughts about colorblindness, institutional reasoning, and teacher conversations. Conversations with the professor in question about the messiness of race and difference would never happen, only silence, lunch time jokes about poor-performing students, and narratives of laziness surrounding criticisms of student work.

As Perry (2011) notes, although structural racism remains an area of academic interest, it is wrong to relieve individuals of their roles in the maintenance of racist practices. "The academic tendency to look at structures rather than at individual will is rooted in the profound influence of Marxist modes of analysis. But even Karl Marx understood the importance of individual consciousness in producing or sustaining these structures" (p. 34). Thus, multicultural pedagogies such as the one described in the narrative above may be intended to respond to the realities of difference and culture, but in many ways can be bent, often unintentionally, to maintain the very tenets of white privilege it seeks to undo. In their study of multicultural text selection and preservice teacher training, Marcelle Haddix and Detra Price-Dennis (2013) explain it this way: "[A]dding multicultural content to the curriculum of field experiences in diverse settings may be viewed as progressive, yet these efforts often fail to uncover issues of racism, power, and whiteness" (p. 251). While teaching multicultural texts is viewed as

progressive, it may produce a false comfort zone for teachers, giving the appearance of critical teaching without requiring considerable changes in one's response to students.

These perspectives were a major influence shaping my thoughts about the students I was teaching and the department curriculum that was being redesigned at the time to more accurately reflect "changes in the discipline" of English, as the student came to my office in tears. While I learned to develop, sadly, a wall of skepticism about students who turned on the waterworks before bursting into my office, this student, as mentioned, had developed a rapport with me in the research and methods class a semester earlier. One of the more persistent students willing to work through comments and revisions with some care, she had distinguished herself as a potentially strong student in the major. Yet I know that teaching styles differ and that students do not always respond to challenges or assignments in the same way. The syllabus and assignment that were the source of her consternation both outlined a fairly clear rationale about what the student should get out of the course, as well as what was expected for the presentation.

Still, ethnicity and race were used synonymously in the descriptions and remained uncomplicated. This was a moment of pause for me, a moment of pause heightened by commentary on the assignment in question that forwarded an uncomplicated critique of the student's failure to distinguish between religion and ethnicity. To be honest, I had no proof that the student had not ignored clarifying remarks given in class or that the student had not performed poorly on the other assignments that would reinforce the comments. But I would wonder aloud about the professor's awareness of the relationship between religion and ethnicity. Similar to my experience in high school, all I could do was conjecture about the motivations for the teacher's assessment.

What was obvious, and what became a major source of my concern was not the student's grade, but rather the ways that multiculturalism and ethnicity had become oversimplified and consumable subjects. And to be perhaps even more honest, the source of concern was not with the teacher, but with the professional constraints and assumptions about student ability that had led to the draining of theory from practice, led to an unwillingness to expand the parameters of the assignment in ways that recognized the complicated relationship between theory and practice. I was concerned about this because I was experiencing similar concessions in my own teaching. Similar to the teacher in question, I was teaching far too many students, who were in many ways "unprepared" or perhaps unaware of the rigors of college English courses. Although aware of critical theories about race and difference in the classroom, I found myself reducing the complexity of assignments and avoiding difficult reading material in an effort to artificially reduce my "workload."

We teachers would not, neither privately nor collectively, discuss such a situation beyond the veiled complaints about workload and student laziness. We would never reason together about the implications for our students—many of whom are black American or international students—or for our pedagogies. Reasoning together about difficult subjects has become something for conference presentations, something done in private with critical texts. In many ways theories of social justice, critical race, and critical pedagogy suffer because the art of conversation suffers. To reason in the way I am suggesting would require comfort with

impolite conversations about our teaching, our assumptions, our reasoning. For minority-serving institutions, this approach to difference would seem crucial to addressing how students of color are assessed.

In the absence of conversations about teaching approaches and teacher assumptions, intent becomes the primary means of rationalizing particular teaching decisions. Yet, intent is an inadequate method given that most decisions elide or sublimate specific views on race. Perry (2011) explains:

> *We should no longer frame our understanding of racially discriminatory behavior in terms of intentionality. It is too unsophisticated a conception of discriminatory sentiment and behavior. It doesn't capture all or most discrimination, and it creates a line of distinction between "racist" and "acceptable" that is deceptively clear in the midst of a landscape that is, generally speaking, quite unclear about what racism and racial bias are, who is engaging in racist behaviors, and how they are doing so. ... So rather than say that racism is now unintentional, I am saying intentionality isn't a good measure any longer, in part because the notion of intentional racism truncates the realm of intent. (p. 21)*

Given this understanding it becomes imperative that teachers develop robust approaches to questioning teaching practices. Teachers wield a limited form of power and in doing so produce consequences that have serious material effects on students, effects that perhaps double or triple in effect for students of color. While it would be hard to call my colleague's decision to give a failing grade to the student a form of color-blind racism

without more evidence, her decision was connected to a systematic approach to teaching that ignores the legacies connected to the bodies in the course. Students become workers to whom knowledge is imparted with the expectation that it be demonstrated back to teachers as given. The fact that bound within these bodies are complicated legacies and intriguing narratives holds little value when imparting wisdom is the goal.

The student in my narrative would go on to recover and continue in her studies, yet who knows where and how such a grade or such a moment will affect future experiences? Moreover, such a missed teachable moment undermines the spirit of courses about race and identity, leaving students to understand race and racism as visible, consumable, and easily identifiable occurrences. It reproduces the same frame of interpretation that led to the initial conflict in practicing the assignment.

Teachers bear a special responsibility to address racial, social, and gendered inequality given their roles as experts in particular areas of thought and in developing the democratic sensibilities of students. In particular, teachers represent the frontline, the agents who have the most direct contact with students and thus in many ways exercise the most influence over student experience. However, a variety of factors beyond a course design shape that course's function and quality. While I was upset that the teacher in the narrative did not extend the parameters of the assignment in ways that would prove valuable and educative to the students (such as requiring a more intensive essay on the function of Islam for imprisoned African Americans), I am equally uncomfortable with laying sole blame at her shoes. When teaching 80, 90, or 100 students in a semester, as we were sometimes expected to do, it becomes a strain to think creatively about pedagogical

choices. More importantly, with numbers that high, is the university not suggesting that knowledge about ethnic groups is something consumable and testable?

What's There to Talk About?

The meeting would begin with the usual discussions of life and teaching. No one had commented on the writing prompts for the upcoming writing exams prior to the meeting as asked. My assumption was that they barely had time to read them, and time would need to be allotted during the meeting for reading and discussing the prompts. As the unspoken rule went, the composition director would develop the prompts and the committee would discuss them before sending them out to the rest of the writing instructors to use for their final exams. The conversations were surprisingly brief as the committee quickly dismissed two of the prompts, both of which had been composed and submitted by two other writing instructors in the program. Admittedly, the ideas of the late submissions were interesting but underdeveloped and would need further revision, something I expected the committee members to avoid. My primary interest was in the discussions that would develop around a prompt that drew on the recent shooting of Jordan Davis. Davis, a black teenager shot to death after a verbal altercation with a white male, was a story lost in the wake of Trayvon Martin's recent trial. The prompt asked students to consider the difference between snitching and civic responsibility. The original read:

> The murder of 17-year-old Jordan Davis has many people upset over the death of another black youth. Unlike the killing of Trayvon Martin, Jordan's murder had several eyewitnesses who are helping the police. However, in many situations aiding the police or anyone capable of penalizing a culprit is frowned upon by

young people as "snitching." While there are many cultural and social reasons for remaining silent, such as the fear others will shun or disassociate themselves from individuals they fear may someday "snitch" on them, this silence allows many culprits to get away with unjust behavior. Take a position and explain whether it is the responsibility of witnesses to wrongdoing to ensure that justice prevails.

Admittedly, the rationale came from a cultural understanding that serving as a witness is not always applauded within certain communities. Specifically, among black youth there are a variety of reasons one may not wish to serve as a witness, a practice often exploited to resolve cases with no consideration of extant circumstances.

Two concerns would be raised about the prompt, the first would question the complexity of the prompt. One professor was not sure students would grasp the nuance of the prompt and proposed simplifying the prompt to ask students whether they agreed or disagreed that testifying as a witness was a civic duty. After some discussion, the initial suggestion was deflected by a senior faculty member and it was agreed that the complexity was a goal toward which students should be pushed. After an uneasy silence, another faculty member would claim, "I think the Jordan Davis stuff will only rile students up and cause them to ignore the main point of the prompt. I do not wish to read 20 essays about the Davis shooting." Other members of the committee would quickly concur, and the passage would be edited to omit Davis.

Frustration would remain subdued, as my feelings were sorted about his exclusion. Davis would represent much more than a catchy reference to current

events. His experience as a profiled teen—perhaps too loud-mouthed, perhaps only in the wrong place—would mimic many of the experiences of the students. If I were honest, it would call up familiar experiences of my own as an urban youth. Yet there was no conversation about this. Yes, Davis would complicate the prompt, he would also frame what was at stake. Given the significant number of witnesses in the Davis case and their role in securing a felony charge, the topic seemed important to how the students in first-year writing, many of whom are African American, might rethink concepts such as "snitching" and civic duty. Within African American culture, snitching represents an alignment with a legal system that has a long history of unjust lynching, shooting, and jailing of African American bodies. Within this history, there has been a long and painful tradition of African Americans reporting on other African Americans for personal gain. Suspicion of law enforcement has become a default logic within many African American communities, and given the pervasiveness of racial profiling efforts like "stop and frisk," snitching has become a default label for any cooperation with law enforcement, greatly impeding the willingness of some to testify about legitimate crimes.

With Davis's death already overshadowed by the force of Trayvon's narrative and the ensuing Zimmerman media circus, the prompt would serve as a critical memorial to both figures. Karla Holloway's (2002) Passed On *would ring in the back of my mind, yet it would be a different ritual other than those connected to death that would add to the conflicting feelings in my chest. No conversation. Ritual assumptions would take precedence over critical consideration. The mood in the meeting would suggest that teaching is always apolitical. A fact that would be stated in a later meeting. No need to charge*

student emotion one member would say. For the committee members at the table, controversy was to be avoided; the situation of Davis was unclear and therefore not useful. Moreover it was potentially volatile in the hands of 18-year-old students. Frustration would remain subdued, reflection would remind me that the decision was unanimous, evidence of my acquiescence. My thoughts would betray me. "Why make waves over such a minor edit?" The meeting would continue with polite conversation about the ending semester. Subdued frustration would remain. Davis would disappear.

Reflecting on the rationale, I would wonder, was student performance the central concern? Was there a conversation available that we were afraid of having? Where did my discomfort come from? Where did it go?

As evident in the narrative, my investment in the prompt was more than I initially wanted to admit to myself, therefore the third-person narrative voice did not seem appropriate. While I revised and developed all four prompts with the understanding that the top two would make up the final exam, I had hoped the "civic duty" prompt (as I came to call it) would be the notable lead prompt. As I will explain, the prompt provided a cultural context for students to think through racialized violence from a material perspective. Resistance to the prompt was anticipated because of what was viewed as its "controversial" subject matter. Most of the past writing prompts from the department avoided controversy. It was a tradition that exposed a departmental predisposition to "apolitical" teaching (something I do not believe is possible). Yet, its approval did not bring the delight I had envisioned, instead it would become a great source of conflict. The prompt's approval

surprised me, while the muting of the racial component did not.

The other prompt selected focused on the use of technology in developing professional profiles, the students were asked to think about the role of Twitter and Facebook as not merely newer and troubling representations of one's professional credibility, but as spaces that create newer forms of professional networking as well. This was a prompt I thought more complex and "troublesome" than the civic duty prompt. Yet it was accepted rather easily and with only minor editing. In fact, one argument for the omission of Davis was that the two prompts did not read the same, as the other prompt did not lead with a reference to an individual figure. I was not sure at the time why there should be any similarity, other than asking the students to think through a stated problem.

Admittedly, perhaps more than I let on in the narrative, I had not considered the exclusion of Davis from the prompt as a possibility. My quick acquiescence stemmed as much from the excitement that such a prompt topic was accepted, as from the implied understanding that a racialized subject in the prompt created visible discomfort for many of the instructors, who were African American and Caucasian respectively. Many would make faces or noises that indicated an uneasy ambivalence about the prompt. However, much of my frustration did not come from the way the discussion unfolded, but from my silence about the work the Jordan Davis reference was designed to do. I was the committee's chair and the coordinator of the writing exam. In the meeting, I was free to speak and to interject, guiding the conversation in ways I saw important, yet I did not press this matter. As a real and not hypothetical black body attached to the prompt, Davis was used to situate what was at stake in the

conversation about snitching and civic duty, he was another potent reminder of the potential for injustice to prevail. I was as complicit in the procedural nature of the conversation as the other members, accepting many of the implied assumptions about apolitical teaching and neutral writing prompts.

The Holloway (2002) text mentioned, *Passed On*, and her article "Cultural Narratives Passed On: African American Mourning Narratives" (1997), sprung to mind as a result of the ritual manner that Davis was excised from the prompt. Another way of thinking about the ways that the interpretive process is as much a manner of rote as it is of meaning making. For Holloway, there are ritual processes attached to the way African Americans mourn death that in some instances reproduce a cyclical frame of interpretation that simultaneously maintains narrow ways of reading death and expansive ways of reading African American meaning making practices. One could compare the contradictory impulses of these rituals to the contradictory frames of color-blind racism. The conversation taking place in the meeting represented a naturalized way of thinking about teaching, one that compartmentalized and separated social politics from educational etiquette without consideration to student experience. In my mind, the revision of the prompt presented a way of absorbing an uncomfortable racialized subject into an easily consumable and abstract discussion of civic duty. Here again was another micro-moment in which race would become a "present absence" and our consideration of it as a critical subject would be displaced by specific choices.

bell hooks's (1994) statement, "It is difficult for many educators in the United States to conceptualize how the classroom will look when they are confronted with the

demographics which indicate that 'whiteness' may cease to be the norm ethnicity in classroom settings on all levels" (p. 41), provides a language for the struggle I am trying to articulate. White privilege represents a skewed way of reasoning, but one that has become embedded in the procedural approaches to academic decisions. However, if I look at the narrative honestly, I was much more deeply implicated in this difficulty to "conceptualize" than my committee members. How easy was it for me to "cling to old patterns?" Despite my desires and intellectual understanding of the way race is interpolated and subsumed in uncritical ways into the educational system, my moment of democratic intervention through dialogue and reasoning was conceded, rather easily. In what ways did I direct the conversation to the conclusion that took place? As an administrator, I saw my duty in that meeting as facilitator and leader, bound by particular rules of academic decorum, yet my strongest weapon, conversation, was never fully utilized.

As Gilyard (2004) eloquently notes, at a conceptual level discussions of race and ethnicity serve a valuable function in tracing the slippery way troubling and unquestioned assumptions about custom and acceptance are maintained. If we can agree that race and the related concept of ethnicity are social constructions, we must also acknowledge their value for shaping the social narratives used to reason through experience. Thus, in many ways, to talk about race plainly or rather race-related phenomena is to pull back the edifice on the particular systems of reasoning being deployed at any given time. As hooks's (1994) statement also implies, moments like those in the meeting exposed our discomfort in discussing race and racism as part of our teaching agenda.

Many of the writing instructors would come to praise the "civic duty" prompt for pushing the students in a language that was familiar to them. For all intents and purposes, the prompt was a hit. In fact, it was mentioned a few times at later departmental faculty meetings. "I really enjoyed the prompt, it made a difficult subject relatable to the students." Yet, for all the praise, it still troubled some faculty members as it produced a different type of essay than expected, an essay that did not produce the typical "agree or disagree" responses. As one faculty member mentioned, "Constructing prompts that allow students to produce 'yes or no' responses would greatly ease the difficulty of grading their essays." Still, the racial component of the prompt, even the hip-hop term of "snitching" often associated with African American male drug culture remains unaddressed to this day. My ambivalence about the prompt's success would heighten.

A Critique and Recommendation

She would make a passing joke about the preparedness of the students she was teaching and their ability to grasp the material and complete assignments. They would laugh and contribute their own narratives of student struggle. When asked about the course, she would provide a detailed account of the course reading list and the rationale behind it. The variety of texts selected would be praised as a good multicultural buffet of interesting texts, a feast that now incorporated globalism as a featured item. We all would applaud her work. With such a strong list of readings and interesting assignments, they would use that as informal evidence that the problem was with the students. All would mention in their own time their struggles with underprepared students. Stories about spending months on grammar only to have more than two-thirds of the students fail the

test would become familiar discussions about how black children do not read anymore. Discussions about how black children do not read anymore would become stories about suspicions of plagiarism. Suspicions of plagiarism would reinforce assumptions about student abilities.

From time to time, he would ask troubling questions about the value of an ethnic literature course without a critical ethnic studies course. He/I would suggest that given the complexity of American English's grammar system it was unlikely anyone new to college-level writing could apply the rules with excellent proficiency in a month's time. Sometimes explanations and rebuttals would follow, other times awkward silence would prevail until subjects were changed. In time, he/I would begin to tell his/my own stories of the "underprepared student." Like most of them at the table, he/I would work to help as many students pass and achieve as he/I could: extended office hours, increasingly more time planning for class, reminder emails, and conversations about expectations. In many ways one could describe their teaching as antiracist, engaged, and invested in providing strong models of academic excellence. In other ways it seemed too systematic, too cliché, a reproduction of best practices and rather traditional ways of teaching.

He/I would see the contradiction take root in administrative choices that required deference to tradition: "We've always done it this way." At times he/I would push for newer ways of thinking about courses, assignments, and texts. At other times he/I would develop rubrics and guidelines that imitated efficient programs at other universities. Part of the problems encountered were beyond our control. Impossible demands on time and performance meant there was little time to do more than complain during our short

lunches and after-work gatherings. Class sizes continued to grow and the concept of race would take a disconcerting move into the background of our concerns. He/I would continue conversations about race with colleagues at other universities, he/I would continue to read Richard Delgado, Imani Perry, Michelle Alexander, Keith Miller, and Manning Marable and wonder how they could penetrate his/my teaching, courses, administrative duties in ways more substantive and imaginative than what was occurring.

Given that students have little say over the "color-blind" assessment practices of the teachers, impetus for change must come from a willingness on the part of administrators and teachers to develop a critical ethnic literacy that places antiracism, antifeminism, and antidiscriminatory practices at the forefront of discussions about curriculum design and intellectual goals for students. The discussions must become more complicated and more invested in understanding the roles individuals play in maintaining institutional racism. With that in mind, I would like to make a few humble and contingent recommendations.

1.   Teachers should begin to talk across subjects and courses about their understanding of race, ethnicity, and difference in formal and informal settings in order to become more comfortable with ways of deliberating about these subjects.

2.   Teachers and scholars should consider ways that the messiness of race and identity conflict with the orderly approaches to teaching and measuring student performance, specifically in courses designated to address identity and difference. Although desirable for maintaining traditional views on

accuracy and efficiency in grading, rigid and stable boundaries about identity are always difficult to maintain.

3.   Teachers should recognize that by creating assignments that address race, one is inviting emotional and opinion-driven responses by students and perhaps creating an uncomfortable environment for others, yet such assignments can develop habits of mind that produce student comfort with difference and change.

4.   Conversations about race, difference, and teaching are necessary and troubling, but can produce important insight into the habits of mind that maintain troubling discriminatory practices. Moreover they can encourage further scrutiny of micro-moments that have damaging or liberating effects on students.

The list is not meant to be exhaustive or even an explanation of how teachers think. It is an attempt to place a magnifying glass on the unstated and unspoken assumptions floating between teacher explanations for poor student performance, assignment choices, and curricular approaches so that pedagogies and curriculums can be sharpened in ways that acknowledge antiracism as a laudable and intended goal.

Teaching, for all of the popular stereotypes and embarrassing public opinions, is undoubtedly a personal and political enterprise. While it need not be an enterprise that privileges the whims of every teacher with a chip on his or her shoulder, it is one burdened with choices that reveal particular assumptions about what is best for students.

Students will undoubtedly learn through assignments, discussions, and lectures how their teachers identify as gendered and raced bodies; how they negotiate their geographical roots and the economics of their upbringing; how their perspectives on language, literacies, and social values shape the way they teach their content and subject matter. While the degree may differ across content and course goals, these things form impressions about how race can and should be discussed and concepts understood. In the same breath, it would be silly, I believe, and problematic to pretend that teaching does not require a careful negotiation of one's fiduciary responsibilities: to teach the beliefs and theories related to a particular area of study; to aid and measure student intellectual growth.

Thus, I want to make two recommendations for thinking through the micro-moments of discriminatory practices that shape much of the function and outcomes of contemporary education. I want to suggest that approaches to antiracist teaching can be improved by making plain our commitments and assumptions shaping our curriculum and assignments and by improving the quality of our conversations (our rhetoric) about race and ethnicity.

By making plain our commitments and assumptions, we can begin to think through the consequences and value of our decisions. In retrospect, my unwillingness to address the teacher who failed the student in the second narrative stemmed from a fear of the discomfort that comes from disagreement. Default modes of academic practice rely on consensus as an indicator of efficiency and effectiveness, thus my compliance in all of the narratives stemmed from the belief that agreement or pseudo-consensus was the best outcome for everyone. Kurt Spellmeyer (2014) presents a

rather interesting and provocative argument about this, namely that a managerial view of education seeks consensus rather than dialogue, and that the intellectual enterprise, and our students, are weakened because of it. In my case, the teachers and I decided whether the civic duty prompt was best for the students in private and devised ways of achieving that desired outcome independent of reasoned debate.

For me, race represents an underexamined, yet saturating, force that influences the way one chooses to read and respond to particular educative moments. It is in those moments one should ask, how does race shape, complicate, or silence the interactions of others? The conversations that evolve out of these questions will strengthen our ability to understand the evolving and complicated way our choices and systems disadvantage particular individuals while providing an advantage for others. In doing this we may begin to work

(together ideally) to make meaningful changes to how race, gender, and other differences are discussed and addressed. Let me phrase this differently: When teachers do not question or revisit their motivations for omitting or discouraging topics, approaches, or points of view that engage controversial subjects, they run the risk of ignoring the rhetorical value of their assignments. Moreover, when they do not do this together through timely (and I hope civil) conversations that ignore comfort as a guiding threshold, our ability to address embedded discriminatory logic is diminished.

Thus, if the work of antiracist teaching is to create reflexive strategies for acknowledging that power and difference inform our choices in ways that remain hidden in everyday educational practices, then openness and conversation must find their way into our everyday critical practices and into our ways of reasoning together.

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