

## Transforming Resistance: Strategies for Teaching Race in the Ethnic American Literature Classroom

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### Abstract

Why are white students unable or unwilling to engage in honest discussions of race and racism? What effective practices and strategies will enable educators to foster transformative learning in teaching antiracism to predominantly white students in the college classroom? How do we transform resistances, evasions, or controversies into “teachable moments”? Finally, how do we use literary studies as a forum to teach antiracism and cultivate commitment to social justice? These questions underlie my teaching and pedagogical research over the past few years. In my essay, I explore these issues and share the preliminary findings of my research.

Focusing on my recent experiences of teaching such courses as Black Women Writers and Asian American Writers, I demonstrate the ways in which pedagogical strategies can be deployed to unlearn color blindness and enable honest, thoughtful conversations about race and racism in the multiethnic literature classroom. I argue that by practicing an antiracist pedagogy, specifically by cultivating an open, engaged learning space, foregrounding identity constructions through course design and theoretical tools, and managing acts of resistance through collective self-reflections, we may begin to transform student learning about racial justice and cultivate commitment to antiracism and social change.

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## Introduction

While reading Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in Black Women Writers, an upper-level course for English majors several years ago, the class and I encountered a problem with meaning during our second day of discussion. We were interpreting the Fisher kitchen scene, in which Pauline Breedlove, the Fishers' domestic servant, beats and berates her young daughter in blind fury while consoling the little Fisher girl with soft, sweet whispers. Pecola has accidentally overturned a freshly baked blueberry cobbler. Although she cries out in pain when the splattered hot berry juice has scalded her legs, her mother turns on her violently because the latter has soiled her immaculately kept floor. The contrast between Pauline's abuse of Pecola and her affection for the little Fisher girl is unmistakable. While she repeatedly scolds Pecola with words "hotter and darker than the smoking berries," Pauline "[hushes] and [soothes] the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl," "the honey in her words [complementing] the sundown spilling on the lake" (Morrison, 1970, p. 109).

It is a typical scene in Morrison's novel—ironic, poignant, and racially charged, and I asked the class what they made of it. A white female student, who had been consistently thoughtful, went straight to the point: that she noticed how differently "Polly" treats the white family's child from her own daughter. "Good!" I commented. Referring to our prior discussion of Morrison's theme of the black community's internalization of the white gaze and its racial self-loathing as well as her narrative strategy of inversion, I proceeded to invite the class to make connections between Pauline's behavior and that of the other black characters who desire whiteness, as

we had seen in previous pages. Morrison's portrayal of a black mother who hates her own child, I continued, can be read as an ironic reversal of the ideal white family in the *Dick and Jane* primer, the intertext that opens each chapter. I paused, expecting the class to chime in and further my point. A white male student raised his hand: "Actually, I'm not sure how race has anything to do with it. Pauline is just a frustrated parent. As for the *Dick and Jane* story, it's class, not race, that's presented as the ideal." If I had expected this comment, I was certainly surprised when another white female student, upon whom I had often depended for astute insights, agreed: "I don't think it's race, either. It's a matter of professional pride. I'm a mother, too, and if my kid messed up my work, I'd be just as mad." The majority of the class, many of whom were white, nodded in agreement. "But see how differently she treats Pecola than the little white girl," the first white female student insisted. Her peers did not seem to be persuaded, and the class hour was unfortunately coming to an end before I could meaningfully intervene.

The class's controversy over race was to recur during that semester in our discussions of other black women's works. In reading Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983), for example, the majority of the class had difficulty seeing beyond character flaws or gender imbalances to understand the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender that thwart the dreams and desires of the black women and men in Brewster Place. For instance, while reading the "Lucielia Louise Turner" chapter, students attributed Ciel's tragic losses of her children to her husband's selfishness and masculine dominance as well as her own feminine submissiveness and dependence. However, the class failed to see, despite Naylor's

allusions, the connections between Ciel's personal tragedies and the collective traumas of the Senegalese slave mothers and the Jewish mothers in Dachau. In this case, like their reading of Morrison's Fisher kitchen scene as recounted above, students demonstrated an inability to recognize the interlocking race, class, and gender hierarchies that shaped the characters' behaviors or experiences.

Other times, student resistance to teaching antiracism would take the form of denying or rationalizing for racial domination. For instance, when discussing Alice Walker's portrayal, in her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), of Sofia's brutalization by the white police and her subsequent incarceration and servitude, several white male students insisted that Sofia's life would not have been as severely damaged if she had acted more prudently towards the white mayor and his wife. Sofia, as the reader recalls, responds with a firm "Hell, no!" when Miss Millie condescends to suggest that the former work as her maid, and she strikes down the mayor after he has slapped her for "sassing" his wife (pp. 84-85). As a result, Sofia is battered by the police during her arrest and sentenced to 12 years in prison, where she endures hard labor and terrible living conditions. When her relatives eventually manage to have her released early so that she can work at the mayor's household in exchange for her long prison term, she is then subjected to years of enslavement by the white family and separation from her own children. However, instead of sharing the narrator's admiration for Sofia's audacity, compassion for her suffering, and outrage at her unjust treatment, these students dismissed Sofia's resistance to white racism as foolhardiness and her harsh punishment as her own fault.

The recurring moment of controversy and difficulty over race and racism was by no means unique to Black Women Writers or that semester. Indeed, it has been a common scenario during my past 15 years of teaching ethnic American literature to predominantly white students at a Midwestern liberal arts college. While students express strong interest in ethnographic knowledge about cultures different from their own and demonstrate discernment in issues of gender or class oppression, many often fail to recognize the intersections of race, class, and gender. Moreover, many white students experience significant discomfort when reading texts that engage in racial politics, especially critiques of racism and xenophobia. Such discomfort manifests in various symptoms of resistance and evasion: Students often attempt to redefine, universalize, or trivialize the issue, or to blame the victim, criticize the author, devalue the artistic quality of the given literary work, or ultimately to downgrade the course or the instructor.

Student inability or unwillingness to confront issues of race and racism provides unique pedagogical challenges and opportunities. Why are white students unable or unwilling to engage in honest discussions of race and racism? What effective practices and strategies will enable educators to foster transformative learning in teaching antiracism to predominantly white students in the college classroom? How do we transform resistances, evasions, or controversies into "teachable moments"? Finally, how do we use literary studies as a forum to teach antiracism and cultivate commitment to social justice? These questions underlie my teaching and pedagogical research over the past few years.<sup>1</sup>

In my essay, I explore these issues and share the preliminary findings of my research. Focusing on my recent experiences of teaching such courses as Black Women Writers and Asian American Writers, I demonstrate the ways in which pedagogical strategies can be deployed to unlearn color blindness and enable honest, thoughtful conversations about race and racism in the multiethnic literature classroom. I argue that by practicing an antiracist pedagogy, specifically by cultivating an open, engaged learning space, foregrounding identity constructions through course design and theoretical tools, and managing acts of resistance through collective self-reflections, we may begin to transform student learning about racial justice and cultivate commitment to antiracism and social change.

### **Color Blindness: Why White Students Do Not or Will Not See Race**

To better understand white students' inability or unwillingness to confront issues of racial hierarchy and domination, it is important to consider the larger context of the racial discourses in American society today. In her book, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) drew on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1986) synthesis of the three-stage evolution of the U.S. discourses on race difference and named "essentialist racism, color and power evasion, and race cognizance" as the three "discursive repertoires" underlying contemporary white women's modes of thinking about race (p. 189). Further, she emphasized that like the U.S. history of ideas about race, the development of these three discursive paradigms by no means suggests "any smooth, unilinear progression of emergence, pre-eminence, and fading away of a succession of repertoires having

taken place" (p. 189). In fact, as Frankenberg pointed out, despite the U.S. racial minorities' nationalist movements in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the rise of the black feminist antiracist discourse in the 1980s, and despite the cultural conservatives' claim that U.S. society is being overrun by multiculturalism, the color and power evasion remains "politically dominant" in public discourse (p. 158). On the other hand, the discourse of race cognizance, or antiracist discourse, is marginal and non-normative (p. 158).

Frankenberg's analysis of contemporary white women's discursive approaches to race, especially the paradigm of color and power evasion, provides a helpful lens for examining the white students' modes of seeing, or rather, not seeing, race in the college classroom. In defining the term, Frankenberg (1993) linked color and power evasion to the "discourse of essential 'sameness,'" commonly known as "color-blindness,"<sup>ii</sup> which originated from the principles of assimilationism and meritocracy underlying the ethnicity theory that emerged in the 1920s. Involving "a double move toward 'color evasiveness' and 'power evasiveness,'" color blindness rests upon the belief that we are all the same under the skin, that culturally we are all assimilating into the American mainstream, and that we have equal socioeconomic and political opportunities in American society. Thus, any existence of inequality, according to this rhetoric, would be the racial and ethnic minorities' own fault (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 14). Simply put, rooted in the liberal humanist belief in the adequacy of American society as a democratic ideal, color blindness remains a dominant white mode of thinking about race that attempts "to not 'see' or, at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences" or power imbalance

(Frankenberg, 1993, p.142). As critical race theorists have demonstrated, many in the U.S. judiciary, for example, subscribe to liberalism “as a framework for addressing America’s racial problems” and “believe in color blindness and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 26).

It is not surprising, then, that many of our students today demonstrate some of the same attitudes and behaviors as those of the white women who would rely upon color and power evasion in their racial narratives as documented by Frankenberg. In her analysis, Frankenberg (1993) has noted that the white women she interviewed “grappled with and tried to pacify the contradiction between a society structured in dominance and the desire to see society only in terms of universal sameness and individual difference” (p. 149). Similarly, some of the white students in my ethnic American literature courses have attempted to universalize or de-racialize a racial moment: “I’m a mother, too” or “I’ve also struggled with my name.” Or, as in *The Color Purple* example mentioned earlier, they have tried to explain away an egregious case of racism by blaming the victim: “It’s her own fault,” or “She is too sensitive.” Yet another practice of color and power evasion involves what Frankenberg (1993) called “a selective attention to difference” (p. 156): namely, examining or even embracing the differences that evoke “good” feelings but repressing or evading the differences, such as power hierarchy and racial oppression, that would generate “bad” feelings (pp. 156-157). Thus, while some of my white students enjoy pleasant excursions into the different culinary practices and rituals in other cultures, they become uncomfortable or silent when faced with representations of racial prejudice and injustice. For some of these students, their color evasiveness and

power evasiveness are exactly as it is named: an act of evasion, or a conscious effort to avoid negative emotions of discomfort, ambivalence, and guilt, and to turn away from the reality of racism or any potential conflict and controversy in the classroom.

For many other students, color and power blindness results from an absence of insight or awareness, a byproduct of their education as members of a dominant racial group. Not only are they ignorant of the Western colonialist and imperialist dominations and the U.S. history of racial injustices, but they are also, as Peggy McIntosh (2004) has pointed out, “carefully taught not to recognize white privilege” (p. 104). “Many, and perhaps most, of our white students in the U.S.,” McIntosh stated, “think that racism doesn’t affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see ‘whiteness’ as a racial identity” (p. 107). Such mentality reflects that of the larger U.S. society, in which the majority of white Americans, as Frankenberg (1993) characterized, generally view themselves as “nonracial or racially neutral” (p.1) and regard racism “as something external to us [white people] rather than as a system that shapes our daily lives and sense of self” (p. 6). When a white student in my course says, “I’ve never been racially conscious, and I’m not a racist,” he does not realize that his very utterance is a form of white privilege. Growing up in a racially stratified society, in which whiteness is the norm, many other white students like him “are taught not to see,” as McIntosh emphasized, white privilege, or the “*unearned advantage and conferred dominance*” made possible by “invisible systems” of oppression (pp. 107-108).

The adverse impact of white students’ color and power evasion is both

immediate and far-reaching. Recalcitrance to honest discussions of racism in the classroom challenges the instructor's commitment to educating students, from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, about antiracism and social justice. Moreover, lack of appropriate interventions frustrates the progressive white students and impoverishes their learning. More than once, several of these students have approached me after class and expressed their frustration with their resistant peers ("Why are they even taking this class?"), their desire to hear a more serious tone in class discussions ("How can they joke about these issues?"), or their sympathy with their non-white classmates ("I feel bad for the students of color in the class"). Such sentiments remind us of our responsibilities to these progressive white students, for whom we need to provide tools and strategies for countering racist behaviors and speech in the classroom. We are reminded, as well, of our responsibility to empower the students of color, who often feel marginalized or silenced in the predominantly white classroom, where their experiences and voices, as Patti Duncan (2002) stressed, need to be included and validated (p. 45). At the same time, it remains our duty to teach many of the "color-blind" white students to unlearn the discourse of color and power evasion. As Karyn D. McKinney (2002) argued, "[W]e as teachers have a responsibility to try not to alienate the white students who are part of our classrooms. Yet we have a conflicting duty to combat [their] denial of white privilege." (p. 138).

For failure to reach these students and enable them to dismantle white privilege would not only stunt student learning in the classroom but also impede social change. As McIntosh (2004) asserted: "The silences and denials surrounding privilege . . . keep the thinking about equality or equity

incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects" (p. 108). As the critical race theorists have further elaborated, a perverse form of color blindness "can stand in the way of taking into account of difference by helping those in need" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 26). Manifested in social and legal policies, extreme cases of color blindness will fail to remedy historical wrongs and redress racial injustices while protecting the structural racisms and maintaining the racial status quo in a white dominant society (p. 27).

### **Practicing an Antiracist Pedagogy**

Given the causes and consequences of color blindness, in its various guises, in the predominantly white college classroom, I would like to return to a key pedagogical question underlying this essay: What effective practices and strategies will enable educators to foster transformative learning in teaching antiracism? Or how do we enable students to unlearn color blindness, or color and power evasion, and develop what Frankenberg (1993) called "critical race cognizance" (p. 159)?

As Frankenberg has explained, race cognizance refers to the critical insight that "race makes a difference in people's lives" and that "racism makes a difference in U.S. society" (p. 159). To achieve this insight involves "a conscious process" in which one thinks about race difference and racism and their impact on oneself, others, and society at large (p. 142). Further, "thinking through race" takes place in existing discursive and material racial contexts and through "a self that is racially positioned in society" (p. 142). Thus, among the white women whom Frankenberg has interviewed, it means, for some, acknowledging race inequality and white privilege while challenging

essentialist racial beliefs and blatant political and social inequities. For others, especially the younger women growing up in a culture of color and power evasion, race cognizance means questioning their previous perspectives and beginning to recognize racism and their own complicity (p. 160).

Likewise, in a predominantly white classroom, to begin a transformative journey toward race cognizance, we must employ an antiracist pedagogy that not only develops student awareness of racism and white privilege but also cultivates commitment to antiracism and social change. This means that we give careful attention, throughout the course, to the ways in which race and racism have shaped both white and non-white experiences and identities in our texts, learning environments, and the larger society.

### **Creating an Open, Engaged Learning Space**

In practicing an antiracist pedagogy, I strive to create, first of all, an open, engaged learning space that not only facilitates but also foregrounds honest, thoughtful conversations about race and racism. For me, the construction of such a learning space begins on the first day of class. The minute I walk into the classroom, both my students and I are well aware of my positionality as an instructor: a Chinese American woman professor in a predominantly white classroom. Instead of allowing the class to elide our racial and ethnic difference or take it for granted (I am teaching, after all, an ethnic American, or sometimes even Asian American, literature class), I choose to name, literally, my Chinese American identity by telling them a story about my name. I tell the class how I once was mistaken by a travel agent as Irish. After an initial second of puzzlement and

disbelief, the class understands and breaks into laughter when I explain that this happened on the phone when she heard me pronounce my apparently Irish-sounding last name. While this anecdote suggests the possibility for a person of Asian descent to pass freely as Irish in a color-blind setting, I also tell other stories about my name and my racialization by white Americans: how in many of my classes, students would often address me through eye contact rather than by my name; or how when introduced to white colleagues, I would sometimes hear comments like, “You speak English so well,” or “How do you like our strange country?” My name stories open up the class and lead to student stories about their names and racial and ethnic identities. No longer just “American” or “mainstream,” the students are reminded of their own Irish, German, or Norwegian heritages and of the early U.S. assimilationist approach to immigration through stories about their family names anglicized on Ellis Island. At the same time, the occasional few students of color in the class also begin to share stories about white teachers’ or classmates’ “difficulties” with their names. Thus, while sharing academic interests, hobbies, or recent vacations will help the class get to know one another on the first day, telling name stories will bring our attention, from the very start, to the ways in which race and racism make a difference, in the classroom and in daily lives, to both educators and students, and to both white Americans and people of color. Moreover, the white American students realize that unlike non-white and especially immigrant individuals, they enjoy the privilege of no longer having to struggle with naming and racialization in the white cultural norm.

Name stories on the first day of class, and whenever relevant, have proved to be an effective strategy to break the silence

about race and overcome color blindness in the classroom. As Patti Duncan (2002) has put it, “To truly teach about race and racism in meaningful, antiracist ways, we as faculty must acknowledge and engage our own social locations. . . . Also, we should attempt to recognize the experiences and social locations of our students” (p. 47). This would involve, as Duncan aptly emphasized, raising awareness of the racial and other social inequities that faculty and students of color face in the classroom and beyond (p. 47). At the same time, I believe we also need to raise white students’ awareness of their own social locations and engage them in critical examinations of their privilege and complicity. Sharing name stories in class is a beginning step toward developing such cognizance.

An open, engaged learning space for thinking about race can be sustained through other pedagogical strategies early in the semester. For the second half of my first day of class, I usually administer a brief initial course survey not only to assess student existing knowledge about the subject matter but also to begin a dialogue about positionality and meaning making and about the risks and rewards for teaching and learning in the ethnic American literature classroom. Here are two of the survey questions: “Why do you believe there is a need for a course focusing on black women’s writing and experiences? What opportunities and challenges might such a course provide for you?” In a recent set of responses, many students commented on the need to give attention to black women writers, who strive to achieve visibility and voice in the white and male dominant American culture. At the same time, students also stressed the need for the class to be exposed to experiences and writings “different from one’s own,” or from the dominant white male and white female

cultural norm. These preliminary yet thoughtful reflections on race and gender differences and inequities opened the space for the class to engage with black women’s writings and experiences throughout the course and develop a deeper understanding of race, gender, and other social hierarchies.

I also use the initial course survey as a way to discuss explicitly the pedagogical challenges in the ethnic American literature classroom and emphasize learning about race as a shared investment for both the educator and the students. For example, in *black Women Writers*, I ask this question: “Central to black women writers’ works are issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality as well as their intersections, issues that can often be difficult to engage in the classroom. What suggestions would you offer to the instructor and your peers to make our discussions a helpful learning experience for us all?” From the same set of responses mentioned above, the majority of the students emphasized the need to “keep an open mind” about “our different perspectives” while also being “open” to sharing one’s own thoughts. As one student stated, “Being open-minded will be crucial to a dialogue in this class.” Although several students qualified their sense of openness with a need to avoid “offending someone else,” “making an example of one another,” or “being judgmental,” others expressed a genuine readiness to challenge and to be challenged. One student wrote: “Discomfort or struggle is okay.” Another student urged her classmates “to know that it’s okay to be wrong, to be learning” and reminded her white peers to “not expect to be catered to or educated by someone from a marginalized group.” To attend to student needs for open dialogues and an active learning experience that accepts one’s own responsibilities and limitations, I continue to cultivate an open, engaged learning space for interrogations of

race and racism as well as critical self-examinations. In addition, I search for other models of praxis to enrich my own pedagogical practices.

### **Collective Self-Reflections: Managing Racial Moments**

Recently, I have discovered that my endeavors for an open, engaged learning space and other pedagogical practices connect well with the “pedagogy of discomfort,” as theorized by Megan Boler (1999, p. 176).<sup>iii</sup> In *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, Boler defined the pedagogy of discomfort as an educational practice and goal to enable students to “inhabit a more ambiguous and more flexible sense of self” and “go beyond a reductive model of ‘guilt vs. innocence’” when thinking about race (p. 176). This pedagogy begins with a call for critical inquiry, “inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others” (p. 176). Yet as a second step, a pedagogy of discomfort also “calls, at critical junctures, for action—hopefully action catalyzed as a result of learning to bear witness” (p. 179). To Boler, race evasion is a form of “spectating,” which “signifies learned or chosen modes of visual omission or erasure” (p. 183) and “a privilege: allowing oneself . . . to remain in the ‘anonymous’ spectating crowd and abdicate any possible responsibility” (p. 184). In contrast, witnessing implies that “we undertake our historical responsibilities and co-implication: What are the forces that bring about this ‘crisis’?” (p.186). A pedagogy of discomfort, then, as Boler has argued, “invites students and educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped

specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment” (p. 179).

In my ethnic American literature courses, my students and I engage in critical inquiries about our subject positions through multiple ways, including the aforementioned name stories and course surveys as well as other strategies to be discussed below. Moreover, we have learned to engage in the collective self-reflection or witnessing, as named by Boler, when we encounter acts of color and power evasion. For example, in the class period following the moment of controversy as described at the beginning of this essay, I invited my students to reflect on our previous trouble with the Fisher kitchen scene. By this time, students had read further and achieved a fuller understanding of Pauline’s characterization: her pride in her role as “an ideal servant” for the Fisher family and her imbibing of white feminine ideals perpetuated by Hollywood. I asked the class whether and how today’s readings had shed new light on that scene. I also invited them to consider whether other factors, such as their beliefs, identity constructions, and emotions, might have affected their earlier interpretations. It turned out to be a meaningful hour: After considerable prompts and some group exercises, the class came to understand the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class shaping Pauline’s experiences and behaviors. In contrast to their former interpretations, many students articulated in class and later in their essays the insight that more than a case of a mother’s frustration, Pauline’s abuse of her daughter resulted from multiple forces: her loss of familial and communal support after her migration to the North, the Breedloves’ economic struggles and the deterioration of their marriage, her escape into Hollywood’s white middle-class fantasies, and her substitution of the Fisher family and home for her own.

In discussing the Fisher kitchen scene and others in my two recent offerings of Black Women Writers, I shared with my classes the controversies and resistances I had experienced in previous semesters. In my future ethnic American literature courses, I also intend to reflect with my students on several of my case studies of the various problematic moments in my classes over the years. It might be helpful, as part of our collective self-reflection, to invite the class to consider the following questions:

1. How do you understand and respond to this classroom scenario?
2. Researchers have identified the common phenomenon that white students tend to use various tactics to undermine or interrupt discussions of race and racism. In what ways do you think this classroom scenario manifests a symptom of this phenomenon?
3. In what ways do you think the instructor and/or you could effectively intervene in this “racial moment”?

In writing the case studies, I was inspired by Terri Karis’s (2008) practice of engaging students in a “metacognitive and meta-affective reflection on the ‘racial moments’” inside and outside the classroom (p. 24). In a workshop she facilitated at the AAC&U Network for Academic Renewal Conference, Karis argued: “The process of reflecting on thoughts, feelings, and assumptions can help students stay with the learning process even in the face of uncomfortable feelings” (p. 24). Karis’s method of “metacognitive and meta-affective” reflections can be linked with Boler’s pedagogy of discomfort, which “[i]deally,” as Boler (1999) envisioned, “represents an engaged and mutual exchange, a historicized exploration of our emotional investments” (p. 199). In interrogating our identity constructions, as Boler argued, “we need to recognize that

emotions, such as defensive anger, fear of change, and fear of losing one’s cultural identities, will arise to define what we choose to see and not to see” (p. 176). Inspired by these and other models of praxis, I continue to engage my students in self-conscious, collective reflections on our beliefs, values, and emotions as rooted in specific historical moments or cultural environments, and on the ways in which our subject positions shape our perceptions and actions in the classroom and outside.

### **Foregrounding Identity Constructions: Course Design and Theoretical Tools**

In his essay “Tracing and Erasing: Race and Pedagogy in *The Bluest Eye*,” Rafael Pérez-Torres (1997) suggested that given the text’s thematic emphasis on racialized identity constructions, “a successful discussion of the book should confront issues of identity (both within the text and within the classroom) as honestly and intelligently as possible” (p. 22). Approaching Morrison’s novel as “a text that scrutinizes the complex dynamics of identity formation that involves everyone,” Pérez-Torres argued, will “make the book speak to all students no matter what their ethnic or racial backgrounds” (p. 21). In my ethnic American literature courses, I have extended Pérez-Torres’s approach by foregrounding throughout identity constructions in both the texts and the reading experiences.

In the course syllabus, the very first text we encounter in the class, I underscore not only how race and other social identities shape the experiences and cultural productions of the people of color but also the ways in which the instructor’s and students’ subject positions impact our teaching and learning. Specifically, in the course description for Asian American

Writers, I pose such key issue questions as: “In what ways do these writers challenge or accommodate dominant representations of Asian American women and men as raced and gendered subjects? In what ways do the subject positions of the writers, characters, and readers impact our understanding of Asian American texts?” Similarly, in *Black Women Writers*, the course description invites the class to consider questions like: “In what ways do these writers challenge or accommodate dominant discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality? What does it mean to be a black feminist reader, and what does it mean for non-black and/or non-female readers to interpret black women’s writings?” Accordingly, the intended learning outcomes, or the course objectives, for these courses emphasize the students’ ability to “understand the role of power and privilege and the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class in ethnic American cultural productions and identity constructions” and “demonstrate an awareness that subject positions of the writers, characters, and readers impact our understanding of ethnic American texts and experiences.”

To enable the class to explore, with intelligence and depth, identity constructions in dominant and nondominant discourses and the multiple subject positions shaping our attitudes, beliefs, and experiences, I have found it helpful to equip undergraduate students with the necessary critical tools and theoretical frameworks for talking about race. In my upper-level courses, I begin with a unit that both provides an overview of the history of a given literary tradition and charts the critical paradigms for the course’s central themes and issues. In the first unit for *Asian American Writers*, for example, we read King-Kok Cheung’s essay “Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies” (1997) for theoretical grounding.

Delineating the trajectories of the racial and gender politics underlying Asian American literary production and reception, Cheung’s essay contextualizes student understanding of Asian American identity formations vis-à-vis dominant constructions. Further, the essay provides the class with the critical paradigms for examining Asian American writers’ and critics’ negotiations of such tensions as American nativity vs. immigrant or diasporic identities, masculinist nationalist discourse vs. Asian American feminism, and Asian American cultural and creative agency vs. ethnic communal responsibility and the forces of the mainstream literary marketplace—themes and issues underlying our reading of the literary works ahead. In my most recent syllabus for *Black Women Writers*, we begin with Robert J. Patterson’s “African American Feminist Theories and Literary Criticism” (2009), which introduces the key issues and figures in black feminist criticism (pp. 87-105). In addition, to examine firsthand the critics’ arguments introduced by Patterson, we read their original essays. For example, the class studies Michael Awkward’s (1995) chapters “A Black Man’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism” and “Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse” in his book *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (pp. 43-57, 59-91). Further, students write a short response essay in which they explore not only the problems and possibilities of antimasculinist black male feminist criticism but also the implications of examining the politics of positionality, or one’s identities (e.g., gender and/or race), in reading nondominant texts. Essays from the class demonstrated that students found the theoretical grounding helpful. While some of the responses to the issue of students’ own subject positions were tentative or vague, perhaps to be expected at

this point of the semester, several essays distinguished themselves with their emergent race cognizance. One white female student, for example, wrote that growing up in a white-dominant culture and attending a predominantly white-female Catholic college, she hopes that reading black women's literature will enable her to "challenge my notions of race, sexuality, class, and gender and my own identity" and help her acquire and articulate new perspectives. Another young white woman reflected on her subject positions as white, female, and lesbian and on both the challenges and opportunities in combating racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

In addition to laying the theoretical groundwork at the beginning, I juxtapose theoretical or critical (con)texts and literary texts in subsequent units to deepen student understanding of ethnic American literary works and of the dynamics of positionality and interpretation. In teaching *The Bluest Eye*, for example, I now have the class read bell hooks's essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (2003) after completing Morrison's novel. Investigating the dominant white, masculinist cinematic constructions and negations of black womanhood and black women spectators' own internalization and resistance, hooks's essay allows the class to better appreciate Morrison's satire on black women like Pauline and Pecola Breedlove, whose self-hatred and desire for whiteness originate from their capitulation to Hollywood's white feminine ideal. At the same time, the essay enables the class to look more broadly at the race and gender politics in cinema and our own subject positions as spectators, or our own complicity with the dominant gaze and our potential for resistance and change. To enrich student learning, I also use, in this course and others, multiple intertexts and visual images, such as films or movie clips, filmed author interviews or biographies, or

for *The Bluest Eye* unit, portraits of early Hollywood icons like Jean Harlow and Shirley Temple and even a hard copy of a *Dick and Jane* storybook. I was inspired by Kathryn Earle (1997), who suggested bringing a copy of the *Dick and Jane* primer, if possible, to deepen student understanding of "how white standards are disseminated and assimilated" (pp. 29-30). It so happened that in my most recent experience of teaching the course, a student was able to share with the class a copy of *Dick and Jane* from her mother's collection. Earle also suggested showing a version of the film *The Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959), another important intertext in Morrison's novel (pp. 27-33). Supplemented by these texts, the critical essays throughout the course have proved the efficacy of using theory to provide students with the necessary critical as well as historical and cultural contexts for thinking about race as it intersects with gender, class, sexuality, and other salient social identities.

### Conclusion

To assess our teaching and learning, I usually administer a mid-term course assessment and/or an exit course survey. In *Black Women Writers*, for instance, I conclude with these questions: "In what ways has the course provoked your interest and thinking regarding African American women's literature and experiences? In what ways has your initial understanding of the subject matter been confirmed, modified, and/or transformed?" Sometimes I phrase the questions in a slightly different way: "Is the course sufficiently challenging to provoke your interest and thinking? What is the most important and/or interesting thing you have learned about black women's texts and experiences?" In their responses, students from my most recent offering of the course commented on the ways in which the

course has broadened their knowledge of black women's writings and experiences. For example, one student wrote: "Just being exposed to the novels I've never heard of is important. It has given me a chance to see a whole other world that I would have been oblivious to without this class." Students also appreciated their enhanced understanding of race and the intersections of social locations in black women's literature. As one student remarked: "I have learned so much about the suffocating effects of society on not only women but also black women. It is eye-opening!" Another student observed: "The most important or interesting thing I've learned about black women's texts is the idea of intersectionality and that readers cannot generalize when talking about black women writers." Several also emphasized the constructive learning environment in the course. For example, "This course does a great job challenging my thinking, and I think we have a great class that discusses and challenges ideas and each other." For another example, "It's nice to have a class that participates and contributes varying ideas on a text or an issue in the text." These latter comments were echoed in the confidential student online course evaluations, where students appreciated that "very in-depth class discussions helped me learn better after reading" and that the instructor "doesn't just lecture but encourages class discussions," or that she "talks with us, not at us."

Students' affirmations of the teaching and learning in this course give me hope. At the same time, I do not easily forget those instances of student resistance to teaching about race and racism in my previous offerings of *Black Women Writers*

and other ethnic American literature courses. Also, I continue to hear from colleagues and students about classes in which some white students resist discussions about race or make racist and other oppressive comments. I am reminded, then, of our continued challenge to reach these students so that they may, like their more open-minded peers, embark on a transformative journey toward race cognizance.

In his essay on race, literature, and pedagogy, Jose Torres-Padilla (2002) argued that "literary studies can play a part in changing minds about racism and transforming passive individuals into agents determined to change the racial status quo" (pp. 214-215). Sharing the same conviction, I am hopeful that my students, many of whom are English teaching majors or Ethnic Studies majors or minors, will translate their learning about race as well as literature into their future professional and personal lives. Although one course alone will not necessarily catalyze political activism or social action, continued commitment to an antiracist pedagogy can create much transformative potential. By deploying a variety of strategies, such as cultivating an engaged learning space, practicing collective self-reflections, and foregrounding identity constructions through course design and theory, we may create pathways for transformative learning and foster agency for racial justice and broad social change. At minimum, these strategies can enable students to dialogue about race and develop accountability for racial and other social inequities. At minimum, we can enable students to take the first step toward a transformative journey.

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<sup>i</sup> My research began as a SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) project, made possible by a 2008-2009 teaching fellowship at my college. I am also grateful to all of my students, who have continued to inspire and challenge my teaching and pedagogy in the ethnic American literature classroom.

<sup>ii</sup> I am grateful to Karen Elias and Judith C. Jones, whose reference to Frankenberg's discussion of the discourse of "sameness," or color blindness, has led me to a more in-depth look at Frankenberg's arguments. See Elias, K., & Jones, J. C. (2002). Two voices from the front lines: A conversation about race in the classroom. In B. TuSmith & M. T. Reddy (Eds.), *Race in the college classroom: Pedagogy and politics* (pp. 7-18). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> I would like to acknowledge Daniel P. Liston and Sirat Al Salim for directing me to Boler's book. See Liston, D. P., & Salim, A. S. (2002). Race, discomfort, and love in a university classroom. In B. TuSmith & M. T. Reddy (Eds.), *Race in the college classroom: Pedagogy and politics* (pp. 239-52). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

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