

subject matter. Luis Sfeir-Younis describes a “genuinely multicultural class,” as one in which “both content and process are transformed in ways that reflect the interests, behavioral styles, and learning modes of a diverse student population. In a course in which class interactions are an integral part of the subject matter, diversity is welcomed, new knowledge is generated, and new ways of conceiving reality are integrated, which may help stretch the paradigm of the discipline.”¹ On this account, the decentered classroom is the necessary form of multicultural education, reflecting in the heteroglossia of multiple student voices the multicultural perspectives of the subject matter itself.

Despite the relief that the decentered classroom provided my all-too-centered voice as a white male, I want to interrogate here the assumption that decentered classrooms necessarily lead to liberating learning experiences. Indeed, at the extreme, undertheorized notions of student expression and of the power of whiteness—to say nothing of the concrete realities of the classroom—can lead to classroom experiences that undermine rather than enhance the teaching of race, ethnicity, and gender. A liberatory education often depends upon teachers—even white male teachers—finding ways of using their authority constructively without at the same time returning to coercive forms of pedagogy that are themselves antiprogressive.

Let me say first that of course students must be involved in the production of knowledge, and that we shouldn't return to a banking model of education. Jane Tompkins's wariness of performance rightly suggests that only a spurious form of education occurs when we teach to display our competence.² For whatever purposes, teachers can and do bludgeon students with their scholarly expertise. However, I would like to extend this recognition by suggesting that students, too, can bludgeon others, even in the naive enthusiasm of their own expressiveness.

This observation runs against the grain of many assumptions concerning the democratized classroom. In one of the few essays directly concerned with a white teacher's legitimacy in the classroom, Thomas Gerschick outlines his efforts to minimize his own authority when teaching about the oppression of others:

I . . . stressed my belief that different people have different experiences and as a result have different perspectives. These different perspectives reflect our different realities. Hence, I noted that in order for us to learn from one another, all perspectives must be acknowledged and understood. . . .

Second, I tried not to play the role of “expert”; rather, I continually

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ITEM 1

PETER KERRY POWERS

A GHOST IN THE COLLABORATIVE MACHINE: THE WHITE MALE TEACHER IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

The first class I ever taught that focused on race and gender was composed entirely of women save for two men—another student and me. In many ways the class was a great success; students were enthusiastic and hardworking, and class discussions were lively. Late in the semester, one woman asked the male student how he had felt being the only man in the room. Another student snickered and pointed out that, after all, I was also male. To which the first student replied, “Oh yes. But don't you always kind of think of your teachers as sexless?”

Being called “sexless” hardly fits even reconstructed notions of masculinity, but at the time I was really quite pleased. Indeed, given that I had attempted to facilitate a decentered classroom discussion, the student's comment was a ringing endorsement. As a white male, I felt I was an “outsider” to the course material, and I mitigated the problem of my pedagogical authority by democratizing the classroom. In short, I tried to disappear.

There is something comforting about this effort to become a ghostly presence—influential, perhaps, but imperceptible. Many teachers see this pedagogical model as a desirable and even necessary method for teaching multicultural

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In this essay, Powers contends that the move toward a democratic classroom has some drawbacks: student self-expression and the diminution of professorial authority together can create as many problems as they solve, especially if naively implemented. Powers here describes his search for a middle ground.

stressed that we all had something to learn from each other. This action resulted in reducing the hierarchy of the classroom. It also alleviated any responsibility students might have thought I had to convey everything about the different forms of oppression. Moreover, it meant that they had the responsibility to contribute what they knew about the subject matter. . . .

Through the use of "other voices," my legitimacy became a less significant issue.³

Before interrogating the limitations, I applaud the generous instincts. As teachers we do learn from students. And students do learn from one another. Classrooms in which this did not occur would be oppressive, not to say dull. Indeed, Gerschick's class embodies all that is best in what Sfeir-Younis describes as the "truly multicultural class."

What worries me in Gerschick's description is that the salutary feel of these passages depends on a vague and generalized conception of students. Their voices can be acknowledged and their contributions and interests valued precisely because they seem to come out of nowhere rather than being located in specific histories and cultural contexts—this despite the general effort to acknowledge different histories. In actual practice, different horizons of experience clash, and they clash not least because of differing experiences and levels of access to power.

For instance, a few years ago I taught *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to an all-white, all-male, all-southern class. At one point I was discussing the political and moral evil of slavery and the social practices that sustained it. One student objected, arguing that since white Southern culture accepted slavery at the time, neither I nor Harriet Beecher Stowe could fairly judge the defenders of slavery. Although they looked bad from our perspective, this student reasoned, defenses of slavery merely expressed the deeply held and even unconscious cultural norms of that time and place. Therefore, as a cultural outsider, I should not judge. No other student raised a voice to disagree.

Now, like Gerschick's students, my student surely had different experiences that had given him a different perspective, a perspective that suggests a "different reality." I think he quite clearly also had interests at stake. But to assume that this must simply be acknowledged and understood as an equal contribution to the development of knowledge concerning racism strikes me as an untenable leap of the imagination.

My temptation is to dismiss the problem as unique to a small, all-male, predominantly white school. However, I have experienced similar kinds of class-

room conversations in a variety of classroom settings, in large universities where white students were a minority in the classroom and in the predominantly white liberal arts college where I now teach, a college where women are in the overwhelming majority. In these various contexts, students relying on their native experiences and realities are often ill-equipped to address the social, historical, and cultural complexities of racism in ways that will make the classroom an energetic space of pedagogical progressiveness. Indeed, given the predominance of racial and ethnic stereotyping in our national history, it is not clear that having six or seven people voice an ethnic stereotype in a small group will be less oppressive and coercive than if I voiced the same stereotype in one loud voice from the front of the class. Nor will a student feel more empowered by having twenty peers misconceive some aspect of his or her cultural history than if I misconceive that history during a lecture. An interesting array of voices speaking eloquently, but uncritically, from the systems of power that shape and enable their voices in the first place will not a community of learning make.

Thus, my early efforts to democratize the classroom were insufficient on at least three counts. First, the assumption seems to be that relations of power and oppression are institutionally embodied in the figure of the teacher, or, perhaps more broadly, in the curriculum and other features of the educational institution. But power and oppression function "democratically" as well, in dispersed forms of discourse and daily practice.⁴ Racism can be manifested through pedagogical authority or institutional decision making, but it also functions insidiously in networks of everyday practice, discourse, and assumption. The teacher's role can be, in part, to question or critique those everyday practices out of which most students find their abilities to express themselves—an unnerving and difficult process to be sure, but one that can enable the classroom to be more democratized than it would be without such an intervention.

Second, I can't withdraw from my own being in the classroom. Where could I find a disembodied voice in which my whiteness or my maleness would not count? Cheryl Johnson has pointed out that as a black woman her embodiment, as well as the assumptions about black women that students bring to the classroom, affect her teaching situation. As a black woman working in the academy, she *can't* withdraw from her embodied presence and disappear.⁵ I would suggest that none of us should try to do so. This is all the more the case because the fantasy of withdrawal into invisibility is the privilege of whiteness and one of its fundamental strategies of power. Drawing on Henry Giroux and

Richard Dyer, AnnLouise Keating notes that by "erasing its presence, 'whiteness' operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called 'minorities' are measured."⁶ Given that "whiteness" has tended to operate powerfully through a strategy of invisibility, I remain cautious about a pedagogy that masks the presence and power of the white teacher in the classroom. On the one hand, such disappearance may simply displace the effects of whiteness to the conversations of the classroom, and on the other it may prevent the white teacher from adequately confronting the implications of his or her own whiteness as it actually operates in engagement with the text and in the operations of the classroom and institution.

The conception of the teacher as facilitator can be insufficient on a third count. It too easily assumes the student's native ability to grapple with texts, and understand their complexities and particularities, see the ways in which they are drawing from and arguing with particular traditions. However, if we are not clear that we are training students into particular ways of seeing and speaking—even if only to treat the voices of others with respect—their expressiveness is as likely to be an iteration of cultural assumptions they have never thought to question as it is to be a developed form of democratic politics. On this score, the invisibility of the white teacher can serve to reinforce dominant ideologies within American culture. Students who have not been trained to critique the culture in which they live may keep on living it, in all its most laudatory and pernicious forms.

Burns Cooper has noted that students' undeveloped approaches to literature can lead them to refuse engagement with different cultural visions rather than be educated by them. He writes of a class in which some of his Alaskan Native students rejected Wendy Rose because her depiction of Alaskans was "inaccurate," in which women students rejected Scott Momaday because he depicted a rape, and Christian students rejected Louise Erdrich because her work was "bawdy."⁷ Cooper says his students accepted Native American literature that presented them with "very positive, heroic views of older times . . . and realistic depictions of well-publicized contemporary problems such as alcoholism and Fetal Alcohol syndrome."⁸ Cooper calls this interpretive approach a form of fundamentalism, whether coming from the left or the right. Its essence is the refusal to engage the complexities of human culture as embodied in literary texts.⁹

Acknowledging these three insufficiencies, it now seems to me that the theory of expression that undergirded my earliest practices as a teacher relied

upon a mistakenly abstract theory of the personal voice. As Giroux has suggested, "The emphasis on the personal as the fundamental aspect of the political often results in highlighting the personal through a form of 'confessional' politics that all but forgets how the political is constituted in social and cultural forms outside of one's own experience."¹⁰ To argue by analogy, if Michael Awkward is correct in arguing that white critics can fall into self-serving critical postures when considering ethnic literature, I think we should assume that students can do so as well.¹¹ Expressiveness may merely describe my students' imprisonment to received cultural paradigms rather than a truly freeing practice earned, at least partially, through a teacher's intervention in their different realities. To the degree that they remain enmeshed within those paradigms, they can, even in the innocence of their own expression, use their expression to imprison others.

Here's another example. An upper division course I taught on ethnicity and American literature included students of various ethnicities, but no one who was an active member of a Jewish American community. Two students identified themselves as having some Jewish ancestry in the distant past. At one point in the course we read *Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth and *The Pagan Rabbi* by Cynthia Ozick, two short story collections that I chose because the authors envision very different forms of Jewishness in the American context. Mostly, my students were enthusiastic about Roth's work, identifying with the struggle that Ozick, the main character from "The Conversion of the Jews," was having with his religion, his parents, and his teachers. We spent a good deal of time talking about how Roth placed a Jewish accent on some fairly common adolescent and preadolescent experiences in the United States. Upon getting to Ozick, however, a rumbling voice of discontent began to bubble just beneath the surface of the class, evident in the frowns I saw and the snippets of conversation overheard as I walked into the room, and in the more hesitant and disjointed conversations that went on in small groups.

To some degree, my pedagogical strategies seemed to work quite well. Small groups discussed how Ozick and Roth represented Jewish American ethnicity similarly or differently. Students immediately recognized profound differences between the two, and began to ask me—and the two students with Jewish ancestry—for the "real" story on Jewish ethnicity. We spent a good deal of time talking about how there was no "real" story in the way they wanted a real story. The real story was that there are different ways of being Jewish in America, and we would have to evaluate their consequences and histories and

similarities on a case-by-case basis. As a deconstructor of the notion of an essentialized Jewish difference, I was quite pleased with the initial developments of this particular exercise.

I was less ready for what began to happen next. Admitting that there were significantly different forms of Jewishness, all but one of the students moved on to categorize Roth's way of being Jewish as good, and Ozick's way of being Jewish as bad. In investigating this judgment, students immediately fell into ethnic stereotyping. Roth was good because he was universal; Ozick was bad because she was particular. Roth was good because his language was immediately accessible, Ozick was bad because her syntax and her use of Yiddish were alienating. Roth was good because he wanted to speak to and with "everybody"; Ozick was bad because she wanted to be separate and exclusive. In short, Roth was good because he wanted to assimilate and erase a Jewish particularity, and Ozick was bad because she didn't value being "plain American." These kinds of judgments were quite plainly ethnophobic—made by students with various ethnic identifications—and verged on being anti-Semitic. As one student put it hesitantly, but with refreshing forthrightness, "I don't know if I should say this, but somehow I think that Ozick is *too Jewish*."

This formulation reveals both the value and the limitation of expressiveness in the classroom. On the one hand, the student's openness helped locate the class regarding the texts and issues at hand. This openness was gained, I think, partly through my extensive use of small groups as well as my efforts to present strong counterarguments to my own at various points in the class through handouts, videos, and my knowledge of critical discussions. On the other hand, the participatory nature of the class discussion actually reinforced the anti-Semitic rationalizations of the Enlightenment by which it was O.K. to be Jewish, but only if this religio-cultural difference was kept at home where it would not disturb the "commonsense" operations of the rational public sphere. As Richard Rubinstein has pointed out in *After Auschwitz*, the logic of this formulation is the logic of the Holocaust.¹² An uncritical emphasis on expressiveness as an end does nothing to address the incipient anti-Semitism implicit in my student's evaluation of Ozick as excessively Jewish.

I would argue further that an uncritical emphasis on the decentered classroom tends to exacerbate this problem. If I structure my class in such a way that student expression is paramount to the success of the class as a whole and to the success of individual students, it is easy to see that students can come to place a higher value on literatures that help them do well and to prefer those

things with which they most readily identify—that is, the literature with which they already feel an easy sense of familiarity. Thus, an uncritical emphasis on student expression *necessarily* means that students will see Roth as "better" than Ozick precisely because students are better able to express themselves about him. Many students will identify with Roth precisely because Roth values and conceives of himself as a contemporary liberal and cosmopolitan individual; he makes it easier for most students to express themselves because he speaks their language. Ozick's voice irritated many students, and they could not speak about her as well because she is far more alien in her insistence on the uniqueness and difference of Jewish thought and practice. Such experiences merely underscore a banal truth of undergraduate education, if not of reading as a general enterprise: students prefer those visions with which they can most readily and easily identify. In the same course we ran into similar problems reading Gloria Anzaldúa and Rudolfo Anaya. Students disliked Anzaldúa because she was "too angry with white people" and was an "angry feminist"—this last judgment made by many despite the class being made up entirely of women. Students tended to prefer Anaya because the protagonist in *Bless Me, Ultima* had experiences that students could "relate to," though none of them had been a young Chicano boy growing up in the Southwest. Perhaps this is because Anaya's book works with the conventions of the bildungsroman and with the masculine attraction to a feminized landscape, familiar conventions of Western literature, to say nothing of the fact that the challenge to Anglo supremacy in Anaya is less direct and confrontational than in Anzaldúa. In a recent course, I ran into the same problem in discussing Eric Walrond and Langston Hughes. Students found Walrond's use of Caribbean dialects annoying, a sign that he wasn't as good a writer as Hughes. Moreover, his understanding of the workings of race were more difficult for students to engage because—working from a Caribbean background—Walrond did not conform to the paradigmatic black/white divide that they saw and understood in Langston Hughes.

Although many essays on teaching multiethnic literature take on the problematic white student who cannot relate to a teacher or to a particular work, preferences for familiarity occur across the racial/ethnic spectrum. For instance, I once taught a course on James Baldwin to a class that was about evenly divided between African American and European American students. None of the students, however, was openly gay. Many students, black and white alike, were more than a little queasy about Baldwin's frank depictions of

homocroticism. Discussion was sometimes awkward—more than one long silence filled in with embarrassed laughter. Two different students came to me privately and said that they had stopped reading certain sections of Baldwin's work because they found the eroticism disturbing and contrary to their moral and religious upbringing. One African American student put it this way: "He's good with the race stuff, but I wish he would leave the sex stuff alone." Left entirely to the democratic interests of the class, I think it's unlikely that we would have even read *Giovanni's Room* or *Just Above My Head*.

This points to a final issue in the learning process that is, perhaps, too little incorporated into pedagogical theories that emphasize a democratized learning process. Learning is an often exhilarating and even transcendent experience, as we begin to see new horizons and experience the world in new ways. Equally true, however, is that such exhilaration and transformation are usually accompanied by—and perhaps only made possible through—the painful process of leaving things behind. Indeed my own engagement with ethnic literature required a serious revision of my undergraduate notions of high modernist writers such as Eliot and Pound—a revision that left me uncertain of how to speak about these kinds of literature at all, to say nothing of newfound hesitations about how to begin to speak about the literature of racial and ethnic others.

Such inability to express myself without hesitations and stumblings was, in a sense, a necessary failure, since such failures mark a struggle with things more difficult than the familiar world about which I could express myself so readily. My students who grapple with Baldwin's blackness or his homosexuality, with Walrond's Caribbean imagination or with Ozick's Judaism, are afforded a moment of important self-discovery: that of their own particularity, their own contingency, even their own incompetence in articulating their relationship to a new and different world.

In response, a teacher need not return to a banking model of education critiqued by Freire.¹³ Rather, I would suggest that the simple either/or dichotomy—either collaborative/liberatory learning or banking/authoritarian teaching—ought to be displaced in favor of a much more complex, creative, and realistic figure, one that allows for both interventionist and reticent teaching strategies. My current favorite metaphors are those of the coach, the mentor, and, sometimes, the artist. The best of such figures know when to keep silent and let the players play the game. They also know when to push and drive a team beyond what it imagines as its point of endurance. Like the artist

whose training and instincts must guide her when engaged in the moment of creation, the teacher must draw upon her expertise, her experience, and knowledge of individual students in order to create a classroom environment in which transformative learning is possible.

Such a view of teaching calls for a more precarious and dangerous practice than either that of the teacher as ghost or teacher as banker. Indeed, it seems to me that in such a position the teacher is always at risk of not intervening appropriately, and thus leaving students short of their potential at a particular moment or of intervening excessively and short-circuiting the necessary processes by which learning occurs.

No prescription ensures that this balance can be achieved. In my own experience I have found that teaching about race and ethnicity through literature continually makes me seek that balance. I have described various situations in which intervention has seemed necessary. On the other hand, teaching about race and ethnicity also induces the sense of particularity that helps prevent a return to an authoritarian style of teaching. The very fact that I am teaching the texts that I do constantly brings home to me my own fleshy particularity as a white male. As I read a passage from James Baldwin or Zora Neale Hurston and hear their language, their syntax, their vision bubbling up from out of me, with the air from my lungs, the vibrations and pulsing of my body, I am made acutely aware of my own white and male particularity, my own historical, cultural, and material being. In short, I experience myself as different. I am certainly unable to disappear as the unacknowledged ghost in the collaborative machine. Rather, where my students are frustrated with their inability to engage a particular work, I have to try and train them into new ways of seeing and speaking—which must also be a training into new ways of being. Where my students iterate racist or sexist assumptions concerning American culture, my students' engagement with other voices—including my own—can lead them to understand their uniqueness as historical and social individuals rather than as representatives of "the norm," however they may have initially construed that norm. Ironically, then, teaching ethnic literature often requires me to exercise more authority in the classroom rather than less, even though this authority must be exercised from a decentered position of particularity. This sense of my own particularity does not guarantee, but at least encourages, a sense of humility about my authority and competence—a humility that should discourage me from bludgeoning my students in a return to the banking model of education.

In similar ways, reading, discussion, and lecture can decenter my students, reveal their own contingency and their own historical particularity. In class they must risk the confusion and disorientation that occur when the assumptions and indeed the sense of self upon which their expressiveness has relied are decomposed or overturned. But it is through such struggle and even loss that new knowledge and possibilities for living are gained. In one course, I had students write a journal on the first day of class answering the question, "Are you ethnic?" At the end of the course I had the students write a short essay on how their conceptions of ethnicity had changed, if they had. Several students wrote about moving from seeing themselves as just "plain American" to an understanding of how being white constituted a particular rather than a "normal" American experience, and that even within the designation "white" there were various experiences based on religious, class, national, and other kinds of differences. By contrast, a Korean American student—one of three students who began the class with a developed sense of ethnic identity—indicated that she was surprised when reading literature from Jewish Americans and Chicanos to discover a wide array of common interests and experiences, things she had previously conceived of as unique to herself and other Korean Americans. I take stories such as these as successes since they are the stories of students who are discovering how to articulate their relationship to their own histories and also the histories of others. To echo Giroux, they are learning to hear their personal voices in the social, cultural, and political structures that have framed their experience. I also take this assignment as a useful deployment of "expression" since it asks students to articulate how their own voices have begun to evolve, and may need to continue to be transformed, rather than simply reifying expression as an end in itself. These new selves are rightly understood as liberated selves, whose expression may serve to liberate others.

NOTES

¹ This essay was completed with the assistance of a fellowship for Arts Commentary from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

² Luis E. Sfeir-Younis, "Reflections on the Teaching of Multicultural Courses," in *Multicultural Teaching in the University*, ed. David Schoen, Linda Frankel, Ximena Zuniga, and Edith Lewis (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 71.

³ Jane Tompkins, "Pedagogy of the Distressed," *College English* 52, no. 6 (1990), 653–660.

⁴ Thomas J. Gerschick, "Should and Can a White, Heterosexual, Middle-Class Man Teach Students About Social Inequality and Oppression? One Person's Experience and Reflections," in *Multicultural Teaching in the University*, 204.

- ⁴ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 109–133.
- ⁵ Cheryl L. Johnson, "Participatory Rhetoric and the Teacher as Racial/Gendered Subject," *College English* 56, no. 4 (1994):409–419.
- ⁶ AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)Constructing 'Race,'" *College English* 57, no. 8 (1995), 905.
- ⁷ Burns Cooper, "White Men Can't Teach," *SAIL* 6, no. 1 (1994), 17.
- ⁸ Burns Cooper, "White Men," 17.
- ⁹ Burns Cooper, "White Men," 20–21.
- ¹⁰ Henry Giroux, *Living Dangerously: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 73.
- ¹¹ Michael Awkward, "Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse," *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990), 581–606.
- ¹² Richard Rubinstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1966; reprinted, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 83–102.
- ¹³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1989).



PHOTO: MISTY McELROY

ITEM 2

PATTI DUNCAN

DECENTERING WHITENESS:

RESISTING RACISM IN THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CLASSROOM

"GO BACK TO WHERE YOU BELONG"

Recently, near the beginning of the term at my university, I taught an upper-level women's studies seminar entitled Asian American Women's Studies, versions of which I've taught in the past at other universities.¹ On the agenda for one particular discussion was the topic of national belonging, especially Asian Pacific Americans' experiences of not belonging and of being made to feel like perpetual outsiders and guests in the United States, regardless of how long our families have lived here or how "American" we may feel. That day I planned to engage the students in a discussion of the function and daily effects of racism as they pertain to Asian Pacific American women's lives and experiences. Before class, I walked a couple of city blocks to Portland's downtown post office. There, at a busy crosswalk, a young woman in a car turned in front of me and I waited for the light to change. Behind me, a young man, presumably a student at the same university, muttered to his companion, "Damn Asians in their fucking nice cars." I turned in time to see his friend nod

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In her essay, Duncan describes classroom experiences in which white students and students of color talk past one another and use conflicting racial discourses. She argues that white entitlement and white feelings of belonging within academe greatly affect how professors teach about race and contends that many professors behave as if white students are the primary concern.

in agreement. Both young men were white. The woman driver, turning with the right of way, was Asian American. "How dare those Asians come to our country, own expensive cars, and turn in front of us?" was what I heard in the tone of his question. Or, how dare those Asians take up any space in this—our—country?

The young man's remark, made flippantly to a fellow "insider," resounds with a sense of entitlement, a confidence in his own sense of belonging, and a hostility to any "foreign" elements, like the young Asian American woman presuming to drive her car in front of him (doesn't she know her place?), or the Asian American professor who turned to confront him on the street after overhearing his comment (he simply stared at me incredulously). After all, we're supposed to be passive, submissive, and above all, silent. Any departure from this scripted role for Asian Pacific American women is considered an affront to normalcy, and an insult to "true" (read: white) Americans. His attitude mirrors that of other white students in the university, especially those from dominant groups who often maintain a belief that the process of education is intended solely for their benefit. They subsequently express hostility for students of color (and others deviating in some way from the mythical norms of U.S. society, including women, working-class and poor students, differently abled students, older students, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students). In addition, this young man's comment (and the assumptions underlying its articulation) highlights the specific hostility many non-Asian Americans reserve for Asian Americans, whom they see as benefiting from affirmative action and other government programs and resources, and stereotype as the "model minority."²

In class that day, I shared this experience with students in an attempt to provide a concrete example of what we had been reading and theorizing about. Asian American students in the class began sharing similar examples, and we discussed all of them carefully, examining the assumptions behind each one. Questions like "Where are you from?" and "How did you learn to speak such good English?" are the most common reminders that we—and others like us—do not belong, and that neither this space nor this tongue are considered "ours." Rather, we are visitors, allowed to share in the American dream and the English language as long as we remember not to overstep the boundaries of racist propriety. Several students shared experiences of being told, in not so many words, to "go back to where they belong," regardless of the fact that many of them are American citizens, born and raised here.

Students in the class were pushing quickly through the materials and ideas. Several of them stated that they felt excited about the opportunity to finally discuss something that related to their own lives, after sitting through countless classes that proceeded as though Asian Pacific Americans, and especially Asian American women, did not exist at all. But we were interrupted in this powerful moment by a white student's comments about the racism she, too, has experienced. Though we had spent a great deal of time in this class reading and discussing theories of race and racism, she categorized her feelings of exclusion and her experience as a "minority" in this particular classroom as "racism." Her attempt to recenter herself and her whiteness was met with silence and disappointment from other students, some of whom quietly retreated from the discussion. And I realized how often white students feel the need to recenter themselves, even in classes about race, racism, and the history, literature, and social movements of people of color.

It is this critical moment upon which I wish to focus in this essay, for this is a common moment, and a recurring one. I hope to provide some context for and analysis of this particular move—a move to recenter whiteness not in terms of interrogating and challenging white privilege, something that is often initiated by critical, antiracist white students, but rather to return things to the way they were (what is considered normalcy for many white people—namely, white supremacy). It is a fear of the destabilization of white supremacy, and hence white privilege, that keeps many white students in terror of discussing race and racism in the classroom, on any but the most superficial levels.

In countless ways, students of color—and other students considered "deviant" by dominant values and standards—are taught that they do not belong in American higher education. In both explicit and subtle ways, these students receive certain messages about their place in the academy. For example, theorist bell hooks comments on the ways in which she was "terrorized" as a student of color during graduate school through racist and sexist messages intended to humiliate and demoralize her.³ Writer and artist Kyo Maclear explores the ways in which she was silenced as a student, often due to the fact that there was no one "like her" represented in the curriculum.⁴ When she did speak, she was generally either not heard or objectified and made to feel "like a freak sideshow whose stories are used to satiate curiosity, or worse, uphold the myth of inclusion." What she learned, she writes, is that for many students of color, "the notion of the classroom as a 'safe' space is a dangerous illusion." Finally, Joanna Kadi, in her essay "Stupidity 'Deconstructed,'" describes her

internalization of such messages and her subsequent belief that she must simply be "stupid" and unqualified.⁵ Privileged people, she argues, misuse words and distort reality to create a space—the academy—that excludes all of the "misfits." More importantly, such institutions socialize us to believe that we are not even worthy of gaining entry, often succeeding in separating "us" from "them." What I argue here is that these two processes—the messages students of color receive about "not belonging" in educational institutions, and the recentering of white students at all junctures in educational processes—are intricately tied together.

"I'M MORE OPPRESSED THAN YOU ARE": TACTICS WHITE PEOPLE USE TO DIVERT OR UNDERMINE DISCUSSIONS OF RACISM

Last year, in an upper-level women's studies class I taught called *Women of Color in U.S. Society*, I was amazed by the number of white students taking the class who seemed surprised that we were to spend so much time discussing women of color. Although the title of the course was clear, they still expected to be discussing white women as the cultural norm. In such classes, when I attempt to push students to center and explore the histories, writings, and experiences of women of color, the women of color students in the class often feel empowered to speak up. Some of them tell me that this is the first and only class for them in which this has been possible. However, there are white students who inevitably seem threatened by the empowerment and centering of people of color, and they often begin pointing out the ways in which they too are oppressed, either by focusing on how they are in the minority in this particular instance or by beginning to list the ways in which they are oppressed as a German American or a person of Italian descent, for example. One white student wrote in her journal entry for the class that she felt "hurt" and "angry" after reading Gloria Anzaldúa's introduction to her anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, in which Anzaldúa calls on white people to be accountable for their white privilege and racism.⁶ This student explained that racism is over and people of color should stop making such a big deal of it. She wrote, "I feel robbed of my heritage," noting that her European American ethnicity was not being taken seriously in this class. Here I do not argue that these students have not experienced oppression, or that various groups of

European Americans have not been discriminated against, but simply that there is a curious—and racist—phenomenon that occurs when white students find themselves decentered in discourses of race, racism, and white privilege in this country.

Another tactic white students often employ is that of simple digression. When issues of race and white privilege are introduced in class discussions and readings, I am always amazed by how quickly some students move to bring up other topics—not to tie them to a discussion of race and racism, but simply to divert attention away from their own whiteness and white privilege. Sometimes they de-emphasize race and racism and choose instead to focus on some other category of identity and social stratification, preferably one which marks them as clearly and unarguably oppressed. One white queer student consistently redirected class discussions to emphasize issues of sexuality and her own oppression as a lesbian, not to make critical connections between and among these parts of our identities and lives, but to shut down the discussion of racism and white privilege, including concrete experiences of racism. Another working-class white woman, after reading Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege and Male Privilege," wrote in a response essay, "Class is the *real* issue, not race. Growing up poor, I have never had white privilege or any kind of privilege." I welcomed her attempts to complicate our understandings of whiteness and white privilege by pointing out the ways in which white people occupy different positions in society. However, I was again dismayed by white students' consistent efforts to recenter themselves and to dismiss any notion of white privilege or accountability in their own lives.

As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, and as I have witnessed in the classes I teach, discussions of race take on peculiar "crises of meaning" in the classroom where white students and students of color talk past one another, employing conflicting racial discourses.⁷ Citing Bob Blauner, Omi and Winant suggest that white students generally tend to argue that racism is a thing of the past, while also considering any mention of race as racist. According to this ideology, "colorblindness" is the only way to be "antiracist," and necessitates a disavowal of any racial discourse.⁸ And Gloria Yamato, also commenting on discussions of race, argues that whenever the subject of racism arises, many white students want to focus on the racism of people of color and on themselves as victims of racism—what she views as a diversionary tactic to take pressure off themselves and other white people.⁹ In contrast, many students of color root racism in power, arguing that race and racism permeate history and

everyday experience on multiple levels. They often connect readings about race and racism to their own daily experiences, attempting to bridge the dichotomy so prevalent in the academy between theory and practice. Such students of color also often have a great deal to say about strategies of resistance to racism, so rarely discussed in the academy.

Meanwhile, white teachers (and some teachers of color) spend so much time worrying about how to make the white students in their classrooms feel comfortable and "safe" speaking about race and racism that it is often the students of color, again, whose identities and words end up elided, negated, or otherwise invalidated. Racism, of course, is present on at least three levels within the university setting. First, at the level of curriculum, students of color not only find themselves presented with little or no reading materials and other resources by or about people of color, but they also encounter both explicit and subtle racist themes in what they do study. Thus, they often find themselves misrepresented or completely excluded from the curriculum. When issues related to race are introduced in classes, they often rely upon additive, tokenistic frameworks that contribute to a climate in which actual people of color are singled out and further objectified and exoticized.

Among the faculty, administration, and fellow student body at the majority of institutions of higher education, students of color find few people like themselves and thus have difficulty locating role models, mentors, and even friends with whom to share common experiences, often resulting in a profound sense of isolation. In terms of locating support from other students, there are additional barriers. Students of color are generally underrepresented in higher education, and often pitted against one another and forced to compete for limited resources. White students often view them as affirmative action cases and refuse to treat them as serious colleagues, and white faculty may view students of color in this light as well. Mary Romero quotes one student, who said: "Being the only students or the only one of two students of color was difficult, particularly in an environment that attributed my achievements to affirmative action and where faculty interest was a response to my ethnicity and a need to affirm their liberalism."¹⁰ Finally, within the larger social and political context, students of color encounter invisibility, erasure, stereotyping, violence, economic disenfranchisement, and other forms of racism and oppression. Thus it should come as no surprise that even at the level of classroom interaction, students of color are victimized by racist comments and assumptions made by professors and other students.

Why are the safety and comfort of white students almost always made a priority, even by some faculty of color? What are our course objectives, in teaching about race? What are the implications of the constant recentering of whiteness in the classroom, on the part of both white students and teachers? How can we reach white students to teach them about race—especially accountability and white privilege—without simply recentering them (and whiteness) to the exclusion and detriment of students of color? What are the risks of this radical pedagogy? What can we gain from using it? And what can students of color gain from professors willing to interrupt racism, despite the difficulties and risks involved in doing so? Of course, we as faculty occupy different social locations, too. As faculty of color, our footholds within the academy are much more tenuous, and our status less secure. We can choose to play the role of gatekeeper, enjoying status as tokens. Or we can use this position to try to transform some of the more oppressive elements of the university and create contexts for radical, liberatory pedagogy. White faculty can be allies, but they must take accountability, and interrogate their own status as white people in a racist, white supremacist environment. Otherwise, they replicate the fear and elisions of so many of their students, who would rather turn away than confront racism head-on.

What I argue here is that my opening example, and the themes of entitlement and belonging within the university, especially where racial and other identities are concerned, have everything to do with how we teach about race. The majority of the university functions as though white students exist at the center of all pedagogical processes, and many professors continue to teach as though this is true. Even worse, some faculty members of color also teach this way. In other words, the assumption is made that white students are the true “subjects” of the learning experience, while students of color are expected to diversify the classroom and university space, enabling white students to receive a more “multicultural” and diverse experience. When, on the job market, search committee after search committee asked me how I would make my white students comfortable in my classes about race, and when my teaching assistants worry over how to make sure the white students feel “safe” in our classrooms, I know they are teaching primarily to the white members of each classroom.¹¹ Such questions and concerns make it clear who the focus of the education process is for these educators. When my teaching colleagues worry that too much discussion about race and racism in our classes will alienate the students, I know they are speaking primarily about the white students in our

classrooms and conflating students with whiteness. What I also know is that students of color (and many white students) often do not feel safe in the classes they take, especially when professors fail to interrupt racist and other offensive remarks or to create a context in which racism and other systems of oppression, including sexism and homophobia, can be adequately addressed. While it is important to teach white students (as well as students privileged in other ways) to critically interrogate privilege, it is also crucial to decenter them in our teaching. Not doing so simply reinforces assumptions on the part of white students that even classes like *Women of Color* in U.S. Society are really about them.

SUBVERTING RACIAL DISCOURSES IN THE CLASSROOM

To truly teach about race and racism in meaningful, antiracist ways, we as faculty must acknowledge and engage our own social locations. Doing so means being always aware and attempting to understand the complexities of our own power in student-teacher interactions. Also, we should attempt to recognize the experiences and social locations of our students. As Adrienne Rich suggests, the concept of “coeducation” is misleading not only in terms of gender inequalities in the classroom (and outside, which inevitably shape students’ experiences), but also in terms of racial inequalities and other inequalities premised on class, sexual orientation, age, and ability.¹² Coeducation is a misnomer because students and faculty of color do not have the privilege of ever forgetting that we live in a racist society. There can be no adequate teaching of race without consistent awareness of students’ experiences in this racist society. Sometimes this may also mean making oneself aware of the racial stratification in one’s own department or institution. Women of color in the academy are often expected to perform social reproductive labor to maintain departmental activities, while we are rarely acknowledged or compensated for doing so. Students of color often encounter problematic expectations from faculty members and other students, and are rarely provided with departmental support and services to ensure their survival in the academy.

In our classrooms, it is imperative that we critically examine our own curricula, including assignments and materials, and also language use and daily classroom interactions. It is also crucial to socially locate the texts and readings we assign. By tokenizing authors of color, faculty members may actually encourage the tokenization of students, too. While it may be easier or more

familiar to rely on tokenistic, additive approaches to teaching, it is clear that such approaches simply reinforce racism and other forms of oppression in classroom interactions. For example, many women's studies instructors continue to rely on syllabi comprised of weekly topics or units, such as "women's health" and "women and work," in which race, class, and sexuality are often relegated to separate weekly topics. In such formats, writings and issues of women of color are often covered during the day or week entitled "race," and similarly, queer women's experiences are addressed in the unit called "sexuality." Such a format assumes that all other topics (reproductive politics, family, domestic violence, media representations, etc.) are really about white, middle-class heterosexual women, and that women of color have nothing to say about such issues. Also, words like "race" and "sexuality" are often conflated with those groups most marginalized by relations of power, whereby "race" is conflated with women of color, for example, and sexuality is conflated with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. Such a method overlooks the fact that white people also occupy racial positions in this society, and that whiteness, too, must be critically interrogated for its many meanings and cultural practices. Finally, many instructors who attempt to teach about race and racism often find themselves beginning each class with whiteness and the experiences of white people. Challenging this practice destabilizes the notion that whiteness is and should be the norm.

Race and racism are difficult, sometimes painful topics in the classroom, for both students and faculty. In my own classes, I have found it useful to establish ground rules early in the term, during which I ask students to discuss their own needs for creating a relatively safe space. Many students are able to articulate at this time the practices that make them uncomfortable and unsafe, and we work as a group to balance sensitivity and awareness of our differences with academic, intellectual freedom in the classroom. At the same time, I recognize that the classroom has rarely been safe for students of color, and I work to create a context for discussing race and racism through readings, films, discussion, and classroom exercises. I have also found it necessary to teach and model appropriate, sensitive ways of interrupting racist remarks and other oppressive comments in class. We can employ overt and subtle techniques for interrupting racism, and our strategies will vary according to our own identities, experiences, disciplines, and pedagogical concerns. In my experience, however, interrupting racism is generally easier to do in classes that rely on nonadditive approaches to the understanding of race, where experiences and

writings of people of color are adequately contextualized. Decentering whiteness and white people has been central to my own practice. For example, not only do I attempt to teach about the rich, varied histories and social experiences of people of color, but I also teach to students of color, as much as any other students in the room.

Transformation in classrooms must occur at all levels, and involves examining and reshaping curricula, being attentive to social locations and contexts, and working to create as safe a space as possible for antiracist interpersonal communication in the classroom. I have encountered many students and faculty members who shy away from discussions about race and racism because these topics make them feel uncomfortable. However, racism is *not* comfortable, and certainly never has been for people of color. Confronting racism, teaching about race, and developing teaching strategies that are explicitly antiracist may not feel comfortable or familiar to many instructors who have grown accustomed to the centering of whiteness, white experiences, and white subjectivity in their classrooms, in the university, and in society in general. However, it will be through such work that we will eventually find ourselves teaching about race in relation to theoretical frameworks and to daily, lived experience for all students.

NOTES

- 1 I currently teach at Portland State University, a large, urban public university in Portland, Oregon. Students of color make up approximately 25 percent of the student population, with Asian Pacific American students comprising the largest group of students of color.
- 2 The myth of the model minority assumes that Asians possess certain innate cultural traits and values that make us opportunistic, even dangerous, to U.S. society. It sends the message that Asian Americans have "made it," usually as a result of these unscrupulous, inscrutable Asian values. At the same time, this stereotype, describing Asians as the *model* minority in the United States, pits Asian Americans against other groups of people of color, as it places the blame for not making it squarely on the shoulders of people of color. Indeed, it ignores the fact that many Asians in the United States, especially immigrant women, recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, and the growing number of homeless Asian Americans, are not surviving economically, politically, and socially and face increasing levels of discrimination and hate violence. Finally, the myth of the model minority, as Shirley Hune suggests, often results in the further neglect of Asian Pacific American students in higher education, as they are seen as not needing academic assistance or guidance. See Hune, *Asian Pacific American Women in Higher Education: Claiming Visibility and Voice* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998).
- 3 bell hooks, "Black and Female: Reflections on Graduate School," in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 55-61.
- 4 Kyo Maclear, "Not in So Many Words: Translating Silence Across 'Difference,'" *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly of Writing, Politics, Art, and Culture*, no. 41/45 (Summer 1994), 6-11.

- 5 Joanna Kadi, "Stupidity 'Deconstructed,'" in *Is Academic Feminism Dead? Theory in Practice*, ed. The Social Justice Group at the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, University of Minnesota (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 327–346.
- 6 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990).
- 7 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 8 Of course, those who maintain the belief that "colorblindness" = antiracism fail to recognize that there is already a central racial discourse in the United States, namely white supremacy. Thus, by refusing to speak of race at all, proponents of colorblindness simply uphold and reinforce white supremacy, however unknowingly.
- 9 Gloria Yamato, "Racism: Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, fourth edition, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 150–154. I've also heard white people say that they wish we could do away with terms like "race" and "racism," because these words are simply not "useful" anymore. Their sentiments provoke concern and anxiety for me, as I realize that what they really wish for is an end to any discussion of their own accountability or collusion with racism.
- 10 Mary Romero, "Learning to Think and Teach about Race and Gender Despite Graduate School: Obstacles Women of Color Graduate Students Face in Sociology," in *Is Academic Feminism Dead?*, 283–310.
- 11 My colleague Patti Sakurai discusses her experience on the job market and the recurring question regarding the comfort and safety of white students in her essay "That's Dr. Sakurai to You: Reflections on Race and Gender Along the Academic Front," presentation at the Women's Studies Colloquium Series on Race and Gender, Portland State University, March 7, 2001. She wonders, "Were white candidates asked the same question?" and writes, "In only one interview in my three years on the job market was any concern expressed or a question asked about my intended interactions with students of color . . . The educational priorities at many of these institutions and for whose benefit they viewed multiculturalism and diversity were quite painfully clear" (12).
- 12 Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 237–245.

MENACED BY RESISTANCE:

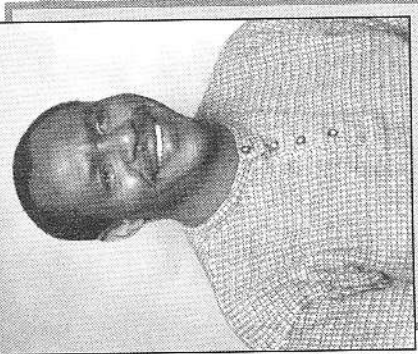
THE BLACK TEACHER
IN THE MAINLY WHITE
SCHOOL/CLASSROOM

PHOTO: MWANGI GĪTAHI, 2001

Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society's well. Even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us. Surely, they must know that their deliverance depends on letting down their ropes. Only by working together is escape possible. Over time, many reach out, but most simply watch, mesmerized into maintaining their unspoken commitment to keeping us where we are, at whatever cost to them or to us.

—Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*

When the African walked into the court of Western letters, she or he was judged in advance by a fixed racist subtext, or pretext, which the African was forced to confront, confirm, or reject. Given that these fictions of racial essence were sanctioned by "science," the Africans had little hope indeed of speaking themselves free of European fantasies of their "Otherness."

—Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Talkin' That Talk"

If Gates' proposition above is a reasonable one—and I believe it is—then relatively few people of African descent ever have any hope of "speaking them-

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In this essay, Gītītī asserts that while whites are rewarded for any work related to "diversity," people of color are not; his essay includes several memorable illustrations from his own career. Inspired by James Baldwin, he makes the case that institutions that are not working to eradicate racism "perpetrate great violence against students of all backgrounds," with their administrators functioning as prison guards of student and faculty minds rather than true educators.

selves free" of American "white" fantasies of their "Otherness." In the context of academia, this would apply as much to prospective students and faculty members as it would to public speakers and visiting scholars. The exertion involved, conscious or otherwise, particularly in confronting and rejecting the racist subtext or pretext, is tremendous and exhausting to the body and the spirit. The waste of energy, talent, and human possibility is simply enormous.

The devastating cost of eradicating racism has been noted by many, including Joe R. Feagin and Hernán Vera in their 1995 book *White Racism*: "From the perspective of U.S. society as a whole, the human time and energy expended in planning, staging, and implementing racist actions is extremely wasteful, and this waste is catastrophic for both black victims and white perpetrators."¹ Elsewhere, Feagin and Vera remark on "not only the very heavy material and psychological costs for African Americans but also the serious material, psychological, and moral costs for white Americans"; they lament that, in all areas of American life, "the abandonment of efficiency because of a racist mythology is thus highly wasteful in concrete material terms. In addition, all who invest in such inefficient corporations lose materially from racism."² It is necessary here to include colleges and universities as corporations which traditionally have invested monies, and received millions in gifts and grants, from anything between apartheid-era South Africa and racist transnational companies. Equally, it is necessary to state without flinching that those colleges and universities which condone white supremacist practices, however veiled those may be, perpetrate great violence against students of all backgrounds, and implicate their administrators, like prison guards, in the continuous imprisonment of minds—the very antithesis of education that liberates the mind. But colleges and universities are far from acting alone.

In his incisive "A Talk to Teachers" address, originally titled "The Negro Child—His Self-Image," delivered in October, 1963, James Baldwin reminded his audience that they must understand that "in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance . . ." Baldwin remarked that American society at that historical juncture was "desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within."³

In the ensuing essay I want to extend Baldwin's insightful observation on the purpose of education and the obligation of "any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the

minds of young people . . .” by taking a look at the state of education in the university classroom almost forty years after Baldwin’s talk to teachers. It is important, at the very least, to gauge whether any substantial changes have occurred in the areas that matter most: the American mind, the curriculum, pedagogy and its practitioners, educational administration, and the power that corporate and political interests wield over the form and content of education. My personal experience in teaching at various U.S. colleges and universities will be augmented with readings from contemporary radical-thinking writers and cultural activists in the areas of literature, pedagogy, cultural studies, and multiculturalism.

Baldwin warns that those committed to fostering enduring changes must be prepared to “go for broke.” In today’s social, cultural, and political climate, how does the “Negro child” that Baldwin spoke about now become adult—“go for broke” in the socializing and formative terrain of the American university today? Essential to this discussion are questions pertaining to the constraints, pressures, and hostilities faced by would-be agents of change, albeit in apparently minimal ways. What, for example, do white students *see* when I, a black instructor, walk into the classroom on that first day of the semester? When I open my mouth and a “foreign accent” comes out? Does my blackness (or my speech) do anything to their comfort level, perhaps causing some to seek their comfort in another course or with a different instructor? While some students may not doubt my competence to teach a particular course prefixed with African American, African, Caribbean, and so on, is it possible that they do not understand why I am teaching them something called American literature, poetry, short story, film?

It is not enough to ask this kind of question of students alone. One must consider also what and how students learn in other courses taught by one’s colleagues. Do students bring with them facts, attitudes, prejudices, and mental habits that complicate (often unnecessarily) the classroom dynamic? What influence do parents, family members, and peers exert on the students I teach or hope to teach? What of the much-vaunted institutional culture that each university or college claims to develop, maintain, and promote? Much of contemporary academic discourse is laced with such buzzwords as “diversity” and “cultural competence,” and a good number of university administrators and teaching faculty, mostly white, have been gathering awards and monies for their work in promoting diversity, multiculturalism, and so on. Finally, there is talking about race, writing about it, doing research in matters of race, publish-

ing papers and books on race, conducting local and countrywide workshops and seminars on race, and nabbing research grants for race questions. All told, it is evident that when white people do it, it is worthy and meritorious work, deserving of timely reward; if black or other nonwhite people try to do it, they are just whining, or perhaps incapable of, or unwilling to do, other kinds of scholarly stuff.

What remains in question are the precise components of such diversity, especially as these apply to recruitment and retention practices for students and faculty of color, as well as to curricular content and the relative stability of those disciplinary areas in which students of color should see reflections of themselves—in the subject matter and in the faculty who teach them.

In the aforementioned essay, Baldwin asserts that the purpose of education, “finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.”⁴ Baldwin posits that “what is upsetting the country [in the 1960s] is a sense of its own identity,” arguing that if one were able to change the curriculum in all the schools so that African Americans learned more about themselves and their contributions to American culture, “[one] would be liberating not only Negroes, [one] would be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody’s history, you must lie about it all.”⁵ If, as Baldwin asserts, one attains a fuller consciousness of one’s identity only through an incessant questioning of one’s complex sociocultural universe, if one must learn to live with not only those questions but also with the sometimes unsettling nuances of the answers they yield, then it appears that contemporary American education, with its overly nationalistic emphasis on a Eurocentric cultural heritage, fails to encourage students (and their instructors) to explore more deeply and widely what it means to be American. The attempted omissions and erasures of every American’s other “self” predispose one to think of oneself in either—or terms, the facile notion of the melting pot notwithstanding. The certainty with which we carve our identities as culturally or genetically unalloyed, the absolute truths that we teach our children and students, particularly with regard to what “we” are not—and others certainly are—may well be the insidious lies that Baldwin sees as historically inscribed in the culture of American education and socialization.

The sad truth of Baldwin's observation manifests itself, for instance, in the plight of the white female student who complains bitterly to us in class that her son, born of a black father, has been "put down [in some official document; the phrasing is hers] as 'black.'" Why, she demands of us, can't the child be listed as white, the color of its mother's skin? One sees here a troubled replay of the "one drop" rignarole: in the past, one drop of "black" blood used to be the sole measure of one's blackness. Today, does one drop of "white" blood make the child in question white, or black? Does it matter, should it matter, what color the child is? Should color ever be the basis of familial love and achievement? The student's question is not a challenge to the entrenched system of racialized identities; in the asking of the question the student reveals her investment in the latter. The lies that Baldwin writes about have worked too well. Clearly, the impact of the lies of American history can only be injurious to interracial couples, families, and other human associations.

Part of the series of myths that pass for contemporary American identity is the myth of the death or disappearance of race as a central and controlling issue in American daily life. The white undergraduate and graduate students I teach routinely repeat the mantra of how far we have come, how much economic and social progress African Americans have achieved since the 1960s, or how education will soon have converted all racially prejudiced Americans into models of civic righteousness. Needless to say, this is deeply confused behavior. In her essay "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," bell hooks examines the classroom dynamic in her own teaching experience, and notes how white students respond with "disbelief, shock, and rage" when black students provide observations, stereotypes, and so on of white people that are offered as "data" gleaned from close scrutiny and study. According to hooks, "Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze, is itself an expression of racism. Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear."⁶ In addressing this aspect of white student behavior in the context of mixed-population classes, hooks notes that white students "have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness,' even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think."⁷

My own classroom experience provides related examples of this closeted racism on the part of white students, and consequently of the intractable, if

sometimes dormant, character of racism. The year is 1993. I am teaching a course titled *Introduction to African American Culture*. A preliminary question is: How do we define "African American," given the complexity of origins, geographical distribution, intermixture, and so on? Before the racially diverse class could even make a tentative attempt to answer the question, a white student vehemently objects that "this business of some people [attaching prefixes such as 'African' to their identity category] is the cause of division and conflict in America." Why, this student wants to know, can't people be *just* Americans?

A vigorous exchange follows this outburst. Are there not Americans who identify themselves as Irish, Italian, Polish, Anglo, and so on? he is asked. Do such categories not observe holidays and rituals, and symbolically enact some of their ethnic being? Many such questions later, the student is compelled to answer in the affirmative. He later "shares" with his classmates that his family are recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, that some of them have had racial slurs thrown at them by white Americans.

Or take the case of my 1997 graduate course the *Novel Across the World*, which required students to recognize especially the motif of resistance to domination, whether it be internal or otherwise. Inevitably, imperialism, European or American, is encountered again and again. So are the motifs of revolution and "necessary violence" as counterhegemonic strategies. The students' own resistance to the idea of other nations, peoples, and "races" mobilizing against their own colonization—and often meeting violence with violence—was most determined. Are there no alternatives to revolutionary violence, almost all of them demanded? Doesn't the use of violence simply guarantee an endless cycle of violence? When I asked the students whether they would push this argument for the American or the French revolution, I received incoherent or sophistry-laden answers. Might the race or geographical origin of the self-liberators be a factor in the students' denunciation of armed resistance, I asked. Silence or indications of hurt feelings were what I got. When students, scholars in the making at the very least, refuse to entertain or engage ideas or propositions even in an intellectual fashion—because race (or one's investment in race) is a nasty subject best left to die a natural death—what does that say about their capacity to "ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions"? Baldwin has told us that "the obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what the risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change."⁸ For me as a teacher, the question that this begs is: What

price does intellectual complacency and avoidance of the unpleasant exact on a nation, especially when institutions of higher learning become the hotbeds of reactionism and the now-familiar dumbing down of the American mind?

I have often thought that the status of the black teacher in an all-white school as being akin to that of the black police officer in an all-white neighborhood. The black teacher may, hopefully, count on his or her colleagues to vouch for his or her character or qualification for the job. Similarly, the black police officer may hope for the same validation by his or her fellow officers. But in neither situation is such validation in any way guaranteed, or without its limitations and caprices. In any case, the white teachers and the white police officers have constituencies behind them—white students and parents and white citizens, respectively, that the black teacher and the black police officer decidedly do not.

The black teacher in a predominantly white school, even when part of a minority group, fares only slightly better, if at all, just as a black police officer in a predominantly white force fares only slightly better than his or her lone counterpart in an all-white force. And if black American citizens, most of whose histories are as old as the Republic, if not older, encounter this questioning of credentials and belonging, what do you think black people of different geographical origins and histories encounter? For the black persons involved, are there realistic career prospects in such scenarios?

At issue is the idea of ownership—ownership of power and the institutions that power creates to maintain and protect itself. Institutionalized power creates insiders and outsiders; it draws boundaries and marks of identification. By these marks it manages to include or exclude, to certify or to disqualify. So it is that the socialization of children entails an imprinting of what “we” own by right, who or what we do not touch. So it is that children and students learn what kind of teachers they “should be” provided with, and which ones they should not be; what kind of education—and what form of instruction—they should or should not be exposed to.

So it was that, as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, when I first stepped into a classroom to teach Spanish to a beginning class, the students refused to believe that I was their instructor. This went on for three days in a row. When I persisted in being present, they finally gave up, but not before a good number of them had dropped the class or shifted to another section. Since then, such student behavior no longer surprises me. Indeed, I have known students to drop the class at precisely that moment when they set foot

in the room and see the “guy who’s going to be teaching us.” For some reason, when I give students their syllabi, I never prefix my name with any of those titles beloved of academia. In most cases, students take that as a sign that I have only minimal academic achievement, and are quick to let me know by their behavior and attitude.

Happily, not all students, and not all families, are as invested in race and social status as others. Many students share with their classmates stories involving parents who ask with dismay why in the world their son or daughter is wasting time on something called “African this” or “Black that,” whether it be literature, art, history, or whatever. Many parents and family members express shock or disbelief that a black instructor is teaching their child. Conversely, many wonder just how it is possible for a black instructor from the other side of the world to be teaching American poetry, or drama, or novel. But students who do their own thinking know that the cultivation of the mind, and of the person, has nothing to do with the color of the source.

There seems still to be scant attention paid to the price that the scholar of African descent pays daily in the course of performing his or her teaching duties. Both anecdotal and research evidence attests to the prevalence of discriminatory tenure review procedures, heavy formal and informal teaching loads, excessive committee assignments, burdensome student advisement, and mentoring demands. But the psychological burden associated with the black scholar’s typical “one minority per pot” status gets little press. It is bad enough that my own colleagues typecast me as the one who teaches “black” courses, going so far as to characterize me—to incoming graduate students, to boot—as the “specialist” in “Afro-Caribbean studies,” whatever that means. It is terrible that a former department head, playing messenger for the dean’s office, once pointedly warned me to “go easy on standards,” as many students, initially expecting an easy ride in the classes I was teaching, were dropping classes—thus costing the university, or department, valuable tuition money. I was, clearly, being warned that my chances of promotion and tenure would be in jeopardy unless I “acted right.” It is deplorable that my students, weaned mainly on a Eurocentric intellectual diet, feel the need to seek validation of what I teach from their white professors. The worst is, of course, the combination of intellectual and social isolation I experience in the institutional setting and in the outside community. Wrestling with student antipathy and institutional ostracism generates often unbearable levels of stress, to say the least. The psychological stress is made worse by the lack of any usable or

friendly resources outside of the shrink's office. Having continually to invent individual stress management strategies imposes not just psychological harm; it has a negative effect on sustained productivity and a sense of being anchored, and consequently it has its own economic costs on the individual and family unit.

I am tempted at this point to write a little about how enormously difficult it is to deal with bereavement in such a setting, but I think the point has been made. The routine trivialization of my grief, personal suffering or loss, including injuries from accidents, is hard to deal with. What does one say about a university community where the human problems of black people are not even noticed?

I spoke earlier of typecasting based on race. While my academic credentials in a general sense determine what range of courses or material I am considered fit to teach, are there nevertheless certain expectations of how I should teach them—expectations colored by departmental ideology, the internalized “fittedness” of black people to teach black courses (and vice versa). A perverse twist of this typecasting revealed itself recently during the course of a job search in the English department. Black candidates were repeatedly questioned about their ability to cater to the needs of white students. One curiously self-indulgent question put to white candidates was whether they believed that a white person can be just as effective and competent to teach courses in African American literature and culture, and to interact professionally and effectively with students of color.

My presence at those interviews and presentations reminded me of my own initial interview, during which I was practically asked whether I could pledge to be a role model for students of color. Now, if I am expected to be a role model for black students (or other students of color), does this mean that I am unqualified to play role model for any other kind of student? Does it mean that my white colleagues may in no way be bothered with requests to play the same role for nonwhite students? The question, then, becomes: Are there levels of socially acceptable prejudice that have resulted in a collective myopia to how “race” informs our actions? Is this prejudice bred into the next generation by the present one? In other words, is it just possible that I teach, with enormous tear and wear to myself, students whose “race” infection is congenital, through the school system and outside of it?

One of the saddest reflections of the contemporary status quo in academia is the continued use of the descriptive “American” as a metonym for “white” or

“Caucasian.” Whenever “American” is attached to history, literature, art, philosophy, cinema, and so forth, it effectively excludes African American, Native American, Asian American, Latin American, and other integral components of America. Even worse, these latter categories are typically reduced to “ethnic” or “area” studies with the status of elective or “cultural” requirement. The marginalization of these curricular areas (or their total elimination in many institutions) impoverishes not only the education that universities claim to make universal; it deprives students of all cultural backgrounds the opportunity to broaden and deepen their knowledge of themselves and the world they inhabit. There can be little intellectual benefit to be derived from a purposely thinned-down curriculum, both for students and their instructors. Nor can the practice be conducive to social justice, whose ambit encompasses the right of students to receive an education that accurately represents the world they live in, as well as their aspirations and dreams. When schools and instructors signal to their students that there are qualitatively “better” instructors or “more culturally suitable” content areas—based on race or culture—then the schools and instructors have abdicated their moral responsibility to ensure parity of status for courses of instruction. Even worse, they have signalled their complicity in curtailing the career progress of nonwhite scholars, as well as the intellectual and social development of students.

It is not necessary here to rehearse the reasons for and the history behind the de facto positioning of the majority of African-descended peoples at the bottom of the American ladder (or at the bottom of the well, to quote Derrick Bell). Suffice it to say that the inadequacy of redistributive measures that would radically improve economic, social, and political conditions for African Americans lies in the widespread and persistent lack of political will among whites that is, in its turn, based on their investment in what accrues to them by virtue of their race. As Derrick Bell has observed in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*,

Throughout history, politicians have used blacks as scapegoats for failed economic or political policies. Before the Civil War, rich slave owners persuaded the white working class to stand with them against the danger of slave revolts—even though the existence of slavery condemned white workers to a life of economic privation. After the Civil War, poor whites fought social reforms and settled for segregation rather than see formerly enslaved blacks get ahead . . . The “them against us” racial ploy—always a potent force in economic bad times—is working again: today whites, as disadvantaged by high-status entrance requirements as blacks, fight to end

affirmative action policies that, by eliminating class-based entrance requirements and requiring widespread advertising of jobs, have likely helped far more whites than blacks.⁹

I contend that the permanence, or persistence, of race in America offers a major reason for the widespread but mistaken white notion that people of color in particular, and women in general, have the jobs or opportunities they have solely by virtue of affirmative action. In the opinion of the majority of whites, blacks are not hired on the basis of merit but rather in accordance with affirmative action objectives.

The adverse effects of this belief on the victim are serious and deeply troubling. In this context, according to Marcia E. Sutherland, "professors of color are preemptively construed as lacking the requisite qualifications, credentials and experience. This is only one of many outcomes which flow from the attribution of Whites that Black academicians are solely affirmative action appointees."¹⁰ Sutherland argues that "ascribing token status to Blacks informs Whites' tendency to offer Blacks low salaries and nontenurable positions," and, further, that "the temporality implied by these appointments fosters a climate in which the Black scholar remains peripheral and inconsequential to the White institution."¹¹ As far as faculty of African descent are concerned, it is no secret that predominantly white institutions practice the dictum "Keep this nigger running." Hired disproportionately at the lowest ranks, socially isolated and intellectually segregated from other professional colleagues, deprived of information on the informal processes to upward academic success, black faculty frequently just up and leave, and in their wake a myth takes root about their well-known inability to tough it out.

In the context in which this discussion is situated, the classroom environment is structured mainly by race. Upon entering college, significant numbers of white students admit to being exposed to students or faculty of color for the first time. The racial demographics of students, faculty, and administrators have already been made predictable by so-called tradition. What may not be so predictable is how the black instructor must negotiate the tensions that necessarily arise in the course of classroom discussion. If white students are reticent to contribute to discussions that involve American history or race, or American involvement in world affairs, what does the instructor do to get them involved? If the same students, mistakenly or otherwise, believe themselves to be the victims of generalized "anti-white" sentiment, is the instructor obliged to be their consoler and defender? Since the white students will let the instructor know

what they think in their student evaluations, how does the instructor negotiate this minefield? Should he or she have to worry so much about these subjective and often retaliatory evaluations?

That is not all. Through a combination of factors students, both white and black, consistently are led to believe that the courses assigned to black instructors are—or should be—"easy" courses. The relative value attached to such courses, many of which are placed in a culture cluster or some such lower-rated academic category, is frequently an indication of the institution's priorities. Be that as it may, black instructors are not "supposed" to be rigorous in their scholarship, teaching, and insistence on performance standards. When, alas, they act out of character and pose a threat to student's grades, they are deemed to have gone too far. As Sutherland reports, "Untenured faculty receive tacit messages to strive for a 'proper fit' with the White institution. In the customary conservative White academic culture this is best attained by the avoidance of challenges to White supremacy. One must avoid the image of being a 'trouble maker.'"¹² Inhospitable working environments motivate people to relocate to what appear, at least in the short term, to be more amenable environments. However, the cost of being on the move so much is the instability it engenders, internalized by the person affected, and used as a stigma by those who judge the "constant mover."

Partly in recognition of the commonplace that language is everything, academia has revised some of its language. Certainly political correctness is bandied about every day. The drones insist that PC is an attempt to muzzle freedom of expression. All that aside, it is safe to conjecture that not too many white faculty members are to be found who address their black students as "Negroes" or "niggers." How, then, is it possible that students at all levels continue to churn out in their speech and writing—without qualification or any sense of irony or insult—such terms as "tribesmen" (in referring to Africans, for instance), "primitive societies," "Bushmen," and "inferior cultures"? Could race have died but forgotten to take its vocabulary along with it?

When white faculty members and administrators tell me that I am very articulate, or that I speak English exceptionally well, what I hear behind their voices are students complaining or cursing because I corrected their English. The unspoken thought is that language acquisition is race-based. That is, a black person like me has no business being truly intelligent, or having strong command of not just English, but several other languages as well. When a black person can do all these things, ways must be found to bring him or her down a

notch. Hence the recourse to "you can't understand them because of their accents," or "so-and-so is such a tough grader, you better not take that class." Incidentally, faculty members who abet students in this kind of behavior do themselves no service. If indeed I am a tough grader, a demanding teacher, what does that say about my accusers or their abettors?

Numerous recommendations have been made for combating or eradicating racism. The most challenging (or challenged) include the kind that Derrick Bell suggests in the opening excerpt, that "only by working together is escape possible." Real change begins, many now argue, when whites begin to recognize that the destruction of racism is in their own interests. Feagin and Vera suggest that "Meaningful solutions to racism involve making the waste caused by this racism painfully evident for all Americans . . . In our view a strong defense of antiracist education and public policies such as reparations must show white Americans that contemporary racism is a waste of energy for everyone."¹³ One hopes that white people are listening. Their humanity, and that of their coming generations, is at stake.

NOTES

- 1 Joe R. Feagin and Hernán Vera, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 167.
- 2 Feagin and Vera, *White Racism*, 168–169.
- 3 James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," in *Multi-Cultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, ed. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1988), 3–12.
- 4 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 4.
- 5 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 8.
- 6 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 167.
- 7 hooks, *Black Looks*, 167.
- 8 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 4.
- 9 Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 8.
- 10 Marcia E. Sutherland, "Black Faculty in White Academia: The Fit Is an Uneasy One," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 14.1 (1990), 19.
- 11 Sutherland, "Black Faculty," 19.
- 12 Sutherland, "Black Faculty," 20.
- 13 Feagin and Vera, *White Racism*, 191, emphasis in original.

ITEM 4

KAREN J. LEONG

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVING RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

When I prepared to begin my first semester as an assistant professor in a women's studies program, my friends, committee members, and colleagues all warned me to adjust my expectations and that I would be teaching students very different from me. They were correct. Significantly, this difference not only included our social and educational backgrounds or aspirations but also extended to my being a Chinese American woman at the front of the classroom. The factors that visibly identified me challenged my students' perceptions of how a professor should appear and act. The dual and contradictory position I embodied as native informant and authority figure was difficult for all of us in the classroom to negotiate. In this essay I discuss how I learned to make sense of race in the classroom.

My first and primary teaching assignment was to teach the women's studies core course that focuses on the experiences of women of color in the United States. This gender, race, and class course has almost always been taught by a woman of color, and, according to my colleagues, has always been a challenging course to teach because it inspires student resistance and hostility. Students are asked to question their own positions within the hierarchies of

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Leong tells how she deals with the student resistance and hostility she encounters as a beginning professor. She describes times when her "perceived dual authority"—as a woman of color as well as a professor—creates unexpected classroom tension, and times when students' minds begin to open.



PHOTO: TIM TRUMBULL, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPH

gender, race, and class that structure our society. This is not always comfortable, and students understandably respond with resistance. As someone who simultaneously represents the very subject of what the students are learning, however, I soon realized that this resistance took on a particularly personal dimension.

My background in feminist and critical race theory encouraged me to try to demystify the classroom experience. Nonetheless, I was not prepared to deal with the ensuing power dynamics in the classroom. My first semester as a professor in the classroom was a revelation of student resistance and hostility. The tensions of the classroom manifested themselves in my course evaluations. I have found that many students do take the time to provide thoughtful feedback and critiques, and I rely on these comments to shape revisions to my courses. But several of my evaluations revealed deeper discontent. Numerous students complained that in a class that was supposed to be about women of color, I only talked about Asian American women (interestingly, this was the class for which I had omitted most of the readings about Asian American women). Several complained that this course focused "too much on race," and they were tired of hearing about oppression. Others expressed their weariness of hearing so many "complaints" about society from so many "victims."

I have since learned that my experience of race in the classroom was similar to those of other women faculty of color. The dynamics of race in the classroom reflect broader dynamics of power relating to gender, race, and class in academia and society at large. Administrators, scholars, and pedagogical theorists alike exhibit a reluctance to acknowledge and address the particular experiences of faculty who are women, and who are not white. Whether we like it or not, the politics of identity shape our interactions with our students and the very dynamic of learning within the classroom.

I shared with someone, whose opinion I greatly admired and respected, my frustration and surprise that my attempts to demystify the learning experience were unsuccessful. I explained that I had been inspired by several books about teaching to challenge traditional models of pedagogy with my students. She, in turn, expressed amazement at my surprise, and pointed out that these authors were either older white males with whom students associate academic authority, or a celebrity scholar of color. "When he appears to be vulnerable, the students already respect him and so respect him more because he is clearly choosing to bridge the distance they perceive between their role and his. But you—" and here she laughed. "You don't have to try to be any more vulner-

able—you already are!" And she was right. I had overlooked my own difference, which in itself made a great difference. And at this point it was too late. My classes were already enmeshed in the ambiguities of my position and the contradictions of power and authority in the classroom—and truthfully, it would have been a great learning experience for all of us if it weren't so awful.

The director of my program at the time sought to support me by acknowledging that race was part of the student reaction. She provided me with a report on the status of Asian Pacific American women in higher education, in which Shirley Hune summarizes, "APA female faculty find they are evaluated differently and lack a sense of community with their colleagues. Their expertise and authority is [*sic*] often contested in the classroom and in their departments."¹ Another study, one that examines the variables of gender and race in college course evaluations, concluded that nonwhite women faculty tend to be ranked lower in these evaluations than any other group. In general, women received lower evaluations than men, and faculty of color received lower evaluations than white faculty. Analysis of how gender and ethnicity affected student evaluations of faculty showed that male students were more likely to rank male faculty higher than female faculty. Furthermore, "women [students] were found to give the highest ratings to minority male faculty and the lowest ratings to minority female faculty, with the ratings of Anglo female and male faculty falling somewhere in between."² The study thus suggests that race and gender intersect to negatively shape students' perceptions of minority female faculty. Given the disproportionate number of women faculty of color hired to teach courses about race and difference in women's studies courses—which anecdotes are some of the most difficult courses to teach—women of color faculty are at a disadvantage before class even begins. Although the study highlighted the how race and gender skew students' course and faculty evaluations, addressing specific factors that shape these outcomes obviously was beyond its scope. The color and gender lines extend far beyond the students and the classroom to American society at large. Race in the classroom is not so much about students and classes as it is about social structures that are replicated uncritically in academia, inside and outside of the classroom. Indeed, I increasingly noticed how the very dynamic that shaped my courses and interactions with students continually manifested itself as deeply embedded in all levels of higher education.

Throughout my first few semesters, I attended numerous teaching workshops desperately seeking tools to construct an alternate mode of teaching in

the classroom. Most of these workshops recreated the very dynamics that we sought to deconstruct in our teaching. Gender and race worked together to determine who would speak and who would be silenced, who would be asked to speak for different groups, and whose experiences would be legitimized. During one workshop about incorporating theater exercises in the classroom, the faculty participated in creating living sculptures, positioning other workshop participants to create pictures of oppression or homophobia. A pattern began to emerge where the faculty of color present were chosen to represent people of color, the woman with the short and spiky haircut was asked to portray the lesbian, and so on. Even though all of the participants had discussed at length how students of color are often called upon in class to “translate” their apparent differences, we nonetheless uncritically performed that same scenario over and over again, substituting bodies for voices throughout the workshop.

In order to create productive learning spaces, we in academic positions of authority must engage in self-questioning and frank dialogue about difference if we expect our students to do so. I have found that many administrators and faculty members are still very uncomfortable even acknowledging the realities of difference that shape our institutions from the top down. How can we expect our students to feel any more comfortable than we do? The desire on the part of some to slip issues about race and difference into our curriculum without our students noticing defeats the whole purpose. Differences are *not* comfortable. No matter how much we try to make it comfortable for our students, or ourselves, at some point we must face the reality that structures of difference in our society place some of us in positions of power and advantage over others. Implicit messages from colleagues that we should not challenge our students in this way, because learning is less likely to occur in a hostile environment, are embedded with white privilege. Our very presence as faculty of color may be perceived as a challenge in and of itself. Regardless of what we say or how nicely we say it, our presence will threaten some students. This is not to suggest that we abandon civility or professionalism, but that we recognize and expect that our bodies will be read personally within the classroom context, changing the very dynamic of the learning environment. By consciously incorporating this dynamic into the educational process itself, I believe that it is possible to empower our students and ourselves to learn to confront and negotiate the multiple permutations of race that shape our classroom as well as our society.

This realization resulted from my own process of learning how to negotiate race in the classroom. I am fortunate to work at a university large enough that other faculty of color were present and willing to encourage me by sharing the scars of their own battles in the classroom. One senior faculty member, a major scholar in her field and well-known for her teaching, sought me out to ask how my first year was progressing. She encouraged me to take charge the first day in class, to state from the outset my credentials and establish my authority; more importantly, she shared her own tales about a classroom of male students literally standing up in class to challenge her knowledge and authority. An African American faculty member will never know how much of a difference she made to me when she spoke during a roundtable discussion following a graduate student’s performance about gender and race. Sharing eloquently her own experience of segregation as a child, and the continued racism she experiences as a woman of color faculty member on campus, she observed, “One learns to protect oneself—to wear armor.” She paused. “Every day before I enter the classroom, I pull on that armor.” This acknowledgment that as women of color we must protect ourselves, that when we are out there in front of the class we are no less vulnerable than when we as students sat in the class, moved me to tears of recognition.

I do not know why I expected being a professor would be any different than being an undergraduate or graduate student. As perpetual outsiders within academia, those of us who represent the underrepresented have long learned mechanisms of survival. My mistake was in thinking that my being a faculty member automatically conferred some sort of privilege upon my person in the academy. Even though our training provides us with some authority in the classroom and elevates our social status to some extent, our very presence as faculty continues to be contested. We must remind ourselves again and again that we do not enter academia as students and faculty with our acceptance a given, nor with our armor fully assembled. We learn over time—specific to the circumstances in which we find ourselves—when and how to protect ourselves and, just as importantly, when we can put down the armor and with whom. I have found that many colleagues are not comfortable relating their own stories from the front. Perhaps these memories are still too painful, or perhaps they fear that to give voice to the struggle means giving ground for which they have fought. I can empathize. At the same time, I know that others sharing their experiences helped me to not internalize my own sense of inadequacy as a teacher, and allowed me to acknowledge the pain and anger of

particular interactions with students and colleagues. Now, in specific contexts in my classroom or in my interactions with colleagues, I reserve the choice to be vulnerable—but I will not do so as indiscriminately as I did before.

Rather than erase race or any other differences from the classroom, this microcosm of society, we need to acknowledge these differences and the tensions that result.³ One of my colleagues suggested that I discuss openly in class the ways in which race was shaping the classroom dynamics. She suggested that this could be a way to ask my students to critique their own assumptions about gender, race, age, and authority. At the time, I did not have the confidence to pull this off. I now recognize, however, that this is as important a strategy as openly critiquing the mechanisms by which we professors gain authority in the classroom. In my classes I now discuss my own privilege of education, a middle-class background, and social status; I do this to show how even as a woman of color I may be located in privileged positions relative to my students and to other women of color. In turn—and depending on the students in the class—I may borrow from my insightful and courageous colleague who asked her colleagues in a teaching workshop, “What is it like to wake up white?” When I ask my students this question that they are often surprised, upset, and annoyed—some seem literally stunned with guilt. If I push them a bit more and am lucky, at least one of my students will protest, “That’s not fair! How can one person represent all white people?” And then I will exclaim, “That is precisely the point! Is this fair to anyone?” Thus we begin our discussion of white privilege, how whiteness has been normalized in American society and culture, and how, as Gloria Yamato explains, guilt is not the point—active intervention in the processes of privilege is.⁴

I now realize that teaching is a performance on multiple levels; we constantly juggle different roles in order to evoke different responses from our students. As women and nonwhite faculty, moreover, we are performing gender and race in new ways for many of our students—we may be the first female, non-white professors they have had in college. The key is to convey this to our students; they must understand that we are performing our pedagogy in order to facilitate learning, and that we are not necessarily representing our own selves in the front of the classroom. Indeed, performing identities may be the most productive way for women faculty of color to negotiate the multiple expectations of the students in the classroom.⁵

I also try to enter the classroom with an awareness of how history has shaped my own life as well as the lives of my students. Many of my students

have grown up in neighborhoods marked by homogeneity in socioeconomic status and racial composition, many have been taught a national mythology that silences the voices of a wide range of men and women, and many have never been challenged to examine the structures that simultaneously advantage and disadvantage them. Awareness of these realities calls for a patience rooted in humility and empathy: to become conscious of one’s own privilege is a painful experience, and it is a process that my students and I will inevitably share over the course of the semester.⁶ At times, my students will teach me from their own experiences, from their expressions of enthusiasm or frustration, and even from their silences, precisely what I am trying to convey to them—and when those moments converge, they can be transformative for all of us.

I seek to develop a learning environment conducive to these moments, a sense of sharing a common journey that requires combining our individual resources and abilities. Every semester I am made acutely aware of my shortcomings and limitations in this process. Recognizing my own frustrations as I learn to teach reminds me that hope is an essential element of education. Learning about the divisions in our society and in our classrooms is indeed painful. Students need to know, and be reminded throughout, that the process of learning is worth it—that what they are learning matters. In practical terms, I infuse my curriculum with moments in history when individuals have transcended immediate limitations to create what bell hooks describes as “beloved community.”⁷

My role in creating beloved community in my classroom fundamentally requires a constant awareness of my own position as a person in authority. This entails knowing that, as a nonwhite professor, students of color may scrutinize my words and actions more closely. Sometimes I am so solicitous of the white students’ feelings, and afraid of appearing to blame whites for all of America’s social ills, that I do not correct racist statements that are painful to other students—particularly students of color. I thus privilege the feelings of the white students at the expense of the nonwhite students. During one lecture, I passed over one student’s comment about rap—I thought it was too obvious, and I hoped that one of my students in this very talkative class would address it. But no one said a word. After class ended, two African American students communicated to me that they had found the comment full of offensive stereotypes about blacks. I agreed, and explained that I had hoped that students in the class would speak up. One of the students, a male, explained, “I know that

people probably expected me to respond. But I don't want to always have to be the one to speak up for African American males." I knew what he was talking about. I may consciously choose to identify myself as a woman of color and acknowledge that my critique of structures of inequity comes from that strategically essentialist position. Yet it is quite a different matter when others continually expect or assume that my words or actions, because I am a Chinese American female, represent those of all Asian American females. In this case, I realized that the students were looking to me to wield my professorial authority in response to a comment made by an older white male student. Was part of this because he was older and white? Was there no immediate response to his dismissive comments because we who found the comment questionable thought it was so obvious that surely someone else would say something? As the professor, and perhaps more so as a professor of color, students may look to me to speak out about these issues. I am still learning when to speak and when to challenge my students to speak through my silences.

Negotiating my position of power in the classroom also means being aware of when my identity as a Chinese American and visibly identifiable woman of color will converge with my position of authority in the classroom. During class discussions about race, I may overcompensate out of concern for how my students of color view me. At other times, it is just difficult to know when to say something and when not to. During one class, Abby, a white female student who had been working hard to participate in class even though what we were learning was clearly challenging to her, responded to another student's comment. As she paused mid-comment, I jumped in to define her terminology, sharply stating, "You mean *white* women, right?" The student faltered, looked uncertain, and said "Yes, that's what I meant—white women." Quickly concluding her statement, she fell silent. And having interjected my point, I felt the entire class recoil at my tone of voice, which had come out sharply, perhaps even accusatory, in tone. At that moment I realized that my perceived dual authority in this classroom discussion about race—as a woman of color in addition to being a professor—had lent my words and tone an extra weight that I had not intended. I hesitated. If I acknowledged that I overstepped my authority, would I end up undermining my authority in the classroom? If I did not, what kind of lesson would my students take away from class discussion? I took the easier way out, stopping Abby after class and asking her to come to my office where I apologized to her for interrupting her and for my tone of voice. Surprised and relieved, she expressed her fear of saying the "wrong" thing in

class. I assured her that I could see that, and that I appreciated her efforts in participating. I added that I too was afraid of making mistakes.

Finally, I remind myself what a privilege it is to stand in front of the classroom, and to challenge students to think in new ways and to grapple with new ways of seeing and knowing. I think of Kerry, a young woman in my class who sat in the front row in the seat farthest to the right. A copious note-taker, Kerry rarely spoke up in class. Right before the midterm, as we reviewed concepts from the class during my office hours, I learned that she and her husband lived with her parents, and she initially had thought I was "white-bashing" during the first two weeks of class. But she added, "I'm beginning to realize what you were doing." I heard this with some relief. Even so, she and her classmates visibly struggled with the course materials. She nodded when other students commented that Peggy McIntosh's list of forty-six examples of privileges whites enjoy in American society was overreaching the point.⁸ After the midterm, Kerry stopped by my office just to chat about my expectations for the her final research paper. Then, abruptly, she changed the subject. "You know how you're telling us that the American Dream is a myth?" I nodded. We had been talking about the myth of meritocracy in class, and how it shaped social policy and people's attitudes. Kerry hesitated. "Well, I went home and told my mother what you said, you know, about the American Dream . . . being a myth." She looked at me with a puzzled expression. "And do you know what she said? She said of course it's a myth." As her eyes filled with tears, Kerry explained, "All my life she's told me that I only needed to work hard, all my life she's told me to believe in the American Dream. And now . . . and now she's telling me it's all been a myth." Kerry looked at me with surprise and sadness in her eyes, her voice almost a whisper. "Can you believe that?"

Over the semester, Kerry stopped by to tell me that she had not realized that she, her husband, and her parents together were bringing in a household income just barely over the poverty line. During class she began to speak up more often, asking me to clarify a question or statement, or to write a term on the board. Toward the end of the semester we read Ward Churchill's piece on the racist practices involved in the use of Native Americans as school mascots, and I showed clips from the documentary *In Whose Honor?* about Charlene Teters' attempts to end the use of Chief Illiniwek at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.⁹ A heated discussion ensued about whether the mascot should be removed or not. Some students adamantly argued that to remove the mascot was simply caving into political correctness. A couple of the students

of color, most of whom sat together in class, stated passionately that those sentiments were racist. Other students of color acknowledged that removing the mascot would be expensive for the school and for the local business community—encouraging more students to speak up and question whose rights and whose history should be considered when the university administration made decisions about the mascot. Several students began looking at me nervously, trying to figure out where I stood on this issue, and concerned that I was focusing so much on the economic issues brought up by the administrators in the documentary. At this point, Kerry, who had been listening intently, raised her hand. Making my way through the outstretched hands of students impatiently wanting to speak, I finally called upon her. Kerry stated, "When slavery ended, there was an economic cost, but we ended slavery because it was the right thing to do. Even if it costs money, the university should change the mascot because it is the right thing to do." The class fell momentarily still and we looked at her as she looked at me. Some students nodded in agreement while others frowned, deep in thought. I turned to the class. Did anyone have anything to add to what Kerry had said? Hands rose again, but not as quickly, as students responded to Kerry's comment.

My final strategy for surviving race in the classroom: enjoy moments like these and treasure them. This is why we're here.

NOTES

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- 2 Bianca L. Bernstein and others, "Contributions of Faculty, Student, and Course Characteristics to Student Evaluations. Report on Student Evaluations of Female and Male Faculty at Arizona State University," Faculty Women's Association, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona (May 1995), 27–28.
- 3 Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–123.
- 4 Gloria Yamato, "Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 20–24, 21.
- 5 A study analyzing student expectations of faculty based on gender only suggests this as well: "Perhaps female professors are more adept at displaying wide range of teaching behaviors, which allow them to match their teaching style to the particular demands of students in certain classes. In this case the woman is viewed as somewhat of a performer, using her wide repertoire of interaction skills as needed." Anne Statham, Laurel Richardson, and Judith A. Cook, *Gender and University Teaching: A Negotiated Difference*, SUNY Series in Gender and Society (New York: SUNY State University of New York Press, 1991), 107.

- 6 Cornel West, *Beyond Multiculturalism and Eurocentrism, Volume I: Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993), 3–7.
- 7 bell hooks, "Beloved Community: A World without Racism," *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995), 263–272.
- 8 Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 1st edition, ed. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 76–86.
- 9 Ward Churchill, "Crimes Against Humanity," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 3rd edition, ed. Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 413–420; and *In Whose Honor?* (Champaign, Ill.: Jay Rosen-stein, 1996).

SHARON PACKER

THE COLORBLIND CYBERCLASS: MYTH AND FACT

FROM AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TO THE COLORBLIND CYBERCLASS

For those of us who came of age in the 1960s, it is impossible to forget the intensity of that era. School desegregation, civil rights legislation, the Birmingham church bombing, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, and subsequent civil unrest literally changed the complexion of that decade, and of all the decades to follow. America's complacency about race was challenged, more than it had been since the Civil War. The affirmative action policies put into place were just footnotes to the many amazing race-related events that altered our lives.

Affirmative action was supposed to be a short-term, stop-gap remedy that would make itself obsolete after it reversed the rabid racial inequities in the United States. Yet affirmative action did not solve the disparities in the American educational system, and the "race issue" did not disappear in America.

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This essay traces the roots of racial utopian dreams for cyberclasses and contrasts those dreams with the reality Packer has observed in teaching eight different psychology courses online. Packer notes a division between students who volunteer racial information in cyberclass discussions and those who do not. Her essay suggests that the difference between the two groups, which affects student participation and involvement, must be incorporated into the current paradigm for cyberclasses.

Some critics claimed that affirmative action created different problems for several other ethnic groups, without necessarily helping those whom it was intended to help the most. The pros and cons of affirmative action remain complex, and are still being debated today in the courts as much as in the classroom.

This essay is concerned with another landmark invention—one that arrived about a quarter-century later, after cyberspace and the Internet information age came into being. Just as affirmative action was breathing its last breath, new technology paved the way for online college classes. These classes could be delivered to an invisible, ether-based audience, and so could be "colorblind" in the truest sense of the word—or so it seemed. This new and innovative "colorblind cyberclass" could conceivably cure pre-existing race-based economic and educational inequities.

The concept of the colorblind cyberclass rode on the shoulders of an unbridled cyberutopian belief system. Faith was placed in a cyberspace-based, semiutopian society. Early enthusiasts foresaw the end of national boundaries and personal property, thanks to this seamless and shared cyberspace that existed everywhere and nowhere. In cyberspace all "cybernauts" could coexist peacefully—exchanging information, cooperating with international and inter-university research projects, and establishing unprecedented personal ties, all because they could bypass time zones, put aside passports, avoid both real baggage and personal baggage. Freed of the constraints of the material body, people would embrace and accept one another for whom they really were, rather than for what they represented through their physical form.

Equally importantly, the colorblind cyberclass could rationalize and legitimize a product that promised remarkable profits for educational entrepreneurs. By focusing on the potential social benefits of cyberclass, these developing online educational enterprises could enlist popular support for their efforts to colonize cyberspace, and to stake their claims in the natural resources of this new frontier. The colorblind cyberclass was a wonderful selling point for a product that already existed.

Eradicating racial differences was not, however, the stimulus for creating the cyberclass. The colorblindness was accidental rather than intentional. Because of the technical limitations of the early Internet, early cyberclasses could not be anything other than colorblind; there was no way to add an image or a photo or a sound clip to the text. The colorblind cyberclass thus reflected the realities of the Internet at the time it was developed.



PHOTO: GEORGE HIGHAM

The first cyberclasses in the early 1990's were completely text-bound, and based on the DOS operating system. They didn't have sound or image, and couldn't even connect to other parts of the Internet. The class was a series of virtual blackboards, composited from written material provided by professor and students. Even when cyberclasses moved to the more user-friendly Windows system, they often crashed from overload. As a result, most early users learned to make do with a bare-bones system that would stay up and running. They avoided the havoc that could result from adding space-gobbling image files to cranky old computers.

Deprived of the ability to engineer cyberspace to meet social specifications, academicians did the next best thing: hypothesized. We prognosticated about the potentials and the pitfalls of conducting college classes online, just as social scientists and financial analysts speculated about all other aspects of cyberspace.¹ These early predictions were based on hope and hype, and reflected our own feelings more than proven fact. Since most academicians sincerely believed in the importance of equal educational opportunities for all, many devised facile explanations about the ways that cyberspace could facilitate these foreseeable goals.

It was said that everyone would really have equal opportunities to a college education, once students and professors "dematerialized" and "disembodied" in cyberspace in true sci-fi fashion. Once we were freed of the physical reality of race—and other potentially damning aspects of the physical personae such as gender, age, appearance, or disability—we would be free to be ourselves, and to be accepted for ourselves. Because racial discrimination had wrought so much destruction in the past, it was automatically assumed that shedding racial identity would be to everyone's advantage.

Few people considered the fact that psychological identities develop around one's physical persona, and that this persona includes race, among other things. Few people considered the fact that complex intellectual, artistic, political, and philosophical positions accrue around race, and that dismissing its existence could simultaneously dismiss the importance of these positions. Even fewer people expected that "erasing" race could put students of color at a disadvantage: adopting an "invisible" identity in cyberspace enforced the unspoken expectations that the standard or default race of unseen cyberstudents is white.

Admittedly, not everyone was enthusiastic about the college cyberclass. There were nay-sayers who predicted that online college classes would actu-

ally impede equal access to higher education, because computers were still out of reach to disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. They worried that the Internet would widen the racial divide by enhancing educational opportunities for students who could afford personal computers, who attended expensive private schools with high-tech equipment, or who lived in affluent public school districts with subsidized classroom or library computers. Cyberclasses would only continue to privilege the already advantaged without doing anything to change the station of those who needed the innovation most.

It wasn't long before the emphasis on economics, as opposed to social engineering, grew. Cybercollege was a relatively late arrival in the Internet arena, and by the time it did appear much of the debate about cyberspace had turned from morals to money. Speculation about the Internet's ability to deliver college classes online grew among the business community once efforts to expand markets for this brave new technology were underway. Many of the university professors who opposed the proposed cyberclasses were also motivated by individual economic interests, and by their fears of losing their hard-won lecturing livelihood. Prodded by anxiety over their already tenuous job security, traditional professors tended to downplay the advantages of cyberclasses. They published oppositional articles in publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Lingua Franca*.

The most outspoken opinions appeared at the peak of the "high-tech bubble," when Internet stocks rose to unprecedented peaks and fortunes were made (and often later lost). As virtually everyone took note of the "new economy" brought on by rising technology stocks, people suddenly forgot their dewy-eyed plans to deliver free online information. They focused on the profit potential of cyberclasses instead.² This economic enthusiasm obscured the fact that financial interests were not—and never were—the sole predictors of personal attitudes toward technology. When studies revealed that even affluent African Americans were less likely to own and use a computer than their white economic counterparts, most people were surprised.

A new expression was coined to describe this unequal access to and unequal enthusiasm about the Internet: The phenomenon came to be known as the "digital divide." Now that this syndrome had a name, it was time to investigate the reasons behind it and to see what could be done or what should be done about this new manifestation of race-based inequality. It was in this climate that my research study of racial revelation in the colorblind cyberclass began. As a psychiatrist who had taught over a dozen college classes online

through a pioneering program at the New School for Social Research, I was particularly interested in the cultural and psychological influences of Internet use, and had already collected years of data. I had reason to believe that the myth of the colorblind cyberclass did not measure up to fact.

COMPARING CYBERCLASSES TO CORRESPONDENCE COURSES

When cyberclasses began in earnest in the mid-1990s, the uninited assumed that computer-based classes would be a high-tech equivalent of traditional correspondence courses. Because human beings imagine uncharted territory in familiar terms, people conjured up images of dreadfully dull lectures delivered by a puppet-like professor who spoke to students through the television. It was assumed that quizzes would be mailed out and term papers completed through the mail, and that no one, not even the professor, could identify anything about anyone in class—except, perhaps, their signatures on their term papers and canceled checks.

Yet the cybercampus has next to nothing in common with the static “TV College.” It shares even less with the laboriously hand-delivered lectures of correspondence schools. What ultimately separates the cyberclass from these other modes of off-site class delivery is its interactivity. This interactivity is even more impressive than its ability to enhance lectures by linking to an infinite number of Internet sites and by accessing libraries online, worldwide.

What’s more, an asynchronous cyberclass allows students and teachers to post lectures and responses on their own time, rather than during “real time.” These postings appear on a virtual blackboard, that is accessible twenty-four hours a day, read by each participant independently at a time and place that is convenient. There is no concern about people talking out of turn, because everyone can post at will. No one needs to worry that two people speaking simultaneously will drown out each other’s voice, because printouts of written text display both people’s opinions without depending upon sound. This asynchronous interactivity permits unlimited opportunities for student–student and student–teacher interchange, whereas an onsite class is limited by real-life concerns about acoustics and decorum.

Student participation in a cyberclass is essential to the success of the course, since students and teachers create a virtual classroom out of a vacuum as they write their lectures and their responses, sitting in separate spaces and

logging on from their own computers without seeing another soul. They can use hypertext to make their postings appear bigger, or bolder, or in italics, and they can add emoticons to substitute for unseen facial expressions. They can add weblinks to their responses. But they cannot appear in the flesh, at least not yet. More recent versions of online classes permit the posting of personal photographs, and aspire to enliven classes through the use of personal videocams that produce indistinct images, like those in convenience store surveillance systems. But, by and large, the virtual environment of the cyberclass is completely distinct from all existing models of communication, and defies comparison to current systems.

It should be noted that each cyberclass is more or less unique, and reflects the predilections of the professor and the attitude of the class. Some universities standardize cyberclasses, while other universities allow more latitude in design and implementation. Some classes encourage more interactivity than others, and some professors exercise their own creative capabilities. Some instructors orchestrate more (or less) interactivity than others. Different subject matters lend themselves to different types of presentations online, just as they do onsite.³

Because the cyberclass transcends real space and real time, it can include students from far-flung places. More and more, cyberclasses include international students, although these international students must live in relatively developed nations with reliable Internet connections. When international students identify the place they log on from, everyone is automatically aware of a diversity of “place.” It is assumed that students realize that some places are more likely to be populated by specific “races.” Students have the option of posting an ethnic, racial, religious, national, linguistic, or any other kind of description of themselves in their introductions, although in practice next to no one identifies him or herself by race without first alluding to place.

Although physical persona ceases to exist in cyberspace, each student’s name appears above his or her posting. Because many surnames as well as given names have ethnic identifiers, and because most names are gender-specific, a great many people inadvertently broadcast their ethnic, racial, national, or gender identities without directly specifying them. At the same time, people of mixed ethnic ancestry run the risk of being counted as members of groups that they do not identify with.

Some people may be comfortable with this totally disembodied existence, but most people prefer to retain some semblance of earthly reality and strive

to attain a sense of presence in this strange place we call cyberspace. They do this by describing themselves in word, if not in image. Furthermore, in order to overcome the anonymity and sterility of a potentially alienating and dehumanizing environment, most cyberclasses start with personal introductions that are more extensive than ordinarily occur in onsite classes. These introductions make for more cordial relationships among students, facilitate discussions, and often lead to long-lasting friendships outside of class. More immediately, students' introductions appear to predict their participation during the course, and often correlate with their interest in joining the class. It is up to the instructor to set the tone for these introductions, and it is entirely conceivable that an instructor who states an identity in terms of race would elicit similar descriptions by students.

EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF CYBERCLASS

The consensus was that race would cease to exist once cyberclass arrived. Such expectations were established in part by the early armchair theorists, and were embellished by sensationalistic reports about people who switched gender identities online and who misrepresented themselves in any number of other ways.⁴ Some of these expectations were seeded by films that were fashionable around 1950, such as Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), *Imitation of Life* (1959 remake), or *I Passed for White* (1960), which depicted light-skinned black women who "pass" when the opportunity arises. Yet hands-on experience proved that these preconditioned expectations were unfounded.

Students with ethnic first or last names invariably referred to their origins in class, emails, or term papers. Although students in my own cyberclasses did not initially allude to their race (or their physical appearance, for that matter), this changed somewhat when the technology permitted the posting of photos. At that time, some students of color posted personal photographs in their introductions. (One never knows how many students of color did not post photos of themselves, nor does one know if the posted photos were authentic.) Students who identified themselves by national or linguistic group—and who disclosed their identities through place rather than race—did not post photos or refer to their race, but spoke freely about the specialness of their own communities. This pattern repeated itself, in class after class after class, and even in faculty forums.

It was impossible not to react to this pattern. Perhaps these photo postings were political ploys intended to elicit response, and preplanned by special

interest or lobbying groups. Or, these selective disclosures could be part of someone's social science study and a clever way to collect data about online reactions to race. But, presuming that these postings were genuine (and, indeed, they turned out to be), this seemed to be a way to express discomfort about erasing race entirely and with being forced to adopt an invisible online identity. Upon questioning, students stated that people presume that someone is white unless they specifically state otherwise. Such students said that they needed to communicate that they were not what they were presumed to be.

The only other people besides people of color who posted their photographs were actors, singers, models, and performers, who depend upon physical appearance to ply their trade, and who adopt a "persona" when they go on stage, and middle-aged, married men who hinted that they were on the move, and who had reason to emphasize their physicality. What was most curious was that students of color who had been silent before posting their photos suddenly became more interactive in class. There seemed to be something liberating about reuniting with one's physical form and with revealing who one really is, even if such revelation exposed someone as being different from the presumed norm.

Conversely, those students with ethnic names or those students who identified their heritage by place or religion (rather than race), tended to be interactive from the start. They made references to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and seemed to be especially energetic when asked to elicit information from parents and grandparents and community members for field projects and other class assignments. There seemed to be a clear-cut correlation between racial revelation (and any other kind of revelation of group identity) and comfort in participating in an otherwise invisible cyberclass.

After witnessing the way that some students were struck silent after shedding such physical identifiers, and then hearing them regain their voices, after posting their photos, it became more and more conceivable to me that race functions as more than just the external persona or mask worn by actors. In classical Greek theater, actors donned these masks before performing on stage. The audience identified the actors through these personae, and the actors themselves abandoned their own internal identities (or their "animae," to use Jungian terms) as they performed for the public through the aid of these personae.⁵

It was curious that actors and persons of color were the two groups who posted their photos in a place where everyone could readily remain invisible. Actors willingly accept and specifically seek out the imposition of an alternate

and ascribed identity, whereas persons of color and other minorities have historically had not a choice about adapting to an identity that is ascribed by outsiders (and often by hostile outsiders, at that).⁶

There was a possibility that persons of color were just playing a role, like actors, or like the black-faced minstrels that Spike Lee parodied in his film *Bamboozled* (2000). But the patterns of behavior seen in the cyberclass implied that assigned and self-perceived racial identity are far more closely connected in many people, and that many people of color do not experience the dissonance between one's external racial persona and one's internal anima—which people of noncolor may presume. Perhaps the cyberspace atmosphere, which deprives people of the opportunity to project their racial or ethnic persona automatically could be suffocating the anima inside and forcing people to swim to the surface, to gasp for air, by posting their personal photos.

In these early cyberclasses it was unclear if racial revelation was important to everyone, or if there was something unique about the individuals who chose to reveal their race online before they felt free to "speak" in cyberclass. It was equally unclear as to whether these effects were nothing more than reactions to my own unstated issues with race and related matters. Before proceeding further, it was incumbent upon me to investigate my own attitudes, to see how they impacted upon class.

JEWIS AND GENES

As is true for anyone, my own life experiences molded my approach toward racial revelation and concealment. As a Jew, and as a psychiatrist, I was well aware that people often have complex, sometimes hidden identities that affect the most minute aspects of daily functioning—and that would certainly be expected to come to the fore in cyberclass.

In spite of this awareness I was unprepared for my own reactions, and for that sudden moment of self-consciousness in a disembodied state in cyberspace. I knew that not everyone acclimates to cyberclass at the same speed, and I also knew that virtually every instructor and every student struggles to find an own online voice, before one can think-type almost automatically, so that conversations flow effortlessly.

It just so happened that this first cyberclass happened to be about the psychology of religion, and invoked the issue of race automatically. Much to my surprise, not one of the students in this first class was Jewish, even though the

university was based in heavily Jewish New York City. Many were from the South, and often from rural regions where past Klan activities contributed to their reputations for being unwelcoming to Jews. (Two students eventually disclosed their Jewish roots; one had intermarried and converted to Christianity, while another had an estranged Jewish grandparent.)

Yet there I was in cyberclass, a Jew who had inherited a nonethnic surname, who could theoretically pass as a Gentile in such an environment were I not so uncomfortable with such inauthenticity, and were my personal identity and intellectual pursuits not so intertwined with my Jewish roots. This inauthenticity became an issue, because I was a member of a minority religion in a class about religion, and I, as the instructor, was present to assume a position of authority. To compound matters further, much of my base of information about the psychology of religion derived from research studies conducted about Judaism. I also had a much more extensive Jewish education than many Jews my age.

I had two choices: I could allow students to assume that I was someone I was not, and therefore forfeit the opportunity to share my religion-specific research (which was the reason I was running this class in the first place). Or I could reveal my religion and acknowledge my minority status, and seize the opportunity to showcase my solid—but circumscribed—base of information. To be fair, my choice was already made for me, because my resume was on display and students were well-aware of my research interests—and of my ethnic-specific education—before signing up for the class. Still, I was surprised by my own trepidations at facing a class of "others," and I was even more surprised by the relief I felt after addressing this issue directly and encouraging students to share their own experiences and areas of expertise.

This issue alone would have sufficed to make me wonder about ways that people of varied races react in cyberclasses where everyone is invisible, but where many people claim to "see" their classmates as they read their words. But there was an even stronger reason why I could not forget the concept of race and the racial implications of "Jewishness." Being Jewish today means practicing the religion, being born to Jewish parents, or participating in various ethnic rites. But these associations are a relatively recent switch from much more searing racial implications that peaked some sixty years ago.

Having been born shortly after the end of the Second World War, shortly after the Holocaust was committed, I was acutely aware of the concept of race and of the "Jewish race" in particular. Jews were exterminated by Hitler not

because of their religion but because of their "race"—specifically, because they were deemed to be an undesirable and polluting race, one that could be compared to vermin and exterminated just as swiftly. Racial constructs were a reality, an unavoidable reality, that meant the difference between life and death. It was irrelevant whether or not this concept of race held up to scientific scrutiny; the damage from the Nazis' spurious race science was already done, and could not be undone even after the war. True, this concern with race was not the same as the racial concerns of contemporary America, but it was a cause for concern for *me* nonetheless. The expression "a member of the Jewish race" was still heard in the 1950s. The epithet gradually disappeared, after prodding by Jewish groups and after the civil rights era imprinted the concepts of "black" and "white" race on the collective American consciousness.

In spite of this alleged racial heritage of Jews, which continues to be debated in scientific circles to this day, it was difficult to identify a Jew with certainty were one to rely upon appearance alone.⁷ Consequently, Hitler required Jews to wear a yellow star on their lapels. That way, even "mischlinge" or "mixed-race" people who had intermarried with Jews or who did not possess the caricatured facial features of "stereotypical" Jews could also be counted. They, too, could be confined to ghettos and conscripted to concentration camps. By inventing the yellow star, the Nazis dispensed with imaginary medieval stereotypes of Jews, which portrayed them as having horns and hidden tails, resembling the Devil and thus embodying evil incarnate.⁸

Frantz Fanon, the Caribbean-born psychiatrist who went on to become the most influential voice in pan-Africanism, wrote about the implications of this yellow star (and about the implications of the veil donned by Algerian female freedom fighters as well). In his books *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon made a point of distinguishing this externally identified "reversible race" of the Jews from the "irreversible race" of most African peoples. Fanon also emphasized the significance of speech and language, in identifying Creoles of mixed race who were common in his native Martinique.⁹ One wonders what Fanon would have said had he lived to see the creation of cyberspace, where people type the same way that they talk and where nuances of ethnic, racial, class, and social identity manifest themselves even in the utter absence of the physical persona or audible speech.

It was revealing to see how much my concerns about racial revelation in the colorblind cyberclass were informed by Fanon's theories of racial determinism.¹⁰ It also made me wonder if my own long-standing discomfort with

racial classifications that congealed in the United States in the late 1960s was impacting on my cyberclass. It was no new revelation to me that I did not identify with any of the racial categories imposed around 1970, even though I theoretically fit into the rubric of "white." But I identified myself as a Jew, and, like many American ethnics, resented being pigeonholed as either black or white just so I could be counted neatly in a census or in affirmative action statistics. Because I, as the instructor, could set an example for the students to follow, when I chose *not* to describe myself in terms of a race, I could be the one who was inadvertently closing off opportunities to students for revelation.

PROJECTING FROM THE PERSONAL

This introspection about the distinction between assigned identity and accepted identity made me more and more concerned about the reactions of minority students, who could conceivably feel as uncomfortable in a place that did not directly address race as I did in a place that did not address religious or ethnic origin. Fortunately, I was able to conduct detailed interviews of student and professor volunteers. Much to my surprise, I found that most people did not even think about race in cyberspace, and that many people who offered an opinion often conducted themselves in a way that contradicted their stated opinions.

Anthropology students, students who lived in racially torn cities, and German exchange students were all acutely aware of race, as were American students of color, while most others had no such concerns. Asian Americans were often outspoken on this subject and stated repeatedly that they were "overlooked" and lumped with whites. People who were intermarried, or who were children of intermarriages, or who held nonmajority sexual preferences, were also interested in these issues. Not surprisingly, professors who taught courses on European languages, literature, or history stated that such issues were irrelevant, whereas American literature instructors who stressed inclusiveness offered many useful anecdotes. Visual artists, who dealt with imagery, voiced intense interest.

Although this project has not reached its end, it is already apparent that the racial concerns of the 1990s are not the same as the concerns of the sixties. The issues that vexed the twentieth century are different from the issues of the twenty-first century. That conclusion should not be surprising, considering that everything evolves over time, including concerns about race and identity. The

most recent census report in 2000 confirmed just how much racial identity has changed since the institution of affirmative action. Twice as many people consider themselves to be of mixed race as in 1970, and fewer and fewer young people feel themselves constrained by race.

Perhaps our real discomfort in addressing race in the cyberclass stems from the fact that our suppositions about race have not kept pace with changing demographics, social practices, and options, and with changes in the world in general. Our vision is bound to be blurred if we try to view a new phenomenon such as a cyberclass through the lens of the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps we are simply feeling the pain of trying to force this procrustean fit. Perhaps the distinction between black and white and yellow and red will become as outmoded as the distinctions made between Jewish and Gentile some sixty years earlier. The introduction of something totally new, such as the cyberclass, is possibly what is needed to signal the end of the old era, and to remind us that it is time to redefine identities that were constructed to meet the needs of three decades past. As essential as this reconstruction is, it has yet to be completed. Some would say that it has not even been sincerely attempted. Either way, it is doubtful that it will be accomplished if universities continue to maintain unwavering faith in the myth of the colorblind cyberclass, without questioning if this medium meets its own goals—or society's greater goals.

NOTES

- 1 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1995), 210–232.
- 2 Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), 1–37.
- 3 Susan Ko and Steve Rosen, *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 218–234.
- 4 Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 255–269.
- 5 Carl Gustav Jung, the controversial psychoanalyst who incorporated wisdom from Greek myth and theater into his psychoanalytical theories, emphasized the distinction between a person's public "persona" and that person's private, hidden sense of self, the "anima."
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 111–141.
- 7 Hillel Halkin, "Wandering Jews and their Genes," *Commentary* 10, no. 2 (September 2000), 54–61, takes up the issue of racial background.
- 8 John Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 13–57.
- 9 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 157–163, 173, 180–182.
- 10 Fanon's theories fueled the African American identity movements of the 1960s.