

INTRODUCTION:

RACE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

The essays in this collection come straight from the heart. Accepting the challenge to make a public statement on pedagogy and race, our contributors took the risk of investing themselves in these pieces. Every one of these essays speaks powerfully and directly about often-painful personal experiences in the classroom; every one of them also puts those experiences in a wider political context. While a significant portion of university and college faculty members manage to ignore race in their teaching, contributors to this collection consider this option undesirable, if not impossible. As socially committed educators we believe that teaching responsibly, in the humanities as well as in other academic disciplines, requires an honest and searching examination of race.¹ The history of the United States has been molded by race, with the discourse of race and racism too seldom examined in popular culture or in the academy. Indeed, race—which shapes all of our lives—is generally thought to be the special province of specific academic programs, which are themselves usually relegated to the margins of the academy and easily avoided by students as well as faculty members.

Some of our contributors teach courses that focus on race, but most do not. Instead, the majority teach traditionally titled courses—American literature, composition, introduction to sociology, literary theory, curriculum theories, biology, psychology and religion, introduction to political science—but recognize the centrality of race in all disciplines, including those that seem unrelated to racial issues. Like many talented and dedicated educators, both veterans and novices, our writers struggle with race in the classroom on a daily basis, a struggle that constitutes a crisis in higher education.

Despite the spurious public consensus among the white majority that racism is an artifact of the past and that people of color have benefited all too much from affirmative action, a visit to almost any college or university campus should swiftly suggest a different story. Most postsecondary institutions

are visibly white, whether one considers the student body, faculty, or administration. The only areas of campus life in which people of color achieve critical mass are in the clerical and secretarial ranks and in service and maintenance work. In both of these areas, people of color are overrepresented. For instance, 53,433 blacks were employed as service and maintenance workers in colleges and universities in 1997, compared with 99,997 whites in the same positions—numbers that are, of course, considerably out of proportion to the general population.² Far more whites were faculty members than were service and maintenance or clerical and secretarial workers in that year, a situation precisely reversed for every other racial category tracked by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Based on these statistics and judging by physical appearance alone, a student encountering a middle-aged white person on campus could logically assume he or she is a professor; that same student encountering a middle-aged person of color could logically assume he or she is not a faculty member but a member of the support staff. The paucity of faculty of color on most college campuses reinforces the racist tautology that several of our contributors describe: professors are white, Dr. X is not white, therefore Dr. X is not a professor.

Nevertheless, the great majority of faculty polled by the *Chronicle* in 1998–1999 (86.7 percent) asserted that faculty of color at their home institutions were treated fairly and only a small number (9.8 percent) reported campus racial conflict.³ Although the *Chronicle* did not track responses by race, we have to assume that the majority of those claiming fair treatment for faculty of color are white, a conclusion bolstered by the interesting coincidence that roughly 86.6 percent of all faculty are white.

Nationwide, the statistics on postsecondary education are bleak. In 1997, the most recent year for which data are available, only 13.4 percent of all faculty were people of color, with the great majority of that tiny group clustered in the non-tenurable ranks of instructors and lecturers.⁴ Although blacks constitute roughly 12 percent of this country's population, only 4.9 percent of all faculty are black. The statistics are even grimmer for Latinos and Latinas, who represent approximately 9 percent of the U.S. population, but only 2.6 percent of all faculty. Americans of Asian descent and American Indians are similarly underrepresented in higher education. Further, many colleges and universities have no tenured ethnic minority faculty. A 1999 *Business Week Online* article titled "A Dearth of Minority Faculty" includes a table showing that twenty-three of the nation's top sixty-one schools have zero tenured faculty of color, with

most of the remaining thirty-eight having just one or two each.⁵ The student population tends to be just slightly less white than the faculty.⁶ Whites dominate in all but a few postsecondary institutions—most of them historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)—which often means that most classes of twenty to thirty students will have, at best, just one or two students of color, and many will be entirely white. These facts are worth bearing in mind when considering the issue of race in the college classroom, as they constitute the context in which our struggles continue.

Although the twenty-five essays collected here reflect so many shared concerns that any thematic arrangement may seem artificial, even arbitrary, for the sake of greater reading ease we have grouped them into three broad categories according to what seem to us the individual essays' most salient themes: authority and (il)legitimacy, rewards and punishments, and transformative practices. Some of our contributors have decades of teaching experience, while others are graduate students and new Ph.D.s just entering the profession. We teach in every region of the country and at many different types of institutions. Readers are sure to find some element of their own experience reflected here.

In publishing this volume, our central hope is to open a conversation about how race structures all of our classrooms and how we—individually and collectively—can dismantle that structure to make way for a new, nonracist academic environment. We see the work that our contributors and others are doing as part of the larger ongoing project of eradicating racism in society as a whole, and hope that the essays collected here spark conversations and actions that further this most important cause.

NOTES

- 1 We use the term "race" while fully aware that it is a social and political construction, not a biological reality. We have opted to dispense with the use of quotation marks around the term, solely in the interest of readability.
- 2 *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, <http://www.chronicle.merit.edu/weekly/almanac/2001/nation/0102802.htm>.
- 3 <http://www.chronicle.merit.edu/weekly/almanac/2001/nation/0102901.htm>.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1997 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, "Fall Staff Survey" (IPEDS-S:1997), at <http://nces.ed.gov/quicktables>.
- 5 http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_25/b3634130.htm?scriptFramed#top.
- 6 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1997 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, "Fall Enrollment Survey" (IPEDS-EF:1997), at <http://nces.ed.gov/quicktables>.

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

"Data from interviews with minority women teachers, surveys of professors, and evaluations by students indicated that the predominantly white classroom with a minority teacher was a contested terrain, and some students struggled to reproduce society's systems of inequality."¹ This brief statement from the abstract for a December 1999 journal article "When the 'Other' Is the Teacher: Implications of Teacher Diversity in Higher Education" supports the claims of faculty of color included in this volume. Unfortunately, as yet there is no full-scale study available to substantiate the largely anecdotal accounts of the effects of racism on teaching evaluations. Because extant studies on course evaluations have not accounted for race and racism in relation to either the instructor's subject position or course content, we believe that the essays in the present volume provide much-needed insight on the subject. When it comes to the responsibility of teaching race, the stakes are high.

Inevitably, addressing race in the classroom makes students—and at times professors—uncomfortable. While we can theorize that discomfort is an integral part of learning, when it comes time for course evaluations students often recall that they were made to feel uncomfortable. If a "good" course is equated with comfort, as less mature students often assume, then professors who cause discomfort are likely to receive lower ratings. If, in addition to addressing race in the classroom, the professor has "high" standards, gives weekly written assignments, teaches subjects that always include race and ethnicity, has an accent, looks "foreign," is visibly nonwhite, is a youngish and/or petite female—any or all of the above—then student evaluations of this professor are likely to be lower than the mean. The significance of this situation is that, according to one professor and former department chair, "In recent years, student evaluations included in faculty dossiers have become a vital element in promotion-and-tenure cases: one thoughtless or flippant comment can ruin a promising career."²

The use of standardized evaluations for courses that inherently trigger student discomfort is unjust if not discriminatory. In a persistently racist society, race is the

bottom line when it comes to resistance from students. Professors who embody diversity or multiculturalism—any deviance from the Anglo-Saxon “norm”—are likely to take the brunt of student unease. A system for evaluating teaching that has not accounted for this crucial factor is, in fact, invalid and counterproductive. Furthermore, from the essays included here it is obvious that white faculty who teach race-related courses can also be “punished” through course evaluations. For one thing, students with white-skin privilege often expect white professors to reinforce that privilege by catering to their level of comfort. Thus, white professors whose pedagogy addresses racial issues would seem to be siding with the enemy. In addition, white male professors who teach African American or Native American literature, for example, risk being equated with the “oppressor” who is metaphorically labeled “the white man.” Faculty teaching such courses who get consistently high evaluations must then suspect that their pedagogical approach is somehow faulty because they made the students too comfortable. The reliance on standardized course evaluations in these situations hardly determines the effectiveness of the course or the instructor. High ratings might simply show that the professor did not push hard enough.

The most difficult aspect of addressing racial issues in college courses is the sense of isolation the instructor is likely to experience. Considering how many colleagues on the faculty manage to avoid race in their teaching—rationalizing that it is not their problem—the minority of individuals who do accept the challenge are often marginalized. Colleagues and administrators who learn about conflict in a particular classroom frequently equate this with poor teaching. Because they themselves do not address difficult subjects like race and racism, they don’t recognize classroom conflict as a potentially transformative praxis. To them, course ratings that are “lower than the mean” explain the classroom commotion they heard about. They pass on such assessments of their maverick colleague to the administrators who, in turn, can use the low scores against the professor when it comes to tenure, promotion, and merit reviews.

Assuming that those of us who address racial issues in our courses are not martyrs or masochists, why do we do this? The short answer is, we still believe in education—and true education requires an open and honest examination of race. Of course, faculty of color may not have the option of evading race. One contributor notes, for example, that students dropped his course in Spanish after they saw that the professor was black. Many of us continue our “front-line” teaching to help combat such ignorance. Our reward is to see young people begin to think and act for themselves—to no longer be intimidated by the taboo subject of race. Having

experienced the potential for social change in our classrooms, we practice a pedagogy of hope.

NOTES

- 1 Lucila Vargas, “When the ‘Other’ Is the Teacher: Implications of Teacher Diversity in Higher Education,” *Urban Review*, 31:4 (December 1999), 359–383.
- 2 Douglas Hill, “What Students Can Teach Professors: Reading Between the Lines of Evaluations,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 16, 2001), B5.

AUTHORITY AND (IL)LEGITIMACY

While scientists have concluded that humans constitute one race, in the United States people think and act as if we were made up of different and incompatible races. The most visible marker of this assumed difference is physical appearance—which often boils down to the color of a person's skin. In the American educational system, the notion that “white is right” belies the purported goals of democratic, egalitarian pedagogy. A professor's race, in addition to racial issues in both course content and classroom student configuration, has a direct impact on the outcome of a course. With the recognition of multiculturalism in recent years, studies on “diverse” classrooms are now available. However, such studies tend to focus on the increasingly mixed student populations that professors are likely to encounter in the classroom, while the professor's racial identity—a large part of his or her “subject position”—is rarely addressed. One possible reason for this oversight is that professors are presumed to be “white.” Since white is normative and un-raced, the professor's race does not enter the picture.

Whiteness studies in the past decade have been challenging this unexamined assumption. If we relate to one another as if we were different races, the studies contend, then white is also a race. Privileging white skin over black, brown, red, or yellow is racist. With the ingrained mindset of equating whiteness with legitimate authority in the classroom, students tend to respond to nonwhite professors with a variety of inappropriate emotions. Several of our contributors point out that, as faculty of color, their very presence creates havoc in the classroom. Students demonstrate their confusion and resentment—emotions triggered by what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance” derived from their social conditioning—by engaging in passive-aggressive power struggles with the professor. With the complexities of race and racism, white feminist theories of the de-centered classroom provide no easy solutions for professors of color.

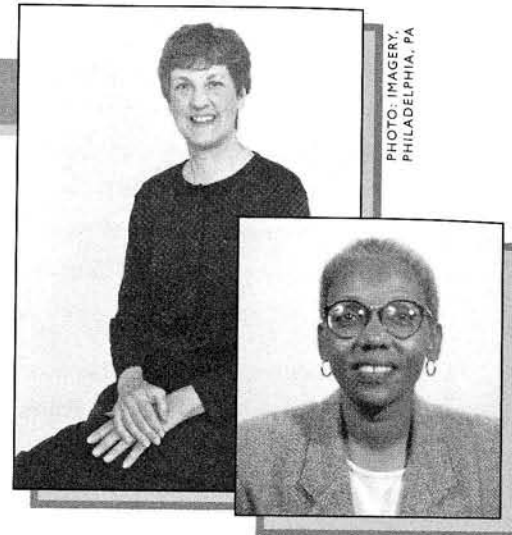
Professorial authority is an especially thorny issue in the multicultural classroom—in courses where race and ethnicity are necessarily foregrounded. As the

essays in this volume attest, student discomfort with addressing racial issues found in course materials—whether in an ethnic novel, a documentary film, or a scientific study on the fallacy of race—often translates into challenging the instructor's authority in and out of the classroom. In a hierarchical structure based on race and gender, for example, the authority to teach African American studies moves in descending order from visibly black male to black female, then visibly white female to white male. An Asian American or Native American of either gender would be suspect. Students accept black instructors for this course since it is supposed to be black, and white instructors due to the continued assumption of white-skinned legitimacy in education. The nonblack, nonwhite professor is automatically illegitimate in such a course. The equation of an instructor's skin color with what she or he can legitimately teach is problematic. That a white professor is acceptable while a nonblack, nonwhite professor is not is equally problematic. The unspoken understanding that ethnically identified courses are best served by a proper race/ethnic match (although whites are often exempt from this requirement)—while nonethnic courses are best served by white faculty—is itself a statement of institutional racism.

Item no. 4

KAREN ELIAS
JUDITH C. JONES

TWO VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES: A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE IN THE CLASSROOM



JUDITH: You and I have had some wonderful conversations about our experiences teaching race in college classrooms, so I'm pleased that we have this opportunity to document some of our thinking on this matter, including an exploration of how the dynamics of race play out differently for a teacher of European heritage (you) and a teacher of African heritage (me).

KAREN: I've appreciated so much the opportunity to share our experiences. Before we get to the important differences you mention, it might be helpful to start with the context within which we work. As teachers in mainstream U.S. colleges, we've both found that when we introduce issues of race in our classrooms, we do so in predominantly white environments.

JUDITH: Yes. For example, at Philadelphia University where we are both now teaching, the learners are drawn for the most part from the white population in

KAREN ELIAS became deeply committed to bringing anti-racist work to the classroom after attending the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference, "Women Confront Racism." She has taught at Purdue University, SUNY Oswego, Lock Haven University, and, most recently, Philadelphia University.

JUDITH C. JONES has years of experience facilitating diversity work in and out of the classroom. She grew up in a black working class community in Philadelphia. Jones earned her Ph.D. in political science at Atlanta University; she has taught at Central State University, Pennsylvania State University, and Philadelphia University.

A white professor and a black professor teaching at the same predominantly white university, Elias and Jones have faced different challenges to their authority. Their essay, a dialogue on race and authority in the college classroom, focuses on their shared interest in a racially aware pedagogy.

and around Philadelphia. There are very few students of African heritage or other people of color in a typical classroom. And of course economic class is another important factor here. Using socioeconomic status as the standard, the majority of our students would be defined as “mainstream.” But I’ve noticed an interesting difference. White students from women’s studies programs bring an awareness of diversity that distinguishes them from white students without similar academic exposure.

KAREN: I find that most white students have had little contact with people of color prior to coming to college. When I ask Beverly Tatum’s question, “How many of you grew up in neighborhoods where most of the people were from the same racial group as your own?” almost all of them raise their hands.¹ As a result, what little they know about people of color has been derived from media-generated stereotypes. But it’s good to note, as we characterize “white students,” that there are some important exceptions. I wonder if we could describe the typical learning environment by examining ways traditionally educated white students are likely to respond—at least at first—to race as a central topic of discussion.

JUDITH: When I first started teaching courses focused on diversity, I became immediately aware of what I now know is resistance. There was palpable resistance to talking about race.

KAREN: I remember one of my white students actually calling out in class at one point, “Don’t go there!” Though their perspective is certainly not monolithic, white students are likely to inhabit a subject position that makes it hard for them to think and talk about race.

JUDITH: I agree. For example, I find this shows up in their use of language. I’ve noticed that it’s difficult, sometimes impossible, for them to use the terms “black” and “white,” especially “white.” When they describe themselves, they say, I’m an American, I don’t think about my heritage, I’m an individual, I’m middle class. In addition, certain topics are hot-button topics: reverse discrimination, affirmative action, white male rage. And since I am often the only person of African heritage in the room, there is an undercurrent of “this is not real, this is not going on, this is your thing.”

KAREN: Yes. White students come to college having absorbed certain beliefs: that racism belongs to another time, that they themselves do not “see color”

and that to notice color at all is to be racist. Given the ideology of individualism that’s so pervasive in our culture, whites also resist the notion that we are anything other than autonomous individuals; the idea that we might be shaped by gender, race, and class dynamics is completely foreign. These beliefs have an unmistakable impact on our classrooms in that for white students especially, direct discussion of race is considered divisive, separating people who would otherwise be perfectly able to get along.

JUDITH: At one point this semester I showed the Prime Time video *True Colors*, which documents how color matters in the daily interactions of a white man and a black man who are similar in all respects except for their skin color.² They are sent out to explore housing and job opportunities in St. Louis, Missouri, and the video shows clearly how the black man is subjected, on a daily basis, to blatant discrimination. In the discussion following the video, one young white woman commented, “This may have happened ‘way back then,’ but this is not the way things are now. Today we’re all allowed to do whatever we want.” And another student said, “What we saw here was awful. But this isn’t typical. The people who discriminated were just ‘bad people.’”

KAREN: I get the same responses when I show this video. When faced with examples of racism, mainstream students will claim that either the incident is exceptional or the agent is exceptional. They are likely to have only superficial knowledge of the history of race relations and thus are unable to formulate a structural analysis. And because most of our students have little understanding of the institutional nature of oppression, they have a tendency to equate racism with an internal condition that shows up as individual acts of prejudice. It therefore becomes easy for them to claim that “reverse racism” victimizes whites as often as it does people of color.

JUDITH: In my course on race, class, and gender, we read an essay called “Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name” by Gloria Yamato, an African American woman who discusses various types of racist behavior by whites, as well as internalized racism.³ At the end of her article, she makes suggestions about how whites can interrupt racist behavior and how people of color can interrupt internalized racism. During class when a Jewish male attempted to engage the group in a discussion of racist behaviors, a very vocal group of white students went into defense mode full blast. One young woman characterized the author as “ignorant” because she used colloquial language in

the essay. And another young woman claimed Yamato was “biased” because she didn’t offer suggestions to people of color for ways they could interrupt “their own racist behavior.”

KAREN: It’s so difficult to challenge this thinking. I know both of us assign Peggy McIntosh’s essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege” as a way of bringing white skin privilege into consciousness.⁴ But of course here we’re calling into question another deeply embedded belief: that race belongs only to people of color. The notions that whites are raced and that race relations are our mutual responsibility fall outside the operative paradigm.⁵ So these are the assumptions that pervade the classes we teach.

JUDITH: And these dynamics are further complicated by the subject positions we ourselves bring to the classroom. Being aware of my own subject position as an African American teacher means having to navigate relationships with mainstream white students for whom having an African American authority figure is a new, and therefore uncertain, experience. The uncertainty is intensified when the students learn that the usual classroom format is being jettisoned for a more experiential, learner-centered approach. Since this approach engenders a climate of safety, I have to be prepared to hear—to use Gloria Yamato’s terms—“unaware/unintentional” and “unaware/self-righteous” racist comments and observations from mainstream white students as the semester goes on.⁶

KAREN: In my classes, unless the number of students of color begins to approximate that of the white students, the former will keep their heads down for fear of being targeted. In fact, introducing discussions of race may feel quite dangerous to them. The students of color are hesitant to reveal themselves in a learning situation where both the teacher and most of the other students are white. Can they trust that we will reflect their concerns or treat them with respect? It’s an important question. And in spite of my best efforts to establish a climate of safety, one in which the students of color can begin to trust that their perspectives will be honored and they will not be called upon in class to “represent the race,” the safety that should be present for them as a matter of course cannot, unfortunately, always be guaranteed.

JUDITH: I’m also wondering about the element of surprise. It would seem to complicate matters for you that you teach courses on writing, so your students don’t come in to class thinking they’re going to have to deal with something

like race. Since I teach courses that focus explicitly on diversity, I have the advantage that the issue of race is on the table from the first day.

KAREN: I recall two years ago in my freshman writing seminar, some white students began vigorously denying the existence of racial profiling. I tried using these comments as springboards for further analysis, but I noticed that a young Afro-Caribbean woman was obviously disturbed. She met with me in private to say that she was having a hard time sitting through the class. “I hear enough of this in my daily life,” she said. “I shouldn’t have to put up with it here. And besides, I didn’t sign up for this.” She meant that since she had registered for a generic freshman writing seminar, she hadn’t expected to have to deal with issues of race yet one more time in my class. One of my biggest fears is that despite my best intentions, the racist dynamics of the larger society will get replicated in the classroom. Her words had a profound impact on me.

JUDITH: My classes are, in a sense, structured by race as soon as I walk into the room. I use the first couple of classes to elicit demographic data from the students, so I know they come from social and educational environments that are devoid of African American authority representation. I remember one particular incident that exemplifies how my credibility as an authority figure is often handled. During one class, in response to my policy of encouraging students to share their work-life experiences, a white female student invited a young white male professional to class to give a presentation about his background in labor relations. Following his fifteen-minute talk her comment was, “We’ve learned so much more about this topic from you.” Her comment literally denied the thirteen weeks I had spent teaching the class, and I can still recall the feeling of deep-seated rage that this evoked in me.

I’ve noticed something else when there is a critical mass of African American students in a class. In discussions about race, the African American students are very vocal, and often these become exchanges between them and me, with little or no participation from the white students. So it appears that, with a person of African heritage as the teacher, the African American students feel more empowered to express their views. On the other hand, I’ve noticed that white students resist my authority by projecting it onto a white person or by making sotto voce comments rather than engaging with me directly. I could generalize about these dynamics and say that the white students “go victim” around giving voice to their feelings and views.

KAREN: What you say here is so important. My white skin privilege clearly offers me a number of protections and benefits. Because I'm white, I don't have to face the kinds of assaults on my status as an authority figure that you experience. In addition, though racist comments are also painful for me to hear, they do not have the same corrosive effect on my person. And though my pedagogy evolves from a passionate commitment to social justice, specifically to antiracist work, I can always step out of the classroom into a setting that validates me because I'm white.

Of course, my insistence on raising these issues is still threatening. I try to remember, in the midst of so much student discomfort, that I'm attempting to model the ability to "shift locations," as bell hooks puts it. This means deconstructing and decentering "the standpoint of 'whiteness'" while at the same time learning to "'occupy the subject position of the other.'"⁷ This is, ideally, how I would like to be able to use my subject position as a white person in the classroom.

JUDITH: I know that, for both of us, the content as well as the practices associated with the traditional classroom are unsatisfactory in addressing issues of race. In rethinking my own pedagogy, I found myself first wanting to understand the essentials: the fundamental things that we need to become aware of in examining race. In other words, what needs to be learned, and what needs to be deconstructed? If you could compile a list of responses to these two questions, what would you say?

KAREN: Keeping in mind that deconstruction and new learning sometimes occur simultaneously when examining race, here are some of the basics. Learners should be exposed to:

- some history of race relations in the United States to show that the constitutional rights we take for granted today had to be fought for and won;
- the realities of racism as it currently exists, and the ways racism can affect its targets;
- the multiple ways racism can be resisted by people of color as well as by whites;
- the fact that white people are raced;
- the realities of white skin privilege;
- narratives by people of color that focus on common "human" experiences;

- different ways of understanding diversity, to illustrate various positions that can be assumed on these issues and to point up the fact that the choices we make have implications;
- the "norms" governing U.S. social arrangements as a way of understanding how "difference" gets defined and measured in relation to these arbitrary standards;
- the fact that most of us occupy multiple subject positions and thus can use our experiences of being outside the norm to understand "the subject position of the other";
- the idea that "race" is socially constructed; and
- the fact that racism is institutionalized in U.S. society.

JUDITH: I love the way you have formulated what I'd like to call a racially aware pedagogy. The task is finding ways to engage students around these issues. In my classes I want to balance theoretical presentations with interactive, experiential activities and outside resources.⁸ For example, to tackle the realities of racism as it exists currently in the United States, I show the videos *Color of Fear*, *The Way Home*, and as mentioned earlier, *True Colors*.⁹ To address the history of race relations in the United States, I recently showed *A Force More Powerful*, a PBS special on nonviolent movements, which includes a well-done documentary about the Birmingham bus boycott.¹⁰ This segment can also illustrate how racism can be resisted by people of color as well as by whites.

Another way I'm working to engage students is by introducing an activity called "show and tell" this semester.¹¹ Students bring in articles from newspapers, magazines, and the web, or they summarize incidents seen on television or at campus events that reflect issues related to race/ethnicity, gender, and class. My goal is to keep their awareness working between classes by encouraging them to notice how institutionalized oppression operates in everyday life. It is proving an effective way to interrupt the "color evasiveness" and "power evasiveness" practiced by mainstream white students.

Something you said earlier about not wanting to replicate the racist dynamics of the larger society in the classroom calls to mind another thing I've struggled with in relation to methods. I used to require students to participate in an activity called "the otherness experience." This activity had to be completed outside the classroom because I wanted the students to place themselves in situations where they could occupy the subject position of the other. Students of color invariably protested the assignment because I was asking

them to replicate racial dynamics that were all too familiar in order to educate mainstream white students. I have changed that assignment and now require students to think about the rank and privileges connected with various aspects of their identity. They are asked to place themselves in a situation of their own choosing to observe how their status affects their feelings and influences their communication with others. This allows me to illustrate, as you frame it, the different ways of understanding diversity as well as the various positions that can be assumed on these issues. So I can interrupt the internalized racial oppression from students of color when they say they don't have any "power" or "rank" in U.S. society by having them notice the rank and privileges they have as heterosexuals and/or able-bodied people.

KAREN: As we talk, I'm appreciating the risk-taking required to develop a racially aware pedagogy. One of the most difficult questions for me is how to bring prejudice to light so that it can be dismantled, without reinflicting harm inside my own classroom. This year I've been trying out new ways of creating a space where students can learn to talk about race. One method is to allow them the safety of voicing their concerns anonymously while insisting on public accountability at the same time. Students submit written comments, then each picks one from the hat and reads it aloud. This seems to reveal concerns that might not have been voiced otherwise. For example, after we had read several works by African American women, students wrote comments implying that these narratives lacked "universal" significance. One student asked, "Why do almost all of the authors make race/gender the most important feature in their essay? Also, why doesn't this course focus on the common human experiences of people living in America?" This opened up enormous opportunities for discussion, allowing us to analyze ways the norms of our culture, which privilege those in power, are used to define acceptable "human" experience.

JUDITH: And I got a similar response from students when I showed the video *The Way Home*. This video features eight different racial/ethnic councils of women talking about issues such as controlling the land, becoming an American, finding identity, and fighting internalized oppression. Women of color comprise six of the eight councils. In their written reactions, students criticized the women of color for "whining and complaining" and "being oversensitive about their color." Other students admitted that they just could not relate to anything the women of color discussed. And I wondered if this inability to appreciate

the "voices" of women of color was connected to unaware/unintentional racism.

KAREN: I'd like to address the question of "voice" you raise here. How, and to what extent, do we represent in our classes the voice that cries out for justice and demands accountability, knowing that mainstream students will do their best to shut it out or defend against it? I realize, in asking this question, that I've tried several approaches. It's become quite clear that it does not work (especially in a generic freshman seminar!) to represent this voice myself. So, wanting to find ways to address these issues more effectively, two years ago I shaped the course around a critique of power relations within an historical context. The fact that we focused on a time other than the present allowed students to absorb this material fairly well because it was less threatening. Similarly, to unify this year's course materials, I chose the theme "coming of age." Using a number of narratives by people of color to illustrate this theme allows me to make the point that the lives of people of color are not unidimensional but in fact are richly complex and, indeed, representative of the human experiences of people living in the United States. Admittedly, though I continue to address race as a central issue in my classes, the voice that cries out for justice has become more muted over time. Perhaps in recent years I've backed off, become less brave.

JUDITH: I hear how your struggle around being a vigorous advocate for social change and working with young people exactly where they are creates extraordinary tension. That's why I don't see your decision to "back off" as having anything to do with your courage. I appreciate how you recognized a need to be more flexible and creative, which I feel is absolutely necessary in order to continue teaching about race in the classroom.

Getting back to the issue of accountability, I'm mindful of another contribution from McIntosh's work on privilege, which is that mainstream students have "permission to escape" the necessity of being vigilant about the dynamics of racial relations.¹² I recall an assignment where the students were required to read an article by Robert B. Moore, "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language."¹³ Some students asked, "What's the big deal about using the word 'blackmail'?" and others commented, "I never think about whether the attributes for 'white' reflect goodness, purity, innocence; these terms are harmless—I would not get upset about stuff like this." I decided to combine Moore's analytical insights into language with deconstruction of an excerpt from a

recent HBO movie entitled *Dancing in September*.¹⁴ The movie is about the presentation of black images on television. I used the film because the two main characters, an African American man and woman in positions of authority within the television industry, present two different perspectives on black representation on television. Of the students who completed the assignment, half were able to utilize Moore's analysis and the other half were at least able to identify the racist representations.

KAREN: Excellent. Despite the students' initial reaction, you didn't give up but persisted in trying to engage them around the issue of black representation in the language and the media. And the result was greater awareness of ways these supposedly "harmless" representations do in fact produce toxic effects.

Regarding white accountability, as the semester ends I'm trying to steel myself against hearing that a student has accused me on the course evaluation form of being "racist against white people." Though I define the term "racist" carefully, some students persist in believing that insistence on white accountability constitutes an expression of racism! In today's conservative climate, simply raising the issue of race can carry this risk. And unless one is fortunate enough to have a sympathetic administration or the benefit of tenure, one's job may actually be threatened.

JUDITH: Your comment reminds me of a recent situation at another mainstream university. A young woman of color, who was hired in a tenure track position in the English department, received the most horrific evaluations from the students, who castigated her multicultural perspective, methodology, and academic competence. She left the university at the end of the second semester.

KAREN: A sad story. It exemplifies the response many mainstream academic institutions have made over the past decade to the threat of multicultural (and feminist) activism. It's becoming more difficult to incorporate perspectives that are considered in any way "political." The radical critique claiming that all knowledge is informed by ideological assumptions seems to have vanished. Thus, we are left with definitions of good teaching that seem modeled on "the way it's always been done." These ideas become so pervasive that it takes an enormous effort to call them into question. And, as we see from the example of this young woman, they shape students' assumptions of what our classrooms should look like.

JUDITH: I have not experienced this type of negative reaction from student evaluations. And, once again, I believe it has to do with the centrality of race in the courses that I teach. Students enter the course understanding that race will be discussed. What has happened over the years is that students will write comments on their final examination papers expressing their reactions to the course. Some recent comments include, "Dr. Jones, this was the most terrifying, thought-provoking class that I've been in since I've been at [the] University"; "I will never forget the simulation, this course, or you"; "This was a great course. This course helped me to understand how I take my privilege for granted in certain groups. I would not have seen this before."

KAREN: Yes! Comments such as these are a tribute to the transformative potential of courses that focus on race—and to the way you teach as well! These are the words we need to keep close to our hearts as we keep on keeping on. At the same time, it might be important to acknowledge that this report from the front lines is not a "master narrative," designed to show how grappling with these incredible difficulties always allows one to come out victorious on the other side. As teachers who work not only to engage a body of material but also to raise awareness and promote social justice, we're opening ourselves to additional expectations, and disappointments. And because the same tactics of denial found in the classroom are often present in the institution itself, we're also opening ourselves to criticism from colleagues. I know I've been marginalized by faculty and administration simply because I wanted to share concerns about discussing race in the classroom. There's also the danger of doing this work in isolation, something that teaching in academia seems to promote.

JUDITH: Yes, I have also experienced feelings of isolation for the reasons you've pointed out. However, I think I come to this position because I'm teaching from the margin. What I've tried to do to redress this sense of isolation is develop relationships with other cultural workers who work outside the mainstream. For example, I belong to a support group that focuses on designing popular education events, which may include a two-hour workshop or a sixteen-week curriculum.¹⁵ This group has been enormously important in helping me to remember that the work I do does make a difference.

KAREN: I really like the way you've transformed "being marginalized" to "teaching from the margin"! It makes such a difference to be able to see my position as something I've chosen rather than had imposed on me from the

outside. And it's true that the support I get also comes from the margins. What a joy to be able to shift focus. Being ejected from the center now becomes an opportunity—to claim connection with a network of progressive cultural workers, whose commitment to breaking the silence around race in the interest of social justice lends strength and courage to our own.

NOTES

- 1 Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 4.
- 2 *True Colors*, ABC News Prime Time Live, 18 minutes, Coronet/MTI Film & Video Inc., 1991, videocassette.
- 3 Gloria Yamato, "Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 4th ed., ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001), 90–94.
- 4 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*, 95–105.
- 5 Ruth Frankenberg refers to this paradigm as "a discourse of essential 'sameness' popularly referred to as 'color-blindness'—which I have chosen to name as a double move toward 'color evasiveness' and 'power evasiveness.'" See *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14.
- 6 Yamato, "Something About the Subject," 91.
- 7 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 177. hooks takes her quote from Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 8 Arnold and Amy Mindell, *Riding the Horse Backwards: Process Work in Theory and Practice* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 25–35. I have found the Mindells' work on different learning channels (i.e., auditory, visual, movement) to be useful in designing interactive activities for the classroom. See also Lawrence Roth, "Introducing Students to 'The Big Picture,'" *Journal of Management Education* 25, no.1 (February 2001): 21–31.
- 9 *The Color of Fear*, produced and directed by Lee Mun Wah, 90 min., Stir-Fry Productions, 1994, videocassette. *The Way Home*, produced and directed by Shakti Butler, 1 hr. 40 min., World Trust, 1998, videocassette.
- 10 *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, produced and directed by Steve York, 3 hrs., WETA, 2000, videocassette.
- 11 Jessica M. Charbencau, "Instructor's Manual and Test Bank," for *Race, Class, and Gender* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001), 5.
- 12 McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," 102–103.
- 13 Robert B. Moore, "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language," in *Race, Class and Gender*, 322–333.
- 14 *Dancing in September*, produced and directed by Reggie Rock Bythewood, 1 hr. 50 min., Weecan Films Production, 2001, videocassette.
- 15 *The Growing Divide: Inequality and the Roots of Economic Insecurity* (Boston, Mass.: United for a Fair Economy, May 2000), 6. See this publication for a definition of "popular education."

Item no. 5

BONNIE TU SMITH

OUT ON A LIMB:

RACE AND THE
EVALUATION OF
FRONTLINE TEACHING

PHOTO: GERALD W. BERGEVIN

We are concerned that our colleagues all across the country appear to feel freer and more willing to discuss diversity and multicultural education if racism is omitted from the topic.

—Benjamin Bowser et al.,
Confronting Diversity Issues on Campus

The bad news is that teachers who present minority history and literature—or similar topics—almost uniformly face varying degrees of hostility, anger, and rejection: reactions unlike anything they have faced before.

—Thomas Trzyna and Martin Abbott,
“Grieving in the Ethnic Literature Classroom”

“You’re really a lousy teacher; you’re just using your color as an excuse.” On the final day of a national convention for English teachers, a stranger sitting across the table—a white-haired, portly man with a sardonic grin—made this declaration as I was describing a classroom experience to a colleague. I stopped in mid-sentence. How should one respond to such a comment? How I did respond might surprise some people and I will return to this later. What the comment brought home to me is more to the point.

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TuSmith argues that addressing racial issues in the classroom makes students uncomfortable. This discomfort is often reflected in negative end-of-term course evaluations. Especially when the instructor is a person of color, the X-factor of “race” renders the use of standardized student evaluations “one of the greatest threats to quality teaching.”

The stranger’s remark encapsulates two issues that I have been grappling with for years as an ethnic literature professor and a visibly Asian American woman. The first is how we evaluate teaching (“you’re really a lousy teacher”) and the second is how race operates in this evaluation (“you’re using your color”). We do an abysmal job in assessing college teaching, I believe, due to our overreliance on standardized course evaluations. Many educators would agree with this assertion. However, too many educators and college administrators consistently ignore and adamantly resist the claim that, if we seriously consider the X-factor of race, the use of such evaluations poses one of the greatest threats to quality teaching.

The stranger actually did me a great service. His assumption helped me to make the connection between my teaching and my position as a visibly “colored” subject in a white-dominant society. As someone who considers teaching her calling and works hard at it, I have been baffled for years by end-of-term evaluations. Too often the gains made by individual students and the class as a whole—the ability to analyze a broad range of culturally diverse and frequently complex works of literature, for example—have not been reflected in these assessments. Reliance on numbered ratings and anonymous written comments on evaluation forms left out the context of the classroom experience. As Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have reminded us, African American folk wisdom says not only to give the facts but to provide the understanding to go with them. This requires slowing down for a longer look.

According to the researchers cited in my second epigraph, student hostility is to be expected in race-related courses. Behind each student’s evaluation of such courses is the unacknowledged emotional turmoil that he or she has undergone. Based on their three-year study of ethnic literature students at Seattle Pacific University, Trzyna and Abbott conclude, “Teaching about race, gender, poverty, and other social and cultural differences is fraught with obstacles, and high on the list of those obstacles is grief, that complex bundle of hostility, sorrow, denial, bargaining, and other feelings that can manifest itself in many forms, including student protests . . .” Students grieve over their loss of innocence, say the researchers, “over the death, perhaps, of [their] notions of the American dream.” The emotions they undergo are “structurally identical” to what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified as the six stages of death and dying.¹

Most students do not associate emotional turmoil with a “good” class. When evaluating a course in which they felt discomfort—even though, according to

the Tyrzna and Abbott study, their discomfort was caused by the course content and subject matter—many students are likely to rate the course “below average.” This rating says little about the quality of instruction and the learning that took place. Granted that discomfort is not the sole province of ethnic literature classrooms, my point is that it is not valid to judge a course by how comfortable the students felt. The fact that race-related courses are likely to trigger “grief” in students renders the uniform use of course evaluations problematic. In my experience, the system is open to abuse.

I have been teaching ethnic American literatures for the past dozen years. During campus interviews for my first tenure-track position I was told by every English department faculty member I met that they were aware of my “situation.” They understood that my particular combination—a “minority” woman who teaches “minority” literature full-time to predominantly white students—meant that my course evaluations would be on the low side. “It won’t count against you,” they reassured me. These senior faculty members cited the example of my predecessor, an African American woman, whose experience had demonstrated that students do not love professors who teach material that makes them uncomfortable—especially when the professor is “colored.” My future colleagues convinced me that they were well aware of such special circumstances. When it came time for my my tenure case, however, this knowledge had vanished. My above-average scores were no longer good enough; since my numbers were not among the highest in the department, the chairman said over the phone, the tenure committee did not recommend my going up for tenure. In this way, the student evaluations were used against me.

I share this story to invite serious consideration of what is going on in institutions of higher education today. In recent years, there have been national conferences on race, but these efforts barely scratched the surface of entrenched racial attitudes in institutions of higher learning. Part of the problem is that few academics openly acknowledge that there *is* a problem. It seems that whoever mentions the “R” word is “it” and, similar to the childhood game, the point is to avoid being tagged as “it.” We also know that not dealing with a problem does not make it go away. In publicly discussing the connection between race and the evaluation of teaching, I set myself up to be “it.” Colleagues can accuse me of playing the race card, as the stranger did. The issue is too important, however, for me to remain silent. As someone who continues to believe in higher education I must speak my mind: the use of standardized course evaluations promotes poor teaching.

The cynicism expressed by some colleagues when I have raised this issue astounds me. In discussing student evaluations I have received advice from “give them all A’s” to “don’t do the evaluations at all.” The latter advice tended to come from high-ranking white male professors. In my experience, not allowing students to complete course evaluations has never been an option. First of all, simply refusing to distribute evaluations shows contempt for one’s students and colleagues. Second, at institutions where I have served on the faculty no student evaluations also means no merit raise, no tenure, no promotion. How could anyone afford this?

The “give them all A’s” proposition may have been said in jest, but I suspect that there is more truth to it than we teachers care to admit. Grade inflation has been a nationwide trend for years. The villains are not an underground network of revolutionaries posing as teachers to overthrow the U.S. government. However, the much-publicized 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* used this analogy: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”²

Grades no longer accurately reflect academic achievement, because many teachers have given up. Not all have given up for the same reason, of course, but how can one not be discouraged when teaching with integrity jeopardizes one’s job? Too often, assigning the grade that a student has earned means that the teacher is vilified and cannot rely on the support of his or her institution. In my experience, assigning an “A–” to a graduate student often meant that he or she did not take a second course with me. A grade of “B+” actually resulted in the students’ reporting me to the dean (as two students did in the first graduate course I taught). If A’s are a foregone conclusion, then why grade at all?

Nationwide, educators have been making a similar point for years. For example, under the pseudonym of Peter Sacks, a journalist-turned-professor describes his “sandbox experiment” in the disturbing book *Generation X Goes to College* (1996). Here is Sacks’s summary of his teaching experience:

I undertook this Machiavellian step after my institution told me to get glowing student evaluations or I’d be out of a job. So I pandered and grade-inflated and got those glowing student evaluations, until I was awarded tenure. Then I quit, unable to endure the pandering and inflating any longer.³

In recent years, articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* have noted increasing student behavior problems in the classroom. "New Research Casts Doubt on Value of Student Evaluations of Professors," for example, cites studies claiming that "professors who want high ratings have learned that they must dumb down material, inflate grades, and keep students entertained." According to these studies, professors tend to "teach to the evaluations." It would seem obvious that this situation defeats the purpose of education. And yet, the majority of American colleges and universities utilizes such student ratings and considers them valid assessments of teaching performance.⁴

The fact that white male educators have been criticizing the use of course evaluations should refute the notion that all those who object to the system are weak teachers who use their color as an excuse. During the height of the PC debate, conservatives tried to claim the moral high ground as defenders of academic standards. According to Dinesh D'Souza, "illiberal education," which he defines as "an education in closed-mindedness and intolerance" perpetrated by a "tyranny of the minority," had replaced the previous curriculum that was more rigorous and benign.⁵ And "multiculturalists"—namely, faculty of color and their supporters—are the cause of the decline. In this scenario the helpless victims of this hostile takeover are honest, hard-working students. In response, faculty of color have vigorously and successfully defended their subject matter and integrity against such unfair polemical attacks. Going relatively unnoticed, however, is the use to which teaching evaluations can be put by university administrators in such a politicized environment. According to Sacks, "Once employed as an innocuous tool for feedback about teaching, student surveys have evolved into surveillance and control devices for decisions about tenure and promotion."⁶

In the still-simmering culture wars debate, race is the X-factor. Based on substantial research as well as personal experience, I have concluded that the reliance on course evaluations—and the use to which they are put—compounds the hidden, persistent, and ignored problem of racial prejudice in the college classroom. In the published scholarship that connects multiculturalism and diversity with pedagogy, scholars are curiously reticent about race. As the first epigraph to this essay observes, academics nationwide are uncomfortable with the subject. The three "tenured radicals" who wrote the statement—two African American sociologists and a European American communications professor—constitute a handful of scholars who attempt to call the question. As they declare in the preface to their book: "We believe that in a race-conscious

society, race, racism, and other ways to oppress people of color take primacy in framing discussions about diversity and the multicultural perspective."⁷

I am in complete agreement. That multiculturalism has been an educational movement for many years with minimal positive results is directly attributable to our personal discomfort with race. Avoidance in dealing with our racial prejudices—both in our racist actions toward others and in our internalization of racist beliefs—has only allowed the sore to fester. Defining "diversity" in terms of gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and physical ability (all serious issues, to be sure) has enabled academics and university administrators to circumvent the irreducible factor of racism in the United States. The stranger in my opening anecdote did not say that I was a poor teacher due to my gender or class; instead, he used what society sanctions as the easiest, most assailable marker of "minority" difference against me. In this and other potentially volatile scenarios, race is the bottom line. The three scholars have a point when they claim that, "if we can confront racism in diversity the other hurdles will be much lower."⁸

To accept these scholars' call to confront racism will mean engaging in intellectual combat. How will such open conflict affect our classroom teaching? I agree with Gerald Graff, who argues persuasively that our teaching can benefit from our most intense professional exchanges. He suggests "teaching the conflicts."⁹ However, the conflicts that Graff discusses are those among colleagues outside of class. In the multicultural classroom, conflict often arises in the form of student hostility—toward the subject matter, toward each other, and at times toward the teacher. It is an obvious fact that faculty with more institutional power are better positioned to deal with such conflicts than those with less power. First, students are conditioned to equate professorial authority with the white male subject. They are inclined to credit the professor who fits this profile with being open-minded and fair, even in a very contentious classroom. Second, when their course evaluations are negative, such professors are better protected from the professional consequences.

When it comes to women of color faculty, however, too often it is an entirely different story. In many of our classrooms, conflict is unavoidable. Forefronting conflicts and openly "teaching" them, however, can play right into stereotypes about incompetent, unprofessional people of color. Suddenly, our courses are visible in the department—and they spell trouble. Student course evaluations are then used to corroborate this impression. An easy conclusion is that the "minority" colleague is an ineffective teacher, since she cannot

control her class. A theory that rewards one group of practitioners can punish another; identical classroom strategies can elicit opposite results. The risks are simply not the same. This means that before ethnic women faculty subscribe to the latest wisdom in multicultural pedagogy, we should keep in mind that the theorist might not have taken our specific and multiple subjectivities into account.

The first undergraduate course I taught as a new tenured professor at a private urban university illustrates this point. At the start of the term, a white male student came into my contemporary literature class, took one look at me, and declared: "I'm against multiculturalism. I can see that I'll be against you all term." When I asked the student what he meant by multiculturalism and why he equated me with it, he simply stood his ground and said, "My father thought this way, my grandfather thought this way, and I'm not about to change!" At that moment a white female student marched up to my desk and said that she was paying good money to study American literature and I had no business including those "other" (meaning ethnic) writers. Had I allowed the conflicts raised by these students to dominate classroom discussion, the course might never have gotten off the ground.

The female student dropped my course. The male student stayed and I taught him to the best of my ability. I noted two points in his favor: he was articulate and he was not invested in being politically correct. Throughout the term, I pushed for in-depth class discussions and maintained a dialogue with each student on their weekly written assignments. By the end of the ten-week term the student wrote in a self-assessment:

The one thing that I think will stick with me well after this quarter is over comes from Anna Lee Walters's "Apparitions." I never truly understood or realized the plight of the underclass in different cultures. Walters's description of Wanda's "physical abuse" by the shoe clerk made me realize how bad things can get. It made me realize some people need to put things on layaway just as there may be some people who need welfare and as a society we cannot and should not condemn these people for this. I now "see" that it is easy to be "one-sided" on issues when you're only told one side. Walters shows and tells me about "the other side" and it is this that I feel will stick with me perhaps for the rest of my life. . . .

Overall I learned a great deal about acceptance and tolerance of other cultures as well as other cultures' literature. I don't know if that was a goal of Prof. TuSmith's when she chose the lit for this class. Nonetheless, I would just like her to know, regardless, that I feel I now have a better

understanding for cultures and the literature of cultures that I previously didn't know about or didn't care to know about. I am now much more accepting of things that are "different" from me and I thank Prof. TuSmith for this.

One remarkable thing about this testimonial is that the student came up with the details about layaway and welfare on his own. I did not privilege these social practices in class discussions nor did I remain in conflict with him throughout the term. I made sure that he read each assignment and pushed him to work in my class. My reward was that he began to think for himself.

Of course, not every hostile student of mine made such a turnaround within a few weeks. A Chicana student who gave me a hard time in my Latino/a literature course took two years before signing up for another course with me. Somehow her opinion of me had changed in her senior year. In one class session she even made the bold gesture of declaring to her white classmates (when they tried to gang up on me) that I was an excellent professor who was more than qualified to teach them African American literature. No one talked to her for the rest of the term. These classroom anecdotes indicate that conflict and confrontation could erupt at any moment in my classroom, and openly processing the issues is not a foolproof strategy when my race—in addition to the visible racial difference among my students—is a major source of conflict in the first place.

For those endowed with white male privilege and institutional power, teaching the conflicts might be an appropriate strategy to confront racism in the classroom. In fact, this would be the responsible thing to do. If more senior white faculty incorporated racial issues into their teaching, then racism can be addressed as part of the educational enterprise. This would model for students an honest and responsible way of working through the cultural baggage that they bring into the classroom. Moreover, this would alleviate some of the pressure currently sustained by faculty of color in the one or two diversity courses of a department or college. That pressure does build up in these courses is well documented by ethnic teachers and scholars.

In 1985, Johnnella Butler, an ethnic scholar in multicultural pedagogy, wrote: "The fear of being regarded by peers or by the professor as racist, sexist, or 'politically incorrect' can polarize a classroom. If the professor participates unconsciously in this fear and emotional self-protection, the classroom experience will degenerate to hopeless polarization, and even overt hostility."¹⁰ Butler recommends "pressure-valve release" sessions to alleviate built-up

tension in the classroom. These discussions work best, she asserts, "when the teacher directly acknowledges and calls attention to the tension in the classroom."¹¹ In a later essay on teaching about women of color, she reiterates the need for such sessions. Tension builds from the "rage, anger, or shame" that "Black and White students alike" feel in learning about the history of atrocities perpetrated against women of color in the United States. "Furthermore," she states, "all students may resent the upsetting of their neatly packaged understandings of U.S. history and of their world."¹²

Butler's observations corroborate the grieving thesis. Given the very nature of a race- and gender-related course, classroom polarization can occur with the most aware and multiculturally adept of teachers. In terms of racial attitudes, a teacher who underestimates the classroom situation—or who has not examined his or her own racial prejudices—can easily contribute to the problem. I concur that effective teaching requires the ability to work through such tensions. Remarkably, however, this theorist, similar to others that I have consulted, never mentions the likely consequences of such intervention: namely, the negative course evaluations from students who equate pressure release sessions with a "bad" course due to the sessions' open acknowledgment that there was tension in the first place.

In an informative compilation of essays titled *Multicultural Teaching in the University* there is a question-and-answer section where thirteen contributors are asked specific questions about multicultural teaching and conflict in the classroom. Of special note is the impressive effort that these teachers make to deal with classroom conflicts. For example, one respondent cites group evaluation, self-evaluation, and feedback, and notes that "if unresolved feelings or unanswered questions remain, we sometimes devote a whole class session to the issues. . . ." Issues are also individually processed outside class, and then brought into the classroom for collective brainstorming. A second respondent relies on weekly reflection journals to process conflicts. As for rating the course, one respondent cites two written evaluations, plus "weekly or biweekly session evaluations . . . at the end of class periods." Another cites an "evaluation/feedback activity at the end of each session throughout the term for about ten minutes." This instructor also requires a written student evaluation and individual student conferences in mid-semester, as well as a final written evaluation in addition to the one required by the university.¹³

Such self-reports indicate to me that teachers of multicultural material are often running scared. Some will go to any lengths to protect themselves from

the dreaded formal student evaluations. While this is not a question of intentionally dumbing down their courses, the obvious question of time must be raised. With so much time and energy devoted to resolving conflicts and eliciting and assessing student reaction, when is the course material actually being taught? With only so much time allocated for each course—and, in my case, when a term is only nine or ten weeks long—something has to give. The multicultural teacher may find herself sacrificing every other assignment on the syllabus in order to process classroom dynamics. An initially rigorous agenda may end in minimal coverage of the subject matter. Thus, the instructor who focuses on teaching the conflicts could lose sight of his or her primary objective. Realistically, if students are required to evaluate the course on a weekly basis via journals, letters, or other written feedback, it is likely that they are not writing papers on the course content. That is, my students would be commenting on class dynamics and issues rather than engaging the literary work being studied. Students thus trained might be well-versed in processing conflicts, but they are ill prepared to read and write critiques of ethnic literature.

If avoiding conflict is irresponsible, then the same might be said of excessive attention to process. Constantly soliciting feedback can be another form of teaching to the evaluations. And yet, as I stated earlier, instructors are often left with little choice when they are held to their students' assessment of their teaching. When it comes to teaching courses with an ethnic American or Third World focus, instructors are doubly at risk. Even relatively secure full professors have discovered this through experience. After team-teaching a conflict-ridden course on Third World women, a geography professor at the University of Michigan concludes: "It is very difficult to sustain this kind of risk-fraught teaching without institutional attention and compensation. How should such efforts be rewarded? If this chapter helps to bring that question to prominence in academic discourse so that some positive institutional changes in costs, risks, and especially recognition are made, I will consider myself well rewarded."¹⁴

Then there is the endowed history professor at Harvard, whose stint in team-teaching "The Peopling of America" brought him student accusations of racial insensitivity. D'Souza reports:

As for Stephan Thernstrom, he has decided, for the foreseeable future, not to offer the course. "It just isn't worth it," he said. "Professors who teach race issues encounter such a culture of hostility, among some students, that some of these questions are simply not teachable any more, at least not in an honest, critical way."¹⁵

In both cases, well-situated white professors discovered the risks involved in teaching culturally diverse, race-related subjects. Their logical conclusion, similar to the advice I received about course evaluations, was “to not do them.” The idea that it is not worth it—meaning, “They don’t pay me enough to put up with this abuse”—is a luxury that not many faculty of color can afford. In academia today, women of color are still the last hired, first fired, and must prove themselves several times over. Walking away from what we are hired to teach, which is usually connected to our color, is not an option. Besides, for me as an American literature specialist, there *is* no “safe” course. Traditional, supposedly neutral courses in the modern American novel and the American short story necessarily include ethnic writers for the simple reason that African Americans, Chicanos, and other ethnic minorities have, indeed, written novels and short stories. Alongside European American authors, there is no justification for excluding ethnic writers of color. Thus, American literature *is* multicultural literature even if this is still not accurately identified in course catalogs. Because I teach American literature and because North American society has always been multicultural, my courses are necessarily multicultural.

While white faculty cited here seem to worry about appropriate compensation for teaching “risky” courses, I am more concerned about how to do my job without being punished for doing it. In today’s politically charged classrooms, the teacher’s subject position is necessarily her starting point. Knowing, from years of experience, that both my race and gender made me vulnerable in front of the classroom, I once had the bright idea of team-teaching a course on American Indian literature with my visibly white husband. My diabolical scheme was to have a white man share, or perhaps help neutralize, the hostility usually directed at me. Thus, I accepted an invitation to guest teach the course at an Ivy League university. At the second class meeting an Asian American student pulled Jerry aside and told him that the students wanted him to speak, not me—even though we had informed the class at the outset that I was the primary on the team (Jerry’s doctorate is in British literature). Flabbergasted, my husband invited the student to drop by our office after class. She refused to come and subsequently dropped the course.

We consider this one of the most successful courses either one of us has taught. As for the course evaluations, they were generally favorable. One point stood out, however. Even though most students rated us as a team, a few went out of their way to rate us separately. Of these, across the board Jerry’s ratings were higher than mine.

For faculty women of color, professorial authority cannot be taken for granted. “English professors don’t look like you” continues to be the prevalent student response to my physical presence. From this initial reaction follows a significant and at times prolonged struggle. A student may go through an entire course without coming to terms with his or her sense of what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” There is no polite way to say it: this is racist. An insidious aspect of racism is that the racist blames the victim for not fulfilling his or her expectations. From my years of experience as an educator I find that the script tends to play out along the following lines:

- Professors are white men. You are not a white man. Therefore, you are not a professor.
- English professors are white. You are Asian American. Therefore, you cannot be an English professor.
- Asian Americans are quiet, humble, and submissive. You have strong convictions and you are not humble. Therefore, you are a failed Asian American.

This line of thinking explains why the student cited above wanted my white husband to teach what was essentially my course in American Indian literature. In her mind, the white man has the authority to teach this nonwhite literature, while the Asian American woman does not. This is a manifestation of what two women of color theorists would have called “internalized racism.”¹⁶

Given the complexities of such interaction, ethnic students and ethnic faculty need space to work out racial issues among themselves. Under the scrutiny of white-folks-in-charge, however, this is virtually impossible. When the ethnic professor holds the ethnic student to some standard of intellectual rigor, she is likely to be cast as the villain. Her white colleagues may view her as engaging in a squabble with another “minority.” Once, when an ethnic woman colleague and I asked why a graduate student was assigned my colleague’s graduate course in postcolonial literature to teach, our white feminist colleagues said, “Why would you begrudge another woman of color a line on her vitae?” This viewpoint reinforces the perception that there is no distinction between women of color professors and students. A valid issue of protocol is typecast as jealousy among ethnic women.

As a visibly Asian woman in America, I know that race will continue to be a part of my life. As an ethnic literature professor, I will continue to address racial issues in my courses. Openly acknowledging that race is a problem in the

classroom provides a starting point. This brings me back to the stranger who told me that I was a lousy teacher. What I said to him was, "You don't tell me who I am. I've had to listen to people like you all my life and I'm not about to put up with you." From a brochure, I later realized that the man had been a former president of the professional organization hosting the convention. His smug deportment suggested that he was used to dishing out such insults and getting away with it. My dramatic response obviously caught him by surprise. After a half-hearted attempt to laugh off the confrontation, the man got up to leave. I held out my hand to shake his. "Nice meeting you," I said calmly, "and see you for the next round."

Practicing the art of open confrontation has transformative potential. Deconstructing racial stereotyping requires both parties at the table. The stranger was not prepared to engage me as an equal, so he ran. In the college classroom, open discussion and active engagement among class participants is an integral part of the learning process. If issues of race prevent such give and take, the instructor must find ways to get the class past this reticence. Good teaching requires risk-taking. A good teacher encourages students to take that extra step, to venture beyond their normal levels of comfort and areas of knowledge. Collective brainstorming—one of the more effective classroom activities—does not occur when students are invested in politically correct behavior to hide their thoughts and feelings. To push, prod, and goad students beyond such a defensive posture requires a hands-on, interactive teaching strategy. In a racially charged climate such as the ethnic literature classroom, an occasional blowup is inevitable—and even healthy. Standardized evaluations applied to these courses prevent such active teaching.

Once considered progressive, anonymous course evaluations sanction racist attitudes among students, place women of color faculty in special jeopardy, and undercut the efforts of multiculturalism in higher education. Knowing that the evaluation system is flawed should be a call to action. Publicizing the problem is a first step. As committed educators, we should collectively pressure our institutions to devise a better way of assessing teaching. Being forced to compromise our standards and pedagogical goals to avoid low student evaluations is simply not an option.

NOTES

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- 2 United States, National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983), 5.
- 3 Peter Sacks, "In Response," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 29:5 (Sept./Oct. 1997), 29. See also Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).
- 4 "New Research Casts Doubt on Value of Student Evaluations of Professors," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (16 Jan. 1998): A12+.
- 5 Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 228–229.
- 6 Sacks, *Generation X*, 29.
- 7 Benjamin Bowser, Gale S. Auletta, and Terry Jones, Preface, *Confronting Diversity Issues on Campus*, ed. Bowser et al. (Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE, 1993), xii.
- 8 Bowser et al., *Confronting Diversity*, xiii.
- 9 Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).
- 10 Johnella E. Butler, "Toward a Pedagogy of Everywoman's Studies," in *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, ed. Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges (Boston: Routledge, 1985), 236.
- 11 Butler, "Toward a Pedagogy," 236.
- 12 Johnella E. Butler, "Transforming the Curriculum: Teaching About Women of Color," in *Transforming the Curriculum: Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies*, ed. Johnella E. Butler and John C. Walter (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 83.
- 13 David Schoem et al., eds., *Multicultural Teaching in the University* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 293–311.
- 14 Ann E. Larimore, "On Engaging Students in a Multicultural Course on a Global Scale: Risks, Costs, and Rewards," in Schoem et al., 218.
- 15 D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*, 197.
- 16 Virginia R. Harris and Trinity A. Ordoña, "Developing Unity among Women of Color: Crossing the Barriers of Internalized Racism and Cross-Racial Hostility," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 309.

Item no. 6

GĪTAHI GĪTĪTĪ

MENACED BY RESISTANCE:

THE BLACK TEACHER
IN THE MAINLY WHITE
SCHOOL/CLASSROOM

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, Gĩtĩtĩ 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" rigmarole: 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 closet 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 reactionarism 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 no. 7

KAREN J. LEONG

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVING RACE IN THE CLASSROOM



PHOTO: TIM TRUMBLE, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY

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.

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 anecdotally 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

- 1 Shirley Hune, “Executive Summary: Asian American Women in Higher Education: Claiming Visibility and Voice,” Association of American Colleges and Universities Program on the Status and Education of Women, *Women of Color in the Academy Series* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998), No. 3, 3.
- 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 Rosenstein, 1996).