

The Dynamics of Teaching Race

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The authors in this book hold these truths to be self-evident:

- We live in a time of rampant racism fueled and legitimized by racist political leaders.
- If unchallenged, racism will continue to extend its hegemony and exclude large groups of people from full participation in political, social, and economic life.
- Racism damages everyone: victims who suffer from abuse, violence, and assault, and perpetrators who live in fear of the “other.”
- The roots of racism lie in the ideology of white supremacy; hence a fundamental pedagogic task is to help people unmask this ideology.
- Racism is learned; therefore, a key task for teachers is to help people recognize how they internalize racist ideas and beliefs and how these play themselves out in everyday life.
- Racism is structural, not individual. It is embedded in systems and institutional practices. A major project, therefore, is to help students think structurally and

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systemically about racism and to go beyond seeing it as a matter of individual choice or personal prejudice.

- The point of teaching race is to prepare students to take action to combat racism.

All of us have spent many years trying to understand the pedagogy of teaching race. There is well over a century's worth of experience represented in this book and our intent is to share the lessons we've learned while pursuing this most difficult of teaching tasks. We don't spend lot of time lamenting the existence of racism or analyzing its history; after all, plenty of other authors have done those things superbly. We choose instead to use this book's space to focus on documenting activities, exercises, techniques, tools, strategies, and approaches that we find helpful to us in uncovering and challenging white supremacy. This is a book focused on practical ways to help students take antiracist action in their worlds.

Defining Terms

Three terms are used repeatedly throughout this book: racism, white supremacy, and microaggression. So as to create a common base for understanding I want to begin by defining each of these as clearly as possible. In general conversation these terms are thrown around somewhat indiscriminately, so it's essential that when they're used in the following pages the meaning is as consistent as possible.

Racism

Racism is a system of beliefs and practices that are embedded in the institutions we move through as individuals and routinized in the conventions of everyday lives. These beliefs and practices legitimize the power of whites and justify their viewing all other racial groups as inherently inferior. Organizational structures, social policies, and institutional habits embody racism by combining to exclude people of color from access to full participation in social, political, and economic life. In the educational sphere,

racism is glaringly evident in admissions policies, disciplinary guidelines, curricula, hiring practices, attrition rates for faculty and students of color, and the composition of boards of trustees. The point of racism is to preserve the power of one dominant racial group.

When racism is threatened it responds with a combination of overt force (police brutality, political imprisonment, state-sanctioned murder) and covert manipulation (symbolic festivals celebrating diversity, public holidays, prominent so-called success stories of black, brown, and indigenous exceptionalism). Racism is expert at reconfiguring itself by appearing to have ceded important territory while in reality maintaining its power. Hence, college application brochures feature a rainbow of different student racial identities, institutions create diversity offices headed up by the only person of color in the senior leadership team, reading lists are widened to include authors of color, and admissions offices and departments recruit students, staff, and faculty of color. In reality, these changes are often superficial. Faculty of color fail to get tenure, diversity officers have a high rate of turnover, attrition rates are disproportionately high for students of color, and new, racially based curricula are regarded as exotic and temporary diversions from an agreed-upon mainstream.

Finally, racism is both socially constructed and learned. No one is born with innate stereotypes, prejudices, and biases about other racial groups. These are acquired through the minutiae of daily interactions via jokes, asides, and parental injunctions; from media messages; in peer group conversations; and from institutional policies and practices. Because of de facto housing segregation, most people grow up in racially homogenous areas with little sustained interaction with other races. In the absence of experiences that counter dominant racial messages and challenge “official” or “stock” stories of race (Bell, 2010), people develop ever-deepening beliefs about various racial groups. Any limited interactions with those from a different race are mediated via these learned narratives so as to confirm the idea of white supremacy.

White Supremacy

Behind the structure of racism lies a set of ideas that legitimizes its existence. This is the ideology of white supremacy. White supremacy is a worldview sedimented in institutional practices to ensure that white people stay in control of the systems and structures that control our society. By white supremacy I don't mean the groups of white nationalists, KKK, and Aryan Nation members who openly espouse racial genocide, exclusion, separation, or repatriation. I mean instead the idea that whites, because of their superior intellect and reasoning power, should be in control of decision-making for society as a whole. White supremacy perpetuates the notion that whites should naturally hold the most powerful positions in business, the judiciary, the legislature, the military, and the media because they can think better than nonwhites. Whites are held to be able to use reason more effectively and think more logically, and therefore be more objective in their decision-making processes. This reflects the enduring power of European Enlightenment thought and its privileging of reason and objective analysis, seen particularly in positivism and scientism.

White supremacy views people of color, by way of contrast, as moved by passion and raw emotion, easily inflamed and therefore not to be trusted with decision-making authority. White supremacy views emotion in mostly negative ways, as an unreliable interference with coolly objective decision-making. In the case of people of color, emotion is viewed as something that is quickly converted into aggression and inflamed mob violence. So the ideology of white supremacy places *whiteness* as the preferred norm in society, *white people* as the natural authorities in any situation, and *white knowledge* (and white forms of knowledge production) as the most valid of humankind. White supremacy is frequently denied by its perpetrators (such as me) even as it's being disseminated. The authors in this book view white supremacy as the philosophical foundation of racism and believe that progress in the area of racial justice depends on dismantling this powerful and all-pervasive ideology.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the everyday behaviors that enact the ideology of white supremacy and keep racist systems in place. They are small acts of exclusion perpetrated by whites against people of color. Yet enactors of aggressions have no conscious, overt intent. When called on these aggressions, whites will typically reply that people of color are being too sensitive, imagining slights that aren't intended and seeing racism when it's not there. In claiming a lack of racist intent whites are actually being honest. There is no deliberate or conscious wish to diminish, insult, or exclude anyone. The perpetrators are just going about their normal daily business and doing what comes naturally.

Because I've grown up as a white man in a racist world I usually don't notice my unwitting microaggressions: After all, they're not decisions I'm consciously making. A white supremacist view of the world creates a structured blindness to one's enactment of racism where whites like myself are concerned. So when I overlook students of color, remember mostly the names of white male students, or direct my comments in meetings I'm chairing mostly to whites, I'm usually unaware these things are happening until someone challenges me. Typically, when whites are called on for committing microaggressions in multiracial groups, other whites rush in to save the perpetrator, saying he or she just had a moment of forgetfulness, was tired, made an unintended mistake, or had a brain fart. Those calling out a microaggression are often accused of taking political correctness too far and of seeing things that aren't really there.

Three Key Dynamics of Race-based Teaching

A complex mix of emotional reactions confronts teachers trying to introduce the examination of race into their classrooms. Some students display hostility and anger; others seem bored, weary, and uninterested, while still more are fearful. Even students who have deliberately volunteered to study the topic fear saying or doing the

wrong thing. As I was writing this chapter I asked two different groups – one composed of students in a leadership course I was teaching and one comprising colleagues in a professional workshop I was running – to list the reasons lying behind any reluctance they felt in addressing the topic of race. Here are the rank-ordered responses, going from most to least frequent:

- I'll say the wrong thing and be called a racist.
- This will be a messy, distressing, and uncomfortable discussion.
- I don't have any experience to draw on that's relevant.
- I don't trust the teacher or leader to know what she or he is doing.
- This never goes well and always ends in tears.
- I'm fed up with the implication that I have privilege and act in a racist way.
- This is just one more example of politically correct brainwashing.

How do we navigate through these different reasons for pushing back against an engagement with racial issues? The contributors in this book suggest three approaches: scaffolding, modeling, and community building.

Scaffolding

Eighteen-year-olds who have grown up in racially homogenous neighborhoods and high schools show up at college completely unprepared to dive into racially charged curricula. They will think about race in broad, dualistic terms – “whites do this, blacks do that” – and will be challenged by any kind of contextual complexity. They will want to know the so-called right, nonracist way to behave and the behaviors they should avoid. Many white students will be firmly caught in the color-blind paradigm and sincerely believe themselves to be good-hearted people who focus on the content of people's character and not on skin color.

So students who have never thought much about this topic (who will mostly be white) should be eased into it, if possible, in ways that feel invitational. In this book, Lisa R. Merriweather, Talmadge C. Guy, and Elaine Manglitz describe how they research students' backgrounds, preconceptions, and experiences (partly through their Race Literacy Quiz), and how they choose instructional strategies based on that inquiry (Chapter 7). Susan Hadley talks about how she switched her approach to teaching about the constructed nature of racial disadvantage by focusing initially on the less emotionally charged benefits of being right-handed (Chapter 3). Buffy Smith describes how she decided to start race-based discussions with the language of power and institutional privilege after researching her young students' reactions against the charged language of white supremacy (Chapter 9). Similarly, George Yancy publicly examines his own unconscious sexism as a precursor to asking students to examine the racism that lives within them (Chapter 2). Another important element in scaffolding race pedagogy is to start by inviting students to tell each other about themselves. Mike Klein's use of the I Am From exercise leads students into considering their racial identity and positionality by having them share the experiences that have shaped who they are (Chapter 5). Pam Barnett uses the My Name exercise and her Hopes and Fears activity to do the same thing (Chapter 6). Dianne Ramdeholl and Jaye Jones ask students to write a personal learning history paper (Chapter 12). Exercises like these are a prelude to the more intensive, personal journaling described by George Yancy, Susan Hadley, Pam Barnett, Lucia Pawlowski, and Wendy Yanow.

It also seems to be useful to immerse students in doing some preliminary reading or viewing of testimony by people of color before moving gradually into a direct examination of their own experiences. Consuelo Cavalieri, Bryana French, and Salina Renninger; Pam Barnett; Mary Hess; Dianne Ramdeholl and Jaye Jones; Wendy Yanow; Susan Hadley; and Lisa Merriweather, Talmadge C. Guy, and Elaine Manglitz all emphasize the value of students hearing stories detailing the experience of being on the

receiving end of racism. Several of these authors argue strongly for using feature films, documentaries, and video to present compelling images and representations of how white supremacy operates.

As Wendy Yanow points out, the point of scaffolding is to begin instruction at the point where many students are – the color-blind paradigm – and then move them into understanding the operation and pervasiveness of racism. Students new to this area of study often need an initiation period during which they stretch their cognitive and emotional hamstrings by doing the warm-up exercises described above. As they develop a basic grasp of the reality of systemic racism and start to trust their peers and teachers, the level of dissonance, contradiction, and discomfort can be ratcheted up. Students can be confronted with more complex ideas of privilege and white supremacy and invited to examine how these manifest themselves in their own lives.

Modeling

Modeling racial disclosure seems to be a dynamic that almost everyone in this book describes. One of the prime tasks of teachers of race is, as much as possible, to normalize the topic. By that I mean making the acknowledgment and discussion of racism as unremarkable as possible. When teachers tell stories of their own learned racism and disclose how white supremacist ideology still lives within them despite all their efforts to push back against it, this accomplishes several objectives. First, it provides students with an example of what an honest discussion of race can look like. Second, if the teacher is happy to provide current examples of how he or she engages in racist thinking or actions, this legitimizes students' attempts to do this.

Third, telling a story of a racially charged event in your own life offers an opportunity to link what seem like abstract concepts (privilege, supremacy, racism, critical race theory) to actual experience. It's so easy to keep the discussion of race at a level of generality that most are comfortable with. We can all condemn racism and laugh at the buffoonish actions of political leaders and

right-wing media figures. But when I, Stephen Brookfield, describe my momentary surprise at seeing a senior leader, pilot, doctor, or academic who is black, I can illustrate how white supremacist ideology operates within me at a preconscious and subconscious level. George Yancy reveals that his students are shocked when they find out their philosophy professor is black, since philosophy is typically viewed as a Eurocentric white discourse. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela (1994) provides a pertinent example of internalized racism when he discloses his alarm at seeing a black pilot enter the cockpit of his plane and immediately wonders if the plane will crash. Tim Wise noted the same reaction in his book *White Like Me* (Wise, 2005).

Community Building

The more students feel that they belong to a community of inquirers united in exploring a significant topic, the more they're emboldened to enter into racial discussions. Consuelo Cavalieri, Bryana French, and Salina Renninger describe how they build what they call a working alliance with students that's intended to foster mutual trust and rapport. Pam Barnett and Lucia Pawlowski both encourage students to develop their own norms and ground rules. Buffy Smith attempts to create a classroom *ohana*, a community in which no one is left behind and all experiences are valued.

The modeling described earlier is crucial in any effort at community building. If people are to start trusting each other, they need to know that they are encountering authentic selves. This requires people to open up about their own racism and give honest accounts of how they struggle to fight against learned instincts and biases. George Yancy shows how difficult this is for whites to do in *Backlash* (Yancy, 2018), his analysis of whites' responses to his letter titled "Dear White America" (Yancy, 2015) that was published as an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.

Students need to see teachers talking about their experience of, and struggles with, racism as a precondition to doing this themselves. When teachers disclose their own passions, enthusiasms,

frailties, and errors, this encourages students to do the same. Interestingly, when white students openly admit to their own learned racism and their struggle to identify and challenge this, students of color are appreciative. Instead of blaming whites for their unearned privilege and blindness to white supremacy, students of color give a sigh of relief that the elephant in the room – their peers' own racism – has been named.

Students who are digital natives frequently use social media to create cyber communities. They share details of their lives on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and so on. Lucia Pawlowski and Mary Hess point out that in real-time instruction, the anonymity of platforms such as TodaysMeet (<https://todaysmeet.com>) allows students to raise contentious issues in ways that can hasten the formation of community norms. This is particularly important when the credibility and authenticity of teachers are concerned. If students are skeptical of you because of your positionality, or if they just don't know enough about you to be able to judge whether or not you can be trusted to lead a group in the discussion of raw and explosive topics, a tool like TodaysMeet can be enormously helpful. Using this anonymous feed, students can challenge you and question your legitimacy with no negative consequences for them. If you can respond to a student's comment on your apparent racism in an open and nondefensive way, this demonstrates your willingness to delve deep into your own biases and microaggressions.

Watching Out for Repressive Tolerance

In one of the most formative influences on my thinking about how white supremacy maintains itself, Herbert Marcuse (1965) explicates the concept of repressive tolerance. Put very simply, repressive tolerance is the process by which institutions manage threats to their authority and legitimacy so that they appear to be changing while keeping things as they are. Instead of opposing the challenge by directly rebutting or discrediting those issuing critiques, institutions respond in a far subtler and ultimately more

effective way. They appear to take the challenge seriously, creating working parties, task forces, and advisory committees to document the grievances being brought to their attention. They then make small, symbolic changes to institutional functioning and present these as substantive and important. But as all these things are happening, the fundamental structure remains unchanged. White supremacist consciousness remains in place and whites continue to hold the levers of power and determine institutional culture and policy.

The easiest repressively tolerant change to make is change the bodies that appear on your public documents. Find the minority of students and faculty of color at your institution and plaster their faces on your website, publicity materials, and billboards. Make sure you have a nicely balanced racial equation of African, Asian, Latin, and indigenous faces on your brochures so that your student body looks like a rainbow coalition. In the alumni magazine make sure you disproportionately profile students and faculty of color who have achieved something of note so that it looks like you devote considerable institutional resources to ensuring their success.

Playing this game of representational identity politics is the cheapest and most immediate move in the repressive tolerance jig. In a very short time, with some simple photoshopping and image manipulation, you can present to the world a dramatically altered version of the kind of institution you are. But the manipulative beauty of this strategy is that you don't actually have to do anything of importance. The numbers of students and faculty of color can stay exactly the same, even as it looks as if a relative equity of representation is in place.

But image manipulation can only go so far. Sooner or later institutions are pressured to increase the representation of different racial groups at all levels of the institution. Money is allocated specifically for scholarships to encourage a higher proportion of students from racial minorities to apply and search committees are urged to ensure that people of color are well represented in the

candidate pool. The problem is that without addressing the ideology of white supremacy and attempting to uncover its presence at all levels of institutional functioning, members of minority racial groups admitted to the institution find themselves negotiating what they perceive as a hostile and unfriendly environment. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006) reported national data showing a 42% graduation rate for African American students compared with the 62% for white students and cited the unfavorable racial climate at some institutions as the first of several possible explanations for this statistic. An even worse 24-point difference was reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, with African American students demonstrating a 38% graduation rate compared with the 62% rate of whites (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017).

The same dynamic pertains to hiring faculty of color, especially at predominantly white colleges and universities. Myers's (2016) analysis of the racial identities of professors at all higher education institutions found that only 5% were black, 4% Hispanic, and 0.4% Native American. An analysis of how faculty of color experience college and university campuses across the United States and United Kingdom reports widespread feelings of alienation, of being outsiders drowning in a sea of whiteness, and of perceiving themselves as assailed on all sides by practices and policies steeped in white supremacy (Bhopal, 2016). Women faculty of color are particularly disregarded, often initially assumed by white students to be secretaries or administrative assistants (Cole Robinson and Clardy, 2010). Additionally, their appointment to the faculty is typically viewed only as a response to the mandatory imposition of affirmative action. Consequently, these women have to work twice as hard to establish their academic legitimacy. Both male and female faculty of color are also expected to take on a second unpaid teaching job of teaching white faculty colleagues about the nature of racism (McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2003).

Admitting larger numbers of students of color without a corresponding investment in administrative and academic support

services for those students only serves to set many of them up for failure. If there is no effort at curricular change, and if faculty continue to work in a mostly color-blind way, then students of color will feel isolated, strangers in a strange land. There will need to be an institution-wide effort to identify practices and policies framed by white supremacy and a willingness by those in the most public positions of institutional authority and power to model their own commitment to examining how they too live out aspects of this ideology and how they struggle to fight it.

The final repressive tolerance strategy is to make a high-profile appointment of a person of color to the leadership team. The most common example is to create a diversity office, staffed by a chief diversity officer or senior vice president for diversity. That person is often the only person of color on the leadership team, and is assumed, by virtue of his or her racial identity, to have the authentic experience of being on the receiving end of racism. This is taken to qualify him or her as someone who is uniquely positioned to address white supremacy.

But chief diversity officers are often set up to fail. The fact that no other high-level leader is a person of color makes it harder for them to develop the network of personal relationships and support that whites enjoy. They are positioned as the exotic other, the voice of authentically racialized experience whom presidents and provosts can turn to and ask, "How does diversity play into this decision?" If the strategy developed to address the need for diversity is essentially to "add, mix, and stir" people of color into a mostly white environment, then difficult questions of racism and white supremacy can be kept at bay. But the real experts on how white supremacy as an ideology is learned and deeply internalized so that it frames daily actions, interpretations, and decisions, are whites. People like me are the learners and enactors of this ideology, so instead of turning to the only person of color on the senior leadership team for awareness of racial issues, the white members need to be examining the way that they are complicit in retaining whiteness as the unquestioned norm and standard of legitimacy.

The Ontology of Teaching Race – Nothing Works

A consistent theme explored in the forthcoming chapters is the fact that anyone engaged in this work constantly feels that they have made the wrong choice or could have done better. There's a constant desire to rewind the videotape and go back to the beginning of a class session for a do-over. So the basic ontology of race-based teaching – the fundamental nature and reality of engaging in this work – is that you continually feel things are spiraling out of control as your plans misfire. Chapters by Bobbi Smith and by me focus specifically on making and learning from mistakes, but almost all the other authors somehow refer to the regular experience of feeling surprised, disturbed, and discombobulated by events and, in the moment that crises occur, of not having any clue what to do next.

The first few times this happened in my career I was mortified and felt like a complete charlatan. Someone (sometimes I myself) would say or do something that produced palpable anxiety and anger. Because I had been socialized to assume that overt conflict in the classroom was something to be avoided at all costs, I would leave the class with an overwhelming sense of failure and shame at my incompetence. There would be two voices contending in my head. One would say, "I'm never doing that again! Why risk messing about in stuff you're unqualified to engage with?" The other one would say, "Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. This was your first time doing this. You'll get better with time and experience."

In the 1980s and 1990s there was a sort of fluctuation for me between building up the nerve to introduce race as an issue in class, seeing my efforts to do this apparently backfire in unforeseeable ways, backing off for a while after having been burned by a scarring classroom event, and then coming back and trying to do it again. Two decades into this work, in the late 1990s, I sort of got it: Teaching about race is not like teaching about other critical and controversial issues that critical theory explores (Brookfield,

2005). Its rawness means that you will probably constantly feel out of your depth and a total novice. I began to accept that I would leave every race-based class feeling that I had screwed up and lost control. So although I've been doing this to a greater or lesser degree for four decades, I know that I will never feel as if I really know what I'm doing.

This is when the ontological realization kicks in: The fundamental reality and experience of teaching race is feeling as if you're not getting it right. Once you accept that things will never go the way you anticipate, you start to reframe what success and failure means. I had grown up as a teacher believing that a successful class was one in which everyone left feeling equally valued, bonded in a common learning project, and enjoying equal opportunities to participate. A failed class, on the other hand, was one whose emotional tenor was out of control. By this I meant that heated emotions were present, and that people left feeling angry, even bitter, or that the discussion got off topic by veering wildly into uncharted waters. If we walked out of the room with some people feeling annoyed because we hadn't settled on a conclusion or view that everyone agreed with, and others accusing me of not giving them sufficient time to speak or complaining that the classroom was not a calm, safe space, then in my mind I had failed.

Lucia Pawlowski's chapter on brave space classrooms unpacks this notion of so-called safety very nicely, and I remember her one day saying to a group of colleagues, "There are two ways to teach about race – badly, or not at all." Once you understand that this pedagogic project is challenging and usually leaves people feeling disturbed, you gradually accept that feeling like an impostor is the nature of the beast. You start to reframe notions of what constitutes good and bad class sessions and come to understand that classroom success is, at a very basic level, simply having the conversation. Moreover, keeping a conversation going in the face of long periods of awkward silence; expressions of hurt, pain, and anger; tears; and the frustration being voiced that we're not reaching a solution is

actually a raging success! I say again, simply having the conversation is an indicator of classroom success and keeping it going is a sign that you are an exemplary teacher. If teaching-evaluation forms had an item asking students to rate the degree to which they were discomfited, disturbed, or made to feel like their world-views were shattered, then teachers of race would typically be ranked as stars instead of being punished in the way Buffy Smith describes. To help students become productively disturbed is the point of teaching race, and the rest of this book explores how we might do that.

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