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Antiracist Pedagogy Against White Racial Knowledge

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In studies of race, the idea that Whites do not know much about race is generally accepted. By virtue of their life experiences, White students and teachers are portrayed as subjects of race without much knowledge of its daily and structural features (Dalton, 2002; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McIntosh, 1992; McIntyre, 1997). It has been suggested that Whites do not grow up with a race discourse, do not think of their life choices in racial ways, and do not consider themselves as belonging to a racial group. Gary Howard (1999) puts it best when he suggests that Whites “can’t teach what they don’t know,” an appropriation of a statement from Malcolm X to mean that White educators cannot teach about race if they do not have knowledge of it. As a result of this oblivion and apparent lack of race knowledge, many White educators and researchers avoid studying racialization because “Race is not ‘their’ project” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003), a sentiment that Aanerud (1997) rejects when she claims that race affects and is fundamental to all our lives, including White lives. The challenge is often posed as the transformation of Whites into knowledgeable people about race.

Arguing that Whites are initially ignorant of race is helpful within certain parameters because it exposes their nonchalance and lack of urgency about its processes. Taken too far, it has unintended, but problematic consequences, one of which is that it promotes the “innocence” of Whites when it comes to the structures of race and racism. It constructs them as almost oblivious to the question of race and therefore obscures their personal and group investment in Whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998), as if racial oppression happens behind their backs rather than on the backs of people of color (Leonardo, 2005). This essay, however, argues that Whites do know a lot about race in both its everyday sense as a lived experience and its structural sense as a system of privilege. It attempts to “make race visible” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003), with the specific goal of “making Whiteness visible.” A critical reading of Whiteness means that White ignorance must be problematized, not in order to expose Whites as simply racist but to increase knowledge about their full participation in race relations. It also means that the racial formation must be read into the practices and texts that students and teachers negotiate with one another (Harris, 1999) as a move to affirm educators’ power to question narratives that have graduated to common sense or truth (Bishop, 2005), like the “fact” of White racial ignorance.

That Whites enter race discourse with a different lens than people of color, such as a “color-blind” discourse (Leonardo, 2006; Schofield, 2001), sometimes called “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2005), “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo & Smith, 1998), or “symbolic racism” (Kinder & Sears, 1981), should not be confused with the idea that Whites lack racial knowledge. Moreover, that they consistently evade a racial analysis of education should not be represented as their nonparticipation in a racialized order. In fact, it showcases precisely how they do perpetuate the racial order by turning the other cheek to it or pretending it does not exist. Constructing Whites as knowledgeable about race has two
advantages: one, it holds them self-accountable for race-based decisions and actions; two, it dismantles their innocence in exchange for a status as full participants in race relations. If constructing Whites as knowledgeable about race means they are full participants in racialization, then this means that race knowledge is shared between people of color and Whites as opposed to the idea that the former are the fundamental “race knowers” whereas the latter are “race ignorant.” This essay attempts to build a conceptual apparatus by which to understand White racial knowledge. It offers suggestions for antiracist practices in education that Whites as well as educators of color may appropriate when teaching, particularly about race. I argue that antiracist pedagogy cannot be guided by White racial knowledge for reasons I hope to make clearer.

The following account is an attempt to describe White racial knowledge, which is different from taking an inventory of White people’s racial knowledge. Following Roediger (1994), we may assert that White racial knowledge is not only false and oppressive, it is nothing but false and oppressive. If this smacks of “conspiracy theory,” David Gillborn (2006) reminds us that perpetuating racism does not require a conspiracy. If educators conduct schooling as usual, the results are predictable and consistent with racial stratification. If this sketch paints White racial knowledge into a corner and as seeming sinister, then it is in line with the argument that Whiteness and anything that comes with it, is violent and bogus. Its history is filled with stories of genocide, enslavement, and the general process of othering. Its way of knowing partitions the world for racial domination; therefore, White epistemology is caught up in a regime of knowledge that is inherently oppressive. Willis and Harris (2000) enter the battle over epistemology in the field of literacy by remarking,

The importance of the role that epistemology has played in the intersection of politics and reading research cannot be ignored. It serves as an explanation for how elite powerful groups, with shared interest in maintaining their status, have worked together to determine how literacy should be conceptualized, defined, taught, and assessed. Understanding the role of epistemology also helps to explain how these groups have worked to convince others of the veracity of their claims by suggesting that alternative ways of viewing the role of literacy in society are invalid because they fall outside of their ideological conceptions. (p. 77)

As an epistemology, Whiteness and its hirsute companion, White racial knowledge, seem to contain little hope. They are bound up with a White ideology that simultaneously alludes to and eludes a critical understanding of racial stratification. Against the suggestion that Whiteness be reconstructed, the neo-abolitionist movement suggests the complete dismantling of Whiteness, finding little redeeming value in it (hooks, 1997; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Roediger, 1991). Here, I am using ideology in the classical Marxist sense as an evaluative, rather than a neutral or descriptive, concept in order to assess group belief systems; that is, concrete forms of social thought (Shelby, 2003). In terms of a study of Whiteness, this critical moment of ideology allows for a race critique that highlights not just the descriptive properties of White racial knowledge but its functions and consequences.

However, White people’s racial knowledge is not synonymous with White racial knowledge. As concrete and thinking subjects of history, White people have some choices to make regarding how they will come to know the world. Sometimes, this knowledge comes in the form of endarkened epistemologies (Dillard, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Wright, 2003), as ways of knowing that are generated from the historical experiences of people of color and then appropriated by Whites. We often see this happen with
antiracist Whites who, while acknowledging their own White privilege, denounce White racism (Wise, 2002). Working against the invidious effects of White racial knowledge supports “teachers’ ability to create a professional community [that] is integral to improving teaching and student learning” (Ladson-Billings & Gomez, 2001, p. 676), which makes the problem of Whiteness central to the search for a countercommunity. In this journey, we give up hope in Whiteness as an oppressive racial epistemology but retain hope in White people as concrete subjects in the struggle against racial oppression.

White educators’ epistemological framework is not determined by their Whiteness, although there is certainly a preponderance of White people who interpret social life through White racial knowledge. For this reason, Whites are the usual suspects of White racial knowledge, the usual subjects for its discourse. That said, even people of color may embody White racial knowledge. Through his comparative studies of Brazilian and U.S. race relations, Jonathan Warren (2002) found that many Black Brazilians espouse a color-blind perspective that resembles that of many White Americans, despite the fact that their structural positions in society differ greatly. This is a compelling argument against the notion that while certainly a powerful influence on one’s epistemology, structural position does not determine how a person ultimately makes sense of that structure. Thus, the following argument is less an indictment of Whites and more a challenge, a gift that requires a countergift as response.

White Racial Knowledge: What Do Whites Know about Race?

It is understandable that studies of Whiteness have evolved in a way that constructs Whites as quite unknowledgeable about race, especially in light of the fact that they benefit from racial structures. In this sense, uncritical studies of Whiteness have fallen victim to a hegemonic assumption about race, in this case, that Whites do not know much about race and therefore must be taught about it. Usually, this means that people of color become the tutors for Whites, the ones “tapping Whites on the shoulder” to remind them how they have “forgotten” about race once again. Nieto (2003) proclaims, “White educators need to make the problem of racism their problem to solve” (p. 203; italics in original). White racial knowledge is an epistemology of the oppressor to the extent that it suppresses knowledge of its own conditions of existence.

It works to make Whiteness visible against White racial knowledge’s insistence on maintaining its own invisibility. It comes with the realization that “even though no one says it, race matters [sic]” (Enciso, 2003, p. 156). In her study of fourth and fifth grade classrooms, Enciso finds that “the real is mediated.” Her evidence supports the idea that race is a structuring principle that must be interpreted in classroom interactions, not as a naturally occurring phenomenon but part of the assumptions that ultimately inform how people construct their world. Furthermore, she resists the individualistic rendition of race as explainable ultimately through interpersonal relations and places it rightly in “systematic constructions of dichotomies, coherences, repetitions, and rationales” (p. 162), a condition that is additive to White students’ education but subtractive for most minority youth (Valenzuela, 1999, 2002). Freire (1970/1993) has insisted that when groups are involved in relations of oppression, the beneficiaries of their structures perpetuate a system whereby they are absolved of any holistic understanding of its processes. However, Freire asks educators to be critical of such myths in one of the first steps toward a “pedagogy of the oppressed.”

As beneficiaries of racism, Whites have had the luxury of neglecting their own development in racial understanding, which should not be confused with racial knowledge. Whites forego a critical understanding of race because their structural position is both
informed by and depends on a fundamentally superficial grasp of its history and evolution (Mills, 1997). This fact does not prevent Whites from realizing their position of privilege, which is a pedagogical task. It points out the possibility of being "pulled up short" (Gadamer’s phrase) when life events “interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294; Gadamer, 1975). Taken racially, I am arguing that Whites may experience being pulled up short in order that they experience a “loss [that] can be an opening to recognize perspectives that [they] tend to dismiss or ignore when life is going [their] way” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 297). Racially pulled up short, Whites realize that they have forsaken a “clearer, more honest, and deep understanding” of race in exchange for a delusionary “condition of self-inflation.” To appropriate Kerdeman, pulled up short counters a certain White bidalgusmo (Rimonte, 1997), or son of God status, and opens them to the humble condition of human fallibility.

This pedagogical realization is arguably what makes McIntosh’s description of White privilege so powerful. Its value lies in its ability to engage, even to surprise Whites in realizing the fact of their racial power. I would argue that many Whites are surprised not because they did not know their power, but they did not realize that people of color knew it as well. That Whites then understand and name the basis of racial power in White supremacy is another matter altogether, which requires an epistemology of color to the extent that this is possible for Whites. A deep engagement of race and racism by Whites contradicts their ability to enforce efficiently the differential treatment of people of color. Otherwise, Whites would have to consider their benefits as unearned and arbitrary, and at the expense of people of color. Of course, this does not speak for all Whites, but for the collectivity known as Whiteness. As utilized in this essay, the term Whiteness refers to a collective racial epistemology with a history of violence against people of color.

Whites are the subjects of Whiteness, whereas people of color are its objects. All Whites benefit from racist actions whether or not they commit them and despite the fact that they may work against them. Bonilla-Silva (2004) uses the term White to denote “traditional” Whites, such as established Euro-Americans, but also includes more recent White immigrants, and increasingly, assimilated White or light-skinned Latinos, and certain Asian groups. We may take issue with Bonilla-Silva’s classifications, but he complicates the category of “White” by pointing out its flexibility to include and exclude groups based on the historical conjuncture of Whiteness. One only needs to consider how Irish and British in the United States live in relative racial harmony despite their longstanding ethnic animosities toward each other (Ignatiev, 1995). Consider also the racial position of Arab Americans, currently classified by the U.S. census as White, but whose racial affiliation has witnessed a shift since 9/11. In short, Whiteness is an objective yet flexible racial force that is supraindividual and “destabilizing the category ‘White’ [sic] shakes the very foundation on which racial differentiation and inequality is built” (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2005, p. 102).

Whiteness is also vulnerable when knowledge about its unspoken structures is formulated and used to subvert its privileges. Such knowledge can come from Whites themselves, but is not generated from their social position or experience. Rather, it comes from the experiences of people of color. This point does not suggest that people of color are “right” by virtue of their identity but that racial analysis begins from their objective social location. Even when racial analysis centers Whiteness, it must do so from the analytics of the racially oppressed (Leonardo, 2005). Because White racial knowledge comes from a particular point of privilege, it is often evasive, which leads Margaret Hunter (2002) to assert that, “Whites’ unspoken knowledge works as a barrier to antiracist edu-
cation because it denies the reality of racism and it maintains the invisibility of whiteness as a racial identity” (p. 257).

As White children are socialized into everyday life and schooling, they learn their place in the racial hierarchy. They begin to know who they are. By “knowing,” I do not suggest a conscious, self-present mode of thinking, but rather a social condition of knowledge, sometimes buried in the unconscious, sometimes percolating to the level of consciousness. It is less an act by the knowing White subject and more of an awareness of one’s racial condition that may escape critical scrutiny. For example, White children learn but rarely question history books that speak almost exclusively of their accomplishments, distorted as these accounts may be (Loewen, 1995), that literature breathes their civilized culture (Takaki, 1993), and that science verifies their superiority as a people (Stepan, 1990). Very quickly, they build a racial cosmology where they assume a place of selfhood whereas people of color pose as the other or as interlopers. From this learning, Whites gain valuable knowledge about the racial order, such as with whom they should associate, play, and later date or marry. Whites’ racial knowledge develops into a particular racial self-understanding that begins with a sense of belonging in two ways. One, Whites are born into a world that is racially harmonious with their sense of self. In the film Color of Fear, Loren remarks that Whites do not have to think about their place in society because they exist in a world that tells them who they are, from day one. They do not experience the self-doubts about identity that many people of color go through in their search for belonging. Growing up White in America has its own challenges, but it is a development rarely bound up with the question, “What does it mean to be White?” because to be White means to belong. Two, it does not take long for White children to recognize that the world belongs to them, in the sense that Whites feel a sense of entitlement or ownership of the material and discursive processes of race (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). From the means of production to the meanings in everyday life, Whites enjoy a virtual monopoly of institutions that make up the racial landscape.

White knowledge is also about knowing where to traverse the social landscape. They know that Blacks live in ghetto spaces, that barrios are replete with Latinos, if not Mexicans (in the case of Los Angeles), and that Chinatown has good “ethnic” foods. Often, Whites avoid such spaces altogether either out of fear of crime or discomfort with a different cultural (sometimes third-worldish) repertoire. In the former, Whites rationalize their fear of ghettos and barrios due to their higher crime rates compared with suburbs. In the latter, Whites feel anxious about the “strange” sounding syllables of Asian languages or the informal economy of ethnic enclaves. They are indeed a long way from the confines of The Gap and Starbucks.

During a class exercise led by a group of my students, the presenters asked their peers, “What are the advantages to your racial identity?” Significantly, Whites answered that they experience freedom in mobility. By and large, they confessed that they felt little prohibition from travel or neighborhood selection on the basis of racial considerations or fear of racial violence. White racial knowledge is the ability to imagine oneself in any space, untethered by the concern, “Will there be people like me (other Whites) living there?” Of course, many Whites cannot afford to purchase a house in particular neighborhoods or travel to expensive resorts, but these are economical, not racial, reasons. Furthermore, when it concerns White fears of minority violence, be it in the form of drive-by shootings or random crime, we have to consider the fact that such fears have little basis in fact since most violent crimes are intraracial, such as Black-on-Black gang or drug activity.

Likewise, my students of color saw advantages to their identity, such as the ability to speak a language besides English in the case of Latinos and the strength of a group
to withstand centuries of oppression in the case of African Americans. However, it was noted that although these examples are personally felt advantages, they are not necessarily structural advantages. In the case of bilingualism, a wave of antibilingual education initiatives is cresting over the nation, led arguably by California’s Proposition 227. Latinos are constantly told where they can speak their language, from the workplace to public schools. In the case of slavery and its legacies, for Blacks there is no structural advantage attached to it. They are victims of explicit racial profiling and implicit cultural rules of etiquette and social behavior, such as interracial dating. Students of color recognized that self and group pride do not equate with structural advantage.

White racial knowledge is knowing how the world works in racially meaningful ways, but avoiding naming it in these terms. Whites know how to talk about race without actually having to mention the word, opting instead for terms such as “ethnicity,” “nationality,” “background,” asking questions like “What are you?” or that most veiled of all euphemisms, “Where are you from?” When a person of color names a state (e.g., New York), the question is restated as, “No, where are you really from?” Moreover, knowing how to invoke the concept of racism without having to utter the word is a trademark of even the liberal White discourse. Manning Marable (2002) found common substitutions, like “the country’s racial picture,” “the overall racial climate,” “relations between Americans of different races and ethnic backgrounds,” “racial matters,” “the race theme,” “an incendiary topic,” “this most delicate and politically dangerous of subjects”…“the state of race relations,” “the racial front,” “black-white relations”…(p. 46). In fact, Whites spend a lot of time talking about race, often coded/coated in apparently racially neutral, or color-blind, terms (Myers & Williamson, 2001; Schofield, 2003). In Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) surveys of Black and White racial attitudes in the Detroit area, he concludes that “[W]hites avoid using direct racial references and traditionally ‘racist’ language and rely on covert, indirect, and apparently nonracial language to state their racial views” (p. 153). Moreover, his research team found, “Only a handful of white respondents did not say something that was problematic at some point in their interview” (p. 143).

Of course, things may change when Whites are exclusively around other Whites. David Roediger (1991) says as much when he describes his childhood experience in the Introduction to The Wages of Whiteness,

Even in an all-white town, race was never absent. I learned absolutely no lore of my German ancestry and no more than a few meaningless snatches of Irish songs, but missed little of racist folklore. Kids came to know the exigencies of chance by chanting “Eany, meany, miney, mo/Catch a nigger by the toe” to decide teams and first batters in sport. We learned that life—and fights—were not always fair: “Two against one, nigger’s fun.” We learned not to loaf: “Last one in is a nigger baby.” We learned to save, for to buy ostentatiously or too quickly was to be “nigger rich.” We learned not to buy clothes that were bright “nigger green.” (p. 3)

Roediger’s suggestion is that White racial knowledge exists and is a particular way of knowing—rather than the absence of it—that is intimate with what it means to be White. White racial knowledge is comprised of a constellation of metaphors used to define Whites’ sense of self and group in opposition to a denigrated other: in this case, Blacks (see also Giroux, 1997).

In Michael Moore’s award winning documentary about gun violence, Bowling for Columbine, Charlton Heston reasoned that we have such high rates of violence in the United States because of a long history of ethnic differences. Curiously, the NRA spokesman found that gun homicides were a result of ethnic differences, rather than a product
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of a fundamentally, racially divided society. To Heston, the existence of these differences was the root of such problems, with fantasies of a homogeneous White society coming through loud and clear. This episode also shows another aspect of White racial knowledge. While they may claim that they know very little about race, Whites suddenly speak volumes about it when their racial ideology is challenged. This happens in university courses where Whites become animated about race and assert their knowledge when their perceptions of the world are questioned. It may surprise the educator that for a group that claims racial ignorance, Whites can speak with such authority and expertise when they do not like what they hear. Of course, as this essay argues they are indeed experts and authorities on race.

Knowing how to act in racially “acceptable” ways is a form of knowledge that Whites develop in their everyday life. For example, it is often touted that people of color “play the race card.” When Johnny Cochran invoked the issue of race during the O. J. Simpson trial, Whites were aghast at the suggestion that the case had anything at all to do with race, or at least that it was tangential to the proceedings. Cochran was accused of making the case racial when race was apparently irrelevant. However, one does not have to look farther than the Loving v. Virginia case of 1967 to understand that miscegenation, or interracial marriage, is a racially charged issue with (Funderberg, 1994) most Whites. Inscribed by a history of antimiscegenation, the Simpson case was already racial; Cochran did not have to make it so (Leonardo, 2003a). Whites reacted in racially significant ways to the case, which showcased their racial knowledge. They projected racialism onto people of color, removing themselves as alibis, or nonracial spectators, rather than participants in the racialization process. In other words, Whites often play the race card as a sign of their investment in Whiteness and as a way to direct the public discourse in terms acceptable to them (Lipsitz, 1998).

In my courses, through much dialogue my students and I have discovered that Whites live with race everyday of their lives. As in the movie, American History X, some White students admit that they learn racial lessons in their daily interaction with the world, usually with their family. The challenge is to find a condition whereby this knowledge is made visible. In response to our readings of Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), Frederick Douglass’s (1982) autobiography, or Peggy McIntosh’s (1992) essay on White privilege, White students confessed that they have memories of race that they rarely speak about or analyze. Given the discursive space, Whites tell narratives about moments when dating a Black man, for example, brought out the worst in their friends and family. That is, what was otherwise a “nonracial” home discourse became racial when a person of color was introduced as a potential, albeit unwelcome, visitor. In her essay, one student wrote a poignant story about having left her school and then receiving a letter from one of her former classmates, informing her that a “nigger” now sits in her old seat. Not to worry, the friend added, because the class would make sure she never felt comfortable. A selective group of White students reflected on their own investment in, experience with, and knowledge of race. However, not all Whites respond to racial analysis in such an embracing way. Usually, resistance and evasion are more common.

In what might be called an “ideal type” in Max Weber’s (1978) sense of it, a White student played the race card in the most prototypical way. During a class discussion, the student confessed to me that she had been feeling unaffirmed because of her peers’ negative reactions to her ideas about race. She concluded that she felt this slight was due to her being a “nonminority,” that is, her status as a White person. After I addressed her observations and offered some advice, she decided to complain publicly to the class during a subsequent session, the main thrust being that her thoughts about race were not treated seriously because she was White. She saw this as a problem if sensitivity about diversity
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included White participation. On this last point, she was on the right track. Based on this incident and the concerns I have about White racial knowledge, I would like to offer some analysis.

First, the student should be commended for feeling empowered to confront her peers and communicate her feelings and observations about race. Dialogues about race are never easy and entrance to them is most awkward for Whites. Her desire to publicly confront her peers is not a problem in and of itself. Second and more problematically, her racial assumptions are symptomatic of the way that many Whites play the race card, an aspect of White racial knowledge. In this particular case, throughout the semester this student received criticisms from peers of all races. In fact, her most vocal critic was another, albeit radical, White student. That the student in question interpreted her “victimization” as resulting from her peers’ racialization of her as a White woman begs some questions, one of which is, Why did she fail to observe that other White students in the class did not feel victimized on the basis of their race? In other words, how was she somehow singled out on the basis of her race, whereas other Whites were not?

To address this question, it is important to remember that when personally confronted with a negative situation, Whites interpret it as racial prejudice against the group. My student may have overlooked the more obvious reason for her peers’ disagreements with her, that is, they found her ideas problematic. Her discursive reversal is not hard to imagine when we consider that Whites, for example, oppose affirmative action based on the perception that it disadvantages them, rather than defining it as a historical form of corrective intervention. Whites are comfortable with constructing racial knowledge when they feel threatened. Racial knowledge here means that the person perceives the group victimized by another group (even if this may not be the case) and speaks out in explicitly racial ways. In other words, this incident is an instance of throwing the White race card. However, when situations are positive and preserve group power, Whites claim that their advantages stem from individual merit, that is, nonracial, deserving, and neutral. This suggests that Whites know when to invoke race in a manner that maintains their “innocence.” In fact, it is at this point when White racial knowledge mysteriously transforms into racial ignorance. Whites suddenly become oblivious to the racial formation.

This case also points out another important element in White racial knowledge. When dialogue is without tension, Whites are willing to enter racial dialogue. For example, they enjoy discussions about diversity. What educator wants to be perceived as antidiversity these days? When discussions become tense or uncomfortable and people of color show some anger or outrage, Whites’ racial resolve wanes and opting out of race dialogue becomes convenient. It becomes too difficult, too much of a strain, and too dangerous. Their participation becomes strenuous and the journey arduous. People of color do not enjoy the same choice because understanding racism and formulating accurate racial knowledge are intimate with the search for their own humanity. As Hurtado (1996) has found, Whites selectively participate in racial dialogue when it serves their needs, which is more often driven by the desire “not to look racist” than by a real commitment to end racism through honest race work.

When threatened, Whites play the “generalization card.” That is, they challenge sociological knowledge of race with the notion that not all Whites benefit from racism or that talks of White supremacy paint an otherwise complex group with too broad of a stroke. They may play the “exception-to-the-rule” card, or elevating individual people of color who have “made it” (Rains, 1997). They personalize what is at heart an institutional analysis. In these instances where race is named, Whites transform into many of the charges they make against people of color (e.g., irrational, emotional, and using identity politics). In the beginning of a course, instructors may remind students that sociological
analysis is not about them per se, as I do; but when discussions become tense yet insightful, Whites perceive generalizations to be about them, as individual persons. Students of color also personalize institutional knowledge, preventing them from apprehending the racial totality, but the consequences are different when Whites derail knowledge of racial patterns. When minorities resist sociological knowledge of race, they further their own oppression; when Whites resist, they further their own supremacy.

In order to maintain their previous knowledge of race, Whites may disrupt radical discussions of racism with exceptions-to-the-rule in efforts to redirect race discourse from an institutional knowledge base to a personal one. As a result, White racial knowledge constructs the formation on its head rather than on its feet. Rather than speak of patterns, it would speak of exceptions. Thus, it fails to understand the racist and pervasive underpinnings of White society. Rather than use generalizations as evidence of a significant, and sometimes growing, problem, White racial knowledge would characterize generalizations as part of the problem. Generalizations are branded “politically incorrect” since they smack of stereotyping. And rather than scrutinize specific forms of racism that need to be combated, colorblind Whites would rather offer examples of “racial progress,” as if the interrogation of racism were on the opposite side of progress. The most common instance of this last point is Whites’ refusal to engage seriously the legacy of slavery because it ended over a century ago. Although American society has indeed changed and slavery is now outlawed, White knowledge fails to grasp the devastating effects of slavery on Black communities, psyche, and lack of material prosperity today.

In order for White racial knowledge to free itself of erroneous assumptions, Whites must be self-critical on a couple of fronts. First, they must disinvest in the notion that they do not know much about race. Second, they can critically decode much of what comes across as “race free” discourse and analyze the racial underpinnings of White knowledge. Third, Whites must learn to be racially sensitive about contexts when race seems a legitimate theme to invoke and ask why it was relevant to them then and not other times. Finally, Whites can participate in building an antiracist pedagogy against White mystifications, and displacing White racial knowledge from its privileged position as the center of classroom discourse.

Notes on Antiracist Pedagogy: Decentering White Racial Knowledge in the Classroom

Antiracist pedagogy is informed by a constellation of discourses and sets of concepts. It also inheres several targets for analysis, one of which is White racial knowledge. Although it certainly comes with teaching methods, antiracism should not be thought of as a method, just as Ana-Maria Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1998) warn against treating Paulo Freire as a method. By portraying antiracism as a discourse, I am suggesting that it comes with a certain family of concerns organized into an overarching project. Antiracism makes White supremacy and its daily vicissitudes a central concern for educators of any racial background. In effect, antiracism is the recognition and critique of White racial knowledge. It is informed by Hunter’s (2002) suggestion of decentering the often White and male standpoint guiding courses on race and ethnicity (see also Hunter & Nettles, 1999).

White supremacy is a specific form of modern racism and is the inscribing force that makes other forms of racism thrive; that is, Whites benefit from race relations in absolute ways. Non-White racism is certainly a problem but to equate it with White supremacy is to forget that Euro-White American hegemony is global and remains unmatched by either Japan’s imperialist history or China’s economic power in Asia. We can say that
understanding White supremacy and undercutting White racial knowledge form the problematic of antiracist analysis and pedagogy. Antiracism is first and foremost a political project such that it is a particular form of work and commitment. In other words, its essence is not a method, a profession, or a curriculum unit. Antiracism is a project of negation to the extent that its main target of critique is the condition that makes White supremacy a structured, daily possibility for many students of color (Leonardo, 2003b).

Whiteness should not be confused with White ethnic cultures, some forms of which may be benign or even critical (see Leonardo, 2002). By contrast as a racial collective, Whiteness is associated with colonization, takeover, and denial. We may go a long way with the White neo-abolitionist movement in asserting that the greatest problem of our time is the White race but find it necessary to qualify Roediger’s (1997) assertion that the White race does not have a culture (see also Ignatiev, 1997). A White racial culture exists, which is intimately linked with a certain way of knowing. Whites as a race appear to have a culture, if by culture, we accept Geertz (1994) and Erickson’s (2005) definition that it signifies the combination of material rituals, symbolic meanings, and sense-making strategies that a group shares. It is summed up in this essay as a way of knowing the world, an epistemology. We only have to point out that people do not seem to question the existence of Black or Latino culture, but have a more difficult time naming White racial culture.

When we recall lynching practices in the United States, we name White racial culture whereby Whites from young to old gathered to pose for pictures eerily circulated like postcards. From this cultural practice, it is convenient for White children and their parents and grandparents to read the event from the perspective of White racial knowledge; along with partitioning the material world, Whites have also divided the epistemological world and segregated counterknowledge from White common sense. It does not mean that Whites do not harbor contradictory feelings about these and similar events like them in history, such as photos of boarding schools for Native Americans, but that the totality of White uptake of race relations informs and creates White racial culture and knowledge.

The concept of racism is central to understanding the American landscape and history. However, because of the distorting effects of Whiteness I have found through teaching that it is paradoxically both underused and overused in education classroom discourse. It is underused for the reasons stated above, that is, guided by White racial knowledge race is perceived as divisive and therefore should be downplayed. In general, White students avoid it, fearing that it would make them a target for criticism from people of color. That said, after having established a level of rapport with my students and peeling away the stigma attached to the term, I noticed that it quickly becomes overused. By this, I mean that anything racist becomes branded as a form of racism without distinctions. In these instances, analysis of racism is stripped of its radical, objective thrust and differences between its forms are leveled and equated with one another.

For example, Latinos are deemed racist when they exhibit hostility toward Whites; that is, racial hatred. Asians are deemed racist when they express stereotypical assumptions about Blacks; that is, racial prejudice. Blacks are said to be racist when they argue for Afrocentric schools; that is, racial segregation. As a result, every group is constructed as an equal opportunity racist and racism becomes the problem of all racial groups, not just Whites. Of course, these situations represent symptoms of a racist society that educators must mediate and problematize. In my courses, I have found it helpful to make distinctions between “interminoritarian politics,” minority-to-majority attitudes, and White supremacy in order to avoid confusing differences in kind with differences in degrees. White racial knowledge seduces students to equate these historical forms and antiracist
pedagogy differentiates them. White-to-minority racism is different in kind from the struggles found between groups of color or animosity from minorities to Whites.

I make it clear to my students that although Latinos may harbor hostilities toward Whites based on race, Latinos do not own the apparatuses of power to enforce these feelings. Of course, a critical educator would mediate these animosities in a historically sensitive manner by acknowledging their root sources. Likewise, I point out that when Asians express racial prejudice against Blacks, although these actions must be denounced, it must be remembered that this is a result of the middleman social position that Asians occupy as a buffer within the historic Black–White anxiety (see Leonardo, 2000). In other words, as the “model minority” Asians are often used as a foil to discipline the Black and Latino population. Last, Afrocentric or Native American-based schools are compromises within a public school system that fails to meet their needs. It would be inaccurate to call their attempts to address their own community’s needs as a form of segregation, as many White students are wont to do.

If segregation represents a group’s institutional attempts to maintain power relations, then efforts by racial minorities to address their own community issues through self-separation cannot be called “self-segregation” or “reverse segregation.” Minority-based schools do not promote the same segregation we saw earlier when Whites segregated Blacks into their ghettoized neighborhoods and prevented them from integrating into the nation’s schools (Kozol, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993). If segregation is an action perpetrated by a group on another in order to maintain group power, then it is difficult to claim that Blacks are segregating Whites through Afrocentric schools in order to maintain Black power. In the same light, Native American nations, Latino-based organizations, or Asian-American ethnic enclaves do not represent attempts by these communities to segregate Whites into their own sectors, let alone ghettoize them.

This colorblind sentiment is showcased in a statement made by Sharon Browne, the leading attorney for the California-based Pacific Legal Foundation concerning a Seattle lawsuit that has reached the Supreme Court (see Blanchard, 2006). The suit involves parents who question the school district’s use of race as one of the determining factors in students’ access to particular neighborhood schools. Browne remarks, “By using race as a factor...they’re teaching our kids that race matters. That is just plain wrong, and it’s not the type of teaching that our school districts should be doing” (p. A8). Only White racial knowledge could suggest that “race doesn’t matter” and in the same suit invoke the Civil Rights discourse as a line of defense against using racial considerations in public policy. It takes the word, as opposed to the spirit, of the Civil Rights Movement to suggest the very opposite of its intent that race matters. In the same school district, Seattle director of the Office of Equity and Race Relations, Dr. Caprice Hollins constructs a color-conscious website that names “cultural racism” as the normalization of rugged individualism and Standard English, among other things (Carlton, 2006). She receives criticism from Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, for challenging one of the “founding principles” of the U.S. nation: mainly individualism. One wonders if the Institute would also consider slavery and genocide as founding principles of U.S. nation creation.

Through my teaching, I have found that the concept of White supremacy is helpful in making distinctions between different forms of racism. For instance, whereas racism has been relativized to mean any form of racial animus stripped of its comparative basis, White supremacy is less ambiguous at the level of terminology. This does not mean abandoning the concept of racism altogether, but points out the usefulness of invoking White supremacy in particular contexts. I go a long way with David Gillborn (2005),
who deems education policy that does not make central the problem of racism as an act of White supremacy. He explains,

This critical perspective is based on the recognition that race inequity and racism are central features of the education system. These are not aberrant nor accidental phenomena that will be ironed out in time, they are fundamental characteristics of the system. *It is in this sense that education policy is an act of white supremacy.* (pp. 497–498; italics in original)

The concept of White supremacy names the group in question. It is unequivocal in its political capacity to name Whites as the group enforcing its racial power. In contrast, the notion of Black, Asian, or Latino supremacy lacks any solid historical reference. There is no such thing. Two, supremacy is also unambiguous; it signifies a group’s attempt to establish absolute control. It is clearly a representation of both personal value systems and institutional behavior because it invokes images of Klan activity and White racial riots, but also Whites’ daily feelings of superiority. Here again, White racial knowledge becomes a challenge, for it constructs White supremacy as a thing of the past, or at least as insignificant as Strom Thurmond’s outdated beliefs.

Concerning White privilege, it is common to argue that Whites benefit from race structures in differing degrees. Because of other intersecting systems or relations, it is not unusual to argue that Whites do not benefit equally from race (Leonardo, 2005; Mills, 1997; Newitz & Wray, 1997). On the level of empirical knowledge, this seems harmless enough. For example, there are poor Whites, White women, and gay and lesbian Whites who suffer oppression. However, it is conceptually misleading to suggest that certain White subgroups benefit less from race than their counterparts who are rich Whites, White men, and heterosexual Whites. It seems even more questionable to suggest that “White trash” is somehow a racist insult, as Newitz and Wray (1997) claim.

By contrast, I argue that *all Whites benefit equally from race and racism, but they do not all benefit equally from other social relations.* People are instantiations of many relations grafted all at once on their bodies, which creates a nexus of power relations, an interdependent system of forces. Given this state of affairs, it is still helpful to invoke a language of causality. Thus, we are warranted to suggest that White women, for example, are not less advantaged than White men with respect to race, but with respect to gender, which affects their overall relation to the totality of forces. That is, it is not White women’s place in race relations that causes their oppression but rather their place in gender relations. Likewise, the phrase “White trash” is a denigration of poor Whites’ economic and cultural location rather than a term of derision based on racial positionality. It is true that “White trash” contains a racial component. But structurally speaking, the exploitation that working-class Whites suffer is ameliorated by what DuBois (1935/1998) once called their “public and psychological wages” (see also Roediger, 1991). No doubt social relations intersect one another and a shift in one alters the overall relation of forces. Failing to provide students with a language of causality, educators forsake a compelling explanation for the particular benefits and burdens that a racial structure produces. This distinction is different from arguing that Whites do not benefit equally from race.

Another point that I teach my students is that antiracism is historically self-reflective. It fully appreciates the role that history plays in shaping today’s milieu. The legacy of slavery, Apartheid, anti-Coolie laws, immigration exclusion acts, territorial takeovers, and other crimes against racialized subjects of history are events from a hundred years ago that are regarded as if they happened yesterday. As antiracist educators, my students understand that our racialized present was not dropped from above by a Euclid-
ian observer, but rather that our current conditions were made possible by continuities in White treatment of people of color. On this point, I often take sports as an example. More than ever, today’s Black inner city youth are seduced by the spectacle of success in sports (see James, 2005). Many kids believe they can “be like Mike” (Jordan), move like Randy Moss, and swing like Sammy Sosa. In my courses on diversity, I link sports with slavery by explaining that during slavery, Africans were treated as repositories of White anxieties. Fearing carnal desires, the White imaginary invested the African body with sexual prominence and promiscuity. This spectacularization of the Black body happened in conjunction with the exploitation of African labor. During Jim Crow, Blacks filled Whites’ void by assuming the stage with White faces in minstrel shows. Again, Blacks provided a convenient spectacle for White audiences. Today, basketball, baseball, and football are no minstrel show but they function in similar ways to showcase the spectacle we know as the Black body.

Critical scholars and pedagogues face particular issues when teaching about race and antiracist work. They understand teaching antiracism to be a social condition that they navigate aggressively and yet tenderly. Aggressively confronting the theme of racism is important because it does both student and instructor a disservice when we fail to name its contours in the most direct and demystifying way, much like White racial knowledge. Thus, in my courses I try to enter the discourse of race and critique its consequences with plain talk. By that, I do not suggest a discourse of transparency (see Aoki, 2000; Giroux, 1995; Lather, 1996). Instead, it is time to suggest that it is quite normal to overtly discuss race, over dinner at the restaurant to activities in the classroom, from the home to home-room. For too long, race discussions have been stifled because of the conservative and even liberal notion that any talk of race is, by default, recreating the problem of race; that is, it reifies what is at heart a social construction. Of course, this is a mystification in itself because it mistakes invoking race with its fetishization. Discussions of race may fetishize the concept, but this is a risk worth taking and on which any critical work reflects.

Whenever I discuss the topic of race, I make sure that I do not stammer or speak in a hesitating manner, whisper when I say “Black” or “White,” or act incredulous when I cite or hear examples of racism as if surprised that certain acts of hatred persist in our post-Civil Rights era. Like other academic subjects, race is part of normal classroom discourse: as normal as Newton in physics or Shakespeare in English. I have tried to remove the “controversial” stigma that White racial knowledge puts on race discourse. Whether or not I have been successful is another matter. However, I have also noticed that it means something different for a scholar of color to invoke race and this is where certain distinctions would help. When a minority scholar speaks plain talk about race, she may be constructed as militant, as needlessly angry about relations that are, after all, “on their wane.” Thus, White racial knowledge constructs scholars who speak with such plainness about an existing problem as part of the problem because it assumes that the most functional way to deal with the situation is to focus on the “positive” relations between the races, not their insidious past.

Because race taps into students’ affective investments, I have found that it touches tender histories in their lives. This is what I mean when I say that I tread tenderly on the topic of race at the same time that I aggressively analyze it. For White students, it should be painful to hear that the White race has colonized and constructed a world after its own image. It is not easy for them to read that, as Massey and Denton (1993) assert in their book, American Apartheid, Whites have intentionally segregated and ostracized Black people into ghettos. Many White students in education consider themselves decent, egalitarian people who believe in racial equality. However, they also frequently have a superficial understanding of race. Likewise, students of color are surprisingly deprived
of a classroom discourse that extends beyond essentialisms. That said, students of color have the experiential basis to understand the effects of race on their lives in a way that White students, who often claim no racial affiliation or knowledge, do not. The various examples mentioned here are hard for students of color to hear as well because they jog memories passed down from their parents and communities. Sometimes they may even resist Massey and Denton’s argument that Blacks have been ghettoized in such a complete and enduring manner like no other group in American history for two reasons.

First, they refuse to be classified as “ghetto,” the image of which has been source of shame and embarrassment when spoken outside of certain Black contexts. Second, because they are college or graduate students, they are a selective group of people who have “made it out of the ghetto” and believe it is a discrete possibility for others who work hard. Of course, we know from Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* that housing segregation leads to paltry material conditions in schools for predominantly Black populated areas. We can extend a similar argument for Latino *barrios*, and inner cities with Asian refugees. Here we see that teaching antiracism necessitates a simultaneous sensibility for class relations, or race’s material cognate, especially when we recognize that capitalism has wreaked havoc on people of color.

Race is completely socially constructed, but we have invested it with material institutions. In its modern sense, race does not mean “group,” although some students would like to construct it that way. If the concept of race were to equate with the notion of group—the idea being that groups have always oppressed each other throughout history—this would effectively cancel out the particularities of our current racial formation. If race were to equate with the commonsense understanding of it as “group difference,” then the Trojans were another race from the Greeks, the Romans just another race of people. In its modern sense, race is the creation of what many race scholars refer to as skin color stratification. That is, although it is possible to refer to race as a trope in biblical times, this is not its modern sense. The basic question of “What is race?” must be asked, something that White racial knowledge assumes is a relatively settled issue. Race is not just a figment of the imagination, but what Ruben Rumbaut (1996) calls a *pigment of the imagination*. Its genealogy is coterminous with the creation of science and its eugenics movement, its “enlightenment” philosophy of the other from Kant to Kierkegaard, its cultural imperialism of orientalist proportions, its colonization of the Americas and Africanization of slavery, and its global exploitation of non-White labor for unimaginable profits (see Allen, 2002; Mills, 1997; Said, 1979). In order to discuss race in its specific and historical form, this modern sense of racialization is what my students and I first try to understand. Any talk of visions of race must initially discuss its propensity for divisions. That is, Whites created race in order to divide the world, to carve it up into enlightened and endarkened continents, and to delineate the White subject from the Black object of history.

That race divides the U.S. nation as well as others around the world certainly can be proven. After all, race was a White European concept created for the benefit of Whites and burden of non-Whites. However, this insight provides little guidance into the workings of race relations or how it worked out that Whites have benefited from racism in an absolute way. That is, if race divides the world, how did Whites come out as the subjects of its specious history? Marxist struggle against capital should complement any antiracist work, but we must also be reflective about its inadequacy for explaining why—outside of Japanese exceptionalism—Euro and American Whites have exploited the international labor force, frequently made up of third world non-White people. It is easy to see that the race-divides-the-nation thesis is more of an evasion and mystification of White privilege rather than an honest analysis of it, because “We cannot prepare realistically for our
future without honestly assessing our past (Bell, 1992, p. 11). White racial knowledge fails to ask why history worked out the way it did, what actions White Europeans took to secure their domination, or the hegemonic assumptions about the goodness of Whiteness in everyday discourse. Race invests skin color with meaning and erects institutions around it to modernize its processes and establishes a hierarchy based on skin color, or what Bonilla-Silva (2004) calls “pigmentocracy” (p. 226). In order to transcend current race relations, which is a concrete possibility, we must first go through race in order to have any hopes of going beyond it.

Note

1. The gift concept was offered by Marcel Mauss (1967) based on his ethnographic studies of the Melanesian islands where he found an economy based on gift-giving as a form of challenge. In The Gift, Mauss documented the process whereby Melanesian natives obligated each other through gifts, instituting power in favor of the giver. In order to cancel out the gift, the receiver must respond with a different and deferred gift, usually raising the stakes and obligating the original giver. This process goes on and on in order to balance power relations. The gift concept has since been appropriated by several theorists, among them Georges Bataille, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Baudrillard. In education, McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen (2000) applied the gift concept to the study of Whiteness.

References


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Zeus Leonardo


