

ARTICLES

PEDAGOGIES OF RACE: THE POLITICS OF WHITENESS IN AN AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES COURSE

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. . .the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.
Toni Morrison

Since the election of President Obama I have received an increase in color-blind assertions from some students who argue that race is no longer an issue. Hence, we are all alike. When I begin to discuss institutional racism I am told that they “young folk” do not recognize racism and have friends from a variety of ethnicities. My courses focus less on individualized racism and more on the systemic nature of racism. Convenient racial blindness is an expedient position for white students and other members of the dominant culture. Too many African American students are silent about or unaware of the dominant influence of white supremacy in scholarship and culture. According to some students racism is somehow a relic from the older generation which they refuse to dust-off. Ironically, my students seem to find racial discourse a repugnant African American studies course exercise in a university, where the majority of the students are white, working to middle-class, who commute to a socioeconomic and racially segregated area in Midwestern urban area USA. Morrison’s opening epigraph generally encapsulates my classroom experience from many white students in my courses who are ignorant or prefer to be silent about broader racial issues facing people of color. I have had a few white students tell me that coming to the university provided them their first up-close experience interacting with African Americans. The putative nature of racism in American society suggests that many white students rarely had, or have, to be cognizant about issues of privilege and what it means to be white in America. Yet,

the inveterate practice of systemic racism reinforces an alterity concerning people of color, simultaneously granting a sociopolitical impunity for whites who can justify or ignore the cruel tyrannies visited on oppressed sectors. In the following paragraphs, I introduce a framework to guide a researcher in a pedagogical process of opening discussion about race and racism in a classroom where white students predominate and many are uncomfortable participating in dialogue about race at least when led by an African American woman. This framework rejects practices where an instructor attempts to detach or make invisible her/his racial and cultural positions which generally become apparent to those who listen during lecture.

When the subject of racism is introduced students want to assure themselves, others in the class, and their black woman instructor about their friendships with other people of color, if white, or with whites, if they are people of color, and each other. Hence in their circle of friends the color of one's skin is meaningless. I appear to be the race ogre forcing their recognition of race and racism as experienced by people of color. As a black woman instructor I am aware of perceptions and reactions of students to me as a facilitator and the annoyance and discomfort of the subject matter for some students. Who and what I am and do has an impact on the tone and direction of students during the semester. Regardless of the content area professors of color are received quite differently than white males and in some cases white females. There are a number of studies—psychological, sociological, and educational—indicating that black women in higher education are viewed as less positive and less competent (Parks and Kennedy 2007, Jones 2004, Harlow 2003, Gasman 2009, Milner 2007, E. B. Brown 2008, L. Brown 2008, Ransby 2008). Often when race, racism, or gender are the subjects for discussion black women are disregarded as conversant because our statements, insights, and responses are dismissed as angry and confrontational despite our education, scholarship and epistemologies (Fordham 1993, Milner 2007, Lorde 1984). Some students seem annoyed that I continue discussions focusing on race in a course where African American is part of the title. It is frustrating for a facilitator to be stereotyped and dismissed by the participants. However, as poet, feminist, critic Audre Lorde (1984, 118) observed “refusing to see difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us.” In their ethnographic study of eighteen feminist college professors about meaningful dialogues about race and gender Maher and Tetreault (1993) indicate “the race and gender of the teacher, as well as the make-up of the class, will affect the intellectual focus; in our observation, the class which included a majority of students of color and had an African-American teacher fostered different dialogues about race and racism than one that was predominantly

white.” Lorde (1984, 124) asserted “Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation.” Race—like class and gender—is a social and cultural construct, not a biological fact, used to misrepresent, exploit, degrade, silence and dehumanize people of color concurrently its construction reinforces white supremacist practices; racism, likewise, is a consciousness where one must be persistent to end its ever present grasp.

Historian Leslie Brown finds that “education and the academy have changed dramatically since the 1960s, but they have not been transformed” (2008, 267). As mentioned previously a black woman’s experience in the academy is quite different than a white male’s. This point is also vividly illustrated by Roxanna Harlow in her study on the effect of race on college professors’ experiences and emotions where she reveals that “76 percent of the black professors reported that students questioned their competency, qualifications, and credibility” (2003, 352)¹. Significantly, she reports “most white professors did not mention challenges to their competency, an indication that they did not need to constantly prove and project intellectual authority” (359-360). Harlow stresses that the label of ‘angry black woman’ is a perception of black women who spend time doing serious work in the classroom and not living up to the expectation of being a “motherly” figure; consequently, “students may interpret their seriousness or businesslike approach within the framework of stereotypical images of black femininity: that is, that black women are angry and have an attitude” (2003, 357). Being categorized as “angry” by students is an antagonism that I have had to face as a knowledgeable speaking black woman and I understand that it is also an attempt to silence or discredit issues relative to an accepted understanding of history, culture and identity. A woman of color must anticipate resistance and on occasion hostility from students. Students need to know that “people of color are not white people with pigmented or colored skin” (Milner 2007, 389).

My courses satisfy a cultural requirement for graduation but they are not required. They may be the last time that some white students publicly address issues of race and racism directly, with individuals to whom they are unrelated and socially unfamiliar, so it is important that

¹ Black women’s experiences in the academy is discussed by many scholars: Elsa Barkley Brown, “Bodies of history,” *Telling Histories: Black Women’s Historians in the Ivory Tower*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008): 215-227. Barbara Ransby, “Dancing on the Edges of History, but Never dancing Alone,” *Telling Histories: Black Women’s Historians in the Ivory Tower*, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008): 240-251. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

they do so through class participation and in writing. Students must be active participants in their learning; to that end their voices need to be heard. “Working with white students on unlearning racism,” bell hooks maintains “one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict” (2003, 64). A classroom discussion concerning race and racism make some students uncomfortable perhaps boxed in and confined within the boundaries of racial propriety unable to articulate issues associated with race, racism and what it means to be anti-racist. In an attempt to alleviate a sense of captivity and establish a sense of community among all members of the class on the first day I greet them individually and have students activate their voices in small groups, immediately. Personal interaction helps establish a level of comfort and trust among other members in our learning community. By the time we become involved in readings and dialogues about race many students—of color and white—reveal racist or prejudicial beliefs and comments made in their communities or by family members. A student once announced that her father had been an office holding member of a KKK organization in state when she was a child. Students often feel the need to discuss individual rather than the systemic or institutional levels of race and racism.

To move beyond the “we are all the same” classroom didactic offered by some students, regarding race and racism, I prohibit the “liberal gesture” of ignoring race and use African American literature and critical race theory specifically focusing on the pedagogies of whiteness to enable frank discussions about race and the systemic nature of racism in our country and culture. To discuss race is risky and uncomfortable for many, perhaps most, of the participants. The academic practice of color-blind and culture-blind approaches “can potentially lead to the dangers of exploitation and misrepresentation of individuals and communities of color” (Milner 2007, 392). The un-naming or invisibility of whiteness appears to be a “gentlemen’s agreement” to which our culture acquiesces. When the influence of whiteness is made visible it makes some students uncomfortable. Other women or men of color must be specified—African American, Arab, Asians, Latinas, American Indians, West Indians, East Indians, Blacks, etc. It is essential to expose the invisibility of whiteness—that whiteness is the standard and people of color must be ethnically identified in research, academia, politics, culture and so on.

In her research about the ideologies of invisibility Margaret L. Andersen demonstrates that “there is increased recognition of ‘diversity in American society’ and, yet there is also a persistent belief among privileged groups that race does not matter. This belief keeps people blind to

the continuing differences in power and privilege that characterize U.S. society, making it difficult to generate public support for programs designed to reduce inequality” (2001, 190). From a psychological perspective, researchers Elizabeth R. Cole and Abigail J. Stewart (2001) argue against the strength and centrality of difference between races and genders because one group is presumed to be superior or “normal” (294). They argue that “. . .research on differences [is] more likely to cause harm and produce distorted and partial findings,. . .” (295). Although he details how to discuss racial issues in a present-day classroom, Grant (2003) advises instructors that for some students who are uncomfortable with racial discourse “. . .strive to steer discussions away from differences to decrease emotional tensions within the classroom. Stressing commonalities tends to be beneficial to discussants, especially on matters of race, culture and religion.” The kind gesture to avoid discussions of social injustice connected to race and racism depoliticizes and ignores white supremacy in favor of a romanticized social order that ignores the institutional degradations that people of color continue to suffer.

Sociologists Douglas Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis, and Paul R. Croll (2009, 404) ask the question “is whiteness in America as hidden as it would seem?” In their study, an assessment of whiteness theory, they maintain that whiteness is a position of privilege from where white folk look at themselves, others and society and it involves cultural practices “that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (406). When it comes to the sociopolitical environment—in employment, education, housing, and finances, for example—white privilege is invisible. In other words, whiteness is the norm people of color are expected to meet in mainstream North American society where underlying stratum operate to disempower them. Ideally in mainstream society, where diversity is the exterior ideal, meritocracy is the way individuals rise through the ranks. Yet, when it comes to employment the ability to network and be familiar with individuals in professions can determine, in some cases, who gets hired. Hence, achievement is sometimes overlooked because “it’s not what you know but who you know.” As they go about their day-to-day activities whites, generally, do not have to think about race. People of color are made to be cognizant of race. In the classroom, students seldom ponder the disparity and discrimination of the public educational systems. In my Midwestern urban commuter university the majority of students are white and, the majority of students matriculating in area city grade schools are African American who will probably never sit as university students because of a segregated underperforming educational system.

Generally, when students think about African American studies, Chicano studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies, they

may think of victims or exceptional people of color who seem to make important cameo appearances in history while often seemingly being subordinate to the larger historic events. Such haphazard placements in history or literature too often fail to detail how they have influenced and contributed to history, literature, politics, business, social justice and so on. Moreover “individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds may find it difficult to even recognize the salience, permanence, effects, and outcomes of racism because race and racism are so deeply rooted and embedded in our ways and systems of knowing and experiencing life” (Milner 2007, 390). Although we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Day as a national holiday many students only know King from his “I Have A Dream” speech and the fact he was assassinated. Too many students, for example, have told me that “I Have a Dream” is the extent of what they were taught in grade school regarding Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, to understand the positioning and achievements of people of color one needs to see the animus of whiteness; in other words, the acceptance of its sociopolitical influence while simultaneously being invisible to those influenced by it. Students reading Frederick Douglass’ 1845/2002 *Narrative*, wanted to concentrate on Douglass’ coming of age and overcoming the odds where the other enslaved folk were just accepting of their conditions. For many, Douglass’ enslavement like those of other blacks in his narrative was just an accepted part of our history and certainly something that is unacceptable today. To open discussions about race I introduce the sociological perspective of whiteness theory.

Building on the pioneering work of Ruth Frankenberg, sociological researchers Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll (2009, 406) created research based on three measurements that also represent the core assumptions of the field: “‘whiteness’ is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege, “second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which white people look at themselves and others, and at society. Third and most importantly, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.” For many students there appears to be incredulity attached to studying race—they would much prefer to focus on related issues of gender, class or any other “isms” rather than race. Racial issues, as applied to people of color, are sometimes dismissed as simply identity or victim politics. Frederick Douglass was born enslaved but he fought and escaped his bondage; he made a choice and somehow white patriarchy is perceived as having had limited influence, for some students. However, when color-blind ideology is presented with the prominence of white privilege in conjunction to the terrorisms of antebellum slavery discussions often white students move to the “wouldn’t you admit things have changed” (for African Americans)? Clearly, looking for a positive response we have moved away from “we are all the same.”

“Whites may be able to see and understand the ways that blacks and others have been disadvantaged by the racial system, but they tend instead to attribute their own success to individual effort and hard work”—meritocracy. (Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll 2009, 408). For a more effective pedagogical framework and to ease tension and reinforce the invisibility of whiteness we continue with our critical discussion of historical literature.

For many students Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* is their first experience reading a complete historical document written by a formerly enslaved individual. Douglass craves literacy, an end to his brutal enslavement, and offers an eloquently detailed description of his barbaric reality of growing into manhood during antebellum slavery. Although most students read it with early twenty-first century stereotyped sensibilities they are quite comfortable discussing what they see as the simple motivations and mind sets of the black enslaved and white enslavers. The enslaved, regardless of gender, are perceived as compliant, docile, ignorant, victims who haplessly accepted their servile fate while enslavers are viewed as cruel, southern masculine beings who followed the dictates of their sociopolitical environments. The enslaved are generally viewed by most members of the class as tragic black victims who accepted their fate not at all resistant to their oppression or oppressors. The general rule of thumb seemed to be that without collective armed struggle, or some continued physical uprising the enslaved recognized and accepted their fate. To encourage critical scrutiny, I asked if students think the enslaving whites saw themselves as evil/bad individuals? Overwhelmingly, most of the white students saw them as products of their environment—there was one white, female student who adamantly refused to go along with such a justification, maintaining they were well aware that they were benefiting from and abusing human beings. The reason for this question is one that I will return to later. During the semester each student is required to ask at minimum six thought provoking questions that has to do with race, gender, class or their intersections—questions that are not clearly answered in our texts. Through Douglass’ eyes students embrace and feel redemption for the “angelic” character, Sophia Auld, who begins to instruct him about the alphabet. In that instance, folk view Auld as bravely embodying heroic characteristics by turning her back on laws against teaching slaves to read, seeing young Douglass as brute property, and in general the dehumanization of the institution of slavery by granting him fundamental tools for freedom. When she is discovered by her husband and he explains the dangers of literacy for a slave and an enslaver she immediately stops and appears to feel betrayed by young Douglass. Yet, in that seminal moment as Douglass listens to her husband detail why literacy will forever unfit slaves for bondage he “understood the pathway

from slavery to freedom” (Douglass 2002, 364). Auld would be a truly heroic character if after she understood the magnitude of her act she continued to defy her husband and society by continuing to teach Douglass rather than becoming irritated and vigilant trying to make sure he curtailed all literary pursuits. Douglass’ eloquence causes some students to have a difficult time imagining him as property. Although he is articulate some students assume aspects regarding the ethnicity of unnamed individuals. Students identify with particular characters but in doing so they often posit racial and class qualities.

As an escaped fugitive, Douglass (1845/2002) thanks abolitionists Mr. David Ruggles and Reverend James W. C. Pennington, for example. An appreciative Douglass (1845/2002) writes, “I was relieved . . . by the humane hand of Mr. David Ruggles, whose vigilance, kindness, and perseverance, I shall never forget. I am glad of an opportunity to express, as far as words can, the love and gratitude I bear him” (423). The commonly accepted assumption was that the established, literate, resistant and revered Ruggles and Pennington were white males according to their magnanimous gestures and abolitionist politics. One white (graduate) student who prepared a power point presentation on that specific portion of the *Narrative* identified the men as white and obviously thought that there was no need to explore their race. Their confidence and status as men and prominent members of society meant they were white males, at least in the mind of this student and apparently the rest of the class. Douglass did not identify Ruggles and Pennington as black, Negro or other and this becomes a complicated aspect of the invisibility of whiteness; the assumption here was that the abolitionists lived lives of advantage and were generally believed to be Northern whites by many students. Scholastically the unwritten rule (gentlemen’s agreement) when discussing, writing or documenting people of color in any form (oral or written) is that they must be identified unlike whites who are considered the standard/invisible. Consequently, “whites’ racial identities tend to be less visible than those of individuals from other racial groups, and whites are less likely to see ways that they have been actively advantaged by being white” (Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll 2009, 405). This position was accepted, by a show of silence, by the remaining members of the class and not wanting to discredit the student’s work I waited until the next session to discuss the accomplishment of the two men and offer a brief power point presentation with their images attached. The student presenter who had been rather vocal up to that point during the semester afterward was reluctant to speak during class sessions. Such moments become key in exposing biases and critical instincts not just for the individual presenting the material but all members of the learning community who consciously or unconsciously accept, in this case, that action,

kindness, bravery and class placement, are indicative of a particular race. The classroom incident occurred, I believe, because Douglass (1845/2002) revered and complimented the men, as leaders, without specifying or qualifying them as Negro, black, or colored.

The influence of epistemological racism is just as apparent in the comments of African American students. Black and Latina students are more often eager to discuss race and racism perhaps because they are more accustomed to its' practice and comfortable with an African American woman facilitating the class. In a discussion of Pauline Hopkins serialized novel, *Hagar's Daughter*, a black female student instinctively and comfortably characterizes two of the mulatto characters (Aurelia and Jewel) as having "good hair." Although "good hair" is a common description in the black community it can be confusing to others. Further, if there is "good hair" one can surmise its antithesis exists. The student defined "good hair" as "hair like white peoples"—straight." Afterward I pointed out, that hair is a delicate issue for many black women.² "Indeed, black women's ideas about hair represent how they negotiate complex identity politics" (Banks 11). What is invisible in this hairy cultural sidebar is the Euro-American influence on beauty norms; when it comes to natural/beautiful hair it should offer no resistance or curl and flow and women get added points for blonde hair. Hence "bad hair," according to dominant culture, is the natural short, dark, course, kinky, nappy, or braided hair of black women. On April 4, 2007 on the *Imus in the Morning Show*, Imus referred to the Rutgers University women basketball players, on air, as "nappy headed ho's" and the insult was continued by sports announcer Sid Rosenberg who commented "The more I look at Rutgers, they look exactly like the Toronto Raptors" [a men's basketball team] (Chiachiere 2007). One is taken aback by how comfortable the white men were in offering their crude public observations of the young African-American women athletes. Nevertheless, that easy outburst characterizes the disdain that black girls and women face daily and substantiates why a young black woman would characterize hair as "good" or "bad." The majority of the white students were baffled about "good hair" and unaware of the painful reality that many black women face in a culture that embraces and normalized white standards of beauty—that is an issue for another semester. Systems of domination make it acceptable

² There are a number of books examining relationship of black women to their hair and beauty: Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2000); Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*. (Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2010); Althea Prince, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*. (Canada: Insomniac Press, 2009); Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975*. (Kentucky: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2007).

to promote long, blonde, straight hair as sexy or beautiful and kinky or course hair as ugly; and also make white men feel comfortable enough to publically denounce African American female college athletes as “ho’s” or masculine. These are not just thoughtless public descriptions or badly behaved white men but manifestations of civilizational racism.³ In 2011, Japanese evolutionary psychologist Dr. Satoshi Kanazawa’s online *Psychology Today* article maintained that blacks have more testosterone and thus black women are less attractive than other women (Lennard).

Good hair versus bad hair, laudable characters assumed to be white, possessors of beauty, or beliefs that generally it is whites who encouraged the helpless and downtrodden people of color typify the beliefs of many students and are examples of the invisibility of whiteness in American culture. There is an unspoken racial ranking/perception that influences most students. Students will not recognize the privileging and invisibility of whiteness as a problem if they are not made aware of it. Legal scholar Patricia J. Williams (1995, 18) writes: “it is useful to attempt to unravel the degree to which powerful negative stereotypes of race and gender play against one another, first in negotiating the subtle, sometimes nearly invisible boundaries of social life, of citizenship, and of entitlement; and then, ultimately, in dictating the very visible limits of the law itself.” Students’ responses are mixed and after class many students confess a variety of incidents where they witnessed racist actions at work. One reoccurring in-class narrative usually conveyed by white female students who waitress and are characterized as racist by black patron(s) or employee(s) unjustifiably, they believe. After they tell their side of an event it appears they want me to tell them that they are not racist. In a discussion about the outcomes of 1954 court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, on race, and universities Williams (1995) remembers:

It’s hard not to be defensive, of course—talking about race in any other posture is extremely difficult. I recently guest-lectured in the class of a constitutional law professor who was teaching disparate impact cases (cases that consider what if any remedies might correct the racially disparate impact of rules that on their face are race-neutral). As I spoke about shifting demographics and the phenomenon of “white flight,” the class grew restless, the students flipping pages of newspapers and otherwise

³ The racial politics of beauty is analyzed by Victoria M. Bañales, “‘The Face Value of Dreams’: Gender, Race, Class and the Politics of Cosmetic Surgery,” *Beyond the Frame: Women of Color and Visual Representation*, (New York: Palgrave 2005): 131-152 and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1991).

evidencing disrespect. Afterward, the two or three black students congratulated me for speaking so straightforwardly, and for using the words “black” and “white.” I later asked the professor: How is it possible to teach cases about racial discrimination without mentioning race? “I just teach the neutral principles,” he replied; “I don’t want to risk upsetting the black students.” (And yet it was clear that those most upset were the white students.) (36).

The praxis of “neutral principles” is another example of invisibility of whiteness and how the institutionalization of racism is able to continue systemically—it is not clearly addressed in schools or classrooms. One of the reasons it is not addressed in schools is because many educators do not want to acknowledge the sociopolitical norm of “whiteness” and its concomitant relation to privilege and oppression.

In Richard Wright’s (1966) novel, *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas intentionally murders his black girlfriend Bessie Mears and not white Mary Dalton, whom he kills accidentally. The in-class discussions always centered on Bigger’s brutal slaying of Mary rather than his heartless assassination of Bessie. Bigger was viewed as a victim of society from the slums through an existentialist lens. Likewise Bigger’s misogynistic violence and subsequent punishment clearly established whose body and “shadowless” corpse embodied power; which Wright performs for a reader when Bessie’s corpse is brought into court as evidence to support his conviction of Mary’s murder. Both the fictional Bigger (Wright 1966) and the actual Douglass (2002) are viewed as unfortunate and fortunate blacks who made choices in tough situations while whites are decent hardworking individuals who do not make the rules just live by them and succeed. Some want to view the conditions of Douglass (1845/2002) or Thomas (Wright 1966) as self-created. The involvement of whites becomes minimal unless they can be seen as heroic and embraceable or resolute villains easily discarded without the collective white race being implicated in their actions. This view is also reinforced with a tradition of Hollywood cinema and television where whites save downtrodden people of color or are assisted by faithful companions of color—*Dances With Wolves* (1990), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *The Lone Ranger* (television series 1949-1957), *The Green Hornet* (television series 1966-1967), *Tarzan* (1920s-2000s)—or white women using educational expertise and innocence to reach resistant/victimized underprivileged students of color in ghetto schools—*Up The Down Staircase* (1967), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Freedom Writers* (2007). Courage, morality, strength, and intellect are attributes of white heroes and heroines on the large and small screen who demonstrate to people of color and global audiences

how to triumph in dangerous situations. People of color can provide support and be co-stars who follow the lead of white heroines and heroes. Such visual scenarios entertain and inform global audiences about race in America and more specifically the socioeconomic and psychological environment of people of color. Rarely are stories globally promoted from a heroic point of view from American people of color.⁴ The character Bigger Thomas, for some, becomes a typical image of a young African American male.

While folk could debate the racist influence involved in Bigger's violence, community and family; he is the villain because of his violent acts. Incidental to Bigger and his community is white privilege which we never directly discussed in class. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright (1966) finds "the Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken" (xi). One's initial view of Bigger has to do with the intersection one's race, gender, class and age. When students set their sights on discussing people of color from the "victim" position there appears to be a clear separation or invisibility related to the influence of white privilege. It is important to acknowledge the prodigious influence of white supremacy what it means to be white and put whiteness in an historic and sociopolitical academic frame—what some researchers refer to as "whiteness theory" (Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll, Andersen 2001, Maher and Tetreault 1993, Milner 2007). A simultaneous understanding of the prevalence of white supremacy can offer another consideration or view of people of color. Wright (1966) contrasts the underprivileged black Thomas family with affluent white Dalton family. Students will point out racist characters or actions and ignore how racism operates institutionally. Wright (1966) describes Bigger as a "product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out" (xx). Some students are able to clearly see Bigger as violent and victim but not see systems of domination that dispossessed and disinherited him.

As a black woman some of my color blind students feel the need to critique me as fair, at the end of the semester—how many of my white

⁴ The wide ranging impact of the racist portrayal of people of color in media are detailed in: Clint C. Wilson II, Félix Gutiérrez and Lena M. Chao, *Racism, Sexism and the Media: The Rise of Class Communication in Multicultural America*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003); and in studies edited by Darnell M. Hunt, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in American* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

male colleagues are rated on fairness? Previously I asked students if they thought enslavers were evil/bad? As mentioned previously, without hesitation students offer their insights and explain why. Looking at the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s white students have a clear response about the behavior of whites during that time frame. However, when it comes to systemic racism today in education, labor, legal system, hiring practices, business, and so on they want to disregard what people of color are saying and maintain that “things” are getting better. Of course the riposte is “for whom?”

The insistence that “things” are getting better reminds me Martin Luther King, Jr.’s (1963) “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” He addressed it to southern religious leaders who believed King and the other protesters were “extremists” who pushed too hard to abolish racial segregation and needed to be patient—just “wait.” He hoped that they would understand the plight of the Negro, and informed them “we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive” (King 1963). It is my goal to bring to the surface the invisibility of whiteness and the impact of systemic racism on people of color.

The Departments of Justice and Education, on December 2, 2011, issued new guidelines charging educators to be creative in finding ways “. . .to reduce racial segregation, which has been increasing nationwide” (Dillon 2011, A1) . Attorney General Eric H. Holder affirms “diverse learning environments promote development of analytical skills, dismantle stereotypes and prepare students to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world” (Dillon 2011, A1). In some diverse learning environments underrepresented students empirical knowledge is too often disregarded, rendering them voiceless, because it does not coincide with the norm that is being represented. For example, in a course where students were being told how women during World War II began to work outside the home a black female student interjected that black women have labored continuously in this country. Curtly her white male professor responded “I was talking about white women.” This insensitive response is another reason why white students and students of color need ethnic studies courses. What other academic venue regularly articulates, recognizes and legitimizes the histories, literatures, cultures, and challenges that people of color continue to face here and globally.

Students from under-represented groups as well as those from the dominant culture are somehow encouraged to view ethnic studies or courses that focus on people of color as subversive, less academic, involving lower academic expectations, an easy ‘A,’ a liberal venue where people of color with un-American sensibilities can whine or complain about the problems of America, or having limited significance to later

professional positions. In an extreme 2010 case, Arizona state schools chief Tom Horne was successful in outlawing ethnic studies after Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law an ethnic studies ban. Horne believed “ethnic chauvinism” was being promoted in a Tucson school district where the Mexican-American studies program that taught “Latino students that they are oppressed by white people. Public schools should not be encouraging students to resent a particular race, he said” (Cooper 2010). The influence of white supremacy is apparent in the governor’s act and Horne’s statement. Nevertheless, 56 percent of the school population in question is made up of Hispanic grade school students (Cooper 2010). Arizona law seems to be an ideal example of critical race theory—“that the people who expressed the law had their own subjective perspectives that, once enshrined in law, have disadvantaged minorities and caused to continue racism” (legal definition). Students and the general population must push the boundaries of propriety and discuss the reality of how race and racism continue to impact the lives of all individuals in the United States.

There is a Kenyan proverb that states “Until the lions have their own historian, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter” (Leslau 1985). For people of color American public educational institutions continue to convey a blatantly biased history that ignores, misrepresents, snubs and discounts people of color while consistently and subtly privileging white supremacy. “Racial discrimination is powerful precisely because of its frequent invisibility, its felt neutrality. After all, the original sense of discrimination was one of discernment, of refinement of choice, of value judgment—the courteous deflection to the noble rather than the base” (Williams 1995, 107). Williams finds “racism inscribes culture with generalized preferences and routinized notions of propriety. It is aspiration as much as condemnation; it is an aesthetic. It empowers the familiarity and comfort of the status quo by labeling that status quo ‘natural’” (107). When students refuse to acknowledge racial differences we fail to understand more intimate forms of our culture, our history, our knowledge, our communities our world and ourselves. To avoid discussions of racial difference and reinforce a classroom world where only commonalities is an idealistic approach to our current existence is impracticable. To allow such passivity in a classroom, particularly in an ethnic studies course, is to deny the continued systemic impact and presence of racism, sexism, classism and other systems of domination woven throughout our social and political systems.

I want to awaken students to a link between the searing pains of racism found in the literature of nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the harsh realities of racism in twenty-first century America where, hopefully, students will become agents for change, or at minimum they ac-

tively recognize institutional racism. The housing market collapse began in poor black and Latino communities and had a great impact on women.⁵ Awareness of ethnic studies and the impact of white supremacy on our culture and in our history could, in an ideal world, prevent future bankers from targeting people of color and women for financial failure, stop educators and bureaucrats from outlawing ethnic studies because whites are not portrayed as heroes, or stop a company from succumbing to the whims of small group who do not want to see a reality show featuring Arab Americans.

The Euro-American experience in many American classrooms is a standard that converts people of color into exceptional visible participants or victims in history, culture, literature and so on. Making people of color visible when it comes to studies about urban violence, welfare violations, illegal aliens, crime, for example, is a standard that contributes to many students' views that race is a subject to be avoided. "The assumption that 'whiteness' encompasses that which is universal, and therefore for everybody, while 'blackness' is specific, and therefore 'for colored only,' is white-supremacist thought. And yet many liberal people, along with their more conservative peers, think this way not because they are 'bad' people or are consciously choosing to be racist but because they have unconsciously learned to think in this manner" (hooks 2003, 39). There continues to be a common level of discomfort when discussing race in the classroom. Nevertheless, my major semester goal is for students to recognize, acknowledge and give voice to the existence and meaning of whiteness just as people of color are recognized and identified. Every individual should know that, much like the literature we read, race and racism continues to be a systemic twenty-first century problem, one that is harmful to all people.

NOTES

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⁵ Facts about the banks and mortgage companies complicity in the mortgage crisis and personal stories regarding the impact of the recent mortgage disaster on women and people of color can be found in Anita Hill, *Reimagining Equality: Stories of gender, race, and finding home*, (New York: Beacon Press, 2012).

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