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ABOUT US AND NOT ABOUT US: THEORIZING STUDENT RESISTANCE TO LEARNING ABOUT RACE AND RACISM FROM UNDERREPRESENTED FACULTY

Eve Tuck, Karanja Keita Carroll, and **Michael D. Smith**

Three early-career scholars write across their experiences as underrepresented faculty who teach required diversity courses to future educators in a predominantly white, small, state college. The authors theorize student resistance to course material and to faculty of color teaching about race and racism in a series of tableaus of their classrooms. They examine the ways that students' tactics of avoidance, consuming the Other, and "I won't learn from you" are simultaneously "about us and not about us," unmasking uneven assumptions about the role of diversity courses in teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: faculty of color, predominantly white institutions, student resistance to learning about racism

In this article, we discuss how faculty of color who prepare educators negotiate additional gauntlets of resistance while addressing often contentious material with mostly white students. Further, we theorize the teaching of courses on human diversity in which our basic assumptions about *race* and *racism* are not shared by most of our students. We first write across our experiences, as Alaskan Native and African American early-career scholars who teach diversity courses in educational foundations, special education, and Black Studies. Then, we present some of the particulars of our work through individual tableaus drawn from our teaching.

Each of us has worked at a handful of higher educational institutions. Now together, sprinkled across programs at a small, predominantly white state college in New York, we meet to decode the messages we receive from students and colleagues about our professorial work. These messages tend to reify common themes around Black men and Indigenous women in the American sociological imagination; remarks cluster around perceptions about our professionalism and our bodies. Comments on student teaching evaluations are evidence of the ways that our hair, bodies, speech, identities, and fitness as scholars are seen as up for grabs/discussion (Stanley, 2006, p. 19). These student responses feel profoundly personal and unique—steeped in a kind of noxious intimacy.

How should we understand, in a phenomenological sense, that what we experience as assaults that are so entirely and specifically *about us*—our personhood, our bodies, our epistemologies, our pedagogies—are so *typical*, so *not about us*, across the literature and across the experiences of underrepresented faculty in predominantly white institutions?

> Our brown bodies end up as the surfaces onto which white students' frustrations are cast because they think diversity is unnecessary or too liberal. We know that the institution believes that by putting us in front of a classroom, it is moving closer to a vision of equality and equity. It does not seem to know, however, that we are left fighting for our physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being after semesters spent as the receivers of white students' anger and mistrust. (Brayboy & Estrada, 2006, p. 101)

Existing mechanisms of feedback on instruction do not work to capture ways that our teaching might be meaningful, even while uncomfortable; rigorous, even while confronting; and thoughtful, even while critical. Carini (2001) has written about the importance of "valuing the immeasurable" in classrooms, especially as the stakes with standardized testing in schools continue to ratchet up. Given the nature of the courses, there is inherent difficulty in measuring future intellectual harvests from the seeds planted during the semester. Further, the immeasurable dimensions of education tend to be "treated with suspicion or dismissed outright as meaningless or not noticed at all" (pp. 176-177).

In the following tableaus, we examine the measurable and immeasurable to describe student resistance in diversity courses. This resistance takes different shapes: avoidance, consuming the *Other*, and flat out "I won't learn from you." The tableaus mark the ways that our responses to these tactics of resistance are consistent within our own

epistemologies and axiologies and relegate core components of our work with students to the immeasurable, dismissible, or invisible.

Tableau One: "Do We Have to Talk about Race?" Issues in Avoidance & Resistance

Without a conscious and direct approach in the discussion of racism, those committed to social change fail to acknowledge its reality, and in many ways, miss the multiple opportunities we have to critically and consciously engage the issues of race, racism, and white supremacy. Educational institutions and classrooms provide an open environment where discussions of racism and other forms of social oppression can flourish. However, what I notice when teaching Black Studies courses in predominantly white institutions of higher education is that avoidance usually misdirects the discussion. Avoidance develops through students' inability to directly engage the reality of socially constructed markers of identity. Regarding issues of race, avoidance and resistance develop when students pose questions such as, "We are all human, why do we need to talk about race?" or "My parents emigrated from Ireland and they had to work hard to achieve. If my parents were able to do it, why can't Blacks and Latinos do it, too?" These lines of inquiry reflect the tendency among many of my white students to avoid the reality of race as it relates to the lived experiences of people of color, and their resistance to any conscious and direct discussion about these topics.

The inability among many of my students to come to terms with the reality of race and the consequences of racism on the lived conditions of people of color, along with the benefits that Whites receive due to racism, disrupts their ability to truthfully engage the reality of racism within a classroom setting. Rather than the classroom functioning as a site for stimulating discussion and the creation of radical, political, and anti-racist social consciousness, I see students avoid and resist discussions of racism that only contributes to the maintenance of the dominant white supremacist social order.

Avoidance of and resistance to discussions of race and racism also appear in my classes through the inability to accurately conceptualize racism. For instance, I always survey my classes for definitions and/or key concepts connected to racism. Invariably, I find the interchangeable usage of racism, prejudice, and discrimination by many of my students. This tendency denies the systematic and power-driven reality of racism. By not distinguishing between racism, prejudice and discrimination, my students turn racism into something that it is not, thus denying the centrality of privilege, power and control. This tendency negates the systematic nature of racism as it directly implicates those who have privilege, hold power, and have constructed systems that give them the fallacy of control. When racism is defined in a way that disconnects it from issues of privilege, power and control, the power-holders and power-brokers can detach themselves from their connected relationship with racism, further confusing what racism is, who benefits from it, and how it manifests in the lived reality of people of color. When we think of racism only in relation to the victims of these socially imposed realties, we fail to deal with the fact that those who impose these social realities also have a stake in their maintenance. I would argue that it is this reality that many of my students avoid and are resistant to because they are directly implicated.

The more the classroom becomes an arena in which we are able to consciously engage issues of social oppression, the more we are able to contribute to the development of socially-conscious human beings who are willing to acknowledge their role in the continuance of oppressive systems. Amos Wilson (1999) argues that

> You must confront the nature of this beast called education, of which you are a part, and how it is going to transform you into a beast; how you then must become conscious of what it is doing to you, and against you, so that you may escape its planned destiny for you. (p. 58)

I see my classroom as a place where I must critically engage the multiple layers of social oppression. As a scholar/activist committed to social change, I see myself as one of many contributors to the development of critical thinking students who see themselves as social actors on the quest for social justice.

Tableau Two: Negotiating Dynamics of Consuming the *Other*

As an Aleut/Unangan woman, my teaching of diversity courses is complicated not only by my being the rare *Other* in the room, but also in usually being the first Indigenous person my students have ever met. Every semester, some students complain on their course evaluations that I spend too much time discussing Native issues, while others complain that I haven't spent enough time sharing my experiences as an Indigenous person—even though these experiences do not directly pertain to the course topic. My decisions of what to reveal and what not to reveal about myself, my tribe, and my family are framed by dynamics of consuming the Other, and the history of appropriation and exploitation of Indigenous knowledge and people in the United States, and across the globe.

People who know me well know that I have a precisely defined sense of what is public and what is sacred. My grandmother taught me which stories needed to be shared with others, and admonished me to keep other stories to myself, with many shades of revelation in between. She taught me to be on the lookout for those who intended to merely consume our stories.

At work here is a calculus of vulnerability, generosity, short-term impact, and long-term residual consequences. These notions are congruous with my work elsewhere that asserts that the academy does not need to know everything (Tuck, 2009). This is not to say that tribes and communities do not need to uncover and recover self-knowledge, but that the academy does not need to broker all knowledge production. While teaching I am constantly negotiating which stories to divulge, and which stories, though helpful in illustrating a particular concept, might not be handled respectfully by my students. This negotiation is not without some pain.

As the teacher, it is difficult to teach my students a sense of reciprocity, yet reciprocity is needed for ethical relations between Indigenous people and settlers. Many white students have difficulty determining stories about race that are appropriate for them to tell in a college classroom; they seem to struggle with what can be public knowledge about them, and about whiteness (Lewis, 2008). Though I try, my modeling of storytelling appears to be unhelpful. Traces of the ways that white students feel implicated by what I reveal creep into evaluations. Further, because I am white-skinned and in most places easily pass as white, I believe that some are conflicted about my appearing to them to be white, but claiming an Aleut identity. They experience this as a tacit betrayal of my white privilege. To offset my own storytelling, I select readings that do some of this storytelling work, so that when white students resist constructions of race and racism, they are confronted by the words of real people in lived lives.

So much of my teaching in these courses feels off-kilter. My role in the class is often to keep students from relying on unexamined assumptions about people of color, and to challenge them when they doubt the legitimacy of claims from the texts about the prevalence of institutional and interpersonal racisms. I cause students discomfort by refusing to allow them to talk themselves back into an easier place, away from the edge of ideas raised in our coursework (Ladson-Billings, 1996). In the face of this felt imbalance, I try to remember that within Indigenous frameworks of knowledge, the emphasis is on how balance can be achieved at the cosmological-tribal scale, not personal or interpersonal level—that balance is at the level of *the whole.*

Tableau Three: "I Won't Learn from You ..."

Herbert Kohl offers a dialectic that distinguishes students' *failure to learn* from their willed decision to *not-learn* from an individual experienced as personally, culturally, and/or psychologically toxic. According to Kohl (1995), a failure to learn is "characterized by a frustrated will to know, whereas not-learning involves the will to refuse knowledge" (p. 6). Reflecting on my experiences as a Black professor who teaches diversity courses, I wonder how some of my students' resistance might be an actualization of their attempts to not-learn. Do they experience the course requirements and activities as a series of "forced choices and no apparent middle ground" that present "unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity" (p. 6)? After all, during the semester, I require them to consider critically concepts that trouble conceptions of race, in ways that decenter their existing epistemology and invoke a cognitive

dissonance between who they experience themselves to be and how they may be experienced by others. The course may, indeed, be experienced as a gauntlet of forced choices requiring students to land somewhere different by the end of the course than where they started—a requirement that some come to resent and resist.

. . .

Not-learning is an "active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place" (Kohl, 1995, p. 2). Given the course topic and pedagogical requirements needed to teach it well, maybe it should be unsurprising to find not-learning used as a means of resistance, especially among individuals who find this material threatening.

The expression of not-learning happens in multiple ways within this context. Some students quietly question possible ulterior motives for choosing readings or viewing certain films, and in the absence of a satisfactorily conspiracy-confirming explanation, warily engage in the material. Others are more direct by wondering aloud about whether "these readings are *really* about my desire to make white people feel guilty or ashamed"—a critique of my intentions that misattributes my professional purposes and misunderstands the pedagogical value of counternarratives. Some students communicate in explicit and subtle ways, not only distaste for the course content, but contempt for being *forced* to take such a course to satisfy general education or programmatic requirements. In a subtler form, their attitude and actions project the message, "They can make me sit in here, but I don't have to engage in the process." At its worst and most explicit expression, some students are openly dismissive of course material or attempt to distract from our present task.

The prevalence of willed choices to resist underscores the difficulty of attempting to change attitudes and beliefs within the strictures of a 16-week course—especially given a lifetime of experiences that have calcified some beliefs prior to our first meeting. Allport's (1958) research shows a powerful relationship between individuals' prejudiced beliefs and attitudes. "Beliefs, to some extent, can be rationally attacked and altered. Usually, however, they have the slippery propensity of accommodating themselves somehow to the negative attitude which is much harder to change" (p. 13). That is, in the face of critical conversations and texts, individuals who are committed to not-learning may work to keep their attitude intact even as their beliefs begin to unravel in the face of other evidence. A single course—no matter how thoughtfully conceptualized or skillfully executed—is up against staggering odds to measurably change this type of entrenched attitude by a semester's end.

Conclusion

In our tableaus, entering into a dialogue on or about race and racism with predominantly white classes resulted in mixed reactions—blank stares, utter disinterest and, sometimes, rapt engagement.

> This work ultimately forces us as instructors into a strange predicament. As people of color discussing race and racism with our students and asking them to examine their privilege, we are in a position where we sometimes feel a need to *convince* them that the racist institutionalized practices that have benefited them socially, politically, educationally, and financially (and to which they are mostly oblivious), need to be overturned. (Brayboy & Estrada, 2006, p. 106)

However, this process of *convincing* is fraught with consistent resistance through avoidance, consumption of the Other and the willed rejection of course content.

As we take responsibility for engaging the topics of race and racism in the classroom, we also recognize that the onus in many instances is beyond us. Teacher education programs, and higher education writ large, bear a larger portion of the responsibility to close the gap between stated values and eventual practice. Requiring a single course on *diversity* to fulfill a requirement—while better than nothing—ultimately fails to demonstrate meaningfully to students (or faculty for that matter) that diversity is an *institutional* value. Instead, students are free to assume (perhaps rightly) that the issues raised in these courses are of far more concern to individual faculty members of color than to the entire institution. Moreover, when *diversity* is engaged in a watered down fashion so that anything beyond the white, normative, heterosexist, elitist, male model

must be discussed under the title of *Diversity*, we lose the ability to engage the intricacies of the different levels of social oppression. In its broadest presentation, *catch-all diversity* may amount to something for everyone but, ultimately, nothing for anyone.

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