

Review Essay

An emotional, intellectual and practical resource: Black Experiences and Expertise on teaching about racism

Exploring race in predominantly white classrooms: scholars of color reflect, edited by George Yancy and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, New York and London, Routledge 2014

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Introduction

This book brings together the experiences and expertise of eighteen scholars of color, based in the USA or Canada, who teach about race and racism. The book attempts to speak to two different audiences, and to achieve at least two different goals. Its first intended audience is other scholars of color: it is to be seen as 'a site of safety and sanity, driving home the reality that they are not alone' as co-editor George Yancy puts it in his introduction (p.9). But the editors also hope that it will be used as a resource for white scholars like me, who address race and racism in their classrooms. In terms of its goals, it seeks to be a place in which the experiences of black scholars can be validated and indeed honoured. But it also has a useful role as a resource bank for a range of useful theoretical approaches, teaching materials and practical strategies for scholars from all backgrounds who wish to address racism in mainly white classrooms.

The book's title highlights the significance of the students' racial location as well as that of their teachers. This is important for two reasons. First, because as the contributors to this volume articulate

with painful honesty, a black scholar can usually expect to face challenges and resistance when addressing race with a mainly white audience, in ways that their white colleagues will not. This problem has also been highlighted by university teachers in the UK (Smith and Lander, 2012). Second, because, as again the contributors to this volume testify, university teachers cannot assume that it will be understood that race and racism are still pressing issues in contemporary life when most of the students are white. There is work to do in both demonstrating that racism is not a thing of the past, and then the even more challenging task of enabling students to see their own, usually privileged, place within racialized structures.

Validating Black Experiences of Teaching

Many of the contributors to this volume discuss their personal experiences of teaching about racism in mainly white institutions. It does not make for comfortable reading. Zeus Leonardo talks of the psychic dangers inherent in scholars of color working in a white space, and of feeling the pressure, 'to blend in, if at least to avoid detection or protect oneself against violence' (p.132-3). Stories of being made to feel like 'the killjoy', 'the race lady', 'the angry one' ; being assumed to be a student; being accused of lacking objectivity, and having their expertise and assessments challenged, are repeated by most contributors. At first I wondered about the editing of the volume. Yet on reflection this repetition was instructive. As a white person, working in a mainly white space, it was salutary to hear one minoritised voice after another testify to this pattern of racial microaggressions. Readers who have themselves experienced this kind of behaviour from students and colleagues may well feel reassured and supported by the courage and commitment of these scholars who know they are doing important work in sometimes hostile environments.

Several contributors talk of the ways in which their bodies are read by students before they have even opened their mouths. Arnold Farr relates how he approaches discussions about race through a wider

conversation about social justice to prevent his students from reducing him to 'an angry Black who is simply venting a personal problem' (p.107). Antonia Randolph explains how she uses her knowledge of how students read her body to destabilize their assumptions about what Blackness looks like. She is young and female, but dresses in a masculine way. Her clothes are from Ralph Lauren but her hair is in dreadlocks. Here I was impressed by the way in which Randolph, as with many of the other contributors, showed an awareness that her work is too complex to allow any strategy adopted to be a complete solution. She is conscious that in presenting herself as middle class, she is reinforcing their belief in minoritised groups from the working class as 'other', 'since so much of their race animosity is tied in with class animosity'(p.37).

Another recurring theme is the way in which several of the authors were initially welcomed into their universities because their presence added credibility to claims to a diverse and progressive faculty. Yet when they seek to enact the practices that are required by a real commitment to diversity and progressiveness they are treated with suspicion. Sara Ahmed's work is drawn on more than once to aid a discussion of 'corporate multiculturalism', a form of performativity, in which all the effort is expended on how something looks, so that no real change need take place. Kirsten T. Edwards understands that her presence as a black working class female member of the faculty functions to absolve the university of any further need for action to address equity issues on campus. Nana Osei-Kofi is also aware that she ticks a box. But when she does enact the agenda she was hired to represent, colleagues express concern that her approach 'gives birth to 'troublemakers', who take the critical ideas they have learned in her classes into more traditional spaces. She learns that her colleagues have warned her students against taking her courses. 'In using students as pawns to delegitimize critical teaching, progressive faculty of color are disciplined for failing to 'know their place' as cultural representatives rather than knowledge producers' (p.164-65). Sanjukta Mukherjee, an Indian national working in the USA, is also aware that

she is valued as what she calls a 'native informant' or sometimes as a 'model minority', but her criticism of US foreign policy is far less welcome.

Against 'reasoning from nowhere': theoretical Insights

As an intellectual resource the book also has useful insights. George Yancy and Zeus Leonardo help us to understand the experience of many of the contributors of being criticized for lacking objectivity by reminding us of how the invisibility and normativity of whiteness looks in the university, in which the 'transcendent and intellectual' is prized over the 'rooted' and 'political'. Cleavis Headley quotes Yancy on his preference for theorizing, 'from a place of lived, embodied experience.' In contrast, as he notes caustically 'In philosophy ...the embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one's search for truth. It is best, we are told, to reason from *nowhere*'. (p.126)

As might be expected, the work of Freire and hooks are cited by several authors as offering a theoretical basis from which to build a classroom ethos which is democratic, and a curriculum in which received truths are challenged. Many authors contend that the best way to address race in white classrooms is through a wider issue. Like Arnold Farr above, several contributors explain how they address race through or alongside a discussion of an aspect of social justice which is less threatening, or more familiar, to their white students. Osei-Kofi talks of discussing liberation theology as a way in with her conservative Christian students. Others, like Karsonya Wise Whitehead, begin with social class and gender.

Many contributors point to the need to start with a wider critique of liberal individualism. There is a wealth of research to support these authors in asserting that it is students' adherence to individualism that is a key obstacle to greater understanding of the continued significance of racism today (e.g. Solomon et al, 2005). Clarence Sholé Johnson begins with students' individual biographies, and then works to show 'how their disparate experiences derive from institutional factors not of their own

making but in which their lives are implicated.’ (p. 90) But he notes that minoritised students are also reluctant to move beyond their individual experiences to explain why such things have happened to them, to ‘theorise racism’, in his words. He also takes students through the history of racialisation as a way of enabling students to see how race is socially constructed, but also to show how its beginnings continue to influence contemporary thinking, using media depictions of Barack Obama as lazy as an example.

Cleavis Headley articulates the liberal view on colourblindness , society as a meritocracy, the notion of affirmative action as reverse discrimination, and then subjects each to a clear-eyed critique, based on his commitment to view the world through the category of race, understanding that race is not an objective feature of the physical world. He advocates that students can learn to manage this balancing act if this work is preceded by a study of language as creating the world, not merely mirroring it. His analogy between Hamlet and the concept of race is a useful one which I will use with students new to the subject: we do not need an individual named Hamlet to have existed in order for us to have a shared understanding of the cluster of ideas that name conjures up.

In a similar vein, Jo-Anne Lee writes that she has had some success in addressing white investment in racism with her white students because she began with a discussion of poststructural and intersectional notions of identity, using Stuart Hall’s writing as a starting point. She reflects that the commonest reaction among white people to learning about critical whiteness, defensiveness and guilt, ‘reflects modernist understandings of identity formation. Poststructural views of identity formation liberate students from believing they have to defend their one true self from attack...students learn of the social construction of whiteness as historically variable and ongoing rather than an essential, fixed identity position.’ (p.67)

Sanjukta Mukherjee takes this insistence on the need for a greater focus on structure further by including the impact of the marketisation of universities themselves in her contribution. She is particularly critical of what she calls 'the inherent corporate bias of internationalising initiatives'. Mukherjee's work demonstrates the value of a genuinely diverse teaching faculty: she raises issues which have not been mentioned elsewhere in this book. For example, she questions the 'rescue narratives' in some of her students' excessive focus on issues like female genital cutting rather than poverty and the effects of globalisation (p.192).

Practical Teaching Strategies and Materials

As with all good teaching, these theoretical positions inform the practical approaches and choice of materials advocated by the contributors to the volume. Several authors discuss the strategies they use to create a classroom climate in which personally challenging conversations about race can take place, pointing to the work they do enabling students to think structurally and to question essentialised identities as fundamental. This is necessary for all students, but in my experience particularly so for white students sitting alongside their minoritised classmates, who often find a really complex discussion of racialisation, which includes analysis of their participation in it, very uncomfortable. Arnold Farr's approach to creating a constructive conversation on this subject is 'preemptive forgiveness'. He precedes the discussion with an acknowledgment that such exchanges are rare in society, because of decades of denial, and that therefore mistakes are likely to be made, and the possibility of giving offence exists. Preemptive forgiveness is the act of forgiving one another in advance for the inevitable mistakes that will occur during the conversation. A. Todd Franklin also tries to make the classroom 'a respectful and tight-knit learning community' but acknowledges that some white students will struggle to confront the influence of race in their lives in such a public arena. He suggests that this can be addressed by asking them to use a journal to explore their thinking in relative privacy. He reads and responds to

their entries, reflecting their ideas back on them and suggesting different ways of perceiving their social world.

Some of the contributors discuss their strategy of bridging the social gap between their white and minoritised students. Kirsten T. Edwards writes about her practice of drawing on the small number of black students in her classes to give real-life testimony with which to counter the stereotypes and generalisations offered by her privileged white students. Such testimony is usually far more powerful than the argumentation of the lecturer, black or white. A. Todd Franklin argues that issues of race equity remain at an abstract level for white students in the absence of personal relationships with people of colour. He has seen many white students appear to develop a passionate interest in understanding their racial location, only to falter when they return to the colourblind world outside the classroom. In his view it is the few students who forge real relationships with people of colour, through close friendship or social justice work, that are constantly made aware of the issue as inescapable for those without a white skin. Meta G. Carstarphen also attempts to make her white students see the world from a different perspective by immersing them in a different culture for a short time.

The volume also contains many suggestions for useful materials to use in the classroom, all of which are fully referenced. Experienced teachers in the field will recognise some of these resources, such as the documentary 'The Color of Fear', but appreciate their recommendation by experts such as these. Others, such as websites, pop songs and poems, as well as readings, may be new and welcome. The problem with such materials is that they may be very context specific. Can a documentary about how race works in the USA engender real insights into how race works in Holland? In South Africa? In the UK? Perhaps. But no easy transposition can be assumed. This points to the main limitation of the book for readers outside the USA or Canada, a point to which I return to below.

Key insights: on white allies and safe spaces

I have been teaching about race in mainly white classrooms for several years now, and am familiar with many of the debates and issues raised by the contributors to this volume, though I did find the uncompromising black perspective refreshing and energising. But there were two themes in the book which brought new insights into situations I continue to struggle with.

The first concerns a concept which many white people working to address racism are drawn to: the white ally. Dyan Watson relates how her departmental white allies practice what they preach, admit when they make a mistake, and raise issues of race in meetings before she does, which means that she does not have to be the sole race expert. This is the positive aspect of being a white ally that seems so attractive to people like me. But Jo-Anne Lee suggests that there are some serious risks associated with being a white ally. She discusses how the white Canadian women in her classes cling to the idea of being a white ally when it is offered to them. They see it as a way out of being seen as the oppressor, the coloniser. But in her white-dominated city in North West Canada, such a move is an easy one: 'it creates an illusion of equality and a false belief that 'allies' are indeed taking anti oppressive action, when, in fact, being an ally is a conceptual identification and little more'. (p.71) As Edwards and Franklin argued, above, the social and geographical segregation of white and non-white groups is a major obstacle to real change. For Lee, 'the ally subject position only serves to falsely and ideologically inoculate them against further critical learning about the ongoing realities of discrimination, poverty and violence in many communities.' Other contributors also note how quickly white students recover from the pain of finding themselves implicated in racism. Lee suggests that it is better not to recuperate too quickly. She invokes George Yancy's term 'tarrying' to emphasise the need to stay in this painful place longer if real change is sought. I too have felt compelled to move quickly to ease the pain of students who see their privilege for the first time, but Lee and others in the volume emphasise how easy recovery is in mainly white societies, and how difficult it is to submit to, in Yancy's words, 'a life of commitment to, "undo" over and over again the complex ways in which one is embedded in whiteness.' (p.13)

The second theme, which recurred several times in the book, was whether classrooms can or should be 'safe spaces'. Recently I took a class in which students from different racial backgrounds were sharing their experiences of how race has impacted on their lives. I was struck by how quickly the discussion became dominated by the white students' views, and how the minoritised students either stopped talking, or joined in with a discussion about whiteness, from a white perspective. It seemed that a secret signal had been made about what this discussion could and could not be about. I did my best to re-balance the discussion, but reading about safe spaces in this book made me think again about how safe the minoritised students in that group had felt to talk about what mattered to them.

As several contributors point out, safe spaces for discussions about race usually mean spaces in which white students will not be made to feel uncomfortable. Lee tells her students that she cannot guarantee that her classroom will be safe in this sense. Kathy Glass prefers to see her classroom as a dialogic space rather than a safe one, to signal the importance of the honest exchange of ideas, and the vulnerability that comes with this. Silence is a well-documented response among white students when discussions turn to racism (e.g. Hick et al, 2011; Mazzei, 2008) and Glass talks of her current strategy being to acknowledge and confront it, where earlier in her career she ignored it. In a similar vein, Dyan Watson talks to her students about the need to 'stay in the conversation', by which she means persevering with the discussion even when it feels uncomfortable. Such subtle points have made me rethink who I am serving when I address race in the classroom.

Conclusion

As a reader outside North America I was occasionally frustrated by the focus on that region alone, and would have welcomed a wider reach, of the kind that Mukherjee brought to the volume. But this is a relatively minor criticism of a collection which could bring inspiration and support to many anti-racist teachers of all backgrounds, particularly those who work in relative isolation in their universities. The

number of voices speaking from different perspectives in the volume make *Exploring Race in Predominantly White Classrooms* a very useful resource for addressing issues of race in mainly white classrooms. It brings much needed validation of the experiences of often isolated minoritised scholars, and in refusing to 'proceed at the snail's pace of white racial consciousness' (Leonardo, 2002, p.40) it offers all anti-racist teachers a necessarily high standard to uphold.

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