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## DECENTERING WHITENESS:

### RESISTING RACISM IN THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CLASSROOM

#### "GO BACK TO WHERE YOU BELONG"

Recently, near the beginning of the term at my university, I taught an upper-level women's studies seminar entitled Asian American Women's Studies, versions of which I've taught in the past at other universities.<sup>1</sup> On the agenda for one particular discussion was the topic of national belonging, especially Asian Pacific Americans' experiences of not belonging and of being made to feel like perpetual outsiders and guests in the United States, regardless of how long our families have lived here or how "American" we may feel. That day I planned to engage the students in a discussion of the function and daily effects of racism as they pertain to Asian Pacific American women's lives and experiences. Before class, I walked a couple of city blocks to Portland's downtown post office. There, at a busy crosswalk, a young woman in a car turned in front of me and I waited for the light to change. Behind me, a young man, presumably a student at the same university, muttered to his companion, "Damn Asians in their fucking nice cars." I turned in time to see his friend nod

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In her essay, Duncan describes classroom experiences in which white students and students of color talk past one another and use conflicting racial discourses. She argues that white entitlement and white feelings of belonging within academe greatly affect how professors teach about race and contends that many professors behave as if white students are the primary concern.

in agreement. Both young men were white. The woman driver, turning with the right of way, was Asian American. "How dare those Asians come to *our* country, own expensive cars, and turn in front of *us*?" was what I heard in the tone of his question. Or, how dare those Asians take up any space in this—*our*—country?

The young man's remark, made flippantly to a fellow "insider," resounds with a sense of entitlement, a confidence in his own sense of belonging, and a hostility to any "foreign" elements, like the young Asian American woman presuming to drive her car in front of him (doesn't she know her place?), or the Asian American professor who turned to confront him on the street after overhearing his comment (he simply stared at me incredulously). After all, we're supposed to be passive, submissive, and above all, silent. Any departure from this scripted role for Asian Pacific American women is considered an affront to normalcy, and an insult to "true" (read: white) Americans. His attitude mirrors that of other white students in the university, especially those from dominant groups who often maintain a belief that the process of education is intended solely for their benefit. They subsequently express hostility for students of color (and others deviating in some way from the mythical norms of U.S. society, including women, working-class and poor students, differently abled students, older students, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students). In addition, this young man's comment (and the assumptions underlying its articulation) highlights the specific hostility many non-Asian Americans reserve for Asian Americans, whom they see as benefiting from affirmative action and other government programs and resources, and stereotype as the "model minority."<sup>2</sup>

In class that day, I shared this experience with students in an attempt to provide a concrete example of what we had been reading and theorizing about. Asian American students in the class began sharing similar examples, and we discussed all of them carefully, examining the assumptions behind each one. Questions like "Where are you from?" and "How did you learn to speak such good English?" are the most common reminders that we—and others like us—do not belong, and that neither this space nor this tongue are considered "ours." Rather, we are visitors, allowed to share in the American dream and the English language as long as we remember not to overstep the boundaries of racist propriety. Several students shared experiences of being told, in not so many words, to "go back to where they belong," regardless of the fact that many of them are American citizens, born and raised here.

Students in the class were pushing quickly through the materials and ideas. Several of them stated that they felt excited about the opportunity to finally discuss something that related to their own lives, after sitting through countless classes that proceeded as though Asian Pacific Americans, and especially Asian American women, did not exist at all. But we were interrupted in this powerful moment by a white student's comments about the racism she, too, has experienced. Though we had spent a great deal of time in this class reading and discussing theories of race and racism, she categorized her feelings of exclusion and her experience as a "minority" in this particular classroom as "racism." Her attempt to recenter herself and her whiteness was met with silence and disappointment from other students, some of whom quietly retreated from the discussion. And I realized how often white students feel the need to recenter themselves, even in classes about race, racism, and the history, literature, and social movements of people of color.

It is this critical moment upon which I wish to focus in this essay, for this is a common moment, and a recurring one. I hope to provide some context for and analysis of this particular move—a move to recenter whiteness not in terms of interrogating and challenging white privilege, something that is often initiated by critical, antiracist white students, but rather to return things to the way they were (what is considered normalcy for many white people—namely, white supremacy). It is a fear of the destabilization of white supremacy, and hence white privilege, that keeps many white students in terror of discussing race and racism in the classroom, on any but the most superficial levels.

In countless ways, students of color—and other students considered "deviant" by dominant values and standards—are taught that they do not belong in American higher education. In both explicit and subtle ways, these students receive certain messages about their place in the academy. For example, theorist bell hooks comments on the ways in which she was "terrorized" as a student of color during graduate school through racist and sexist messages intended to humiliate and demoralize her.<sup>3</sup> Writer and artist Kyo Maclear explores the ways in which she was silenced as a student, often due to the fact that there was no one "like her" represented in the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> When she did speak, she was generally either not heard or objectified and made to feel "like a freak sideshow whose stories are used to satiate curiosity, or worse, uphold the myth of inclusion." What she learned, she writes, is that for many students of color, "the notion of the classroom as a 'safe' space is a dangerous illusion." Finally, Joanna Kadi, in her essay "Stupidity 'Deconstructed,'" describes her

internalization of such messages and her subsequent belief that she must simply be "stupid" and unqualified.<sup>5</sup> Privileged people, she argues, misuse words and distort reality to create a space—the academy—that excludes all of the "misfits." More importantly, such institutions socialize us to believe that we are not even worthy of gaining entry, often succeeding in separating "us" from "them." What I argue here is that these two processes—the messages students of color receive about "not belonging" in educational institutions, and the recentering of white students at all junctures in educational processes—are intricately tied together.

#### **"I'M MORE OPPRESSED THAN YOU ARE": TACTICS WHITE PEOPLE USE TO DIVERT OR UNDERMINE DISCUSSIONS OF RACISM**

Last year, in an upper-level women's studies class I taught called Women of Color in U.S. Society, I was amazed by the number of white students taking the class who seemed surprised that we were to spend so much time discussing women of color. Although the title of the course was clear, they still expected to be discussing white women as the cultural norm. In such classes, when I attempt to push students to center and explore the histories, writings, and experiences of women of color, the women of color students in the class often feel empowered to speak up. Some of them tell me that this is the first and only class for them in which this has been possible. However, there are white students who inevitably seem threatened by the empowerment and centering of people of color, and they often begin pointing out the ways in which they too are oppressed, either by focusing on how they are in the minority in this particular instance or by beginning to list the ways in which they are oppressed as a German American or a person of Italian descent, for example. One white student wrote in her journal entry for the class that she felt "hurt" and "angry" after reading Gloria Anzaldúa's introduction to her anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, in which Anzaldúa calls on white people to be accountable for their white privilege and racism.<sup>6</sup> This student explained that racism is over and people of color should stop making such a big deal of it. She wrote, "I feel robbed of my heritage," noting that her European American ethnicity was not being taken seriously in this class. Here I do not argue that these students have not experienced oppression, or that various groups of

European Americans have not been discriminated against, but simply that there is a curious—and racist—phenomenon that occurs when white students find themselves decentered in discourses of race, racism, and white privilege in this country.

Another tactic white students often employ is that of simple digression. When issues of race and white privilege are introduced in class discussions and readings, I am always amazed by how quickly some students move to bring up other topics—not to tie them to a discussion of race and racism, but simply to divert attention away from their own whiteness and white privilege. Sometimes they de-emphasize race and racism and choose instead to focus on some other category of identity and social stratification, preferably one which marks them as clearly and unarguably oppressed. One white queer student consistently redirected class discussions to emphasize issues of sexuality and her own oppression as a lesbian, not to make critical connections between and among these parts of our identities and lives, but to shut down the discussion of racism and white privilege, including concrete experiences of racism. Another working-class white woman, after reading Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege and Male Privilege," wrote in a response essay, "Class is the *real* issue, not race. Growing up poor, I have never had white privilege or any kind of privilege." I welcomed her attempts to complicate our understandings of whiteness and white privilege by pointing out the ways in which white people occupy different positions in society. However, I was again dismayed by white students' consistent efforts to recenter themselves and to dismiss any notion of white privilege or accountability in their own lives.

As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, and as I have witnessed in the classes I teach, discussions of race take on peculiar "crises of meaning" in the classroom where white students and students of color talk past one another, employing conflicting racial discourses.<sup>7</sup> Citing Bob Blauner, Omi and Winant suggest that white students generally tend to argue that racism is a thing of the past, while also considering any mention of race as racist. According to this ideology, "colorblindness" is the only way to be "antiracist," and necessitates a disavowal of any racial discourse.<sup>8</sup> And Gloria Yamato, also commenting on discussions of race, argues that whenever the subject of racism arises, many white students want to focus on the racism of people of color and on themselves as victims of racism—what she views as a diversionary tactic to take pressure off themselves and other white people.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, many students of color root racism in power, arguing that race and racism permeate history and

everyday experience on multiple levels. They often connect readings about race and racism to their own daily experiences, attempting to bridge the dichotomy so prevalent in the academy between theory and practice. Such students of color also often have a great deal to say about strategies of resistance to racism, so rarely discussed in the academy.

Meanwhile, white teachers (and some teachers of color) spend so much time worrying about how to make the white students in their classrooms feel comfortable and "safe" speaking about race and racism that it is often the students of color, again, whose identities and words end up elided, negated, or otherwise invalidated. Racism, of course, is present on at least three levels within the university setting. First, at the level of curriculum, students of color not only find themselves presented with little or no reading materials and other resources by or about people of color, but they also encounter both explicit and subtle racist themes in what they do study. Thus, they often find themselves misrepresented or completely excluded from the curriculum. When issues related to race are introduced in classes, they often rely upon additive, tokenistic frameworks that contribute to a climate in which actual people of color are singled out and further objectified and exoticized.

Among the faculty, administration, and fellow student body at the majority of institutions of higher education, students of color find few people like themselves and thus have difficulty locating role models, mentors, and even friends with whom to share common experiences, often resulting in a profound sense of isolation. In terms of locating support from other students, there are additional barriers. Students of color are generally underrepresented in higher education, and often pitted against one another and forced to compete for limited resources. White students often view them as affirmative action cases and refuse to treat them as serious colleagues, and white faculty may view students of color in this light as well. Mary Romero quotes one student, who said: "Being the only students or the only one of two students of color was difficult, particularly in an environment that attributed my achievements to affirmative action and where faculty interest was a response to my ethnicity and a need to affirm their liberalism."<sup>10</sup> Finally, within the larger social and political context, students of color encounter invisibility, erasure, stereotyping, violence, economic disenfranchisement, and other forms of racism and oppression. Thus it should come as no surprise that even at the level of classroom interaction, students of color are victimized by racist comments and assumptions made by professors and other students.

Why are the safety and comfort of white students almost always made a priority, even by some faculty of color? What are our course objectives, in teaching about race? What are the implications of the constant recentering of whiteness in the classroom, on the part of both white students and teachers? How can we reach white students to teach them about race—especially accountability and white privilege—without simply recentering them (and whiteness) to the exclusion and detriment of students of color? What are the risks of this radical pedagogy? What can we gain from using it? And what can students of color gain from professors willing to interrupt racism, despite the difficulties and risks involved in doing so? Of course, we as faculty occupy different social locations, too. As faculty of color, our footholds within the academy are much more tenuous, and our status less secure. We can choose to play the role of gatekeeper, enjoying status as tokens. Or we can use this position to try to transform some of the more oppressive elements of the university and create contexts for radical, liberatory pedagogy. White faculty can be allies, but they must take accountability, and interrogate their own status as white people in a racist, white supremacist environment. Otherwise, they replicate the fear and elisions of so many of their students, who would rather turn away than confront racism head-on.

What I argue here is that my opening example, and the themes of entitlement and belonging within the university, especially where racial and other identities are concerned, have everything to do with how we teach about race. The majority of the university functions as though white students exist at the center of all pedagogical processes, and many professors continue to teach as though this is true. Even worse, some faculty members of color also teach this way. In other words, the assumption is made that white students are the true “subjects” of the learning experience, while students of color are expected to diversify the classroom and university space, enabling white students to receive a more “multicultural” and diverse experience. When, on the job market, search committee after search committee asked me how I would make my white students comfortable in my classes about race, and when my teaching assistants worry over how to make sure the white students feel “safe” in our classrooms, I know they are teaching primarily to the white members of each classroom.<sup>11</sup> Such questions and concerns make it clear who the focus of the education process is for these educators. When my teaching colleagues worry that too much discussion about race and racism in our classes will alienate the students, I know they are speaking primarily about the white students in our

classrooms and conflating students with whiteness. What I also know is that students of color (and many white students) often do not feel safe in the classes they take, especially when professors fail to interrupt racist and other offensive remarks or to create a context in which racism and other systems of oppression, including sexism and homophobia, can be adequately addressed. While it is important to teach white students (as well as students privileged in other ways) to critically interrogate privilege, it is also crucial to decenter them in our teaching. Not doing so simply reinforces assumptions on the part of white students that even classes like *Women of Color in U.S. Society* are really about them.

### SUBVERTING RACIAL DISCOURSES IN THE CLASSROOM

To truly teach about race and racism in meaningful, antiracist ways, we as faculty must acknowledge and engage our own social locations. Doing so means being always aware and attempting to understand the complexities of our own power in student-teacher interactions. Also, we should attempt to recognize the experiences and social locations of our students. As Adrienne Rich suggests, the concept of “coeducation” is misleading not only in terms of gender inequalities in the classroom (and outside, which inevitably shape students’ experiences), but also in terms of racial inequalities and other inequalities premised on class, sexual orientation, age, and ability.<sup>12</sup> Coeducation is a misnomer because students and faculty of color do not have the privilege of ever forgetting that we live in a racist society. There can be no adequate teaching of race without consistent awareness of students’ experiences in this racist society. Sometimes this may also mean making oneself aware of the racial stratification in one’s own department or institution. Women of color in the academy are often expected to perform social reproductive labor to maintain departmental activities, while we are rarely acknowledged or compensated for doing so. Students of color often encounter problematic expectations from faculty members and other students, and are rarely provided with departmental support and services to ensure their survival in the academy.

In our classrooms, it is imperative that we critically examine our own curricula, including assignments and materials, and also language use and daily classroom interactions. It is also crucial to socially locate the texts and readings we assign. By tokenizing authors of color, faculty members may actually encourage the tokenization of students, too. While it may be easier or more

familiar to rely on tokenistic, additive approaches to teaching, it is clear that such approaches simply reinforce racism and other forms of oppression in classroom interactions. For example, many women's studies instructors continue to rely on syllabi comprised of weekly topics or units, such as "women's health" and "women and work," in which race, class, and sexuality are often relegated to separate weekly topics. In such formats, writings and issues of women of color are often covered during the day or week entitled "race," and similarly, queer women's experiences are addressed in the unit called "sexuality." Such a format assumes that all other topics (reproductive politics, family, domestic violence, media representations, etc.) are really about white, middle-class heterosexual women, and that women of color have nothing to say about such issues. Also, words like "race" and "sexuality" are often conflated with those groups most marginalized by relations of power, whereby "race" is conflated with women of color, for example, and sexuality is conflated with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. Such a method overlooks the fact that white people also occupy racial positions in this society, and that whiteness, too, must be critically interrogated for its many meanings and cultural practices. Finally, many instructors who attempt to teach about race and racism often find themselves beginning each class with whiteness and the experiences of white people. Challenging this practice destabilizes the notion that whiteness is and should be the norm.

Race and racism are difficult, sometimes painful topics in the classroom, for both students and faculty. In my own classes, I have found it useful to establish ground rules early in the term, during which I ask students to discuss their own needs for creating a relatively safe space. Many students are able to articulate at this time the practices that make them uncomfortable and unsafe, and we work as a group to balance sensitivity and awareness of our differences with academic, intellectual freedom in the classroom. At the same time, I recognize that the classroom has rarely been safe for students of color, and I work to create a context for discussing race and racism through readings, films, discussion, and classroom exercises. I have also found it necessary to teach and model appropriate, sensitive ways of interrupting racist remarks and other oppressive comments in class. We can employ overt and subtle techniques for interrupting racism, and our strategies will vary according to our own identities, experiences, disciplines, and pedagogical concerns. In my experience, however, interrupting racism is generally easier to do in classes that rely on nonadditive approaches to the understanding of race, where experiences and

writings of people of color are adequately contextualized. Decentering whiteness and white people has been central to my own practice. For example, not only do I attempt to teach about the rich, varied histories and social experiences of people of color, but I also teach *to* students of color, as much as any other students in the room.

Transformation in classrooms must occur at all levels, and involves examining and reshaping curricula, being attentive to social locations and contexts, and working to create as safe a space as possible for antiracist interpersonal communication in the classroom. I have encountered many students and faculty members who shy away from discussions about race and racism because these topics make them feel uncomfortable. However, racism is *not* comfortable, and certainly never has been for people of color. Confronting racism, teaching about race, and developing teaching strategies that are explicitly antiracist may not feel comfortable or familiar to many instructors who have grown accustomed to the centering of whiteness, white experiences, and white subjectivity in their classrooms, in the university, and in society in general. However, it will be through such work that we will eventually find ourselves teaching about race in relation to theoretical frameworks and to daily, lived experience for all students.

#### NOTES

- 1 I currently teach at Portland State University, a large, urban public university in Portland, Oregon. Students of color make up approximately 25 percent of the student population, with Asian Pacific American students comprising the largest group of students of color.
- 2 The myth of the model minority assumes that Asians possess certain innate cultural traits and values that make us opportunistic, even dangerous, to U.S. society. It sends the message that Asian Americans have "made it," usually as a result of these unscrupulous, inscrutable Asian values. At the same time, this stereotype, describing Asians as the *model* minority in the United States, pits Asian Americans against other groups of people of color, as it places the blame for not making it squarely on the shoulders of people of color. Indeed, it ignores the fact that many Asians in the United States, especially immigrant women, recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, and the growing number of homeless Asian Americans, are not surviving economically, politically, and socially and face increasing levels of discrimination and hate violence. Finally, the myth of the model minority, as Shirley Hune suggests, often results in the further neglect of Asian Pacific American students in higher education, as they are seen as not needing academic assistance or guidance. See Hune, *Asian Pacific American Women in Higher Education: Claiming Visibility and Voice* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998).
- 3 bell hooks, "Black and Female: Reflections on Graduate School," in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 55-61.
- 4 Kyo Maclear, "Not in So Many Words: Translating Silence Across 'Difference,'" *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly of Writing, Politics, Art, and Culture*, no. 44/45 (Summer 1994), 6-11.

- 5 Joanna Kadi, "Stupidity 'Deconstructed,'" in *Is Academic Feminism Dead? Theory in Practice*, ed. The Social Justice Group at the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, University of Minnesota (New York: New York University Press, 200), 327-346.
- 6 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990).
- 7 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 8 Of course, those who maintain the belief that "colorblindness" = antiracism fail to recognize that there is already a central racial discourse in the United States, namely white supremacy. Thus, by refusing to speak of race at all, proponents of colorblindness simply uphold and reinforce white supremacy, however unknowingly.
- 9 Gloria Yamato, "Racism: Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, fourth edition, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 150-154. I've also heard white people say that they wish we could do away with terms like "race" and "racism," because these words are simply not "useful" anymore. Their sentiments provoke concern and anxiety for me, as I realize that what they really wish for is an end to any discussion of their own accountability or collusion with racism.
- 10 Mary Romero, "Learning to Think and Teach about Race and Gender Despite Graduate School: Obstacles Women of Color Graduate Students Face in Sociology," in *Is Academic Feminism Dead?*, 283-310.
- 11 My colleague Patti Sakurai discusses her experience on the job market and the recurring question regarding the comfort and safety of white students in her essay "That's Dr. Sakurai to You: Reflections on Race and Gender Along the Academic Front," presentation at the Women's Studies Colloquium Series on Race and Gender, Portland State University, March 7, 2001. She wonders, "Were white candidates asked the same question?" and writes, "In only one interview in my three years on the job market was any concern expressed or a question asked about my intended interactions with students of color . . . The educational priorities at many of these institutions and for whose benefit they viewed multiculturalism and diversity were quite painfully clear" (12).
- 12 Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 237-245.

MAUREN T. REDDY

## SMASHING THE RULES OF RACIAL STANDING

**SECOND RULE:**  
 Complaints by blacks are discounted, but black complaints by whites are less effective witnesses than are complaints by blacks, who are members of the oppressor class. This phenomenon reflects a widespread assumption that blacks, unlike whites, cannot be objective on racial issues and will favor their own no matter what.

—Derrick Bell, "The Rules of Racial Standing"<sup>1</sup>

After giving a powerful talk on antiracist pedagogy, with a particular focus on teaching students to read whiteness as a raced category in literary texts, a prominent white feminist scholar was asked how she deals with her own conferred white authority in the classroom. Her reply—"Oh, I use it. I think we have to use whatever we have against racism"—met laughter and scattered applause, indicating audience approval. The disjunction between this assertion and her talk's trenchant critique of white dominance was shocking, yet the scholar, along with most of her audience, seemed untroubled by the logical and ethical problems inherent in her position. Although Audre Lorde's adage that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house is not always true, it seems apt in relation to white authority in the classroom. That is, a professor who "uses" this conferred—as opposed to earned and examined—authority reinscribes racism through her self-presentation regardless of the content of her course; the master's tools thus rebuild the master's house of white supremacy even as the overtly antiracist intent of the course materials



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This essay considers strategies for dealing with the presumption of authority attending on whiteness and for decentering whiteness in the classroom. Reddy reports here on the mixed results she has achieved with several such strategies.