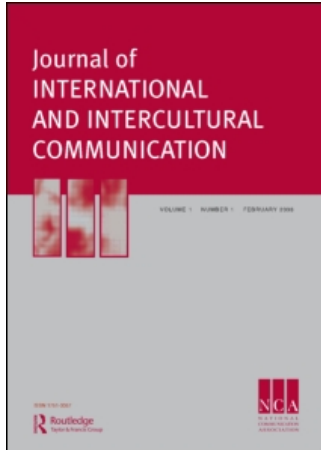


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“Why Are You Shoving This Stuff Down Our Throats?”: Preparing Intercultural Educators to Challenge Performances of White Racism

Julia R. Johnson, Marc Rich & Aaron Castelan Cargile

In general, white students respond intensely to explorations of racism. Intercultural educators are often unprepared for the challenges white students assert during conversations about racism and are unsure how to reply appropriately. Herein, we offer examples of student responses to critical race pedagogy in order to assist teachers in addressing similar stories told in their own classrooms. Based on data collected from over 300 student assignments collected between fall 2003 and fall 2006, we present a typology that categorizes patterns of white student resistance, including acknowledgement of racism, white self-preservation, diversion from structural power, and investment in white supremacy.

Keywords: Racism; Intercultural Communication Pedagogy; Resistance; Whiteness

African Americans hold a grudge against America for what happened to them during slavery. But it wasn't like they came over here free and became slaves—they came over on slave ships. So I think if anything they should be happy that America freed them 'cuz now they are free. (student journal entry)

You cannot generalize to the whole white population that we are all racists because a few whites actually are. (student journal entry)

As instructors who have taught or teach at urban universities in Southern California, the most ethnically and linguistically diverse state in the U.S., we pose the question, “(Why) Don't we all get along?” On the surface, all appears well in our

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intercultural (IC) classrooms. Most of our students recognize the discourse of hate and know how to perform what they believe to be equality. Political correctness, however, is only an order to ceasefire. It may quell discussion, but racial tension remains just beneath the surface of classroom interaction. When we probe deeper, assign critical readings about racism and privilege, and ask penetrating questions, we find that students—particularly white students—strongly resist meaningful discussion about racism and how it influences our collective and individual lives. We have also found that many faculty who want to teach about racism and other forms of oppression are fearful because volatile discourse emerges in classrooms where power is critiqued and analyzed.¹ Challenging racism warrants careful and systematic attention in our discipline and in our classrooms (Allen, 2007).

Confronting racism is an intense relational engagement because we negotiate intellectual and emotional knowledge as well as history and power. In classes where racism is challenged, the reaction of white students “is always severe” (Robollo-Gil & Moras, 2006, p. 383) and student responses range from overt racism (Rich & Cargile, 2004), to entrenchment in white supremacy, to refusing to listen to others (Fishman & McCarthy, 2005), to actively denying the importance of racism and student complicity in it (Warren & Hytten, 2004, p. 323). Furthermore, students typically present themselves as moral and responsible social actors who would rather not be identified as racist and subsequently attempt to persuade others that they support equality and justice.

Teachers must work diligently to address the challenges students present in discussions of white supremacy as well as navigate their own anxieties and relationship to it (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003; Rich & Cargile, 2004). Fishman and McCarthy (2005) explain that white teachers often initiate critical dialogues about race with good intentions, but can become caught in the white privilege they seek to challenge or fail to provide historical contexts for individual responses to racism. Some educators seek “polite dialogue” (Fishman & McCarthy, 2005, p. 354) or are unsure how to handle “emotionally charged and conflicting stories” (p. 352). Additionally, teachers cannot control how racism is expressed (Jeffrey, 2005) and feel anxiety about responding appropriately. As critical IC teachers, we believe that students, particularly white students, need to be challenged about race.² Furthermore, teachers, particularly white teachers, must also challenge themselves to think through the ways white supremacy structures our understandings of race and pedagogy. White people can resist white supremacy and construct antiracist identities (Segrest, 1994; Wise, 2005) and our classrooms provide one potential site for social change.

The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with concrete examples of white students’ responses to classroom dialogues about race so that they can better prepare themselves for encountering similar stories in their own classrooms. It is not enough to engage students in conversations about diversity or assign essays on critical race theory; professors need to continually draw students’ attention to the manifestations of racism in the lives of people of color. We must also provide students with models of socially just behaviors and interactions (Miller & Harris, 2005). While there is no single pedagogical plan for combating racism in our classrooms, there are strategies

we should utilize, including confrontation, which as Akintunde (2006) contends, “is an essential element of any class that seeks to deconstruct White racist ideology” (p. 36). Furthermore, confrontation can be accomplished with kindness and humanity, but it requires addressing racism directly, including the affective responses (anger, guilt, frustration, denial) that emerge inside and outside the classroom.

Typologizing whiteness has particular pedagogical and theoretical value. Typologies like the one provided here are themselves pedagogical—they teach us about how racism works and they allow educators to have an informed sense of the kinds of discourse that occurs in classrooms where race is advertently or inadvertently addressed. Secondly, when we can better predict how students will react during classroom conversations about race, we not only prepare ourselves for the inevitable, we can also potentially intervene in racist discourse. At this juncture, it is important to note that whiteness is a discourse that can be performed by people of all colors (Carrillo-Rowe & Malhotra, 2006) and that people of all colors can resist white supremacy. We focus on the performance of whiteness by white students because of its pervasiveness and its historical force, a point to which we return below.

In this paper, we present a typology of student responses to conversations about racism that we hope will help teachers prepare to confront white racist ideology in their classes. We begin by situating our analysis in research on student and teacher responses to race. Second, we offer a typology of responses to racism and consider what student resistance means. Third, we offer intervention strategies for addressing racism in the classroom. Finally, we explore directions for future research.

Whiteness and Pedagogy

Academics and activists have been writing about white supremacy and whiteness for over 100 years³ and “whiteness studies” has developed in the social sciences and humanities, including Communication Studies, over the last 20 years (e.g., Allen, 1994; Avant-Mier & Hasian, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carrillo-Rowe & Malhotra, 2006; Cooks & Fullon, 2003; Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Feagin & O’Brien, 2003; Frankenberg, 1993; Jackson, 1999; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Nakayama & Martin, 1999; Roman, 1993; Tierney & Jackson, 2003; Ware, 1992). Most relevant to this study is the literature addressing the relationship between whiteness and pedagogy that seeks to understand how whiteness is communicated in classroom spaces and to analyze how white racial domination is (re)produced and challenged in educational settings (e.g., Cooks, 2003; Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Miller & Harris, 2005; Simpson, Causey, & Williams, 2007; Warren & Fassett, 2004). We are particularly interested in the studies that explore how whiteness is performed in classrooms and how teachers engage the difficult dialogues that ensue.

Classroom exchanges about racism are charged with emotional as well as ideological intensity. Our bodies often speak for us (Cooks, 2003) and the roles that students often choose circumscribe the possibilities for dialogue, depending upon how critical they become (Miller & Harris, 2005; Warren & Hytten, 2004). How well teachers engage with students also defines the possibilities of challenging white

domination. The more comfortable instructors are to openly engage difficult dialogues (and not simply gloss over substantive issues), the more willing students are to share openly (Simpson et al., 2007). In addition, students are often willing to move into and through emotional tension when other class members move beyond blaming, condescending or patronizing (Simpson et al., p. 43). What we have learned generally from critical analyses of race (particularly whiteness) is that the analysis of student (and teacher) responses lends insight into the ways that whiteness is both challenged and reproduced in the everyday spaces of education (Cooks, 2003; Warren, 2001).

As scholars have documented, white people typically perform whiteness by evading questions of power, by asserting color-blind logics and through the expression of possessive individualism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Frankenberg, 1993). Additionally, “the experience and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 293). We have found consistent evidence of these general patterns in our classroom conversations of racism. White people don’t like to be connected to histories of oppression and structures of power (power evasion) and some students wrongly believe that addressing difference causes racism. White students may also assume that their experiences and ways of acting are transcendent and a matter of individual choice and experience. The capitalist economy in which we are socialized perpetuates this individualism because it conditions us to believe in autonomous individuals who operate beyond social structures (Lannamann, 1995) and, as Tierney and Jackson (2003) contend, “this freedom to be an individual . . . is available only to those who have the social power and privilege to preserve and enforce that freedom—Whites” (p. 93). White people, more than any other group, learn to erase the social and, thus, perpetually focus on the self. These general patterns emerge consistently in our classrooms, but take various forms in student responses.

Our primary interest in this essay is to enhance classroom pedagogy by documenting whiteness as it is performed by white students and by analyzing the ways these performances reinforce white supremacy. Other scholars have traced patterns of whiteness ranging from examinations of white women’s narratives about whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993) to more recent studies of the color-blind ideologies whites assert (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Within Communication Studies, three examples of whiteness typologies include Tierney and Jackson’s (2003) rhetorical examination of whiteness as a set of fantasy themes, Warren’s (2003) examination of “staged performances” that “protect” white identity,⁴ and Warren and Hytten’s (2004) examination of the “stances” people take toward white privilege. Tierney and Jackson (2003) examined public understandings of whiteness that are codified in our popular imagination, precluding the likelihood of alliance formation. Warren (2003) identified four ways undergraduate students at a large, relatively homogenous (white) midwestern university performed whiteness, including through the erasure of difference and construction of sameness, through contradictions, through the use of stereotypes and through a “rhetoric of victimhood” (p. 56). Focusing on students in one graduate seminar and mirroring Conquergood’s (1985) typology of ethical

positions ethnographers can take toward “Others,” Warren and Hytten (2004) present four problematic stances people can take toward whiteness and argue that the role of “critical democrat” can alter whiteness by balancing “their own relationship or investment in whiteness . . . while always keeping their own implication in the perpetuation of racism in play” (p. 330).

The aforementioned studies address how whiteness works, how it is reinforced and/or how it might be resisted. We extend these aforementioned studies as follows: First, data for this essay was collected over 3 years and is drawn from over 300 student journals or papers during that time. In this sense, we offer a broader range of responses across time than other typologies presented in *Communication*. Second, we develop more elaborate categories of responses illustrating how whiteness emerges in classroom dialogues about race. Certainly “more categories” does not necessarily translate to enhanced quality. However, we developed parts of the typology to illustrate more fully the kinds of statements students assert when race emerges in classroom dialogues as well as analyze how those responses support white supremacist ideology. By privileging student voices, we have designed this typology as a tool for educators to use in the (intercultural) classroom which we believe will enhance their ability to prepare themselves to address racism. After soliciting student feedback to discussions about race in their own classrooms, faculty can utilize the typology offered here to illuminate the ways in which student resistance is patterned and ingrained in U.S. discourse. We discuss the pedagogical implications of the typology toward the end of this essay.

Typology of Resistance

Over the past 10 years, we have explicitly addressed issues of power and oppression in our classrooms. As teachers of IC, performance, and cultural studies, we approach the critical examination of whiteness in various ways, including showing films, offering proactive performances, assigning readings and facilitating dialogues about the ways racism structures our lives. Part of this pedagogical process includes having students process classroom discussions and dialogue in written assignments such as journals or reaction papers.

The data we utilize in this essay was collected from over 300 student journals and response papers written over 3 years between the fall of 2003 and the fall of 2006. Respondents were enrolled in two different large, urban public universities located in Southern California. Our student populations in all courses were racially diverse, although the majority of our students were white/European American. In this paper, we focus on the responses provided by white students because they are the most resistant to exploring white supremacy and the most predominant nationally.

We have made a strategic decision to emphasize the responses of white students. We realize that our focus can unwittingly essentialize/recenter whiteness and consequently render people of color invisible. We also believe that white people can intervene in racism and that people of color can perform whiteness, engage white supremacy (see Carillo-Rowe & Malhotra, 2006; Johnson, Bhatt, & Patton, 2007), and

internalize racism. However, when white bodies/persons perform white supremacy, there is a specific historical legacy and force to those utterances that warrant specific analysis. We contend that structural analyses of racism require nuanced readings of different kinds of articulations of whiteness in order to work against racial domination. For example, Simpson et al. (2007) provide useful examples of how race and whiteness are navigated relationally amongst white students and students of color in focus group and interview dialogues. Our goal herein is to present and critique how white supremacy is enacted in multilinguistic, multiracial, and multiethnic settings. If white students freely engage white supremacy in these contexts, then we contend they are equally (if not more) likely to engage racism in more homogeneous settings. The more familiar teachers are with the nature, substance and nuance of whiteness articulated by white students, the better able they will be to address racism in their classrooms. And, as Kincheloe and Steinberg (2000) argued, to avoid essentializing whiteness, we must “study the social, historical, rhetorical, and discursive context of whiteness, mapping the ways it makes itself visible and invisible, manifests its power, and shapes larger sociopolitical structures in relation to the microdynamics of everyday life” (p. 182). We contend that this typology and our analysis of student responses meet these criteria.

As we coded student responses, we preserved the writing style from the original journals in order to most accurately represent the personas and emphases students provided. Four primary themes and a number of subthemes were identified and corroborated by all three authors. The four themes generated from students’ responses illustrate general resistance to addressing white supremacy and include *acknowledgement of racism*, *white self-preservation*, *diversion from structural power* and *investment in white supremacy*. In what follows, we explain each element of the typology, present specific statements that illustrate each and briefly analyze student responses. We devote significant space to the words of students because we believe this will best prepare IC teachers to teach critically in their own classrooms.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement stories are told to explain that racism exists “out there” and is perpetrated by overt racists such as skinheads. White students may insist that racism is a regional problem (“Southerners are racist”), or that racism is the domain of extremist groups or the perversely ignorant. White students who perform these stories typically embody the role of the good, white liberal. These students want to address racism immediately—prior to self-critique and reflection—or be told what they can do to “help” people of color. They lack the information and experience to understand that racism, in all of its forms, exists throughout the U.S. and is frequently perpetuated by well-meaning white folks. Acknowledgement stories are comprised of three subcategories: 1) “I Don’t Want Things to Change/Things Won’t Change”; 2) “Guilt”; and 3) “I’m a Victim, Too.”

“*I don’t want things to change/Things won’t change.*” When arguing that things won’t change, students often assert the benefits of diversity and avow that some

persons are more privileged than others. Instead of moving into a realm of social justice, however, the students use neutral language to describe a distant stance from transformative possibilities. As two different students note:

The idea that we can be tolerant and accepting of the difference of others is a great view, however not very likely . . . I partake in racial jokes, laugh . . . at stereotypes . . . and am doing nothing to change my attitudes of those of the people around me.

I do think that white males have privilege, even over white females, but again I don't spend my time thinking about or spelling out what those privileges are . . . but that's society and I just make the best of it.

These students do not demonstrate a commitment to any kind of personal or social change, and even choose to participate in overtly racist behaviors (jokes). These students seem to be resigned to a "that's life" approach to the disease of racism. This kind of acknowledgement also maintains a solid distance between the white person and racism that exists "out there," thereby ensuring that people of color are Othered and de facto segregated from "whites like me."

"*Guilt.*" While some students assume distance from racism and the possibility of changing racist structures, others become caught in shame or guilt about the ways structural privilege is granted to white persons and oppression is experienced by persons of color. Consider the following student narratives:

A lot of the time, I just feel guilty for being white. I wish there was something that I could do to change the privileges that we have.

. . . one thing I do notice about being white is, in the united states, carrying the responsibility of every white person in this country over the last 200 years. Not a day goes by in a class where we don't talk about "rich, land-owning white men" or "white men in power" where I don't feel some sort of guilt.

The first time I became aware that my "race" affected the way I am treated in society was when I saw the Rodney King beating on T.V. I . . . I knew deep down that would not be happening to a white person . . . I was completely disgusted and almost ashamed.

As indicated in the statements above, students often feel "guilty for being white" and feel that they need to carry "the responsibility of every white person in this country." Social psychologists such as Helms (1990) contend white people move through stages of racial identity development, which includes feelings of guilt as a white person becomes more aware of her/his own racism (as cited in Tatum, 1997, p. 97). Although understandable from a developmental perspective, an overdeveloped focus on white selfhood evades questions of power and analysis of structural inequalities. It is also an affective strategy that invites the interlocutor to sympathize with the experiences of white persons, while simultaneously erasing the oppression experienced by people of color.⁵ In addition, guilt is a manifestation of structural power: If one *feels guilty* they are responding to a critique of privilege and domination. Culturally, we revel in guilt and treat it as an end (i.e. see how sensitive I am, how well I "see" racism?). Thus, guilt functions to maintain white supremacy by

immobilizing action and by recentering attention (within the discourse of whiteness) instead of decentering whiteness.

"*I'm a victim, too.*" Claims of white victimage can call on feelings of guilt in order to "reverse" a discussion of power inequities. Victim claims are usually asserted more adamantly than guilt appeals and tend to deploy anger and indignation at naming whiteness and white power. For example:

Oh, dear, don't get me started on being white again. White privilege. It exists . . . I hate it. I, in many ways, resent being white . . . I feel that being white makes me an outsider. I didn't ask for white privilege but I can't get rid of it. I want to . . . be proud of who I am as a white person. But I can't be because of the limitations that it puts on me.

I know I have white privilege . . . but this is not an excuse for other cultures to demise me or tell me that I have only gotten this far because of the color of my skin. I am intelligent, smart, and determined.

The aforementioned victim narratives all begin with an acknowledgement that whites are privileged, resulting in the expression of resentment and limitation. These feelings are coupled with an erasure of whiteness and a redirection of energy from an utterly unjust system onto the bodies of people of color as evidenced in another student response: ". . . this is not an excuse for other cultures to demise [despise?] me or tell me that I have only gotten this far because of the color of my skin." To make whiteness synonymous with victimage requires the negation of racism experienced by people of color while simultaneously focusing the discussion on the discomfort of the privileged.

Acknowledging the existence of racism is crucial for initiating transformative action. However, acknowledgement must be accompanied by an investment in taking responsibility for social change. Fearing change, remaining in guilt or reorienting power to claim victim status as a member of the dominant culture functions to subvert or minimize the value of acknowledging racism and its effects. We next turn to the stories white students use to preserve their sense of self.

White Self-Preservation

Challenging racism may create an identity crisis for white students. When students learn about power, privilege, and oppression, their entire sense of self and their social world is called into question. As a result, students may engage in a rhetoric of self-preservation, or narration designed to recuperate their sense of self through appeals to a universal morality and/or ongoing entitlement. The primary function of a self-preservation narrative is to cast oneself as a hapless innocent in a drama of antagonists. Students who perform *self-preservation stories* make a great effort to convince others that they are not racists and that they are not responsible—and therefore not accountable—for past injustices against people of color. We identify four types of self-preservation narratives: 1) "I'm a Good White"; 2) "Historical Amnesia"; 3) "Minimizing Whiteness"; and 4) "The Blame Game."

"I'm a good white." Over the years, we have noticed that white people, particularly those of us who identify as liberal, are strongly invested in our "inherent goodness" and, often, moral superiority. The claims of being a good person are synonymous with an innocent whiteness embodied by persons who date interracially or who travel to locations where few white people live. Goodness is also juxtaposed to badness as the following statements illustrate:

I personally am not an enemy. I have several friends of different color lines and have in fact dated both a black person and a Latino. So stereotyping me as a white racist is completely unfair.

I do not like to be look at as the evil white girl. Because I am not evil. I try to accept everyone for who they are. My best friend is black.

There are a lot of Caucasian people that only accept whites . . . Those types of people have ruined it for people like me. We are the innocent ones . . . !

These appeals to being a "good white" draw from white supremacist logics where whiteness is associated with benevolence and innocence. Because Western society is structured by dualistic thought, students may believe that their options for being in the world are either good or bad, innocent or evil ("I . . . am not an enemy," "I am not evil," "We are the innocent ones") and have limited understanding of simultaneous manifestations of resistance and racism. "Good whites" are accepted by racial "Others" ("My best friend is black," "I have dated a black person and a Latino") which helps prove the innocence of particular white persons and a separation from white supremacy. The inability to understand the distinction between what one wishes reality to be and the reality of power can be traced, in part, to historical amnesia and obliviousness to structural understandings.

"*Historical amnesia.*" Historical amnesia is a plague in U.S. society and serves a powerful function for maintaining popular support for U.S. hegemony in the world as well as for maintaining our collective investment in white supremacy (Loewen, 1995). Our white students want to forget the past, which functions to preserve a sensibility of their innocence in the present.

Why am I held accountable for what people did a hundred years ago? I never had any slaves . . . I don't feel that I personally owe any group anything for the past unjust treatment.

I did not own a slave. I did not beat people because of their skin color. I did not treat people like that, so don't treat me like I did. Yes, my ancestors may have done that to Africans back then, but I did not.

When history is addressed in our classes, students consistently distance themselves from the slavery of African Americans more than any other atrocity, policy, or law. Students often use the extreme violence from the era of slavery and the subsequent realities of Jim Crow as a backdrop for arguing that history is problematic to consider in the present. Instead of problematizing history, students contend that they should not be "held accountable for what people did a hundred years ago," that they "did not own a slave" or "did not beat people because of their skin color."⁶ Referencing slavery

is significant for several reasons, including 1) the legacy of slavery is disassociated with the present, thereby minimizing the contemporary experience of racism for African Americans, 2) it conforms to a black–white binary of race relations that defines the U.S. nation-state, but that also erases the experiences of diverse racial groups and, 3) racism is equated with only the most overt and hideous forms of racialized violence, which are important, but limit conversation of the more implicit forms of racism that insidiously permeate contemporary social life.

“*Minimizing whiteness.*” Many white students work diligently to negate the meaning of whiteness and the power of white bodies. This erasure of whiteness as a color and an identity functions to preserve and “recuperate” whiteness from an association with racism. When asked what whiteness means, students replied:

[Whiteness] means nothing to me . . . I am who I am regardless of my color, or my culture. I have no definition of myself being “white” because I never really see others by their color.

In all honesty, all it means to be white is that I can’t go out in the sun for very long. Other than that I do not see a difference.

Whiteness, oh what a bullshit term . . . I am white and might even exude whiteness from time to time . . . but I don’t put much meaning into it.

The “meaninglessness” of whiteness in the narratives above relies on the use of color-blind logics and the reduction of social identity to a manifestation of melanin. To say that whiteness means “nothing” or restricts access to the sun erases whiteness as a social force (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). The student’s use of personal choice is also important when whiteness is called into question. In all three responses, students reference their choices—“I never see” color, “I do not see a difference,” “I don’t put much meaning into it.” The rhetoric of individualism present in these narratives is connected to appeals to meritocracy as well. Wise (2005) illustrates that meritocracy is a myth for everyone—white supremacy sets white people up for success and provides us with systematic advantages in all we do.

“*The blame game.*” White students often play a “blame game” when contemporary racism is connected to history. “Blame game” narratives preserve white selfhood by framing the innocence of some whites while simultaneously directing aggression toward those who critique whiteness, primarily people of color.

I’m sick of people making me feel uncomfortable and like dirt, simply because I’m white.

. . . how many more articles are we going to be forced to read that basically put down all white people. Well news flash! Not all white people want to touch a black person’s hair, not all white people are Christians and hate jews. Not all white people owned slaves. So why are people so free to categorize all white people together as evil?

The Truth is not all white people think alike and they are all categorized that way. The minorities blame the white person for things that has happened and this has caused the law to implement affirmative action. The white person is now at a disadvantage.

When white students talk about being blamed for oppression or accepting blame for racism, they usually express anger or vitriol. Ironically, white students often blame others for “making” them *feel* or address whiteness as a racialized identity. In the first narrative, the student mentions feeling uncomfortable or dirty by virtue of her/his whiteness. By saying “I’m sick of people making me feel,” s/he expresses anger about analyzing white people’s role in white supremacy. In the second narrative, the student responds to the analysis of whiteness as a social or group identity by mentioning “all white people” four times and by calling into question the marking of whiteness as a category of identity. It is also important to note that the student begins by blaming the (white) instructor for “putting down” white people. Finally, in the third narrative, the categorization of whiteness is presented as problematic, in terms of erasing individuality (“not all white people think alike”) and for creating “disadvantage[s]” for white people.

The four types of self-preservation narratives are individually meaningful, and are also powerful when read in relation. Maintaining status as a “good white” requires historical amnesia, minimizing whiteness and blaming others. For the students quoted here, whiteness is synonymous with racism so they work diligently to purge themselves of badness by highlighting their goodness and by blaming others. We will next focus on the ways white students use a variety of diversionary tactics to avoid meaningful discussions of racism.

Diversion

Diversion stories are narrated by students who want to completely deflect the discussion away from racism and white privilege. Students may tell diversion stories in an attempt to convince others that people of color separate themselves, or that they are just as racist as white people. In addition, students may also make diversionary attempts by noting that the focus on racism marginalizes other important sociopolitical issues. White students who have made little investment to understand race or privilege may divert by confidently claiming that they fully comprehend racial relations and are ready to “move on” to other IC subjects. Finally, white students may divert by exclaiming that they have felt marginalized by people of color, or that racialized others are responsible for their own oppression. Diversionary responses are frequently successful because they “hook” students and teachers into discussions that quickly move away from privilege and power, while at the same time functioning to make structural oppression invisible. Diversionary narratives can also create doubt and frustration for teachers and students who assert antiracist positions. We identify four types of diversion narratives, including 1) “*They are Racist, Too*”; 2) “*Blame the Victim*”; 3) “*Its Not Fair*”; 4) *The Real Problem is Not Race, It’s . . .* and 5) “*Whites as Outsiders*.”

“*They are racists, too.*” Similar to the ways children divert attention away from parental criticism, students divert discussion away from white supremacy by accusing people of color of racism. Students comment that:

... minorities hate to be stereotyped yet they do it too! They stereotype whites. I don't know how many times I feel like I'm such a horrible person and feel entirely blamed simply because I'm white. News Flash!!! Not all white people are the same!!!!

When the girl said that blacks are not racist, I think they are more than white people personally. They have this anger with White people and I know a lot of them do not like us.

So basically everyone, people of color and whites, are racist. Ok, well then maybe people of color need to admit this too. They seem to think the only racism in this world comes from white people while they are just as guilty of being racist too.

Although racism is a problem in these narratives—as indicated by the student references to stereotyping and racism—it is not connected to a legacy of white racial domination. In fact, by pointing to people of color and saying “they are racist,” the white students obliterate structural power, make racism the *responsibility* of everyone and erase systematic white terrorism. Saying that people of color are “just as guilty of being racist” and more racist than white people, presents a flip side to color blindness. Color is hyper visible and what counts as racism is defined by whites against racialized “Others.”

“*Blame the victim.*” Part of blaming people of color for racism often involves individuating manifestations of structural power. A primary strategy that dominant group members often use to combat explorations of structural power is to blame the victim for her/his oppression (in addition to blaming people of color for racism in general). Just as men have historically blamed women for rape, white students revictimize students of color by arguing that those who experience oppression “create their own realities.”

I am sick of people complaining that us “whites” make their life hard; you make your own life hard. We make our choices in this world, no matter what race you are. YOU are responsible for your own happiness and well being

Black people don't vote often. They should. If they really aren't able to use the voting systems in Florida they should make a ruckus because the squeaky wheel gets the grease. If they feel cheated they should say something about it.

The nature of blaming victims manifests in both overt accusations such as “YOU are responsible” as well as an erasure of historical facts, as evidenced in the second comment alluding to African Americans being knocked off the voting rolls during the 2000 presidential election. This kind of blaming also functions to evade power as it operates through the bodies of white people (“I am sick of people complaining . . .”) and as power is wielded through institutions. Furthermore, the second response also demonstrates a belief in the U.S. nation-state as “fair” and “just,” as evidenced by the student's contention that “saying something” would be sufficient recourse for systematic exclusion from the political process. Being cheated, is a matter of personal *feeling* as opposed to a material experience of structural, systematic oppression. White supremacy establishes expectations for the behavior for all people and, for people of color, in particular ways. As Nakayama (2000) argued

People of color . . . have long held practical knowledge about the workings of whiteness for their own survival in a white-dominated society. Knowledge about when to speak out and when to remain silent, when to look and when to avert gazes, have all played important roles in the ways that whiteness functions. (p. 364)

"Its not fair?" Many of us learn from childhood that the world is not fair and that we need to prepare ourselves for the realities of inequity. Many students have difficulty dealing with injustice, and use appeals to fairness as a strategy for avoiding discussions of power. Refrains from students range from defending most white people to challenging the displacement of white norms and claiming "reverse discrimination." For example:

I had a friend that passed the fire academy a few years ago with flying colors, and he did not get a job in a firehouse for almost three years because of affirmative action. Was that fair? The answer of course is no. There were two African American gentlemen in his class that joked about all they had to do was pass the academy and they would be hired on in a flash.

I don't have a problem with this until you won't let the "dominant" group have their own time. All white groups are challenged and called racist if they don't include a person of color Shoot, there is a black entertainment television channel which no one has a problem with but I bet money that a strictly white entertainment channel would be questioned This to me sounds like a double standard.

One thing that really bothers me that takes place on our own campus every year is a special graduation . . . for African American or Black students graduating I believe that this injustice is in fact caused by the African American community's ethnocentrism.

The appeals to fairness cited above engage two primary strategies. The first strategy is to attack people of color and institutional efforts to redress their systematic exclusion. The second strategy erases power inequities through appeals to "reverse discrimination." In the first narrative a student raises questions about affirmative action and in the third narrative a student asserts that programming directed toward traditionally disenfranchised groups is a "double standard." Students also commonly argue against student organizations or graduation ceremonies designed for historically excluded student populations.

In all these cases, students direct conversation away from questions of white power and privilege to focus on the "bad deeds" of racialized "Others" or antiracist whites. Furthermore, these kinds of claims—while designed to position the students and other whites as hapless "victims" of unfair acts—erase the significant material inequities that prompted the formation of Affirmative Action policies, culturally specific graduation ceremonies or the need to study racism in the first place.

"The real problem is not race, its . . ." One way white students try to avoid discussions about race is to direct attention toward other forms of injustice and oppression. Generally, this type of diversionary tactic is used by white people who represent both dominant and disenfranchised groups (white and also women, lesbians, working class, disabled, etc.). And, while studying intersections is essential

(and part of our teaching), most students do not engage intersectional analysis. Rather, they request a focus *away from* racism in order to highlight other identities. For example:

Yes, because I am “white,” the system is somewhat built for me, but I am also a lesbian. Women and homosexuals are discriminated against as well.

I think a lot of the items in class we talked about in regards to race really have to do with money. For example the whole counting the votes subject has to do with poor people and we all know that come in different colors . . . you could say that the majority of poor people are colored but I feel it is more so that they are poor, lower class, less educated . . . they would be the ones to mess up the votes and therefore it should just be thrown out.

How about how the rich “oppress” the poor (not all whites are rich you know)? Or men oppress women? Or the older oppress the younger?

Examining intersections is essential for understanding how identity is navigated, how power manifests and, importantly, how some people experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Johnson et al., 2007). However, intersectional analysis mandates a complex and interconnected analysis of social categories, not the elimination of one category in order to analyze another. In the narratives above, students may tangentially acknowledge whiteness (“I am ‘white’”), but only begrudgingly, as evidenced by placing the word white in quotations (as if whiteness was not real or meaningful) or by claiming that “not all whites are rich” as a precursor for discussing sex and age. Even in cases where students acknowledge that race and class are connected (“the majority of poor people are colored”), the student contends that class is more important and engages racist and classist stereotypes to divert attention.

“*White outsiders.*” When the social world does not focus on people accustomed to privilege, then the privileged tend to feel anxiety. Although white students deny the isolation experienced by many people of color, they simultaneously construct a rhetorical space where whiteness is placed on social margins:

I am “white,” but at my high school “white” people were the minority. Quite frequently I would be walking in the halls, unable to understand anything being said around me. At one of my jobs, my co-workers would talk about me and my friends, right in front of our face, in a different language.

The first time I was treated differently because of my race was in seventh grade. I was on the basketball team at a small private school. The majority of the students were black, and the white students acted like black students in style of dress, speaking in Black vernacular or Ebonics. I felt very out of place . . . I was treated as an outsider, called names like cracker, whitey, and collar.

As we have argued throughout this paper, white racism is systematic and structural. We teach it as such and ask students to understand the structural as personal and vice versa. Clearly, being called a name is a potentially painful experience. It can also feel uncomfortable to not understand languages being spoken in one’s presence. Discomfort is not oppression, however, and it is a sign of privilege

when white students believe they should be able to understand everything going on around them or never have their racial embodiment questioned publicly. It is significant that the students are unable to situate their personal experience within larger structural dynamics and recenter whiteness by defining it as marginal. Given the innumerable privileges white people receive in general (with important variations and nuances given intersecting identities), the white students could approach being called a “cracker” as a moment for empathy with people of color who live with much more severe treatment throughout their lives.

We have found that white students in IC classrooms commonly use diversionary tactics when discussions center on race relations. White students are quick to assert their status as a member of a marginalized community (e.g., homosexual, poor, women) in order to imply that they understand what people of color experience, and to move the conversation into an arena where they feel more comfortable and knowledgeable. These tactics can be highly effective because other white students in the class will frequently “jump on the bandwagon” and share stories of being an outsider or blaming people of color for their own oppression. Without a clear intervention, the entire discussion can be shifted away from structural racism, leaving students of color in a position where they are made to feel that they must defend their experiences. In our final category we consider student responses that require an allegiance to U.S. grand narratives.

Investment

Investment stories are told by students who subscribe wholeheartedly to U.S. grand narratives. Because grand narratives proffer a country in which anyone can make it if they try hard enough, and where there is liberty and justice for all, students perform investment stories in order to maintain the status quo and demonstrate that the real problem is an unwillingness on the part of people of color to work hard enough to succeed. Meritocracy rules the day in investment narratives. Not only do these stories blame victims of oppression, they also maintain ignorance and create an environment ripe with patriotism. These stories may become even more predominant during times of national struggle.

Students who offer investment stories cling to the belief that everyone is equal, and assert that things are constantly getting better in the U.S. They may highlight the success of individual people of color to support their claims. Finally, investment stories occur when narrators freely embrace the benefits of white skin. Although the four types of narratives we identify all require the evasion of power, investment narratives demonstrate a firm commitment to maintaining privilege because there is a refusal to acknowledge racism as a fundamental social structure. There are three general kinds of investment narratives: 1) “We are All Equal”; 2) “Progress has been Made”; and 3) “I enjoy the Benefits of White Privilege.”

“*We are all equal.*” Stories of equality are defining features of life in the United States, although this nation-state was established for the benefit and welfare of a select few. The formation of our national consciousness was constructed through

contradiction: Few benefited from the oppression of many and stories of equality were spun to compliment exploitation. It should not surprise us, then, that our students frequently perform grand narratives. Whiteness is constructed as synonymous with Americanness in these stories. As you read the following narratives, notice the use of capitalization and exclamation points used by respondents:

I believe that we have become so politically correct as a society that we believe that race influences everything. Sometimes when I hear about how it is portrayed on television or who got off on what court hearings I want to just say DEAL WITH IT. . . . I feel angry that society has made it okay to portray circumstances in these racial ways, but it makes me tired, tired of being looked at as though I am privileged because I'm white. I want to be the same. EQUAL!

Deep down I am just a person that happens to be classified as white and from now on I am classifying myself as American. This is the heritage I can truly identify with. . . . I am like all the people in my neighborhood no matter what skin color. . . . I AM AMERICAN AND PROUD OF IT!!!!!! . . . I am no longer white!

I am white, I am a citizen of the United States, and that's all there is to it. I am not better than any one else, I consider myself equal to others.

Within the aforementioned stories students express frustration, anger, and sincerity as they appeal to equality. The connection between equality and individuality is made by several students as they define their behavior, including "I am classifying myself as American," "I am no longer white!," "I am a citizen of the United States," and "I want to be the same. EQUAL!" Student investment in whiteness is expressed in the assumption that individually defined circumstances constitute a collective reality: Students treat the world as theirs to define and social power up for negotiation. Equality is addressed as the purview of individual will and structural racism is rendered obsolete.

"*Progress has been made.*" Students often contend that racism is a thing of the past, a by-product of bygone eras when people were more ignorant. Appeals to progress are integral components of investment narratives: One must be invested in the inherent goodness of a system in order to contend that the present is better than the past. As one student stated in her/his journal, "We need to look toward the future and learn from the past but not make it an excuse for oppression." Other students stated:

Over the years America has slowly begun to change its ways for the better. More and more opportunities have been made available to minorities. . . . I believe everyone now has equal opportunity to become anything they strive to be.

The truth is that America is "progressing" so let's not "digress" by constantly pulling up the past and shoving it in the so called "oppressors" face!

I bet slaves never would have believed two of the highest ranked jobs in the government would one day be held by black people (Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice). Looking at history from a broader perspective, I find they have improved their situation tremendously and will undoubtedly continue to progress through the future.

In the U.S., we are socialized to believe in meritocracy through the grand narrative of the American Dream. Of course, the American Dream equalizes significant inequality and provides a foundation for claiming that the small changes we have witnessed in some aspects of social life are indicative of a change to deep structures of inequality. Student narratives about progress call on this grammar of meritocracy as evidence by claims such as “More and more opportunities have been made available to minorities” or “I bet slaves never would have believed . . .” By using public figures like Powell and Rice, students also rely on tokenism to provide evidence of structural transformation and progress.

“I enjoy the benefits of white privilege.” Finally, students express an investment in their own privilege and a desire to maintain the benefits they receive from a white supremacist system. This kind of investment is grounded in liberalism, as opposed to overt forms of racism engaged by explicitly white supremacist organizations. As the stories below indicate, liberal engagement of white privilege can range from the articulation of overt selfishness to a self-centeredness coupled with the expression of empathy for the targets of racism.

. . . I also think I can't feel any worse for African Americans and Native Americans. They have been treated so badly in the past. It makes me ill and sometimes I am not proud of my skin color. But if somebody would ask me “would you change my skin color” I would say “absolutely not.” I am just being honest.

When I learn about the KKK or slavery I become very grateful that I am white and that I am nurtured because of this. I can say that being white has made my life a lot easier than someone's of another race.

If for some reason I get a job over some one of a different race, because I'm white, then that's ok with me. I'm the one with the job.

The students' investment in white privilege is situated in an understanding of the effects of racism as evidenced by statements like “I can't feel any worse for African Americans and Native Americans” or “When I learn about the KKK or slavery I become very grateful that I am white and that I am nurtured because of this.” In these stories, students use an awareness of racism as justification for investing in white privilege. The third student invests with complete self-interest, happy that s/he is “the one with the job.” For these students, their own ease and peace of mind and body takes precedence over the people on whose shoulders this ease is maintained.

Investment narratives illustrate that many of our students are deeply committed in habit, if not intention, in white power and domination. Asserting claims of equality and progress demonstrate a naïve hopefulness in white ways of being and knowing. Investment is most clearly demonstrated when students cling to the unearned privilege they have been granted. In the weeks and months following 9/11, we were inundated with investment stories whenever we attempted to facilitate discussions about race relations. With frequency and immediacy, white students argued that everyone needed to come together as Americans, and “put our differences behind us.” During times of war, our students will narrate these stories to perpetuate an “us versus them” binary in which U.S. citizens are morally superior. As the immigration

debate heats up on a national level, IC instructors will likely hear new manifestations of this form of student resistance.

Pedagogical Interventions

Critical race scholars agree that there is no quick fix for racism, or clear-cut pedagogical strategies that will work across classrooms and demographics. Furthermore, intercultural teacher-scholars may be more or less comfortable challenging students to engage in critical discourse. How far instructors push can be further complicated by university mores (the second author was once told by a college administrator that there were no racial issues on campus), geographical, historical and political climates, and the racialized bodies of teachers and students. We are especially sensitive to the tendency of our students to quickly move to “fixing” the problem after one discussion or unit on racism. That said, we offer three pedagogical strategies for addressing racism in classroom settings.⁷

The first strategy educators can engage is to develop pedagogy in anticipation of student responses. For example, we have developed instructional modules that make connections between the past and present and the dialectical tensions between the structural and the personal. In terms of history, we explore contemporary events within a framework of legal history, we teach how histories of race and migration are intertwined (see *Ozawa v. U.S.* or *U.S. v. Thind*, 1923), we ask students to explore how racism is made invisible in U.S. history classes (Loewen, 1995) and we address the undeniable economic connections between slavery times and today. Specifically, the third author has spent countless hours developing and refining an in-depth PowerPoint presentation on the historical, legal and economic aspects of racism in the U.S. This presentation is updated each year to account for contemporary and unfolding events. We have found that this presentation provides students with a foundation of understanding race relations prior to engaging in critical discourse. These aforementioned modules assist us in situating contemporary race relations within the structural legacies that inform intercultural interactions so that we can analyze how the statements of “individuals” are part of larger patterns of meaning.

Second, educators can use this typology to better illuminate how their students reify resistance strategies. In their examination of how white identities can potentially be transformed in the classroom, Rich and Cargile (2004) illustrate the importance of mirroring to students their responses to classroom dialogues about race. These authors use a “recursive loop,” a “strategy that not only entails collecting journals and anonymous confessionals,” but also “feeding back these voices to the students themselves in public, dialogic displays” (p. 353). The authors presented journaled responses publicly (anonymously and with permission), so students were given “immediate feedback about how their classmates were privately responding to a range of class readings and discussions” (p. 358). Students responded powerfully to this strategy, expressing a range of emotions. Ultimately the loop provided an

opportunity for deep personal and communal reflection. Perhaps, most importantly, students were given an opportunity to learn how their responses were connected to larger patterns of discourse. The typology we present herein extends the use of the recursive loop by enabling instructors to not only mirror student responses, but also illustrate how they are situated within the larger discourse of resistance to racial dialogue. As a pedagogical intervention, instructors could collect anonymous student responses to classroom discussions and readings, and then (with student permission) note how their responses are aligned with categories offered in this typology. Students would be able to actually see how their stories are not unique, but instead reify the very categories we are attempting to transcend in order to combat racism.

Our final pedagogical strategy strays from teacher-student interactions, and instead focuses on the role of the educator. During a recent campus engagement focusing on racism, the second author was met with volatile reactions from campus faculty, leaders, and administrators who challenged the notion of structural racism and became outwardly hostile and agitated. Students of color in the audience later commented that they were shocked at the level of denial and lack of understanding from campus leaders. Hence, we are hopeful that this typology offers educators an opportunity for critical self-inquiry. Scholars (Rich & Cargile, 2004; Tatum, 1997) have noted that white folks go through a series of steps in route to understanding race and privilege. As emphasized in *Critical Pedagogy*, educators should be committed to ongoing and critical reflection about their own relationships to dominance. In reading this paper, we imagine some readers might recognize themselves and/or their colleagues in some of the student comments. If you recognize yourself, identify or align with some of the student responses, then it is important to examine your own background and history as part of your pedagogical preparation for resisting white supremacy. Furthermore, if student responses are echoed by colleagues, campus leaders or hiring search committees, we hope that this essay can be used as a tool of intervention. In order to “practice what we preach,” we have sent preliminary copies of this essay to leaders on our home campuses, and also invited them to visit our intercultural courses during specific sessions. After reading this essay, one of the campus leaders who previously responded in ways that perpetuated whiteness has softened his rhetoric and accepted an invitation to participate in more dialogue about racism.

Conclusion

It can feel overwhelming to meet student resistance head on, in the classroom or when reading student journals. The more willing we are as educators to maintain the commitment to antiracist pedagogy, the better able we will be to create different possibilities for our students. We believe it is possible to transform and eradicate white supremacy. Of course, there is no “quick fix” to our global history of white supremacist domination. Furthermore, we are not necessarily convinced that addressing racism in our classes will necessarily contribute to larger social change.

However, we do believe that antiracist efforts must be engaged by all of us, in all elements of social and “private” life in order for change to occur. Raible and Irizarry (2007) contend that “normative whiteness” can be challenged when whites transform “whiteness in innovative ways in conjunction with racial others, ultimately rejecting white superiority” (p. 195).

Our goal in this essay was to illuminate and categorize the responses that white students utilize to avoid discussing race. By being aware of these multiple responses, IC educators will be better prepared to facilitate the scenarios that will likely arise when they approach race from a critical perspective. Hence, it is our hope that IC teachers will be able to construct antiracism curricula that account for the typology presented here. There are several directions future research might take. First, researchers might consider charting a variety of pedagogical strategies that could efficaciously counter students’ attempts to derail discussions on race. Our analysis of student resistance strategies offers a starting point for generating some responses. However, more in-depth examination of reading materials, discussion leading strategies, and so forth are needed. Second, it is important to explore how pedagogical strategies for teaching antiracism must differ based on faculty embodiment. For example, teachers of color are treated as “inherently” knowledgeable and self-interested when they teach about racism. Conversely, white teachers may be viewed as “more objective,” and will rarely be accused of “pushing an agenda.” Thus, the strategies faculty can successfully (i.e. with greater or lesser expressions of hostility, negativity mentioned on evaluations, challenges from administrators, etc.) utilize in their teaching varies greatly. Finally, researchers should consider unpacking the ways in which white supremacist discourse and ideology are embodied by students of color. Discussing pedagogical strategies for addressing internalized racism and responding appropriately to students of color in mixed-race classrooms is important for understanding how many of us perform whiteness.

Our pedagogical goal is teaching for social justice, which requires the development of critical consciousness. Freire (1970) defines *conscientização* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). He contends that the true function of education should be to collaborate with students so that they—as the oppressed and oppressors—might develop a critical consciousness to know the world as it really is and to act on that world and transform it. Freire argues that the systematically privileged (i.e. oppressors) must “fight at the side” of the oppressed to change dehumanizing reality (p. 31). As critical race educators, we believe that our classrooms can be sites of conscientization, places where we work with our students to identify the material reality of racist oppression and begin to act in antiracist ways. We contend that the first step in this ongoing process is to be aware of the strategies that white students will employ to maintain the status quo, thereby preparing ourselves to strategically and humanely confront white racial domination.

Notes

- [1] In our teaching and research, we focus on intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on race because of space constraints and for analytic clarity.
- [2] Our pedagogical practices are informed by critical approaches to the study of Intercultural Communication, which involves a commitment to examine unequal relationships of power and to intervene in dominant discourses in the interests of social justice.
- [3] In fact, W. E. B. DuBois (1990) argued that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line . . .” (p. 16) in July 1900.
- [4] Here we specifically reference the third chapter of Warren’s (2003) larger study.
- [5] We use the term strategy to refer to a consequence of communicative action and not necessarily an intentional “manipulation” of an audience. Like Nakayama and Kizek (1995), we are interested in the circulating power of whiteness that functions within/through the language that people use and do not believe we can know the intention of any particular speaker.
- [6] This erasure of blackness and the history of people of African descent is also used by students of color to suppress the past: “I found myself wanting to say that the US government took this land from my ancestors and gave us a tiny bit of land in return, but you don’t see me still angry . . .”
- [7] The teacher’s body is a primary site of pedagogy in the intercultural communication classroom and in conversations about race. Faculty of color are almost always “read” as racialized by students (of all colors) and the bodies of white teachers often go unmarked until a student of color or the teacher him/herself addresses whiteness (Cooks, 2003). Classroom pedagogy is always structurally situated and the choices a teacher can or will make should consider those structural constraints.

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