

## **Teaching Critical Whiteness Theory: What College and University Teachers Need to Know**

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My small, four-year, regional, upstate New York college is similar to many colleges and universities across the country. It has a predominantly white student population, comprised primarily of middle- and working-class students. The majority of my students are from rural, economically depressed, racially homogenous areas. When planning my first critical whiteness theory course, I knew that most, if not all of my students, would be white. I also knew that my class would probably be the first time white students had been asked to think about their racial identity in a formal educational setting and that they would need as many tools as I could offer them to critically engage with whiteness. I anticipated that I would encounter some resistant students, while other students would eagerly embrace a new way of thinking about themselves and the world, and I wanted to feel as prepared as possible for both kinds of students. In planning my own classes, I have turned to recent scholarship to glean some advice about how to build a successful whiteness studies class. This paper is a brief overview of some of those ideas and it covers four major areas: (1) the attitudes that white students bring with them, (2) the goals of critical whiteness pedagogy, (3) the potential pitfalls of critical whiteness pedagogy, and (4) strategies for counteracting the pitfalls.

When teachers think about the attitudes white students bring with them to the college classroom, they sometimes assume that white students have no awareness of themselves as racial subjects.

Recent scholarship, however, indicates that white students are often aware of their racial subjectivity, and it is couched in negative terms. Reporting data collected from a series of interviews with white students, Charles A. Gallagher (2003) asserts:

The students I interviewed experience their whiteness as a “real” social category that intrudes on most of their everyday activities. Race matters for these students because they have been weaned on a brand of racial politics and media exposure that has made whiteness visible as a social category while simultaneously transforming whiteness into a social disadvantage (p. 300).

For many white students, their self-perception is built upon a notion of victimization, not privilege. Within some of the social and political discourses they are familiar with, whiteness is a category of oppression. For example, many white students hold the conviction that affirmative action policies are not necessary due to the gains of the civil rights movement; therefore, they are victimized and oppressed by “reverse racism” and “quotas.” As Henry A. Giroux (1997) argues, “unfortunately, for many white youth, whose imaginations have been left fallow, unfed by a larger society’s vision or quest for social justice, identity politics engendered a defensive posture” (p. 294). Some white students who have not been offered opportunities to analyze power and privilege in America believe themselves to be subjected to “politically correct” punitive measures in a society where racial equality has already been achieved.

White students’ previous attitudes are shaped not only by a sense of victimization, but also by a lack of exposure to people of color. Students live out their parents’ social choices, which often mean predominantly white suburbs, schools, and social circles. Research has found that white students frequently replicate these social choices in college:

Although there are more numerous formal and informal opportunities for racial interaction and growth in the university than in most secondary educational environs, white students' lives in these environs are often not very different from their separated lives in previous home and school communities (Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003, p. 216).

White students working within this paradigm often rely on racial tokenism as proof of their antiracism, touting their acquaintances and friends of color, while the majority of their choices indicate comfort with segregated spaces. For these students, experiences with "race" are defined solely in terms of encounters with people of color.

Since many white students define their experience of race purely as experiences with people of color, they often profess colorblindness. For these students, one friend is just as good as another, and they believe racial identity to be immaterial to the friendship. Whiteness is an unmarked racial category for them; therefore, an unmarked racial identity would seem to be what people of color would want. However, as Julian Bond has so eloquently stated, to not see color is to not see the consequences of color, and many of these students fail to understand how racism remains a powerful influence in the lives of people of color in the United States. In their urgency to move past "race" as a meaningful category of American identity, white students also frequently profess an unwavering belief in the meritocracy. The meritocracy takes colorblindness a step further. In addition to denying that racial differences comprise any meaningful societal distinctions, racial differences also have no bearing on societal status. White students are left with the comfortable assertion that race has ceased to hold any bearing on life chances to fully participate in a middle-class American life, and that our places in American society represent nothing more than a collection of individual choices.

Given that the attitudes white students typically bring with them to college include victimization on the one hand and colorblindness on the other, it is not surprising that first among

the goals for critical whiteness pedagogy is helping students come to a critical awareness of the history of whiteness. In his discussion of activism and the academy, William Aal (2001) argues that what is needed “is a better understanding of how ‘whiteness’ as a set of overlapping identities, structures, and power relations keeps the United States divided along the lines of race, class, and gender” (p. 295). In short, the first major goal of critical whiteness pedagogy is to analyze what whiteness is and how it works. To meet this goal, students examine the foundations of historical and social constructions of whiteness: how whiteness developed as an identity category in opposition to enslaved Africans and indigenous nations, how immigrant groups were sorted into their places in the racial hegemony, and how whiteness mediates other identity categories such as social class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability. When meeting this goal, white students begin looking at whiteness not as simply a category of identity, but as a position of power formed and protected through colonialism, slavery, segregation, and oppression.

The second major goal of critical whiteness pedagogy is to understand the material effects of white privilege. Although whiteness is a construction, it has concrete effects that continue through intergenerational transfers of wealth and systemic inequities that go unchallenged. As George Lipsitz (1998) describes in his exhaustive study of the possessive investment in whiteness, white privilege is built and maintained “through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educations allocated to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination” (p. vii). Whiteness has cash value, and a thorough analysis of how that value is built and maintained is key to critical whiteness pedagogy. White students need to understand

what is at stake when talking about institutional racism, and how they are implicated in those systems through the inheritance of wealth and opportunity.

A third major goal of critical whiteness pedagogy is to build a power literacy of whiteness as a set of discursive practices that produce racialized subjects. Rather than keeping focus solely on the individual white subject, studying the discursive practices of whiteness “takes the emphasis off white bodies as they negotiate the day-to-day double binds of whiteness. . . . It shifts to the discourse, the culture, the structures, the mechanisms, the processes, the social relations of whiteness that produce racialized subjects including whites” (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 285). Shifting the primary analysis to systems (such as housing and labor discrimination) helps students to understand that whiteness is not simply a matter of individuals undertaking individual actions. Focusing on discursive practice moves whiteness to a question of systems—a consideration not of “who,” but of “how” as Levine-Rasky terms it (p. 274). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) call this practice power literacy, and it serves a concrete pedagogical purpose; “often in our classes we are confronted with white students who equate all forms of prejudice” (p. 15). The assumption that all biases are the same belies the reality that systemic inequities produce racial subjects who hold different levels of power in American society. Power literacy instructs students in why biases are different; some biases have far more destructive force than others. Introducing white students to those discourses and the systems they produce opens new analytical frameworks for thinking about oppression.

The final major goal of critical whiteness pedagogy is to help white students form a positive, antiracist white identity. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) remind us, whiteness is an “identity vacuum”; we should be prepared to help white students construct a progressive identity as an alternative to retreating into a white ethnic identity or resorting to conservatism (p. 12).

For them, an important goal is to assist white students to feel “empowered to travel in and out of various racial/ethnic circles with confidence and empathy” (p. 12). When faced with an unflattering picture of their racial group, white students need alternatives to fill the identity vacuum. Offering students multiple antiracist role models from different walks of life helps to fill that vacuum productively. This is part of the emotional work that teachers should be prepared to do when managing the classroom: acting as a mentor to help white students reflect on their emerging antiracist white identities.

The difficulties white students encounter in a critical whiteness theory classroom lead to the second major consideration when building a critical whiteness pedagogy: the potential pitfalls. Students can have a series of affective responses, ranging from guilt to resistance. Levine-Rasky (2000) describes the most common affective responses as “resentment (concealed by white defensiveness) and inhibition (in expressing oneself amid changing standards of social acceptability)” (p. 280). Affective responses must be attended to, as they can easily halt white students’ engagement with whiteness, or worse, become the center of the class. For some, the easiest means of dealing with discomfort is to retreat into a white ethnic identity. If one can claim that one’s immigrant ancestors were also oppressed, one is released from feeling responsibility as inheritor of the material gains of the oppression of others. Linda Alcoff (1998) warns that it is impossible for whites to disavow whiteness. Even when a white person is completely committed to antiracist efforts, no amount of individual work renders whites ineligible for privileges (p. 12). In other words, there is no escaping the discomfort of being white. What remains is to use that emotional energy in a productive and positive way, rather than lapsing into individualism, self-display, or hostility.

To help white students positively work with the tensions of interrogating whiteness, teachers should prepare a range of strategies. The goal is not to shield white students from discomfort, but to help them deal with the powerful affective responses that can derail a class. Teachers can use four strategies to channel white students' affective responses into useful critique: (a) reaffirm whiteness as a set of social relations instead of a range of individual actions, (b) study concrete moments of racial formation, (c) assist in developing white double consciousness, and (d) offer a variety of white antiracist role models. The purpose of these strategies is to help white students maintain their focus on systemic racism, and when the focus does turn to the individual, to guide white students into ways of forming ethical, positive white identities.

The first strategy teachers can use is to establish early (and continually reaffirm) focus on whiteness as a series of social relations, not simply a matter of individual choices made by white people. As Levine-Rasky (2000) argues, "It removes the representation of white in the sense of a people and of white legacy as inherited by individual white bodies. It is the replacement of white in this sense with a critical, relational, contextualized whiteness. Critical whiteness takes the emphasis off white bodies" (p. 285). First and foremost, teachers should remind white students that whiteness is a study of racial hegemony, not just the study of individual racial subjects. Critical whiteness theory is not an indictment of individuals so much as an indictment of an inequitable, oppressive system.

Critiquing systemic racism leads to the second strategy; teachers should present white students with studies of concrete moments of racial formation. For Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998), this study takes the form of "particular moments, including the exposé of the invisibility of its social power and privilege, awareness of the way whiteness as an ideological construction

cannot be simply conflated with white people, recognition of the power of whiteness to help produce both white and nonwhite subjectivity/consciousness” (p. 17). The studies produced by David Roediger (*Working Toward Whiteness* and *The Wages of Whiteness*), Noel Ignatiev (*How the Irish Became White*), and Matthew Frye Jacobson (*Whiteness of a Different Color* and *Roots Too*) are particularly useful for this kind of work. All three trace the contested and complicated journey of immigrant groups into whiteness, which underscores how individual racial subjects are formed, categorized, and disciplined into the racial power structure. What these studies demonstrate for white students is how whiteness shifts to include or exclude groups according to the social, economic, and political forces of the moment.

In the classroom, teachers can use local history as powerful object lessons of how racial formation functions. For example, the upstate New York city where my college is located has a geographical history similar to many cities in the United States; neighborhoods and suburbs have been shaped by steering, block busting, red-lining, and white flight, whereby realtors, lenders, federal policy makers, and white homeowners colluded together to shape a racially segregated housing market. Our city’s segregation is not simply a matter of individual choices, but a complex map forged through federal, state, and city policies designed to disenfranchise people of color. Turning an abstract discussion about theories of residential segregation into a concrete example of their families’ neighborhoods provides a clear example of how racial formation in the United States works.

However, as white students study whiteness as a contextualized practice that builds and maintains hegemonic systems, one cannot completely lose sight of the role of the individual within those systems. For this purpose, a third strategy teachers can use is to help white students locate themselves through constructing Linda Martín Alcoff’s (1998) notion of a white double

consciousness. Although Alcoff (1998) takes her inspiration from DuBois, her version shifts the definition: “Instead, for whites, double consciousness requires an ever-present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an exclusive human community” (p. 25). Alcoff (1998) asks white students to acknowledge the role whiteness has played in oppression while simultaneously holding up antiracist models. Her answer to the question, “What should white people do?” provides a template of how to admit our complicity while striving for justice. One never finishes the work of being responsible for whiteness; Alcoff (1998) reminds us how we can maintain a clear sense of our position without getting mired in guilt.

In order to enact a successful white double consciousness, white students must have white antiracist role models to follow. A fourth strategy teachers can use is to offer their white students a variety of examples of how to undertake ethical and effective action. In *White Like Me*, Tim Wise (2005) describes the difficulties of being denied role models:

One of the biggest problems in sustaining white resistance is the apparent lack of role models to whom we can look for inspiration, advice, and even lessons on what not to do. Growing up, we don't see many whites taking up the banner of racial equity, fighting for an end to unjust privilege and institutional racism. (p. 62)

Working from the examples before them, white students can begin to forge new, proud, and positive antiracist identities. However, this process requires teacher assistance. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) warn, teachers of whiteness should “refuse to allow individuals to assume new

identities without extensive analysis. Whites traditionally have devoted little attention to their racial identity, attending to it only after decades of heightened racial and ethnic awareness. A pedagogy of whiteness must understand these historical dynamics and appreciate the ways the white identity crisis has been colonized” (p. 20). While these kind of emotional processes are often seen as outside the purview of the college classroom, we must be prepared to make it part of the academic experience. Reading and writing autobiography are particularly useful tools when engaging in these affective processes; Tim Wise’s *White Like Me* (2005), Mab Segrest’s *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (1994), and Frances Kendall’s *Understanding White Privilege* (2006) all provide good models for white students to reflect on how their own histories fit within the larger history of American racism. Teachers can collect stories of white antiracists who have shaped their region. White students are typically unaccustomed to reflecting on their racial identities; the critical whiteness theory classroom should make space for that work, encouraging students to support each other through complex theoretical and emotional transitions while looking to a variety of role models.

And finally, teachers should remember to use one of the most effective tools at our disposal: our own histories and struggles. We have entered into this work through a desire to create a more just and equitable nation. If we ask our white students to reflect on their own racial identities, we should be willing to be honest about our own journeys. Critical whiteness pedagogy asks teachers to be forthcoming about their goals and intentions. We can make ourselves part of that pedagogical commitment, and continue to be accessible to our white students during a challenging learning experience.

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