Chapter 3

Insider's Guide Part II: Discrimination, Racism, and Race Hatred

The following definitions and examples are focused on racism and other forms of discrimination and hatred. As in the previous chapter, some of the quotes come directly from published texts, formal student interviews, and student writing; others I have created from memories of ideas, feelings, and opinions I have heard expressed in the classroom, in private conversations, or in all-white public environments. Many of the quotes show how people express their prejudice and racism—sometimes unconsciously or subtly, sometimes quite openly. Other quotes try to capture the experiences and points of view of people who are targets of racism. You can use this "insider information" to educate yourself as I did when I began to tackle this subject. You'll feel more competent to answer students' questions, steer them in the right direction when they get off track, and, most importantly, you'll be prepared to give your students specific examples that link abstract concepts to real life.

I have also used this guide, or parts of it, to open up the topic of racism in the classroom, or to prepare students for discussions of race-related topics in various disciplines. I might start with the first three definitions in this chapter, prejudice, discrimination, and "reverse discrimination," since these terms are commonly misunderstood. After students have read the definitions, I ask questions that help them think more deeply about each quote: "Have you ever heard this attitude expressed?" "Is discrimination (or prejudice) always wrong?" "Is discrimination by people of color against whites as destructive as discrimination by whites against people of color? Why or why not?" You might want to limit discussion time for each example so students will stay open to new information as they work their
way through the definitions in this chapter. You'll probably find that this information is a lot to give students all at once. Go slowly and be sure to ask questions that promote discussion as you go along. More ideas for discussing other, more creative ways of addressing these topics can be found in Chapter 8 and in the "Annotated Resources" section.

* * * * *

**Prejudice**—an attitude, either positive or negative, toward a category or group or toward individuals on account of their group membership.

I'd hire an Asian any day because they're really hard workers.
white employer

Can't you find a nice Jewish boy to go out with?
Jewish grandmother

Mexicans just want to come up here so they can get welfare benefits.
white food service worker

White people can't be trusted. Deep down, they're all racist.
African American undergraduate

Immigrants don't want to fit in—they just want our jobs.
white undergraduate

discrimination—behavior that denies people equal treatment because of their membership in some group (Herbst, 1997).

This black all-male academy succeeds because our children learn without distractions.
black administrator

Yes, our admissions policies do favor children of alumni. It's a kind of "thank-you for your support," a way of increasing loyalty to the school.
white administrator

Whites aren't welcome in the Angela Davis lounge.
black undergraduate

I have been followed so often in stores—it doesn't seem to matter if I'm dressed up or wearing jeans. What's ironic is that most people who steal from stores in this area are not African American.
African American professor

reverse discrimination or reverse racism—terms that emphasize the irony of trying to create a more egalitarian society by giving preference to one racial group over another. The often unstated assumption is that racism is a thing of the past and the playing field is now more or less level.

I'm against affirmative action because it discriminates against white males. Sure, minorities have been disadvantaged by racism in the past, but two wrongs don't make a right.
white undergraduate

When I told the bus driver that I had no change, he just glared at me. But when an elderly black lady was fumbling with her purse, he laughed and waved her on. That's reverse discrimination.
white undergraduate

In my law class we learned that some theorists actually propose that black juries should discriminate in favor of black defendants because racism is so pervasive in our society that blacks will never get justice from the white-dominated judicial system. Isn't that reverse racism?
white undergraduate

The next three definitions deal with stereotyping—from the unthinking generalizations people often make about groups they don't know very well to the "othering" of "exotic" groups, to the vicious slurs of outright racists. I try to reassure students by saying that we all probably have incomplete or incorrect information about some ethnic groups, that none of us intend to hurt anyone by our ignorance, and that this is a chance to think about the generalizations and negative judgments we might be making without realizing it. I then read the quotes aloud to the class or give them a printed copy of these next three definitions. I ask questions like, "What group or groups are stereotyped here?" "Why do you think this stereotype is so common?" "Can you think of other examples of stereo-
types that you’ve heard or seen?” “When are stereotypes humorous and when are they painful?” “Is it harmful to stereotype your own ethnic group?” “What can we do when we hear our friends making remarks based on stereotypes?” When you get to the examples of derogatory stereotypes, you might want to avoid reading some of the quotes aloud even if no students from the targeted groups are present—racial slurs carry astounding power. I ask my students to read silently, and then tell them that while whites have often demonized people of color, there have always been whites that have repudiated this practice—in all historical eras. If students bring up the derogatory stereotypes that some people of color have used against whites or that people of color have used against each other, I acknowledge this, and then ask students to move on to the discussion of different types of racism that follows, where this point will be examined in more depth.

**stereotype**—a set of traits that come to characterize an identity group, often based on inadequate knowledge or understanding of that group.

You flew on Qatar Airlines? Wasn’t that kind of a scary experience?

---

white undergraduate to another

Hi, Noriko, glad . . . to . . . meet . . . you. Uh, do you speak English?

---

white undergraduate

This university needs to show its commitment to our minority students by offering more remedial help.

---

white administrator

White people at this university are so ignorant about what it’s like to be poor.

---

Vietnamese American undergraduate


**orientalizing, exoticizing**—stereotyping, often fueled by the media, that depicts Asians (and sometimes other people of color) as bizarre, sly, crazed, or deviant—very much “the other.” In advertising, for example, Asian and Asian American females are often pictured as mysterious, submissive, and sexually available to white males. Asian males are depicted in movies as Kung Fu experts, or wise old masters who seldom speak, or sly, deviant criminals.

I prefer to date Asian women. I’m really tired of loud-mouthed, pushy females who have an opinion about everything. Asian women are quiet. Low maintenance. I don’t need an intellectual equal as a partner; I get enough mental stimulation at work. When I come home I want a woman who’s ready to please me, not argue with me.

---

white male, twenty-something

Asian models are all so slim and sexy and gorgeous—I don’t know why Asian American women complain about it. If being mysterious and exotic were such a bad thing, why would they agree to be portrayed that way?

---

white male undergraduate

Other students tend to exoticize me sometimes. They ask me to say certain words because my accent is “so cute” and then they repeatedly ask me to teach them to curse in Spanish or to make them some authentic Mexican food. This, you might say, is showing their curiosity towards my culture, but after awhile it gets ridiculous and insulting. I’ve been asked if there are trees in Mexico and why we like to live in such degraded conditions.

---

Mexican undergraduate

**derogatory stereotype**—a set of negative traits that ridicule and demonize an identity group.

Jew, Jew; Two for five; That’s what keeps; Jew alive. (Folk rhyme)

He held his head up in the glare of the lamp—a head vigorously modeled into deep shadows and shining lights—a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face—a face pathetic and brutal; the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of aigger’s soul. (Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,*” 1976, pp. 26–27)

Chinese immigrants to California in the late 19th century were depicted in a magazine cartoon as “a bloodsucking vampire with slanted eyes, a pigtail, dark skin, and thick lips. Like blacks, the Chinese were described as heathen, morally inferior, savage, childlike, and lustful. Chinese women were condemned as a ‘depraved class,’ and their depravity was associated with their physical appearance, which seemed to show ‘but a slight removal from the African race.’” (Takaki, 1998, p. 101)

In “An Open Letter to Mr. Edward Zwick,” Hala Maksoud, President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee says in part: “The 20th Century Fox Movie, *The Siege,* is packed with stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as violent, unscrupulous and barbarous. . . . It portrays Arabs and Muslims as a homogeneous, threatening mass who are repeatedly referred to as ‘those people.’ Ever when ‘those people’ are incarcerated behind barbed wire, they do not elicit any sympathy, because they all look alike and different from the rest of ‘us.’ Further-
more, a clear and direct link is made between Islamic religious practices and terrorism. Indeed, images of a Muslim washing his hands before prayer, as hundreds of millions of Muslims do every day, precede acts of terror in the film. This firmly reinforces fear of Muslims in the viewer’s mind..." (www.hri.ca/urgent/thesiege-1101.shtml)

The following are definitions and examples of various types of racism discussed in current literature, along with some related terms. After students read them over I ask questions that help them think critically about them: “What do you think of this definition, these examples?” “Have you heard people saying these kinds of things?” “Where have you read things like this?” “Has a group you belong to (religion, gender, class, ethnicity) ever been a target?” “What do you do to try to avoid being a target?” “How is racism similar to or different from religious persecution?” “Why do some people feel that whites are the only group that can truly be racist?” “What can we do as individuals to stop racist words and practices?” “What could we accomplish by joining with others?”

Discussion of these concepts can be tricky. See later chapters for how instructors in a variety of disciplines handle these conversations, and ideas on how to get beyond students’ tendency to blame the victim, to treat the subject superficially, or to clam up.

“traditional” or “old fashioned” racism—an open and unapologetic belief in the superiority of the white “race” based on notions of biological, cultural, and moral inferiority of other “races.” While this form of racism is less socially and officially sanctioned than it was before the Civil Rights Movement and other ethnic identity movements of the 1960s and ’70s, it is still alarmingly prevalent. In fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that there are more than 450 racist and neo-Nazi groups in the U.S. Of these, 127 are Klan organizations and their chapters; 100 are neo-Nazi; 42 are Skinhead; 51 are Christian Identity (a racist religion); 12 are black separatist; and 112 espouse a mixture of hate-based doctrines and ideologies. Today, new recruits to hate-based organizations are not limited to white, working class teenagers. Speaking of the neo-Nazi Skinheads (not to be confused with anti-racist “traditional” Skinheads), community organizer Michele Lefkowith says, “They’re getting young kids, 12- and 13-year-old kids who are really bright, and befriending them. . . . Some [recruits] come from really prominent families, where Mom’s a researcher and Dad’s a professor, [or] families that own major businesses. . . . They also prey on kids who have no place to go, homeless kids. They

offer shelter to them, a roof over their heads, and food. It’s a real manipulative thing” (“Street fighter,” 1998).

The Negroes were not Children of the Kingdom, they came from far distant planets in the rebellion of Lucifer and they degenerated, they deteriorated, they were even fused with bestiality, so there are various statues of them so degenerate and low that they are not fit to even dwell with the habituation of the White Men. (Aryan Nations web page: www.nidlink.com/aryanovic/tare.html).

“We believe in Hitler’s ways. But that don’t mean we worship him. He was smart, but he was a homosexual. I think what he did with the Jews was right, mainly. They was coming into Germany, buying up the businesses, treating the Germans like slaves. I think he killed more than six million. That was just all they could find.” (Member of the Nazi Low Riders, Antelope Valley, CA quoted in Finnegan, 1998. p. 288)

“I won’t have a Filipino in my house when my daughter is around,” said one of the women. “Is it true that they are sex-crazy?” the man next to her asked. “I understand they go crazy when they see a white woman.” “Same as the niggers,” said the man who did not like Filipino servants. “Same as the Chinen, with their opium.” “They are all sex-starved,” said the man of the house with finality. “What is this country coming to?” one of the women said. (from the memoir, America is in the Heart, by Carlos Bulosan, 1996, p. 141)

ethnic slur—derogatory term used by any ethnic in-group to put down an ethnic out-group: spic, gook, redneck, frog, white trash, chink, jungle bunny, hula girl, mick, russky, kraut, etc. Ethnic slurs by the dominant group are meant to keep a subordinate group in its place (e.g., “wetback”). Slurs by the subordinate group are a way of “talking back” to the more powerful group (e.g., “gringo”) and thus have less power to hurt (Herbst, 1997).

one-drop rule—the idea that having any black ancestors—that is, having “one drop of black blood”—defines people as “black.” This social “rule" was originally established to increase the number of people who could be considered slaves. As racial tensions grew increasingly hostile after the end of the Civil War, a great deal of anger and ridicule was directed at anyone suspected of circumventing the one-drop rule by “passing” for white. For example, before the 1920 presidential election, Warren G. Harding was accused of “passing” by elderly whites who claimed they knew his father was “a mulatto with ‘thick lips, rolling eyes and chocolate skin’” (Appling, 1998, p. 20). Ironically, when African Americans attempt to use the rule in their favor by suggesting that Beethoven, Dostoyevski,
Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson should rightly be called “black,” their claims are dismissed as absurd.

**rule of hypo-descent**—“According to hypo-descent, the various purported racial categories are arranged in a hierarchy along a single dimension, from the most prestigious (‘white’) through intermediary forms (‘Asian’), to the least prestigious (‘black’)” (Fish, 1995, p. 58). Children who result from interracial unions are often categorized by others as members of the less prestigious race. In other words, children of a “black” parent and a “white” parent are seen as “black,” no matter how light their skin. Interestingly, other cultures may see other features as more important. In Togo, West Africa, African American Peace Corps volunteers have had the unsettling experience of being called “yovo,” a term meaning “white” or “foreigner.” For the Togolese, the manner of dress, the way of carrying one’s self, and the languages one speaks are more salient characteristics than skin color.

**racial hatred**—stereotyping, resentments, slurs, ignorance, and hatred of any “race” for any other. Some whites and people of color assert that only whites can be racist because whites as a group have the power to make and enforce legal and cultural rules that keep the racial hierarchy in place (see “institutional racism”). Others point to the anti-Korean and anti-Chinese racism in Japan; inter-ethnic strife in the Balkans, (where all parties are “white”); and Arab anti-black racism in Sudan and Mauritania, where Arabs still keep black slaves. All agree that racial hatred (as opposed to racism) can be practiced by any ethnic group.

I’ve been ordered to get glasses of water for neighboring restaurant patrons. I’ve been told to be careful mopping the floors at the television station where I was directing a show. Even with my U.S. passport, I’ve been escorted to the “aliens only” line at Kennedy International Airport. I’ve been told I’m not dark enough. I’ve been told I’m not White enough. I’ve been told I talk American real good. I’ve been told, “Take your hommus and your pitas bread and go back to Mexico!” I’ve been ordered to “Go back to where you belong, we don’t like your kind here!”

Filipino-German American
(Arboleda, 1998, p. 1)

Unfortunately, too many young black kids today are saying they hate all white people— even when they’ve never met a white person in their lives! That’s a real problem. But that’s not the same as racism. Racism equals prejudice plus power—the power to make the rules and set the standards, to control the corporations and the banks and the police force, to set the curriculum and to make up the IQ tests, to choose to put money into poverty programs or to spend it on the military.

black community activist

**“symbolic” or “modern” racism or “racial resentment**”—A more subtle form of racism that became more widespread in the U.S. in the 1980s, symbolic racism claims the moral and cultural, rather than biological, superiority of whites, and avoids racial epithets or crude put-downs. Widespread among both conservatives and liberals, it is based on the belief that targeted groups violate “traditional American” moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic such as hard work, self-reliance, obedience, and discipline. It is rooted in early-learned fears and stereotypes and can be self-righteously ethnocentric:

The main reason Puerto Rican kids don’t succeed in school is that their parents don’t care about education.

white Education major

They discovered down in Florida that when people feed the alligators, they lose their ability to forage in the wild. Welfare does the same thing to humans. If you keep giving hand-outs, you’re not helping anyone.

white undergraduate, referring to an analogy made by white legislators in the U.S. House of Representatives, March 24, 1995

People are ready to call anything racism when it is going to benefit them. I’m sorry, but I’m tired of hearing it. It’s just a way for them to slack off and not do the work.

white undergraduate

We’re not allowed to say this in the current atmosphere of political correctness, but don’t you think the reason there are so many black men in prison is that so many black men are criminals?

white graduate student

While these attitudes and behaviors are called “modern” racism, their roots are very old. Frederick Douglass observed: “[W]hen men oppress their fellow-men, the oppressor ever finds, in the character of the oppressed, a full justification for his oppression. Ignorance and depravity, and the inability to rise from degradation to civilization and respectability, are the most usual allegations against the oppressed” (quoted in Gates and West, 1997, p. 2).

**code words**—Modern forms of racism must somehow accommodate egalitarian values and the belief that racism is a thing of the past, so words with no overt racial connection are used to refer euphemistically to stigmatized groups. “Welfare cheat,” “inner city youth,” “at-risk student,” “unwed mother,” “those people,” and “unqualified,” are some examples. Other code words refer obliquely to whites and sometimes to “model
minorities: "taxpayers," "home-owners," "family values," "hard workers," "deserving poor." As Cornel West points out, "In this age of globalization, with its ... information, communication, and applied biology, a focus on the lingering effects of racism seems outdated and antiquated. Yet race—in the coded language of welfare reform, immigration policy, criminal punishment, affirmative action and suburban privatization—remains a central signifier in the political debate" (Gates and West, 1997, pp. 107-108).

Aversive racism—another modern form of racism, more subtle than symbolic racism, that is practiced, often unconsciously, by whites with strong egalitarian values. "Aversive racists ... sympathize with the victims of past injustice; support public policies that, in principle, promote racial equality and ameliorate the consequences of racism; identify more generally with a liberal political agenda; regard themselves as nonprejudiced and nondiscriminatory; but, almost unavoidably, possess negative feelings and beliefs about blacks" (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986, pp. 61-62).

"People like to say that they're not racist, as if there is no racism in them," says social psychologist Raphael Ezekiel. "I find that not a sensible thing to say. We live in a society that is racist. Therefore, we have within our own souls at one level or another some racism ... If one lives next door to a cement factory, inevitably one inhales cement dust and the cement dust becomes a part of one's body. If one lives in a racist society, one inhales racism and that becomes part of one's soul. ... If one wants to be an effective fighter for social justice it's not enough to say, 'I hate racism.' You have to spend the time and effort to get acquainted with the racism you do have inside yourself, so you can take account of it. It's like the Leadbelly song, where he says, 'You got to say, Good morning, Blues.' You've got to say good morning to the racism in you, so you understand where it can trip you up" (quoted in "Roots of racism," 1997).

Institutional or systemic racism—the network of laws, practices, norms, and values that effectively prevent equal access to education, jobs, legal services, earnings, and respect across ethnic groups. Since the Civil Rights Era, institutional racism has been much reduced because many laws made with consciously racist intentions were struck down. What remains is a system of discriminatory practices, norms, and values that are invisible to and/or denied by whites, especially those in power. The following are some examples offered by perceptive white students to show how they unwittingly help perpetuate past injustices in institutional contexts.

My high school offered AP classes that boosted my GPA to 4.2, so when I applied for college I was able to beat out students from inner city and rural high schools who got all As. That, of course, made me a better candidate for a top law school.

As long as I have a decent credit record, I can get a mortgage easily for a house in the suburbs. And I’ll probably go for it, even though I know that some groups are denied by banks and unwanted in white neighborhoods if they manage to get there anyway.

I have confidence in the health system because people of my race have never been singled out as guinea pigs for experimentation. That means I won’t hesitate to go to the doctor for regular check-ups and follow their advice when I get really ill. I wish everyone felt the same level of trust that I do.

When I have kids I’ll be able to send them off to school, knowing that they will not be automatically placed in a lower reading group or a special education track because of their color or class. And I know that if my kids are like me they’ll get all kinds of special dispensations from high school teachers who’ll decide they’re “promising” kids, even when they’re goofing off.

I cannot imagine the police requiring me to give a blood sample for DNA analysis because a murderer of my race, age, and approximate height is loose in the community. What an uproar there would be if people from my race and class were treated that way!

Internalized racism—anxiety, self-doubt, and in extreme cases, self-hatred felt by some members of stigmatized groups because of the pervasiveness of derogatory stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and other forms of racism. Several professors of color explain:

Internalized racism is what really gets in my way as a Black woman. It influences the way I see or don’t see myself, limits what I expect of myself or others like me. It results in my acceptance of mistreatment, leads me to believe that being treated with less than absolute respect, at least this once, is to be expected because I am Black, because I am not white. (Yamato, 1992, p. 67)

It was only recently that I realized that in all my years of working for tenure, I had been accepting the idea that I should adapt myself to the white norm. We are taught very early on that the white style is the default, the background against which people of color are projected.

Asian American faculty member

Internalized racism feeds on ignorant stereotypes that are pervasive throughout society and on the persistence of poverty among ethnic groups traditionally despised by the majority. An African American scholar de-
scribes some of the conditions in impoverished communities of color that help self-hatred to flourish:

Where there’s work, it’s miserably paid and ugly. Space allotment at home and at work cramp body and mind. Positive expectation withers in infancy. People fall into the habit of jeering at aspiration as though at the bidding of physical law. Obstacles at every hand prevent people from loving and being loved in decent ways, prevent children from believing their parents, prevent parents from believing they themselves know anything worth knowing. The only true self, now as in the long past, is the one mocked by one’s own race. (DeMott, 1995, p. 37)

Anyone whose group has been stigmatized can suffer from self-hatred so internalized, so “normalized” it is sometimes hard to recognize:

She sure looks better since she got a nose job. Eastern European Jewish male, referring to a classmate from his own ethnic group

I just like light-skinned black girls better. It’s just a preference. Just like some guys like tall girls. African American undergraduate

She’s lucky she’s got good hair. African American woman referring to a bi-racial friend with wavy, rather than coiled, hair

He looks like an FOB (“fresh off the boat”)—no style. And that ridiculous accent! Why can’t they learn to speak English properly over there? Indian American student talking about an international student recently arrived from India

As students of color begin recognizing and questioning the internalized racism that they have been carrying with them, the emotions that surface are sometimes overwhelming. Two students write about their experiences:

As I held the child in my lap, I was repulsed by her dirty clothes, her nappy hair, the smell of urine. What does this say about my people? What does this say about me? I began to dread my volunteer service at the day care center. It became harder and harder to get up on Friday mornings. African American undergraduate

I was silent in this class most of the semester because I was thinking about all the ways I have been taught to hate the Chinese part of myself—my looks, my Chinese name (which I almost never use). I was appalled when I realized that all this time I’ve hated my father, too—his accent, his stupid stories about his childhood, his strange ideas sometimes. Bi-racial Chinese/European American undergraduate

Though many examples of internalized racism exist in literature and in academic texts, I prefer not to spend much time on the issue when teaching white students. It is too easy, even for the most well-meaning whites, to shift the problem away from the ways their group is implicated in the racist society we all inhabit, and onto the effects of racism on target groups. While developing sympathy and understanding of other people’s pain is a worthy goal, it is even more important for white students to understand the ways they have benefited from being part of the group that calls the shots. The literature calls this “white privilege” (Mcintosh, 1992), even though it should be obvious that not having to suffer ridicule, exclusion, and judgments based on superficial physical characteristics should be a given, rather than a privilege in a society that values egalitarianism.

White privilege or “unearned” privilege—pervasive and systemic ways that being white confers unearned advantage in U.S. society. White privilege is often blatantly obvious to targeted groups but nearly invisible to whites until its various manifestations are pointed out. When asked to consider ways that they were privileged in their own lives, some perceptive white students offered the following:

I can come late to class or have trouble expressing my thoughts in writing without anyone assuming I am unqualified to be in college.

I can sit on my front steps and have a beer without anyone thinking I am shiftless, lazy, on welfare, or “disadvantaged.”

When I intern in an international corporation—and later, when I achieve my goal as a manager—I can be certain that the company culture will reflect the styles, language, values, and norms I was brought up with.

When I approach an cash machine at night, no one will assume I am there to rob them.

I can choose not to think about race and racial problems—because I can easily believe that I don’t have any.

The final two definitions, ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, refer to the all-too-human practices of seeing the world from one’s own point of view,
and then passing that point of view along as “normal and natural,” or “the best,” or “the smartest” way of doing things—especially if one is a member of the powerful majority.

**Ethnocentrism**—the often unconscious practice of seeing and judging other groups through the lens of one’s own cultural styles and values. In these quotes, teachers and other authority figures are judging members of other groups by their own cultural norms without knowing enough about the values, cultures, and histories of the groups they view negatively:

It really bothers me that Lei May is so quiet. I think she needs help developing her self-esteem.

African American middle school teacher

When an African produces writing of the same caliber as Shakespeare, I’ll “diversify” my syllabus. Until then, we’ll stick to the Classics.

white professor

Why do you see them driving Cadillacs when they hardly have enough money to pay the rent?

white undergraduate

If they’d only read to their kids. I know Native Americans come from an oral culture, but since the brain develops most during the first seven years they really need to provide an optimum environment at home.

white kindergarten teacher

**Eurocentrism**—the idea that Europe is the center of all that is worthy to study, imitate, or aspire to. Researchers have been surprised and troubled to find that Eurocentrism has subconscious effects on people on every continent. In a study that asked 400 first year college students in twenty cities around the world to draw a world map from memory, students “greatly enlarged the size of Europe and shrank the dimensions of Africa.” Researchers concluded this was not just the result of the “badly skewed Mercator projection” that map-makers have used until recently to draw a round earth on a flat sheet of paper. “If the Mercator projection alone caused the size bias, then North America and Asia should also appear larger than life. . . . But that did not happen: Europe was the only continent consistently exaggerated” (Monastersky, 1992, pp. 222–223).

Here, three white U.S. professors give a variety of reasons why their courses are Eurocentric:

My reading list? It’s writers I’ve read and enjoyed over the years. Yes, I know, they’re all white males. But they’re the ones I know best.

I teach a course called “Great Ideas.” We cover Galileo, Locke, Freud, Marx, Einstein, and Dostoyevsky. I’ve never had more than a few students of color sign up for my classes. The ones I’ve had have been very good—superior, I’d say. But I don’t understand why this curriculum doesn’t appeal to more of them. These ideas should be available to everyone.

The unique source of the American ideals of liberty and equality is Europe, not Asia or Africa or the Middle East. It is European institutions we all should be studying. European authors we should be reading. We don’t have room in the curriculum for a study of all the world’s cultures. As a specialty, yes, I can see it. Diplomats need to know about foreign ways of thinking, languages, history, and so forth. But this should not be our core curriculum.
Chapter 4

Classroom Confrontations

I firmly believe that you cannot change your perceptions of people who come from unfamiliar cultures while having safe and superficial chit chat. It is only when you get uncomfortable and passionate that the true work towards reform can begin. Sometimes, in order to be heard, in order to make progress, you have to be raw and honest.

African American undergraduate

The challenge in this conversation is to get below the social niceties to the real divisions between us. And that involves to a certain extent normalizing the fear, suspicion, and not knowing. The classroom has got to feel like a safe enough place that students can say what they think, even though they sometimes wish they didn’t think those things. And then I think there can be a conversation. Often it’s heated, often it’s angry, but there’s a commitment to stay with it and to work it through. It may not reach a resolution, but it may reach a sharing.

Charles Beilng, Co-Director, University of Michigan Intergroup Relations Program

When we open up discussions about race and racism, topics that have long been taboo in the white community and a thorn in the side of communities of color, it is only natural that strong emotions will surface. “One thing I wasn’t quite prepared for when I first started doing this was that students bring a lot of anxiety and anger and frustration and sense of injustice into the classroom,” says a Philosophy instructor. Not only are students of color frustrated and upset about the daily indignities of racism, “there are a lot of angry white students who think they didn’t get into Harvard because of affirmative action. The stakes are pretty high for them and they take it very personally.”

Sometimes students’ emotionally charged views emerge as soon as a race-related issue is introduced by a text or lecture or discussion topic. But
more often, the confusion and hurt smolder under a thin veneer of civility. "There is very little honest dialogue around race," observes a white graduate student who grew up in an African American community. "The political environment is so charged as to make every talk about race seem scripted. There is a great deal of distrust on all sides." "We worry so much about being politically correct that we make ourselves uptight and uncomfortable," adds an African American sophomore. "Students don't want to offend," says a white faculty member. "They don't understand—as I think many of us don't if we're honest—what those boundaries of offense are."

Given our country's history, it is perhaps only reasonable that such tension still prevails. "Think about it this way," writes a perceptive white undergraduate. "What we know as 'black' culture started evolving when the European slavers started taking Africans sometime during the sixteenth century. In America the slave trade stopped about 250 years ago. Blacks have been citizens, in the electoral sense of that word, for about 150 years. That citizenship has been forcefully protected and given teeth for about 30 years. Hardly more than a generation. One generation between Bull Conner and the fire hoses and living together in college dorms. When people ask, 'When are we all going to get along and live like color doesn't matter?' I always marvel at how stupid these questions are. We don't even know each other! It's like the first real dance you went to as a kid. Boys on one side, girls on the other. We stand and stare at each other, aware of the fact that we are different, but not knowing exactly how, or what that means. We're scared to go over and talk to each other, for fear of what our own group will say" (Miller, 1998, pp. 12-13).

But other students, particularly students of color, suspect that beneath white students' naive goodwill and their careful, "politically correct" comments lie all manner of racist assumptions and beliefs that they hesitate to voice or even acknowledge. An African American senior says, "If I am in a class that is comprised of mostly whites I always feel that they try and contain their true feelings for my sake—especially when we are discussing anything that has to do with African Americans." A Puerto Rican third year undergraduate adds, "In the classroom people are more afraid of sounding stupid by telling how they feel about other people of different ethnicities. Thus, they remain quiet most of the time or deviate from the subject or agree with a non-racist view just so they won't look bad."

Even when white students are not consciously suppressing racist beliefs and feelings, they often remain silent because they believe they have nothing to contribute to the discussion. Race, to many whites, is an at-

ttribute of other people, people of color. And racism is something that people of color experience, regrettably, from ignorant whites—someone in their parents' or grandparents' generation perhaps, or someone in another part of the country without a college education. Since so many white students have grown up in residentially segregated communities it is not clear to them how they, too, are participants in race relations. They do not see their own views on affirmative action or poverty or educational attainment or health outcomes or police practices or political representation or the distribution of wealth as racist or even racially biased. Even when they are interested in learning about how they and their society have been affected by racism, they believe their role is to listen and try to make sense, internally, of this new view of the world. They may be doing a lot of thinking in their silence, but their thinking is not evident to students of color, who may be angry and even frightened by this apparent stone wall. "At the beginning of this class," writes one of my African American students, "I could see that I had a certain ire about white people, and I didn't know where it came from. They irritated me because... while some of the people of color were pouring out our hearts [about experiences with racism] the rest of the class was silent. As a result of this... I decided not to put my feelings and thoughts out in the air and just did what the others were doing—sitting quietly."

Sometimes, however, the careful treading around an issue is disrupted when an outspoken student voices an opinion and the exchange that follows escalates into a loud, threatening display. A white graduate student instructor describes what happened in her first year of teaching a sophomore level class in Philosophy where most of her students were white:

On this particular day we were talking about affirmative action, and someone took the position that colleges that were primarily African American—Morehouse, for example—were totally racist. That was the start of it. Then someone else said, "What about those black fraternities on our own campus? It's ridiculous that they should be allowed." And that pushed a lot of buttons for people. One of the two black students said, "Well I'm in a black fraternity, and I'll tell you why!" And a white student jumped up and yelled, "Well, I think you're a racist for joining one!"

We were in one of those small basement classrooms with the little windows up by the ceiling, and it was very hot and tense. And these were two very large, loud men. I think they were standing on chairs at this point. I was thinking, "Oh, God, what am I going to do?" The whole class was getting into it, egging them on. I kept trying to say, "Look everybody, be quiet, hold on," but my voice was really weak and scared-sounding. Finally they stopped shouting and sort of looked at me. It was just luck that it was close to the end of the class, so I was able to say,
“OK, here’s where we’ve come in the discussion so far. You’ve raised some points on this side and some points on that side. Here are some of the questions you still have to think about and now we’re all going to go home and next time we’ll continue.” So then in the next class before we did anything else I gave this big lecture on respect. No yelling, no name calling, no making fun of people, no rolling your eyes or reading the paper while other people are talking. But in addition to personal respect, you also have to respect other people’s positions. You can’t just dismiss their arguments; you have to listen to what they say. So after that, things were much calmer. It must have been a sort of catharsis. I was wondering what students would say on the course evaluations at the end of the semester. But it was really weird; they didn’t even mention that altercation. They just said, “We really got to debate the issues; it was a really heated debate. It was great.”

Although this instructor remained uncomfortable with emotional outbursts and tried successfully in later years to manage her classes in ways that would avoid them, some faculty welcome opportunities to get down deep, to “the real divisions between us.” Sandra, a white English professor, says:

I’ve been teaching for twenty-nine years, and in just about every class I’ve had, there’s been a confrontation. I know that’s probably my teaching style. I encourage it. Let me give you an example. Recently I had a kid in an Introductory Composition class who was a classic small town, God-fearing conservative, and he had written a really racist paper. I don’t remember what the unifying idea was supposed to be; each paragraph was about a different thing. But in every one of them this kid, Jarret was his name, managed to say something racist. Things like, “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t have anything against black people personally, but you know, they’re lazy, they’re stupid, and if they really wanted to make it in the world they’d get off their butt.” Well, he didn’t say “but,” but that was the gist of it.

There were two black students in that class with very different personalities and different class backgrounds: Tyrone, an angry kid from inner city Detroit, and Denise, a middle class sorority girl whose interests ran to getting the right diet, how to keep your abs flat, how to know if you’ve got the right man, that kind of stuff. She was into being raceless, if you know what I mean. For most of the semester she appeared as if she didn’t notice she was black. She had really adopted that persona. So when Jarret read his paper to the class, Denise tried to deal with it by deflecting the discussion to correctness issues. She was clearly using it as a strategy to defuse the tension. “Oh, I have a comment” (you know, trying to break in), “On page three, on the third line, you need a comma.”

But Tyrone wasn’t having any of it. He was standing up, ready to fight! Or rather, he looked like he was ready to fight. You know, I think it makes white instructors uneasy when they have that kind of explosiveness from a student who has grown up in inner city black culture. They don’t understand that even though someone like Tyrone might use a threatening tone of voice or even jump out of his chair, he isn’t ready to physically fight; he is ready to contend. And to try to make him calm down or to suddenly intercede—or more than intercede, intervene: “Now we’re going to go around the table and take first Jarret, then Denise, then Tyrone”—that would have been like a slap in the face to this person. For me to do that would be to completely shut him down.

So when something like that happens, I jump right in. I don’t try to be neutral or play the moderator, especially in the first confrontation of the semester. I’m real clear about my own politics. I say something like, “Tyrone’s right! That is a racist statement!” But at the same time, I want to know what Jarret has to say about this, I want to know what he was thinking when he wrote this. But what I don’t do is tell Tyrone that we’re taking turns. Instead, when I see that other people want to speak (and I know they want to speak because they’re shouting) it’s, “OK! Jarret! Jarret has something to say!” I just shout over all the uproar. I want to be sure that everyone wants to get into the discussion. When it’s just two people arguing, the class gets real uncomfortable. So I throw my two cents in, kind of simultaneously, and that gets people hopping. And sometimes, when we’d leave the class, we’d all still be talking, taking it out into the hall.

While Sandra is clearly comfortable with this style of open confrontation, other instructors are frightened by the prospect of a class out of control. A white professor who teaches a graduate course on Health Politics says:

I’m very worried about what I might stir up. If I stirred up things that I was unable to handle and made deep problems in people’s lives, I would think I was responsible. But also, I’m hesitant about making some special deal in class about people’s race, that they would have a perspective on life that would come out of the fact that they’re white or black or Latino. . . . I think there are other aspects of who we are that may be more critical than our gender or our race. On the other hand, white people do have the privilege of not having to think about their race. It’s a huge privilege! We never have to assume that someone’s treating us in a special way because of our race. It’s out of our ken. We “have no race” because we’re the majority. And occasionally I get a little glimpse about what that might be like, but most of the time . . . I don’t know . . . I think about my inability to talk about race with any kind of authority.

Despite fears of losing authority or control, some instructors who are initially hesitant plunge in anyway and discover that the openness and depth of the emotional exchange has benefits that far outweigh the anxiety they may continue to feel throughout the semester. June, a white instructor of English Composition and Literature, was dissatisfied with “all these little polite arguments” that went on in her classrooms:

I was disappointed in how I had been teaching. It was a personal challenge for me to try to get some real conversations going. I had my chance when I found myself
with an Advanced Argumentative Writing class with a lot of strong personalities—about ten students out of twenty-five who were comfortable with open conflict and didn’t think much about it.

There were three black students in that class, which doesn’t sound like many, but it was a first for me. I had taught Composition for years at Michigan and almost never had an African American student in my classroom. One of these students was a real big man in the Black Student Union on campus. On the surface, he was very political—he wore his hair in an Afro and always came dressed in a dashiki and beads—but underneath, he was unsure of his opinions and seemed afraid of offending anybody. Then there was this other black guy, a fraternity type, who wasn’t going to have anything to do with the Black Student Union. He had this gorgeous girlfriend who used to walk him to class—a black girl, always dressed to the nines. The rest of the students were white. Scrubbed-looking. Some of them were athletes; others were headed for business or law school. About half of them were Jewish, and after awhile they all began sitting next to each other, so this created a pretty strong dynamic. Then there were three young white women who came from small Michigan towns. They were scholarship students from blue collar backgrounds and they were working umpteen hours a week as well as going to school.

And then there was Gloria. The first day, when she walked into the classroom, I couldn’t figure out her race. It’s hard to explain the color of her skin. It was like she was black but her skin was light. And for that, was a big issue. She said that people used to tell her all the time, “Oh what pretty hair you have, what beautiful skin you have.” And that made her really angry, because the reason she looked like that had to do with a tragedy in her grandmother’s past. And this had caused the whole family a lot of pain, which was made worse by all the attention Gloria got for being pretty. So most of the time she was into looking severe, somewhere in between an intellectual and a nerd. After the semester ended, we used to sit outside and eat lunch together sometimes, and she would tell me about her life. Every story she told me had to do with her past and with other people’s perceptions of her.

Her family was very poor—I don’t even know if you could say they were working class. She had been a scholarship student at a prestigious private high school and one of only two African Americans there. She hated that school, even though she was grateful for the doors it opened up for her. She once said something that really stuck with me: “Do you believe that I was friends with this black girl only because we had the same color skin? I didn’t even like her! And I don’t think she liked me. Have you ever been friends with someone just because they had white skin like yours?” She was real smart and extremely articulate, but she was unhappy with her college experience because she felt that professors set up their classes so that nobody ever got to say what they really thought. And that was making her crazy. Her grandmother had always told her, “You gotta get along with white people. You gotta pay attention to what they want.” But she had never had that kind of temperament, even as a child. And so by the time she got to my class, she was boiling. The first day, oh man, I knew it was going to be a nightmare.

I had set up a little get-to-know-you activity. Everybody was supposed to say something about themselves that would help other students remember who they were. Students were saying things like, “Well, I went to Israel this summer for three weeks.” Or, “I’m going out for water polo.” And all this time, Gloria was lying way back in her chair with her feet spread out, just staring at everybody. People were beginning to notice her even before she spoke because she looked so disgusted. And when it was her turn, she said—in a kind of husky drawl—“Well, my name is Malcolm. And you’ll find out why soon enough.” There was dead silence. It was the first serious thing that anyone had said. Nobody asked her any questions, the way they had the others. And at the end of class, she just got up and strode out the door. Her body language was so exclusive, so dismissive of everybody. I knew she was messing with me, too.

Every day after that she came into class ready to pounce. The first time I let them choose partners to share their papers with, she chose the black student leader. And immediately, she started ripping his paper to shreds. “You’re trying to suck up to whites here? What’s your deal here? Are you a white lover?” She would never whisper; everything was public. The poor guy was speechless, he was so into not rocking the boat. When he finally replied, she tried to look so pretty: “Well, have you thought about such and such?” And she wasn’t having any of it. Oh, he was mortified by her. He thought she would ruin everything for him.

One day, one of the Jewish girls, Tanya, brought in a personal experience piece that she wanted to read aloud for the whole class to critique. It was a typical freshman essay about how adversity can make you stronger. She had been in a car accident that had resulted in some scars on her face, so she’d had a number of plastic surgeries to repair the damage. Looking at her there was no way you would know that she ever had any kind of disfigurement. She was a beautiful girl, flawless skin, dark eyes, perfectly formed features. Nevertheless, she had been really shaken up by the possibility that she could lose her good looks so easily. She was on the verge of tears as she read it aloud, because this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. And most of us were trying to take her seriously, even though it was kind of hard because she was so pretty.

But Gloria was incensed. And when Tanya was finished, she launched into a diatribe: “How could you possibly take yourself so seriously? How could you waste the time, not just of me, but of black people, but do you think that everybody in this class has had a life like yours, do you think that everybody in this class has had a life like yours, that they could have six plastic surgeries? You need a reality check, girl!” I mean, Gloria was on the verge of tears too. Her cousin had just died in a gang fight. Another family member had been raped as she was leaving work on the night shift at a downtown hospital. All this was happening thirty miles away in Detroit while kids on campus were consuming with football games and frat parties and water polo.

That was the flash point. Right then, two of Tanya’s friends started screaming at Gloria. "You’ve been judging us all semester! You don’t bother to figure out what anybody else thinks! What do you know about how Tanya feels? Is it her fault that her Dad has money, that her Dad could pay for this? Is that her fault?" And Gloria said, “I know all about you kind of people. I’ve been around people like you all my life, I’m sure I understand.”

And then, the interesting thing was that the black fraternity guy who came to class dressed to kill, who never wanted to say anything controversial and certainly had never wanted anything to do with Gloria, all of a sudden came out on
Gloria’s side. “Well, you’ll have to admit this is kind of superficial,” he said. “I mean, can’t you see that this is kind of insulting to some of the others in this class? Didn’t you have this in perspective before you put this in our face?”

So now it wasn’t just Gloria shaking things up any more; the whole mode of communication kind of shifted, and everyone got into it, even the ones who had started out so polite. So for the rest of the semester, there was a lot of shouting.

A lot of shouting! People would come down the hall and open the door to see what was going on. And even though my stomach was in knots, I have to admit, I felt exhilarated. “This must be right,” I thought. People are really looking at each other and talking to each other and arguing about what somebody’s writing. That’s engagement!” But on the other hand, my whole white Southern upbringing was that you don’t have confrontations! I had tried to play it that way at first.

But when I started doing my usual thing of, “Okay, now, just a second,” there was this dead silence. And people were looking at me and trying to raise their hands for me to recognize them. And I thought, “I’m just going to die if I sit through the semester with people looking at me to raise their hand!” I really was scared of shutting it all down.

I had one student who was so courtly—if you can use that word for a kid of nineteen or twenty. He had been taught to be low key no matter what, and he was really determined to stick to his upbringing. In the middle of the semester he came into my office and told me how frustrated he was because he had things he wanted to say but he couldn’t, because everyone was shouting. So I said, “Well, do you want me to say, ‘Charles wants to say something now?’” Well, no, he said, because that would be embarrassing. So I said, “What can I tell you then? You don’t want me to intercede.” And so even he stopped trying to raise his hand and got in there with the rest of them. Sometimes things would get so heated, people would be jumping up out of their chairs to make a point. So then I would try to calm things down by rephrasing what they were saying so they’d see me as a kind of moderator: “Oh, so you think such and such.” But the first time I did that, Gloria looked at me and said, “What is that? You mean you think we didn’t hear what she said? Get outta here, talking trash like that!” And then the students who were arguing with her would say, “Yeah, Gloria’s right!” It was wild.

One of the reasons I let it go on at such an emotional pitch was that I was so fascinated by what they were saying. Even though I’ve taught about issues of race and class for years, I think I’ll never get through working on these issues in myself. For one thing, I don’t think I have ever fully understood the extent to which white people are held responsible by black people for history. That was a big issue in this class. The white students had been pretty isolated, either in prep schools or small towns, and hadn’t had much contact with black kids. They knew about black people being angry at white people but they didn’t quite understand why. They would say things like, “It’s not my fault that black people were slaves.” My ancestors didn’t even come over here until World War Two.

One of Gloria’s big deals—she had a huge screaming fit one day—was about how groups that have been targeted in the past can have so little understanding of how oppressed groups feel today. “You’re Jewish and you don’t think it’s okay to hold people responsible for what happened in the past?” she yelled at them. “Don’t you have someone who was killed in the Holocaust? Don’t you think that people should know what happened to you and take some responsibility for seeing that it never happens again?” And they were just blown away! I think they had never really made that connection, even though several of them had been in Israel and Europe the summer before and had toured the concentration camps. They just sort of said, “Oh,” and sat there, thinking.

It was even harder for some of the working class kids to make these connections. One girl talked extensively about this, how she didn’t accept being held accountable because her ancestors had never had any position of authority so they couldn’t have done anything to anybody. “I’m not rich,” she said. “I don’t know anybody who’s rich. I don’t know anybody with any kind of power. What do you want me to do?” And Gloria said, “I want you to go to a movie with a black guy if he asks you—and be happy about it.” And the girl said, “Wow, I don’t even know a black guy at this university!” And Gloria said, “That’s my point!” You know, it was so fascinating to watch them and take in what they were saying and see the ways they were looking at each other. I just couldn’t bring myself to manipulate their discussion, to play chess pieces and facilitate.

Of course it wasn’t total anarchy. They would listen to me. They would move from small groups into the large group and back again when I asked them to—slowly sometimes, and still arguing, but they would get there. They certainly wrote some superior papers. I had given them complete freedom to write arguments on whatever topics they wanted, and many of them chose to write about their lives, what had affected them, and what they thought about things. And because of the openness, some of the kids who had been really isolated got to find out what people from other groups really thought of them and their values. Like Robert, the guy who was in the black student association, he said he had never been around whites until he came to the university. And actually he became quite good friends with a white guy in the class, and they often chose to be partners to give each other feedback on their writing. Robert had written a paper about interracial dating and how he would never go out with a girl who wasn’t black. And I think this was the first time he ever really knew what a white person thought about his ideas, or that anyone would say that it was racist to think he’d only have a black girlfriend. He had to examine these ideas that he’d absorbed from his friends at the Black Student Union and to defend these arguments for the first time.

But all these topics were relatively tame. Sometimes, the discussion got into issues that are really taboo, at least among white people. Like some of the conspiracy theories—all the Jews in Hollywood who are trying to keep black people out of the entertainment business, that kind of thing. And I can tell you it was a revelation to the Jewish students that all three of the black students—who were so different from each other—all three of them believed that Jewish people were trying to shut them down. Maybe if it had just been Gloria who had said that, they wouldn’t have paid so much attention. But that was something brand new to them, that black people in general felt there were ethnic groups who were actively trying to keep them back.

Occasionally I did feel I had to intervene when someone said something beyond the pale, but I never did it in front of the class. Stacy, one of the white girls who came from a working class family, said something so inappropriate one day
that I asked her to come talk to me about it in my office. She must have been fed up with Gloria's constant put-downs and dismissal of everyone's arguments, and in fact, she was right to call her on it, but the way she phrased it was really racist. She said, "I used to think my grandparents were bigots because of the way they talked about blacks, but you, Gloria, you're just exactly the way black people are!" So I called Stacy in for a chat and I asked her, "Why don't you tell me more of your ideas about black people and where you think those ideas came from?"

So Stacy started telling me about growing up in a tiny town in Michigan where the residents were proud of the fact that there were no black people for miles around. Black people knew better than to even drive through that town, she said, because they knew it would be dangerous for them. Since the town was too small to have a high school, she had been sent to a consolidated school district where teachers taught the students to treat everyone as equals and not be racist. But this was still kind of hypothetical because the school was uniformly white.

Every Sunday after church Stacy's family would go to her grandma's house for dinner, and her grandma, who always wanted them to tell her what to think about everything, would go on about how blacks are dumb and lazy, and how they're poor because that's the kind of people they are, and that you should never feel sorry for them because everybody makes their own life. Stacy didn't really question this until she was a high school senior, when she had to start looking for scholarships because her family didn't have enough money to send her to college. That's when she started thinking. "If we make our own lives, why don't we have enough for me to go to college? Other people have money to go to college, what's the matter with my parents? What's the matter with my father?" But at the same time she still blamed blacks for causing all the trouble, and the contradiction—which she still wasn't seeing very clearly—continued to be confusing for her. "This is one of the things I hate about college," she told me. "It's making me love my family less than I used to. Especially my grandparents." So I said, "You might consider writing a paper about that." And she said, "No, no! That would be like I was blaming my poor grandmother, and she can't help it; she's of another generation. I don't want anybody criticizing my grandparents!"

I think Stacy also wondered why I had called her in to my office for her racist remarks while I never intervened when Gloria was on her verbal rampages—which were probably on and off racist. I didn't really feel guilty about it, but I had to think why that would be okay—when on the other hand it wouldn't be okay—to treat them differently. And what I finally told Stacy was that people like Gloria, people who were minorities, people who had been marginalized in our culture, had been silenced all their lives. And that white people—regardless of their class background—had never been silenced. I said that while it was important to be truthful in class and say what she really thought, repeating those derogatory stereotypes about blacks seemed like going up on them when there were only three blacks in the class and twenty-one whites. I said it seemed kind of thuggish. She was kind of taken aback at that because she was a really nice girl. She didn't want to be thuggish. So we left it at that. She wasn't resentful. But then she wrote a few really shallow essays before she was able to get to the heart of the internal conflict she was having.

Near the end of the semester Stacy announced with great emotion that she had a paper she wanted to read to the whole class. She had turned her conflict with her grandmother into a philosophical issue about how to decide what is good and what is evil, using her grandmother as an example of how complicated that notion is. Her conclusion was that it's tempting to blame someone like her grandmother and to call her a bigot, but that's an easy way out. It's a dangerous thing to simplify, or to quantify, abstract notions like good and evil; the best you can do is to always be challenging your ideas any time you are tempted to put a label on them. At the end, I bet there were a dozen people who were crying. And Gloria was just transfixed. In fact, I think that was the first time that Gloria had ever paid attention to anything anybody wrote. She usually went, "Mm hm. Yeah." You know, "You're boring. This subject is boring." She was so good at communicating that! So after Stacy finished she looked directly at Gloria and said, "Are you going to say something?" And Gloria said, "I really appreciate your honesty. I don't like your grandma. I think your grandma's a bigot. That's her problem. But I really like you. I appreciate your honesty and your courage." That did it; Stacy started crying along with the rest of us.

What was so thrilling to me about that class was the depth, the honesty, and the real thinking that was going on. Their arguments weren't just random shouting or name calling. They were arguing about perspective: about what's important in life, what's worthy to be thought about, worthy to be written about. And the interesting thing was all these different perspectives that people were coming from were grounded in race and class. And you could see the allegiances shifting as the semester went on. The working class white students started saying they had more in common with people like Gloria than with the affluent students, and how their views on race might have something to do with the way they themselves were stigmatized. They all started thinking about how class had shaped their way of looking at the world and who they were. And for these nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, it was a revelation! All of a sudden, they were saying, "Oh my God, you mean everything I think is important comes from what class I am and what color I am?" Of course, people like Gloria understand that pretty early on, which is why she was so frustrated and lashed out so much in class.

On the last day of the semester I decided to let each of them make a closing statement. I told them they could each say anything they wanted, and no one could ask questions or comment on it, just like in a law court. And in her closing statement, Gloria said, "One of the reasons I've been so hard to live with is that I had to learn years ago what it seems like you're just thinking about now. And it makes me mad that I didn't get to be a little girl as long as you did." That was important for her to say, and important for other people to hear.

And then, one of the really quiet working class students—she came from a single parent home in a small town and her mother was a waitress, so she was having a pretty hard time with all this stuff; she was having a pretty hard time in general, scraping pennies together—she started out crying, and by time she had gotten mid-way into her closing statement, a whole bunch of us were trying not to cry. She said she was glad she was in the class even though she hadn't said much—because she doesn't like people to know what she thinks about things.
And then she turned to Gloria and said, "But Gloria, people like you don’t understand what it’s like to be white and poor. Everything in the world makes you feel like you’re not as good as other white people. It makes you feel so low. You think you are the only one with problems just because you’re black." And then, turning to Tanya, she said, "People like you make me mad too, because you think nobody in the world has problems and that it’s nothing to go out and buy a party dress for a hundred dollars." And everyone, including Gloria, was moved that she had finally said something and that her statement was so truthful and open, and Gloria even called her up after class because she wanted to ask her some questions, and they went out for pizza together—maybe only that one time, but it was interesting that they took it upon themselves to continue that conversation.

Several years later, Tanya—the one who had got so much criticism about her plastic surgeries—called me up to say goodbye before she graduated. She wanted to tell me that that English class had been the best class she had ever taken at the university, despite the fact that it had also been the most difficult. She said it was the only class she’d had where people could say what they really meant. It was the only class where people had really begun to listen to each other.

Classrooms like these stir up many of our hopes and fears about real dialogue, deep reflection, and critical thinking about race and class. If only all students could come this far and be so moved by their new understandings of each other. If only all students were willing to risk saying what is on their minds. But on the other hand, what if the students had not come together at the end? What if the students of color had become even more hurt and embittered in the process? What if the white students had gone away with their prejudices even more deeply entrenched than before?

Instructors who choose to let students confront each other so freely and honestly need to feel a deep conviction that “getting real” is the only way that healing can begin. It doesn’t matter what the assignments are, or what subject matter is involved, or whether the instructor decides to stay in the background or jump into the conversation. As long as the instructor believes, deeply, “This must be right!” her conviction will be felt by everyone in the room—even when, as Michael Eric Dyson says, the “animal of race” breaks out of its artificial cage and runs unfettered and free.
1. I will put more emphasis on the early stages of white identity development, as these are the ones that characterize students in most college classrooms today. A description of the reactions of students in all the stages of identity development can be found in Tatum (1992) and Derman-Sparks (1997).

2. I have used the terms “stage one,” “stage two,” and so on for simplicity, as I find it difficult, myself, to remember the psychological terminology used by Helms: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudoindpendence, Immersion/Emersion, Autonomy.

3. Such a moment is captured in the video, *The Color of Fear* (Wah, 1994) when a white male who has been unable to hear the experiences of men of color in an anti-racism workshop suddenly catches a glimpse of the world from their point of view. At this quiet, but emotionally intense moment, an African American participant says, “From here on, I can work with you.” and the viewer has a powerful sense that change is possible for just about anyone.

4. Tatum (1994) reminds us that despite the smooth ascent that “stages” imply, racial identity development is not necessarily linear; we may find ourselves in several stages at the same time on different issues, and we may revisit, from different vantage points, stages we thought we had passed through, as if we were pausing on a spiral staircase to view our old—but still curiously present—thinking about race.

---

**When Race Breaks Out: Conversations About Race and Racism in College Classrooms**

Helen Fox (Peter Lang Publishing, 2007)

---

**Chapter 7**

**Mixing It Up:**

**Reactions of Students of Color**

Talking about race and racism with white students who come into our classes in so many different stages of identity development is a complex task. As we have seen in Chapter 6, some of our white students don’t recognize their own ethnocentric assumptions and find the whole topic of race to be tiresome or irrelevant. Others admit that racism and prejudice exist but believe that people of color are largely to blame for their own problems and are angry at them—and us—for suggesting that white attitudes and practices have anything to do with it. Whites who are more aware of the experiences of students of color may feel guilty and embarrassed by the remarks of the first two groups but rarely have enough examples or effective arguments to convince them that racism is still a major problem. All these students need more exposure to the perspectives of people who bear the brunt of racism. The most compelling testimony, of course, comes from students of color who are willing to talk about their own personal experiences. And sometimes, giving them the opportunity to do so is just what they need. One of my Latina students reflects back on a class where she sometimes took on the role of educator of white students who “didn’t get it”:

The classroom environment was an extremely safe place for me. The experience proved to me that there are places where my opinions and experiences are a valid source of information. Many times in the past I have disregarded what I felt or thought if it differed from mainstream experience. But by ignoring it, we perpetuate the idea that racism and prejudice do not affect us all and that the little injustices that minorities feel daily are isolated incidents. [Now] when I speak, I try to speak the truth from my heart.
But what if our students of color are not so ready to tell their stories? What if they turn out to be just as unreflective or judgmental as some of our white students? Or—worst case scenario—what if they, too, deny the existence of racism? When I began to do this work I assumed that most college-age students of color knew what racism felt like and could name it when they experienced it. I thought that anyone who had felt the sting of prejudice would want to defend others against false accusations and stereotypes. And I believed that as long as the classroom environment was “safe” most students of color would be willing, even eager, to inform their classmates about their cultures, or tell their immigrant stories, or share their painful experiences with racism and prejudice with whites who were willing to listen. But in fact, as I probably should have guessed, many were not so inclined. A high-achieving Puerto Rican student, for example, might take a strong stance against affirmative action in university admissions, even going so far as to bring in articles for the class to read that disparaged other members of his minority group. Or an African American student from the deep South would claim that never in her life had she been touched by prejudice. Even though I wanted to encourage diversity of opinion among all students, and even though I knew that students of color had vastly different life experiences, seeing them minimize the effects of racism, distance themselves from their cultures, and blame other people of color for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps was profoundly discouraging.

Of course not all my students of color took such reactionary positions. Many were well aware of the ways racism had affected them and had plenty of stories to tell. But even when they were willing to take on the role of educator they could become frustrated with the wall of resistance from white students—especially those who believed themselves to be liberal non-racists. One of my Asian American students captured the feelings of many of her friends of color in a “raw theater” piece they created to shock students into dialogues in public places on campus:

The white people in my class are so frustrating. They’re so fake and politically correct—all they want to do is “change the world.” They think they know what’s going on but they really have no clue; they live in a privileged little bubble. They’re all in the class so they “can learn about other cultures and hear opinions different from theirs.” I hate how they can’t even be real. It’s like they need to tiptoe around issues because they are scared of being pined as racists. They all try so hard to be down and be accepted by their people of color. They need to feel good all the time after class to ease their feelings of guilt. Meanwhile, we are the ones being sacrificed—recounting painful memories, spilling tears—for their benefit. And we are the ones who leave class torn up and frustrated. I’m sick of having to teach white people shit. We always have to be the spokespeople and the educators. I’m so sick of rich, suburban white kids talking about racism.

Other students of color would stifle the urge to be sarcastic and judgmental and try to look at the situation from the perspective of their white classmates. Still, this could be difficult and profoundly depressing for them. One of my African American students reflects:

Towards the middle of the semester I began to feel resentful at the role I was selected to play. I did not enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to help broaden the views of my white peers. I was dispirited, tired, and angry at having to discuss race as a reality instead of an imaginary issue. . . . Then I reminded myself that because whites were sheltered from the effects of racism, they were unable to view race outside of their privilege. They could easily make the claim that race did not matter, that everyone is equal, and, as an extension to that logic, that everyone is treated equally. I struggled hard trying not to condemn them for their misunderstanding, but I hated having to explain my point of view. The animosity that I harbor still hinders me from reaching out and aiding others in their understanding.

Some students of color who initially acted as effective educators became overwhelmed with anxiety as they learned more about the extent and virulence of white racism. An African American student began to withdraw from class discussion about half way through the semester, scribbling furiously in his journal while the rest of the class listened to outside speakers or debated the issues. One of his entries:

We currently have a speaker from an interfaith group talking about white supremacist groups. He is very educated and intelligent, at least I am speculating. My body is shivering, trying to figure out why individuals deal in hate. I don’t understand this. I didn’t realize how ignorant I was about some of these groups. I really wish I wouldn’t have to come to this class. The conversation is very intimate, but I would love to leave.

Such expressions of fear disturbed me more than any other student reactions. Knowing what students of color face in the world outside, I was determined to make my classroom safe for them. But how was I to do this while still providing my white students with the information they needed to know? And why were my students of color affected in such different ways, some frightened into silence, some disgusted with their white peers, some trying hard to understand the reasons for their classmates’ ignorance?
As I expanded my reading about racial identity development to students of color (Cross, Parham, and Helms, 1991; Tatum, 1992), I began to see the behaviors that most puzzled and annoyed me—the collusion with stage one whites, the sarcastic put-downs, the withdrawal from class discussion, the stony refusal to accept tentative gestures of friendship from white students—not as character faults (a stance that probably betrayed my own stage of identity development) but as natural stages in the development of a positive, healthy racial identity.

According to Beverly Tatum, students of color in the first stage have internalized many racist assumptions and stereotypes about their ethnic group, including the idea that “White is right” and “Black is wrong” (1992, p. 10). Surprisingly, perhaps, stage one students of color may be among our highest academic achievers. Many of them have grown up in white suburban environments and worked diligently and successfully in mostly white high schools. They may have been singled out by stage one white teachers who told them they were not like other blacks, or they were different from the reservation Indians, or they spoke good English and were therefore superior to the ingrates who spoke only Spanish. They have accepted these comments, sometimes gratefully, sometimes with a sense of discomfort that they do not show and may not fully understand. They have learned to ignore or laugh off racist comments made by white friends and sometimes collude with them in their put-downs of other ethnic groups. They tend to distance themselves both physically and psychologically from people in their own ethnic group who are the most visibly oppressed: those who are poor or whose language or culinary preferences or cultural traits feed white stereotypes.

It can be difficult to find yourself teaching a class where both students of color and white students are in stage one of their identity development. For quite opposite reasons, both groups have a psychological interest in pretending that we live in a colorblind society, that success depends entirely upon individual effort, and that we are all getting along just fine. Both groups also can afford to take strong, emotional positions against “other” students of color who whine about racism or hold loud protest marches that interfere with classroom learning. Both groups may have little sympathy for people of color who suffer economic hardship or who have made “bad choices” in their lives.

For example, in a class where I introduce issues of language and power to upper division English majors, students whose ethnic groups have been mocked for speaking “improper” or “broken” English are often the most vocal in their opposition to the statement put out by the Linguistic Society of America in support of African American Vernacular English. When one of my African American students read that AAVE is “systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties; and that characterizations of it as ‘slang,’ ‘mutant,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘defective,’ ‘ungrammatical,’ or ‘broken English’ are incorrect and demeaning” (www.isadc.org) she responded hotly that she came from a long line of English teachers, that her mother and grandmother had always insisted that only “proper English” be spoken in their home, and that her goal was to become an English teacher in the black community so she could make sure her students learned to speak correctly. A Japanese American student added that if African American language was proper English, then what about the broken English spoken by her grandfather—was that to be called a language too? The white students sat quietly through this exchange, their opinions conveniently validated by the students of color without their having to say a word.

In such a situation, I now try to separate the idea of learning the dominant language to gain authority (which I support) from devaluing and demeaning other languages and dialects (which I see as racist and classist). I might ask students to think of examples of other dialects that have no racial implications, such as American and British English, and ask them to consider which version is “correct.” I ask them to think of examples of other languages they know where the dialect of one country or region is considered superior to another—Parisian French over French Canadian French, for example, or Castilian over Mexican Spanish. One instructor uses her own Scottish dialect to illustrate this point, explaining to her students how throughout the history of Scotland, the syntax and semantics of different regions were judged as more or less acceptable, depending on the economic and political situation at the time.

If, as sometimes happens, a whole class resists these explanations and examples, I might be tempted to pile on more and more authoritative knowledge that will force my students to question their world view. However, I’ve learned that this tactic causes stage one students of any ethnicity to resist even more strongly. If instead, I allow them to voice their own opinions, all the while encouraging them to reflect, sometimes in writing, sometimes in small group discussion, on the ways the new information might challenge their positions, sooner or later most will begin to open themselves to new perspectives—if not publicly, in class discussion, then in response to my questions on their reaction papers and journal entries, and in the privacy of their own minds.
toward social justice goals is likely to be slow. As one of my students put it, "Sometimes I think that professors expect us to learn in one semester what it’s taken them their whole career to understand." We need to remind ourselves that it takes time and courage to admit that the ways we learned to understand the world are incomplete or flawed, and that this realization is especially painful for stage one students of color, who have so much to lose, at least initially, from allowing themselves to see society’s view of them more clearly.

Students of color enter stage two when they begin to encounter blatantly racist attitudes or become involved in painful incidents that jar them out of their more or less benign view of the world. Of course many of our students of color entered this stage long before they came to college, since they were introduced to the realities of racism in early childhood. For those who grew up in impoverished environments the gross disparities between rich and poor are painfully apparent. James Baldwin writes about the first time he went downtown with his father, away from their "dark and dirty" neighborhood where junkies and pimps lounged at their doorstep and into the rich, white world of tall buildings and gardens and heroic monuments. "It is clean," Baldwin writes, "because they collect garbage downtown. There are doormen. People walk about as though they owned where they are—and indeed they do. And it's a great shock. It's very hard to relate yourself to this. You don't know what it means. You know—you know instinctively—that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told" (1988, pp. 5–6).

Whether or not they see the blatant socioeconomic divide firsthand, many students of color hear painful stories around the family dinner table about how racism has affected their parents and grandparents. "How did we come north from Texas, where grandpa grew up?" an African American teenager might ask in response to a school assignment. "Well," comes the answer, "when granddad was only a little older than you, he had to jump into an empty boxcar in the middle of the night to escape a Klan lynching." In a Japanese American family, children might hear talk about a relative who went crazy after his experience in an internment camp, or how their dad’s first business venture was sabotaged by a competitor who hated “gooks.” In a Latino family, a child who asks why Mom stutters when she speaks Spanish might learn how she was shamed by a first grade teacher for “talking like a dirty Mexican.” Or Dad might come home angry, his blood pressure soaring, because he was stopped and questioned—again—while taking a peaceful evening drive through their own up-scale neighborhood.

In addition to learning how racism exerts its cruel influence on their families, many children of color have grown up with deliberate instruction from their parents about what racism is, why it happens, and who is responsible for it. This is quite different from the situation in liberal white households, where racism, when it is mentioned at all, is generally described as an unfortunate aspect of past history, or as the isolated acts of immoral or deranged white supremacists. While white children are learning how to deny or minimize racism (or, in blatantly racist households, to amuse each other with openly racist jokes and stories), many children of color are being told with frightening clarity how they can expect to be treated by the white world. A Latina psychologist told me that she first became aware of this difference in child-rearing practices when her daughter Julia came home from school incredulous that the white children she was working with on a group project had been puzzled by her suggestion that they write about racism. "I don't get it," Julia told her mother. "How can they be ten years old and not know what racism is?" Her mother was just as astounded. "That had never occurred to me," she told me. "As a person of color it never occurred to me that children would grow up not discussing this, not hearing about it, not having people read the newspaper to them, not having people say there's inequality in the world, and people are going to judge you because you're Hispanic or Chinese or Black."

But for the children of color whose families have tried to shield them from racism and who have always played happily with white “best friends” in comfortable neighborhoods, stage two can arrive with tremendous psychological force. An Arab American middle school child, after inviting white classmates over for his birthday party, endures a week of teasing about how his house “smells of hommus and tabbouli and camels,” making him ashamed to bring anyone home again. A Filipino American child waiting excitedly for the ceremony that will induct her into a Girl Scout troop is told in a whisper by her well-meaning white friend, “It's okay—because your father is a doctor.” An African American teen who all her life has been welcomed into her white friends’ homes is suddenly excluded from sleep-overs and finds her phone calls unreturned. The prospect of dating becomes awkward and lonely. Japanese American author David Mura writes:

[It is difficult to underestimate how much as a teenager I wanted to fit in, how deeply I assumed a basically white middle class identity. When a white friend proclaimed, "I think of you just like a white person," I'd take it as a compliment, a sign I'd made it. The problem was this: From the onset of my sexuality, I]
Mixing It Up

stumbled into experience after experience which pointed to my difference. At some level of conscious awareness, I was aware of racial differences in standards of beauty, that my sexual desires were crossing racial lines. Yet, I had no one to talk with about this, nor any language to describe it, even to myself. Since I was so desperate to deny my racial identity, I never sought to break out of this zone of silence, to become more conscious of how race or ethnicity affected my life and my desires. (1996, p. 83)

Often the effect of such incidents is understood only later, after time, distance, and a broader view of society helps the young person make sense of it. A mixed white and African American student writes:

I had my formal introduction to racism at the start of third grade. I am not sure if it had to do with the school or if it was just that kids at around eight or nine consciously became aware of racial differences that we had been internalizing well before that time. I had my eye on this girl in my class, as usual, I was the only black person. I thought she was really cute and I mentioned to one of my friends that I kind of liked her. When she found out, she ran up to me and began kicking me over and over and yelling, "If you think I’d ever go with a nigger . . ." and other things to that effect. To be honest, she was only about 4'3" and 65 pounds so her kicking me didn’t do much damage, but I don’t think I had ever been hurt quite that badly before. It wasn’t until I got to college that I really thought about just how deeply that girl had hurt me that day. Looking back on it now I still wonder if it really happened or if it’s just an invented memory that I like to torture myself with. I’m pretty sure it did happen, though, since that was not the last time I would get to experience racism up close and personal. I was continually reminded in subtle and not so subtle ways that I was different, and different in a bad sort of way.

Such experiences propel students of color into stage three, where they withdraw to their own ethnic groups for safety and comfort and begin to learn more about their own history and culture, information that is so often denied or marginalized or even ridiculed by white society. African American students at this stage join black fraternities and sororities and participate in all-black cultural activities and political organizations in their high schools or on their college campuses. Indian American students may join together with newly arrived Indian foreign students to put on a gala of ethnic dance and song—attended almost exclusively by Indians. Chinese American students who have grown up in English speaking households may take their first trips to Taiwan or Hong Kong where they enroll in intensive Chinese language classes set up specifically for the American born.

This willing separation inevitably causes concern among white students in the early stages of their own identity development. Since most of them have grown up without any meaningful interaction with people of color and have learned to see much of the racism in their families and communities as normal, they have little understanding why this "acceptable level of racism" would be seen as outrageous by students of color, or even leave a reservoir of hurt in their hearts. Some express disappointment that their dreams of a multicultural campus have been spoiled by students of color who “don’t want to mix.” Those who are more comfortable with open expressions of racism react with anger and sarcasm. A third year undergraduate who identifies herself as Hispanic of Chilean descent writes of her experience with these white reactions as she entered stage three of her identity development:

I grew up in a mostly white, affluent community in the U.S. As an affluent Hispanic with a relatively light complexion (which was still, by ‘ar, one of the darkest in my community), I didn’t experience any problems as long as I shared in “their” ethnicity. Once I began to grow and explore my own heritage, things drastically changed. In Spanish classes, even though I spoke only a little, I was immediately singled out by the white students as “taking the class for an easy A,” or “another wetback taking advantage of the system,” or, though I have never been the recipient of federal funds until recently, “a welfare child mooching off the hard “white” work” their parents did.” I found solace in friendships with the few other minorities in my high school, but for the most part, I felt alienated from this 99% white community. I have never felt entirely comfortable around whites since high school.

After experiences like these, students of color may quite understandably develop a deep mistrust of whites and a cynical belief that dialogue with white students will never be anything more than (as one of my African American students put it) “an exercise in superficial, feel-good political correctness involving liberal whites who will leave the class further convinced of their moral righteousness and ability to save the world, and a few token ‘Uncle Tom’ students of color who will serve as the whites’ ‘black best friends.’”

While stage three students of color often reject friendly dialogue with whites, they are also pulling ahead of most of their white peers in their ability to recognize the ways that racism permeates society’s institutions. An African American senior writes in her journal:

I cannot convey how much I am affected by the usual portrayal of blacks in the media. We are subject to blatant typecasting in Hollywood. The worst is the joker/professional; even with a stellar educational background the character is not respected. Makes me think of a modern-day, middle class Sanbo. Then there are any number of wanna-be Jezebel, Mammy and Coon characters. Everywhere
I look, the media shuts down any truly positive, human portrayal of black people. There are black scholars, painters, musicians, and philanthropists. Why is it that this information is always out of the reach or interest of Americans?

This ability to see the broader picture can at times make stage three students of color excellent discussion participants and sometimes inadvertent educators of silently listening whites who have gone beyond blaming the victim and are open to a deeper understanding of personal and institutional racism. But when stage three students of color find themselves in a class with white students who have yet to recognize the existence of racism in their own assumptions and behavior, they easily become exasperated at the difficulty of discussing at a sophisticated level what white students are only beginning to comprehend. For while whites in the early stages of their development can easily recognize the “Mammy, Jezebel and Coon” characters on television, they are more likely to accept these stereotypes as “just the way black people are” and feel justified in either laughing at them or turning off the show in disgust.5

If you are working with a few stage three students of color in a class of whites in the early stages of their racial identity development (which on many campuses is the norm), you need to support your students of color, preferably in private conversations during office hours, letting them know you understand what they are up against and explaining as well as you can why white students have difficulty recognizing racism. At the same time, you need to be providing the experiences, texts, videos, and visitors that help your white students move forward, while listening to their frustrations and supporting their growth in private conversations and in your responses to their writing. Unless the students of color agree to act as educators or want the opportunity to vent, as Gloria did [Chapter 4], I try to plan classroom interactions that minimize angry personal confrontation. Videos like The Color of Fear (see “Annotated Resources”), which offer strong, articulate perspectives of people of color as well as humane responses to stage one white attitudes, are validating to students of color at this stage and instructive for whites at any stage of their development. However, if careful management of classroom discussion is not your style, or if “race breaks out” anyway, it is important to reassure the whole class that conflict over racial issues is normal, that they are engaged in an honest conversation that most adults in this country are unable to have, and that you have faith in their ability to grow and learn from the course material and from each other.

When the classroom gets hot, conciliatory moves are sometimes made by students of color themselves, even by the very students who are most passionately engaged in the discussion. In one of my classes, a mixed white and African American student who had grown up in the dual world of a low income housing project and a progressive private school of the arts was so ready to act as mediator at these times that she insisted that we not leave a difficult class session without standing in a circle, holding hands, murmuring heartfelt slogans of unity. When I brought this suggestion to another class, however, the stage three students of color opposed any comforting mantras or “fake, feel-good tactics,” for in their opinion, “the angrier we all leave class the more real and honest we’ve been.” I tend to let students of color set the tone at these times, since it is their hurt and exclusion that is at the heart of any angry exchange about racism. Whatever the group dynamics, talking about my own experiences with race, especially in areas where I’m still learning, can be helpful both to white students, who come to see me as a role model, and students of color, who appreciate the honesty.

As students of color enter stage four they are beginning to feel more secure and positive about their racial identity and are able to reach out in friendship to genuinely respectful whites without losing touch with friends from their own ethnic group. Their stage three retreat to their own ethnic groups has given them a safe space to talk about the daily indignities of racism and debate questions of identity and solidarity among themselves without worrying what white people will think: How should we confront issues of internalized racism? Is it fair for black men to date white women? What about hierarchies of color within black and Latino communities? What are some different ways to think about interracial adoption? How can we confront the divisions in our communities along lines of socioeconomic class?6 After talking about these questions in safe spaces among themselves, students of color are more prepared to learn about the cultures and histories of other stigmatized groups, and to understand the ways that gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, religion, age, and other social identities have been causes of discrimination, ridicule, and hatred. But regardless of their new willingness to reach out to other groups, even mature, self-possessed, high-achieving students of color may need to retreat to spaces where they are most comfortable at various times during their college experience. Regardless of their use to us as educators, these students should not be expected to have endless patience, especially with those white students who resist our own best efforts to reach them.

Racial identity development theory can help us understand the dynamics of our classroom discussions and help us develop patience with students
Notes

1. Psychologist William Cross developed his model of racial identity development specifically in reference to blacks (Cross, Parham, and Helms, 1991). However, Tatum (1992) extends this schema to other students of color (Asians, Latin/o/as and Native Americans), saying “there is evidence to suggest that the process for these oppressed groups is similar to that described for African Americans” (p. 9).

2. Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion (1939) also makes this point.

3. Cross’s model of black racial identity development titles the five stages as follows: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment (Cross, Parham, and Helms, 1991). I am using “stage one,” “stage two,” and so on for simplicity.


5. Excellent videos that show the history of stereotypes in movies and on television are Ethnic Notions (Riggs, 1987), Color Adjustment (Riggs, 1991), and Heathen Injuns and the Hollywood Gospel (KCTS-9 Seattle, 1979).

6. All these issues can be of intense interest to whites, as well. But since whites are more comfortable seeing people of color as “the problem” than addressing the issue of their own racism and privilege, I try not to dwell on the struggles and divisions among people of color in my mostly white classes. Nevertheless, it is helpful for white instructors, at least, to understand these issues in order to know their students of color better. One means of introduction is through videos: A Question of Color (Sandler, 1992) on the origins of the “caste system” of skin tone and hair; Los Vendidos (The Sellouts) (El Teatro Campesino, 1972) about Latino stereotypes, acculturation, and class; My America ( . . . Or Honk If You Love Buddha) (Tajima-Peña and Thai, 1997) about Asian American lifestyles; Miss India Georgia (Grimberg & Friedman, 1997) about assimilation and identity among Indian Americans; and Tales from Arab Detroit (Howell & Mandell, 1995) on the generation gap between Arab American parents and their children. Many more fine videos are described in “Viewing Race: A Videography and Resource Guide” (1999) (www.ViewingRace.org).

Chapter 8
Exercises, Assignments, and Advice

This chapter and the one that follows, “Annotated Resources and More Ideas for Assignments and Discussions,” give you texts, videos, exercises, and discussion topics to promote deeper, more intelligent conversations about race in your classrooms. Many are suitable for a wide variety of classroom contexts; others can be modified to suit your class size, subject matter, and time constraints. Some of the advice may seem obvious—until you challenge yourself to put it into practice. As in earlier chapters, I sometimes use the voices of students and instructors to provide a rationale for the approach I advocate. A summary of all my advice can be found at the end of this chapter.

Setting the Tone

Model Sensitive Inter-cultural Interaction

In most of my classes, there are only a few students of my ethnicity. Professors don’t seem to know I’m there and students don’t bother to say hello to anyone who doesn’t look like them. They probably wonder why I’m quiet in class discussion, or why I hang out with my Korean friends after class. I just don’t feel particularly welcome. . . . I have come to realize that it is the sense of nobodiness that makes me so sad and frightened sometimes.

Korean undergraduate

Make everyone feel as welcome in your classroom as you would in your own home. Learn how to pronounce unfamiliar names by asking, with a smile, “Could you tell me your name again? I’d really like to learn how to say it correctly.” Recognize any tendency in yourself to confuse two students of an ethnic minority you have little contact with (this has happened to me more often than I care to admit). Express interest, publicly, in each student’s home country or community, whether it is an impoverished
inner city area, a tiny country you’ve never heard of, or the very town where you grew up. Talk to students before class or in conference to learn about their interests and goals, and use this knowledge to guide your choice of materials. A news article about a company that has begun to tie promotions to diversity goals will catch the attention of future business people; visits from health professionals of color will cause students headed into medical fields to actively question their stereotypes; an exercise comparing the treatment of slavery in different high school textbooks will appeal to future teachers. Your attempts to personalize the curriculum and make warm, friendly connections will provide a model for students of any ethnicity who are unsure about how to approach people who seem different, as well as for those who haven’t been taught to care.

On the first day, take time for introductions and other get-to-know-you activities. Students can interview their neighbor for a few minutes around aspects of college life that everyone has in common: “Where’s your home town?” “What’s your major?” “What sports or music do you enjoy?” “Where are you staying on campus?” Then ask all the students to introduce their partners to the larger group.

Speak enthusiastically about events on campus put on by ethnic organizations and urge all students to attend. Go to some of these events yourself and tell your class what you enjoyed about them. Stress the benefits of being a minority in a group of people whose language, color, and/or styles of celebration are different from your own.

Respect Students’ Needs for Safety

*Having a person of the same ethnicity sit next to me in class is like having a built-in comfort zone.*

_African American undergraduate_

Start out by letting students sit where they are most comfortable, even if that means white students all sit together and smaller groups of African American or Latino or Vietnamese students cluster in various parts of the room. In my own classes, I begin to vary these configurations for small group work after students are comfortable with my style and the class content. The smoothest way to achieve mixed groups without explicitly mentioning it is to have students count off by the number of groups you want to create (e.g. count to four to make four groups). In classes where race is the central topic and where strong needs for safety may come up at various points in the semester, I alternate between letting students choose their own groups (“Get together with students you feel the most comfort-

able with”) and mixing things up (“Get into groups with students who are writing on your topic so you can share resources and help each other with arguments”; “Get into groups with students who are researching different topics so you can explain your topic to a new audience”; or, more explicitly, “Get into a group with people you haven’t talked to yet”). You can also ask students to group themselves by the first letter of their last name, the month of their birthday, or some other neutral category.

**Affirm Human Similarities**

I strongly believe that students in the early stages of their racial identity development (that is to say, most white college students) need to hear messages about unity and similarity—that all peoples of the world are a single human family—before they begin delving into the ugly realities of racism, economic power struggles, and the clash of cultural and religious values. Students who have not yet begun to question the outright racist beliefs of their home communities need to hear this message for obvious reasons. But students who truly believe in equality and deplore the “divisiveness” of racial issues need to begin with unifying messages as well. No one likes to hear the worst about themselves or the country that they hold so dear. We can ease these students into more honest personal examination and critique of their society by affirming their idealism at first. Of course we must not let them rest there comfortably. They need to be pushed, sometimes gently, sometimes more forcefully, into an awareness of what so many people of color find maddeningly obvious: that whites find it “normal” to exclude other perspectives, deny other people’s talent and potential, stereotype entire ethnic groups as criminals or deviants, and so on.

I promote friendly, “low-stakes” interaction across ethnic groups by inviting my multicultural classes to meet at least once a semester at my house or in other out-of-class settings like a coffee shop, a student co-op, or outside on the lawn when the weather is nice. I introduce activities and icebreakers that require cooperation among students from different backgrounds and cause them to laugh and cheer for their own multicultural team. I arrange opportunities for students studying a second language to meet with native speakers of that language who want to improve their English—sometimes for course credit. I help organize an annual Intercultural Leadership Seminar that brings students from a great variety of backgrounds together for an intensive three and a half days to share their cultural values, beliefs, and perspectives, sometimes far into the night. I act as an advisor to student leaders who want to break down self-segregation
on campus and build bridges among ethnic organizations. Sometimes I simply encourage students to develop these projects on their own initiative; students are often the best, most creative organizers, for they know their peers’ interests and concerns and how to get them involved.

For a simple first day exercise that promotes seeing similarities across ethnic groups, ask students to count off into groups of three or four and find at least one thing that they all have in common (a love of classical music? a state they’ve all visited? an interest in deer hunting?). Rather than suggesting categories, let them talk until they find their own. Then ask them to tell what they’ve found to the rest of the class. Alternatively, call out areas of student interest and ask students to stand when they hear a category they fit into (“Who is a student athlete? A football fan? Who is thinking about business as a career? Who likes to write poetry?). Ask athletes to say a few words about their sport, musicians to mention their instrument, and so on.

Show Students of Color You Can Be Trusted
I’ve come to realize that the best way to make students of color a little more at ease in my classes is to speak early on about my commitment to discussions of race and racism and the ways I actively work to counter racism on campus and in the community. I then directly address the sensitive nature of the material I’m going to cover. If the word “nigger” appears in books on my reading list, for example, I will talk about the offensiveness of the term and ask students their opinions about possible approaches to the study of racist literature: Should we avoid reading these novels? Should we excuse the racism of the author because of the time and place the novel was written? How should we consider the present racial context along with the historical context? These serious, scholarly questions not only help students think critically, they show that I take their concerns and emotions seriously.

When the subject of your course focuses on problems of people of color and you are concerned that some of your students will feel singled out or demeaned by the approach you must take, address the issue openly, early on in the semester. An instructor in the health sciences who presents material on how race and poverty affect health status starts the first class by saying something like this:

In this class we’ll be talking about how some ethnic groups are more affected by poverty and health problems than others. I realize this can be an sensitive issue, since these facts have often been used to stereotype and blame people of color for their own problems. But this is just the opposite of what I want us to do in this class. We need to acknowledge from the start that the history of discrimination in this country has created vast differences in wealth and access to health care. We’re going to look at these differences carefully to see how we can work to change the situation.

Avoid Asking Students of Color to Speak for Their Entire Ethnic Group

When the subject of poverty in Detroit came up in my Sociology class, everyone looked at me for an answer. I had to respond that I have never been poor in Detroit and I’m searching for answers just like everyone else. I didn’t like having to prove myself to other people; it was uncomfortable.

African American Detroit

You can keep such embarrassing moments from happening by saying at the outset, “Some of us may know poverty firsthand, some of us may have lived or worked in impoverished areas, and some of us may have had absolutely no experiences of poverty to draw on. If you want to speak from your own experiences or those of your friends or relatives, these perspectives are especially welcome.” Then open the discussion to all.

Exploring Ethnic Identities

Multicultural teaching means students will learn about their own culture, too. Many times white students will say, “Do we, as white students, have ethnicity?” Learning about your own culture is very important. Once you know about your culture, you are more able to accept it and also more able to accept other cultures.

Christina José, Professor of Women’s Studies
(quoted in Schoem et al., 1995, p. 282)

All our ethnicities. In small groups, ask students to tell share their ethnic and family backgrounds, some of the influences that have shaped who they are, and/or their concept of “home.” Then bring them back into the large group and ask a few to talk about the most interesting things they learned. To help students from European immigrant backgrounds understand why they may know so little of their cultures, I sometimes tell the story about Henry Ford’s Americanization classes for the European immigrants who worked on his auto assembly lines in the 1920s. At graduation, so the story goes, there would be a huge cardboard soup pot on stage with a door cut in the side. Students would march through the door
dressed in the clothing of their home countries and singing folk songs in their mother tongue. Then the door would close and their teachers would pretend to stir the soup with ten-foot ladles. After a few minutes the door would open again and the students would march out dressed in suits and ties, waving little American flags, and singing "The Star Spangled Banner." ¹

**Immigrant stories.** White students, especially, will find it instructive to try to find out more about their ancestors’ ethnicities by interviewing their parents or grandparents, using web-based tools for tracing genealogy (www.familysearch.org), and reporting on their findings. A simpler way to approach this is to ask students to write a two- or three-page narrative about one of their ancestors who first arrived in America, using any facts they might know about that person and making up the details of the rest (or, if they like, by completely inventing an ancestor) according to what they know or surmise about the time, the culture, the likely economic and social position of their family when they arrived, and how they fared in their new land. I make the point that all of us came to this part of the world somehow, either voluntarily, as ancient migrants or newer arrivals; or involuntarily, through kidnapping and slavery, and that all of these stories are interesting and important to know and share. I have found this exercise to be very useful in classes where students express anti-immigrant sentiments, as it makes the point that today’s immigrants have many of the same desires and frustrations as their own ancestors. Most students, including those whose ancestors came involuntarily, enjoy writing these stories and sometimes ask to read them aloud to their classmates. If an African American or Native American student objects to the underlying idea that “we’re all immigrants together” (because it simplifies and glosses over the horror of enslavement and genocide) I support their stance, try to make room for their anger, reiterate the differences between involuntary and voluntary “immigration,” and encourage them to write their opinions and objections in addition to (or instead of) the assignment itself.

**Identities exercise.** For groups of about 20 to 150 students. Time: 1–2 hours (larger groups take longer than smaller ones). This is a very rich exercise that makes it possible for students to question each other about sensitive issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and other identities. Students appreciate it because, as they say, “it’s structured, so we’re forced to interact with each other.” Prepare the exercise by posting sheets of flip chart paper around the room with the names of identity groups that reflect the approximate make-up of your class. In larger classes I’ve used the following categories: Northern European; Southern European; Asian; Middle Eastern; African/African American/Caribbean; Latino/a; and Native American. I also add some pertinent religions: Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim/Moslem, Hindu, and Buddhist, which gives students more than one group to choose from and gets them thinking about their multiple identities. Students sometimes want to form a “Mixed” category for bi-racial people, which I let them do, even though this sometimes brings up uncomfortable issues between students of color who choose to identify themselves this way and those who object to this category (since it seems to reinforce color and caste hierarchies). ²

Students choose one of these identity groups (which for some will be a difficult task in itself) and meet with others from the same group for about twenty minutes, talking together about these three questions: (1) What makes this group unique? (i.e., what are the commonalities among students who have chosen this group?) (2) What are some of the differences among people in this group? (3) What do you think other groups think about your group? Students then write their answers on the flip chart paper and post it back up on the wall.

Next, students have about fifteen minutes to mill around in silence, reading other groups’ responses to these questions and thinking (and perhaps writing down) questions they want to ask of people in the other groups. Then they have about thirty minutes to question members of other groups, and if there’s time, another twenty minutes or so of large group discussion where each group shares the questions they were asked, the ways they responded, and what they learned from other groups.

I always start off by talking a little about my own ethnic and religious identities to give students a model and put them at ease. When this is done in a very large group with many instructors or facilitators, the variety of instructors’ identities and the complexity of their backgrounds can cause students to question their own stereotypes even before the exercise begins. For example, when I did this exercise with seven other instructors and their classes in a large hall, an instructor who looked white introduced herself as a mixture of Native American, African American, and white; another whose braided hair, ebony skin, and French accent seemed to identify her as West African said she grew up in Switzerland and loves to ski; and an instructor identifying as African American traced her ancestors from many Native American tribes as well as “unknown whites.” All of us talked about the identity category we would choose if we were participating in the exercise and affirmed that we had created some pretty
large and diverse categories (e.g., "Asian"), and admitted that we might not have even thought of the category that is most important to some of the participants. We then had to help some students choose: for example, a white student who had never considered that he was anything but "American," and a Black Muslim student who felt strongly that her ethnicity and religion could not be separated.

In evaluations of this exercise, students say that talking in their own ethnic or religious groups first helps them feel more comfortable, for they meet students who are in some way like themselves, make new friends, and sometimes learn new things about their own heritage. This gives them confidence for the scarier part, when they question other groups about issues that they may have always wondered about. Black students ask Indian Americans about the meaning of the red dot on women's foreheads; white students ask Korean students how they feel about being called a "model minority." Native Americans get asked about casinos and pow wows; Jews ask Christians why they try to convert them—and all is done in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Giving explicit instructions, allowing a specific time period for each part of the exercise, and facilitating discussion afterward that validates emotions and feelings help students who are new to a multicultural environment feel a bit more safe in the minefield of group relations.

Being an ally. After students have learned the basics about other ethnic groups and have explored the subject of race and racism in depth (see next section), I promote a deeper, more complex understanding of the experiences of different ethnic groups by having students read novels and memoirs (see "Annotated Resources") written by and about people from groups different from their own. Then I ask students to write a five-page letter to the author or a specific character in their own voice and from their heart, showing that they have heard and understood the difficulties and frustrations that person has faced and mentioning specific actions they might take to become an ally either to that individual or to the group they represent. Brainstorming beforehand about what it means to be an ally to another ethnic group and the specific kinds of actions or activities that this might involve will help students think more positively and realistically about what they might propose. Be sure students think about both the personal and the political. Students come up with ideas like learning more about an ethnic group, committing themselves to using a language they've learned but never practiced in the community, talking with friends about suppressed history, showing a video about the Civil Rights Movement at a family gathering, writing letters to Congress people or the

student newspaper, or longer term goals such as teaching in a resource-deprived school, setting up a medical clinic in a depressed area, or working with their political party to draft legislation that supports targeted groups.

Promoting Dialogue About Race, Racism, and Privilege

I came into the class with the notion that I held relatively few stereotypes. As I soon found out, I had not even begun to ponder these issues. I had never heard of things such as "white privilege." I had rarely acknowledged that I have been treated differently than students of color. I only knew that I was not a racist, and that I cared a lot about helping minorities in their struggles. I had no terminology, and no comprehension of ways to combat racism. Now, my mind has undergone a huge transformation.

white undergraduate

I am embarrassed to say, at the beginning of this semester I really didn't think I had much to learn. In fact, I thought I could teach the class with my experience. I waved the flag of my home town, Detroit, to prove my commitment against racism, as if claiming that living in a mostly African American city will forever protect me against racist tendencies. I naively used my neighborhood as proof that I was a "good guy." The truth is, this class has taught me more about myself than any class has.

white undergraduate

"What is your race and how do you know it?" The purpose of this question is to get white students thinking and talking about the ways race is constructed and racial stigma is passed through the generations. To avoid superficial or mocking answers ("by looking in the mirror") from stage one students I model this myself first:

I'm white, as far as I know. But I was never explicitly told I was white, so how do I know it? That's a mystery. I can think of subtle ways that whites in my neighborhood defined themselves and each other as white. There were ways of teasing and insinuating that someone had some black ancestry. It was obvious from the tone of voice that this was something shameful, something to be avoided. People who looked like me talked about other people as "Oriental" or "Negro" or "Mexican" in ways that let me know I wasn't one of "them." "They" were mysterious, different, and somehow dangerous. I knew that some of my Jewish friends were white because they weren't spoken of in such derogatory or frightened tones, even though their skin might be quite dark. So I think I learned what race I was by understanding what I was not.

When white students are encouraged to question their own learning about race, students of color often feel more comfortable talking about how they learned about themselves. Some will talk about the pride they
were taught in their families in stark contrast to the ways they were put
down and shamed at school or ostracized in the community.

"What is race? What is racism?" Instead of giving students definitions
of race, racism, racial hatred, discrimination, prejudice, reverse racism,
and ethnocentrism (as in Chapter 3), ask them to work in small groups to
come up with their own working definitions and examples of each term.
I give each group of four students three or four terms, some of which
overlap with those I give to other groups (i.e., group one gets race, rac-
ism, and racial hatred; group two gets racism, racial hatred, and discrimi-
nation; and so on). Be sure to tell students that the object is not to get the
"right" answer or even come to consensus at all; the process of discussion
is more important than the product. Then bring everyone back together
and ask each group to give their definitions and examples and mention
any issues they disagreed on. Discussion will naturally ensue, since groups
will have come up with somewhat different definitions. You can add fac-
tual information and historical background, if necessary, to help with ac-
curacy. This exercise can take over an hour. If you don’t have this much
time, you might ask students instead to survey several of their friends
about how they would define these terms and bring the results to class for
discussion.

"How significant is race in your daily life? Why do you think this
is so?" Many white students say that race is not at all significant, while
students of color will, if they feel comfortable, begin to describe the many
ways they are made to feel different, odd, shut out, and less than whites.
While white students learn a lot from discussion of this question in mixed
groups, students of color may begin to feel frustrated or angry that their
experience is so little known and understood. In classes with more than
one or two students of color, you might want to do this as a brief, anony-
mous, in-class writing assignment, and then collect the answers and read
some of them aloud. A discussion about the gap in perceptions may
follow.

You might also do this as a "fishbowl" discussion. Set up two concent-
ric circles of chairs and ask students identifying as white to sit in the inner
circle (the fishbowl), while students of color sit in the outer circle. The
white students then discuss the questions while students of color listen
silently. Then ask the groups to switch places so that students of color are
now discussing their experiences among themselves in the inner circle
while white students listen. You can then ask the class to write a brief
response to the discussion or discuss general reactions in the large group.

In another variation, useful for larger, mixed classes, each corner of the
room is designated as a possible response to the question: "How signifi-
cant is race in your everyday life?" e.g., "very significant"; "moderate-
significant"; "somewhat significant"; and "not at all significant." Students
move to the corner that matches their own response and talk with the
group that forms there about specific instances when race mattered (or
didn’t matter) and what they make of this. You can add interesting com-
plexity to this exercise by asking students to move to the appropriate
corner for gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and/or reli-
igion after they have discussed the significance of race. Allow about fifteen
to twenty minutes for discussion of each identity category. As students
move to different corners they discover similarities and differences across
and within racial/ethnic identities. For example, some whites, Asians
and blacks may find that they all grew up in upper class (or working class)
families, or that being female is very significant to them. Discovering simi-
larities in experiences can help promote dialogue later, if issues of race
become heated.

"When did you first recognize your place in the racial hierar-
chy?" Other ways to ask this question are: "When did you realize that
people of different races or ethnicities were treated differently?" Or, more
simply, "What did you first learn about people of color? About white
people?"

White students are sometimes silent or give superficial answers to these
questions since they often feel they have no experiences with race (by
which they mean races other than white, a misunderstanding that should
be pointed out to them). On the other hand, they might claim that they
have had no negative experiences regarding race since their parents brought
them up to treat everyone equally. Underneath these attitudes often lie
much tension and fear about revealing deeply internalized racist beliefs. If
a white student says she has no stories to tell since she was brought up in
a very tolerant household, I ask her gently if she knows that there is a
racial hierarchy in this country at all—which of course she does. Then I
ask her if she knows where she fits in. She does. "Now, this is harder," I
say, "How do you know that?" When students are stumped for answers,
I find that telling my own story helps.

"Describe an experience when race seemed particularly impor-
tant." Although white students may claim they have had no such experi-
ences, this exercise will encourage them to talk about racial incidents that
have happened to friends or acquaintances of color, which is helpful in
breaking the silence about the racism that permeates the society. The braver students sometimes share incidents in which they have been perpetrators or silent bystanders. Some will talk about the racist remarks or harangues of family members. Students of color, if they feel comfortable, will talk about times when they themselves were the victims of racism or prejudice, or they may reveal that they have never experienced racism firsthand. Very rarely will students of color bring up prejudices and rivalries between different ethnic groups or by people of color against whites; they know all too well that such discussions give white students more reason to deny or minimize their own responsibility. This exercise is best done in small groups of four or five where each student is under a certain amount of social pressure to contribute experiences to the discussion.

“How do you feel about ethnic labels?” Working individually, students (and instructor) write brief descriptions of their own experiences on flip chart paper in answer to these prompts: (1) the first time you can remember being classified or referred to by your race or ethnicity; (2) the first time someone else referred to you by your race or ethnicity; and (3) the first time you referred to yourself by your race or ethnicity. As they finish, students post their flip chart paper on the walls around the room in a “gallery” format. Everyone walks around in silence and reads everyone’s experiences. All sit down again and the instructor simply asks: “First impressions?” “Questions?”

“What is it to be American? What was it to your parents?” These deceptively innocuous questions can sometimes bring out the essence of the problem of race in U.S. society. Whether white students take a positive or negative tack on this (mentioning either patriotism, freedom, and pride, or consumerism, imperialism, and environmental destruction) they rarely explicitly bring up race. Students of color, however, especially those in later stages of their racial identity development, may talk frankly and sometimes angrily about being made perpetual outsiders. First and second generation immigrants will have different takes on these questions, depending on how much racism and anti-immigrant feeling they or their family have experienced. A discussion of these questions could lead into an assignment to read a memoir or novel written by an immigrant author and/or to read the suppressed history of the publicly condoned racism against Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other ethnic groups (Loewen, 1995; Takaki, 1998).

“Where did you learn what you know about race and ethnicity?” This exercise was created by one of my students as she was reflecting on her own assumptions and stereotypes of various ethnic and religious groups. Make a list of everything you know about several identity groups you are unfamiliar with (e.g., Muslims, Jews, Gypsies, Africans, Mexicans, etc.). Now write where you learned each thing (e.g., the movie, Aladdin, grandparents, playground games, children’s books about Babar, etc.). Talk about your list with a partner.

“In what ways are you (or are whites) privileged at this university/in this town/in this organization?” Peggy McIntosh’s (1992) article on white privilege is important background reading for this conversation, as she lists many ways her white skin buys her “an invisible package of unearned assets.” Ask students to make their own list, then talk about them with one or two other people, perhaps within their own ethnic or racial groups, then share their findings with the whole class. Students of color may list the privileges they perceive whites to have, and/or list their own privileges in terms of educational opportunities, family, class, etc. White students should be prompted by the article to see how their whiteness or apparent whiteness adds to any other privileges they have. Model this by mentioning a few of your own privileges. I might say that as a white instructor I can bring up the subject of race in my department without being thought of as a complainer; I can benefit from affirmative action without being accused of incompetence (white females are the major beneficiaries of affirmative action); I can take a drive in the country and stop for gas in a small town without fear of violence (there is considerable Klan activity in rural Michigan); and I can sit on my front steps relaxing with a beer without anyone assuming I’m lazy, alcoholic, unemployed, or on welfare.

“How does it feel to be a victim? A perpetrator? A silent bystander? An intervener?” In small groups, ask students to respond to some or all of the following prompts: “Talk about a time you felt different from the people around you. How did you feel about it?” “Talk about a time when you were the victim of harassment, discrimination, stereotyping, or racism. How did you feel about it?” “Describe an incident where you were perceived as being prejudiced or racist. How did you feel about that? What was your response to the person who told you about it?” In the large group, ask students: “How did you feel when answering these
questions?" “Which questions were the most interesting?” “What did you learn about yourself?” (adapted from Meyers and Zúñiga in Schoem et al., 1995, p. 318).

You can do a variation of this as a “four corners” exercise. Designate each corner of the room as a place where students talk about (1) a time when they have been oppressed or put down by others; (2) a time when they have oppressed someone else; (3) a time when they have stood by and watched someone oppress another; and (4) a time when they have intervened in an act of oppression. Students move from one corner to another at the instructor’s signal (the time allowed depends on the size of the group). Both exercises are good levelers of differences; they allow white students to see that they do not have to automatically assume the role of oppressor and that they can be allies with people of color and others by standing up to oppression. Talking about the issue from all sides also helps students of color acknowledge their own prejudices and see their fight against racism as part of a larger enterprise of human rights, which they can engage in with whites as well. If students get into arguments about which kind of oppression is worse, or argue that one kind of oppression doesn’t count, Audre Lorde’s short piece, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions” (1993), is a sobering, heartfelt reminder of some of the larger issues in the struggle.

You can also do these exercises as writing assignments, either in class or as homework. Ask for volunteers to read aloud from their writing or have students read aloud to each other in small groups as prompts for further discussion. This writing exercise works best as an ungraded assignment; students shouldn’t feel pressured to invent good stories that never happened.

**When Discussion Is Silent or Superficial**

**Using videos.** When students are extremely reluctant to address personal experiences and attitudes about race directly, or when the class is all or almost all white, watching a video together can substitute for having to talk about sensitive issues, at least at first. After showing the video, ask students to reflect for a few minutes quietly, then write for a few minutes to capture their feelings, thoughts, and questions. Open discussion by asking students to share their feelings (everyone says one word describing his or her feelings at that moment), then their thoughts and questions. Ask: “What struck you as interesting, important?” “What reminded you of something in your own experience?” “What surprised you?” “What do you disagree with or question?” Excellent videos that prompt these discussions are: *True Colors* (ABC Primetime Live, 1991); *America in Black and White: How Much is White Skin Worth?* (ABC News, 1996); *Skin Deep* (Reid, 1995); and *The Color of Fear* (Wah, 1994). (See Racism: Contemporary Stories and Examples in “Annotated Resources” for descriptions.) For more videos and ordering information, write for the excellent booklet by National Video Resources: “Viewing Race: A Videography and Resource Guide,” Vol. 4, Spring 1999 (by e-mail at ViewingRace@nvr.org or through the website: www.ViewingRace.org).

“Why is race so hard to talk about?” If discussion continues to be guarded or silent, try this question. Well-meaning white students often respond, “Because we don’t want to offend anyone.” I then continue to probe: “Why are we (including myself is very important) so afraid of offending each other?” “Does anyone have a story or incident that they would be willing to share about a time they offended someone inadvertently?” If there is still no answer, I might remove the personal element by telling a very general story about what unnamed others have experienced: “Sometimes students have told me that they inadvertently referred to someone as black when that person wanted to be called African American—or vice versa—and this led to some tension and anger. Has anyone heard of something like that happening?” On multicultural campuses, almost everyone has. Their stories can lead you to ask another question of your mostly white classes: “Why do you think people of color are sensitive about race?” There is always at least one white student who will venture, “Because they have had bad experiences.”

This discussion can often go further in this direction if you ask, “What kinds of prejudice do people of color suffer?—do you know of any incidents or have you read about any?—think about Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and others as well as African Americans.” This takes it out of the personal arena for awhile, which is helpful when people are wary about revealing themselves. Students may then bring up (or you can suggest) indignities such as police harassment, anti-immigrant legislation, media stereotyping, lower expectations in education, ridicule (of an accent, of physical characteristics), fear and avoidance, questioning of abilities, and so on. If students bring up incidents in which whites have been harassed by people of color, acknowledge these experiences I give a sympathetic nod and perhaps a brief comment: “That must have been painful”) and then move the discussion back to the original question.

“One thing I’ve been reluctant to say” When dialogue falters, or when you or some class members see the need for more depth and feeling in students’ responses, pass out file cards and ask students to write
anonymous one thing they have wanted to say in previous class discussions but have been afraid or reluctant to reveal. Collect the cards, shuffle them, and read some of them aloud as prompts for discussion.

"What makes it difficult to have meaningful relationships across the racial divide?" Posing the question this way makes it harder for white students to claim that everything is fine since they have black friends or since they went to a school with people from different backgrounds. Starting from the premise that trust and depth of friendship is difficult, students are prompted to think about what might be lacking in their relationships with friends of other ethnicities. Students of color may say, if they feel safe enough, that the reason for the difficulty is that whites don’t recognize the everyday racism that is so much a part of the lives of people of color. If the conversation gets deeper, they may also reveal that they talk about race and racism all the time with their friends of color when their white friends and acquaintances aren’t around. This, more than any other comment, will make the white students reflect, perhaps silently, on the ways they do not know their friends of color. Other whites, who know they don’t have meaningful friendships across the racial divide, may advance all kinds of reasons why this is the fault of people of color: they don’t respond to offers of friendship or collaboration, they accuse whites, implicitly or explicitly, of being racist, and so on. You might then ask the white students why they think this is true, and perhaps give some of your own experiences that suggest why trust is so difficult. I like Gloria Yamato’s (1992) reminder to well-meaning whites that we should not fool ourselves into thinking that if we have a few good conversations with a friend of color or a successful collaboration on a project that we now have “the people of color seal of approval” (p. 70). We need to stay open to continued personal introspection and show ourselves to be trustworthy again and again.

Excellent books that speak to reluctant white students about race and address the basics of communication across racial differences are Harlon Dalton’s Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks and Whites (1995); and Paul Kivel’s Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice (1996).

Promoting Discussion of Texts

Using Reading Journals

In the beginning of the semester it was hard for me to write even a few lines because I really didn’t know what I was feeling; I had thought about these issues for a long time throughout my life but never critically analyzed my thoughts.

white undergraduate

This journal has provided me with an opportunity to express my thoughts without being criticized or looked down on for my views.

Vietnamese American undergraduate

Most conversations about race are short on facts; students of all ethnicities typically don’t know enough about the histories, definitions, arguments, laws, and perspectives of other groups to dialogue or argue effectively. I begin with texts that define terms (such as “race”), give specific examples of racism, reveal privilege and prejudice in a personal way, and discuss suppressed histories of people of color in the U.S. I introduce institutional racism much later, after students are convinced that racism does exist in the U.S. today and that it affects every one of us intimately. (See “Annotated Resources” for the best texts I have found on the following topics: Human Origins; Social Construction of Race; Histories, Cultures, and Contemporary Realities of U.S. Minorities; Identity; “Whiteness”; Racial Socialization; Racism: Contemporary Stories and Examples; the Psychology of Racism; the History of Racism; and many aspects of Institutional Racism: Racial Profiling, Criminal Justice, Health, Housing, Education, Language, and the Media; as well as texts on Activism and Teaching Issues). I start with texts whose tone is moderate or even soothing (see especially Kivel, 1996); I find that using strident texts early on puts many white students off and discourages the kind of personal questioning and tentative exploration they need to do at first.

To help students dig into the material, I ask them to record their thoughts, feelings, reactions to discussion, and reactions to readings in a journal that I collect and comment on every couple of weeks. If I want them to interact more with the texts themselves, I ask them to respond to four or five quotes of their choice from each article they read. They can ask themselves questions and attempt to answer them, they can question or argue with the author, they can bring in their own personal experiences, and they can refer to other pieces they’ve read. To push for greater depth I grade these entries ++ for excellent work, + for acceptable work, and RW (rewrite) for comments that need more depth of reflection and/or attention to clarity of ideas. I give students nearly endless opportunities to rewrite these entries until they have achieved the best grade possible. This system makes it clear that personal engagement and critical analysis are my expectations of every student in the class.
Allowing anonymous reactions. When students have read a text on a particularly contentious subject (white privilege, affirmative action, welfare reform), ask them at the beginning of the class period to jot down a few words describing their feelings as they read or thought about the material. Collect these, then ask them to write down whatever thoughts and questions came to them. Read aloud both piles of anonymous reactions, first the feelings, then the thoughts and questions. Or, read the feelings aloud, then shuffle the thoughts and questions and pass them back to students to read aloud. Discussion will follow.

Using quotes as prompts for discussion. As a fun variation on the standard discussion format, I sometimes ask students to pick out the quote from the reading for the day that most impressed them, write it down, walk around and compare quotes with other students, and, finally, gravitate to small groups for discussion. Ask groups to address questions such as the following: “What does the quote mean to you?” “How does it apply to the subject of race or racism?” “How does it pertain to your life?” “What are your reservations or questions about the quote?” After twenty minutes or so of discussion, ask each small group to share with the larger group the most interesting points that came up.

Talk circle. This exercise allows space for quieter students to voice their ideas and can produce remarkable results. Ask students to write for five minutes on the topic or article to be discussed in order to collect their thoughts. Each student then has exactly one minute (timed by you) to express his or her ideas about the topic without interruption. Students are not obliged to speak, but if someone chooses to remain silent, the whole circle of students must also keep silent until that person’s minute has expired. If the class is larger than about fifteen students, you might want to split it into several groups and have student volunteers time the contributions of students in the other groups.

Coins exercise. Here is another equalizer that many students find both fun and instructive. Have students sit in a circle, and place a wastebasket or a baseball cap in the center. Ask students to take out two pennies and a silver coin. (Bring extra pennies and encourage sharing, telling the class they will get their coins back at the end of the exercise.) Tell students: “The pennies represent statements and the silver coin represents a question—not an information question, but a question that turns the discussion in some new direction. When someone wants to speak, s/he throws a coin into the center. That person then has the floor and no one can interrupt. When s/he is finished speaking, someone else can throw in a coin. When you use up your coins, you can’t speak any more and you must stay silent; no begging, buying, or stealing of other people’s coins! You don’t have to use up all your coins, but I encourage you to do so. I also will have three coins and follow the same rules.”

This exercise is fascinating to many students since the big talkers use up their coins quickly, leaving space for the quieter ones to discuss their perspectives, sometimes for the first time. I end the exercise when the group has been completely silent for about two minutes. In a group of fifteen to twenty students, this takes about an hour. Be sure the text and/or topic you choose is rich enough to sustain the discussion, and that everyone has done the reading. You might want to give students five or ten minutes to skim over the text first.

Student-led discussions. Ask for pairs of student volunteers to lead discussions of specific readings. Each pair should meet before class to plan specific questions to ask and to prepare to give their own take on the questions if discussion falters. Pairs from different ethnic backgrounds sometimes find their own meeting and discussion time extremely instructive. If you have been using a variety of formats for discussion, students may follow your lead and try some of these.

Helping Students Recognize Racism

Use videos to inform students about the prevalence of prejudice in the everyday lives of many people of color. The following are particularly helpful: True Colors: America in Black and White: How Much Is White Skin Worth?, Color Adjustment: The Color of Fear, Pockets of Hate (See Racism: Contemporary Stories and Examples in "Annotated Resources" for descriptions). Discuss the videos as described above (“When discussion is silent or superficial”).

Use texts that tell personal stories and give detailed examples from the point of view of the victim. (See Racism: Contemporary Stories and Examples in "Annotated Resources").

Teach students media analysis. Students can begin to learn to critically analyze the media that present them with subtly racist and ethnocentric images, texts, and reporting styles. By looking closely at television, feature films, children’s books, history textbooks, advertisements, video
games, and news articles, students can begin to notice what and who is absent, whose perspectives are ignored, who is ridiculed ("in fun"), who participates in self-ridicule or self-stereotyping and why, and what information presented as fact is just plain wrong.

**Children’s Books:** Choose four or five children’s picture books for students to read and analyze. I have used the following: Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Match Girl* (1996); Marcia Brown’s *Shadow* (1986) (about an African village); Ina Friedman’s *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (1984) (about how a Japanese woman and European American man learn each other’s cultures); Alice Dalgliesh’s *The Thanksgiving Story* (1954) (which presents the usual Eurocentric view of American Indians); Carolivia Herron’s *Nappy Hair* (1997) (a book that caused a furor among African American parents when a young white teacher introduced it to her multicultural third grade class); and Faith Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* (1991) and *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992), which portray responses to slavery and racism from the perspective of young African Americans.

I give one of these books to each small group of students and ask them to read the story together and discuss what effect they think it would have on children of different ethnicities, what objections parents might have, what facts or perspectives are absent or skewed, and whether or not the students would recommend the book if they were consultants to an elementary school reading program.

**Movies and television:** Show the videos *Ethnic Notions* (Riggs, 1987) and *Color Adjustment* (Riggs, 1991) (or clips from them) that document the racist depictions of blacks in cartoons, “blackface” minstrel shows, and film from pre-Civil War days through the television shows of the 1980s. After discussion of these films, ask students to choose a television series or several news broadcasts or an evening’s worth of television advertising to document the stereotyping that remains today. If you want your students to learn how to do a more detailed and sophisticated media analysis, see Barbra Morris’s excellent (1999) article, “Toward Creating a TV Research Community in Your Classroom”, which explains how to teach students to formulate research questions, develop hypotheses, design coding charts, categorize and analyze data, and evaluate results.

**Newspaper articles:** Hand out a *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* article (i.e., something not “obviously” reactionary or racist, but arguably ethnocentric or racially biased) that leaves out certain perspectives, or uses “code words” to refer negatively to certain ethnic groups, or adopts a condescending tone, and so on. Ask the class to read the article and, in small groups, make a list of whatever biases they find. Then they share these with the large group.

**Magazines:** Have students compare the ways that people from a particular ethnic group are portrayed in “mainstream” magazines to the ways they are shown in publications designed by and for members of that group. How often and in what ways are the members of the group portrayed? What idea does this give readers about the ethnic group as a whole? See Gaskins (1996), “The World According to Life” in “Annotated Resources”: Institutional Racism, Media.

**Developing Anti-racist Arguments**

*I like that you stress knowing facts. No one can fight you when you know better than they do. I’ve noticed a difference in my ability to communicate more concisely and convincingly. I feel like I’ve got a few missiles in my arsenal.*

*Latina undergraduate*

Students need more help than we usually give them in learning to refute arguments, especially on a topic as emotional as race. You can use the following discussion formats to help students discuss race among themselves, or use them to help more advanced students develop both the confidence and the facts to confront racist arguments in their communities.

**Fishbowl.** Place four chairs in a square, facing each other, in the center of the room. Have students help move the rest of the chairs to a circle around these center chairs. Explain that four volunteers will take the seats in the center and start off the discussion on the topic of the day. They can give their own arguments and opinions or take on the role of someone whose opinion they disagree with (or don’t really know whether they agree or disagree with). Students sitting in the outside chairs must remain silent. However, at any time, a student from the outside circle may tap the shoulder of any student in the center and change places with them.

This technique almost always produces lively debate and a fun, competitive atmosphere as students jump in and argue with each other. If your purpose is to let all students in on the discussion, you can add an additional rule that students may tap someone only once (or twice). I sometimes also participate (I can’t help myself), but I find I need to en-
Role play argument. This technique helps students to explore ideas they are unsure about or to anticipate and answer arguments from their friends and families. I ask students to stand in a circle, and tell them I will start an argument with a volunteer who agrees to come into the center of the circle with me. As in the fishbowl exercise, students in the outer circle must stay silent; if they want to get into the argument they can tap either one of us on the shoulder while we’re talking, and we’ll change places with them.

The difference between this and the fishbowl is that this exercise is strictly play-acting; students can argue an opinion they disagree with as if it were their own. I make this very plain when starting off the exercise, by choosing a role and/or expressing opinions that students know I don’t hold. I might play a doubting parent, for example:

Mike, I know you’re really involved in this course on racism you’re taking, but can’t you lighten up a little bit when you come home? After all, racism is a thing of the past by now. We sent you to an integrated high school, you’ve always had friends of other races, why are you making such a big deal about it now?

Or I might play a student who argues hotly against affirmative action:

I can’t believe you went to that affirmative action rally, Sherri. Don’t you remember in high school when those black kids got into the Ivy Leagues and we didn’t? They weren’t even in the advanced placement classes! It’s not fair! We worked our butts off and they got a free ride!

The ethnicity of the combatants is tricky here, because the perspectives one takes will have different meanings and/or be perceived differently depending on what one looks like (try imaging the above roles played by a Latino or an Asian American). Since I want my students to explore all perspectives as freely as possible, I tell them that they can take on the identity of someone from another ethnic group if they want and argue from that position—but they should let us know through their dialogue that that’s what they are doing. Then I model this:

As a black man I really take offense at your argument that racism is a thing of the past. Every time I walk down the street at night, I see white people crossing to the other side to avoid me. Do you realize how painful that is?

Usually we can keep a dialogue going for about twenty minutes; it tends to range over many topics and jump around rapidly, but it does give stu-

dents both the arguments and the experience to put their ideas into action, and is quite instructive even for those who choose not to enter the fray themselves.

I sometimes use this exercise as a prelude to a major paper in which I ask students to write a dialogue between themselves and another character, using realistic conversational language and tone, about a racial issue they have discussed in class or encountered in their family or neighborhood. The object is to show they can listen fairly to their imaginary character, no matter how obnoxious s/he is, and keep that person listening while they help move the conversation toward a more accurate and compassionate understanding of the racial situation. This is more difficult than students first imagine. They tend to let one character lecture the other, rather than letting both sides of the argument come out. They may resort to emotional language or exasperated put-downs rather than reasoned argument, or jump from one issue to another without exploring any of them fully. Often, first drafts of these dialogues end in a stalemate, with both characters angry at each other. Sometimes their own unintended biases come out, as when a Korean American student tries to convince her father that blacks are naturally athletic and Asians are naturally good at math, or when a white student lets her imaginary character get away with arguing that Latinos who live in poor neighborhoods are all quite dangerous. Peer review of these papers (reading the dialogues aloud to a group of three or four other students and asking them for feedback) helps writers learn more about the experiences of others and the points of view of their opponents, and to think about the best ways to reach the stubborn characters they have created. They can learn more about this with practice in the LARA Method (see below).

Arguing both sides. Set up nine chairs in a circle, seven of them facing inward and two of them, the “debate chairs,” facing each other. Ask for nine volunteers to fill the chairs while the rest of the class looks on. Whoever sits in the two chairs that face each other will take opposing sides in a debate about a contentious issue the class is studying (affirmative action, welfare reform, police brutality, immigration policy, etc.). About five minutes into the debate, at the instructor’s signal, everyone stands and moves one place around the circle so that the two “debate chairs” are now occupied by one new participant and one former participant—who now must argue the other side of the issue. The debate continues for another five minutes, and so on. Continue until everyone in the circle has had a chance to argue on both sides of the question. Some of the class can be observers; listening to others argue helps the weaker or more reticent students develop their own arguments.
LARA Method. This deceptively simple method of dialogue on emotionally charged issues was developed by Bonnie Tinker of Love Makes a Family using non-violence techniques she had been trained to use in the Civil Rights Movement. It involves four steps: Listen, Affirm, Respond, and Add. The idea is to listen deeply “until you hear the moral principle that [your opponent] is speaking from or a feeling or experience you share.” Then affirm by “express[ing] the connection you found when you listened,” letting the person know that you agree or empathize on a deep level. Third, respond fully and honestly to the issue the person raised, and finally, add new information that will correct mistaken ideas and give a more factual basis for discussion. The point is not to “win” the argument but to reach a deeper understanding and connect on a human level, despite differences.

I have students practice LARA in class by handing out written scenarios that are familiar to them: a person who thinks minorities are unfairly advantaged by affirmative action; a person who thinks immigrants are coming to this country to get welfare benefits and have babies; and another who argues that Native Americans lost the war and shouldn’t be hollering about land claims. I have also used recent political cartoons from local news sources that depict Arabs as evil predators or that stereotype white police officers as ignorant, lower class jerks. I ask one student to argue that these depictions are dangerously racist or classist and the other to argue that everyone is too sensitive these days.

The LARA Method can be difficult, especially the first two steps, which are the least familiar to students. Model the method by choosing an argument students are familiar with, say, the Indian land claims issue. Pull up a chair and sit next to a student volunteer. Ask the student to take the opposing side and argue about the unfairness of these claims, the advantages Indians get just for being Indian, etc. Listen closely for something, sometimes unstated, that you can sympathize with. Then Affirm: “I agree that fairness is important. Life isn’t easy for a lot of white people, either, these days. Lots of us are struggling to own our own homes or to have a bit of land to call our own.” Then Respond to the student’s point of view and Add information that s/he hasn’t mentioned: that treaties guaranteeing land to Indians were repeatedly broken; that tribes lost most of their land and some whites grew rich from what they appropriated as their own. That it isn’t fair for whites who didn’t personally benefit from broken treaties to have to pay for the mistakes of the past but neither is it fair for the Indians to have lived for generations without the land and resources guaranteed to them, growing poorer because of it. Continue the process of listening and affirming as the student continues her side of the argument. After this demonstration, ask students to get into small groups and practice. Two students can role play while two others observe and give feedback. Then switch positions and perspectives. (For more detailed information on the LARA Method, write to Love Makes a Family, PO Box 5163, Portland, OR, 97208.)

Counseling Frustrated, Angry, or Resistant Students

As students learn more about racism and privilege they can become emotionally overloaded with frustration, anger, or guilt. I encourage them to express these feelings in their journals and to come and talk to me privately in conference. Sometimes all they need is a sympathetic ear, a little encouragement, and some assurance that the process will ultimately be productive. Occasionally, though, students are so overwhelmed by their emotions that they are ready to give up on the whole enterprise. Here’s how I modify the LARA Method (Listen, Affirm, Respond, Add) to reassure such students in conference:

1. **Listen** to students’ frustrations and points of view. Let them spill. Just having someone listen can relieve tension and make students more open and willing to question their own views.

2. **Affirm** the student’s feelings and experiences:

   Commiserate, if necessary, with their position, even if you feel it’s inappropriate or immature:

   I can see you’re angry. This stuff is really difficult, really emotional for everybody.

   I’m sorry you felt so threatened when you were in high school. Nobody should have to feel unsafe in their own neighborhood.

   It must be frustrating to be a white male in discussions like this. Everyone is looking at you, thinking you’re the enemy. And you’re thinking, “They don’t know me! I’m not like that!”

   Find a way to agree with and support something in their thinking—some sentiment, some value, some fear. Sincerity is very important here:
Of course you didn’t intend to offend anyone. I can see you’re a sensitive person who cares about others.

Yes, it would be wonderful if we could all accept each other as individuals without regard to color. That’s the kind of society we’re working toward.

I can see you worked extremely hard to get into this university and that you want to uphold its high standards. I admire that.

3. **Respond** to the argument the student raises without engaging in direct confrontation. Let the student know where you stand without insisting that s/he hold your views:

Let me tell you how my experience working with students at this university has led me to support our affirmative action policies.

There’s been some interesting work done on why students from some ethnic groups are resistant to the kinds of teaching and subject matter taught in most high schools. Let me tell you about it and then you can decide for yourself what you think.

You know, I used to think that everyone had an equal chance to succeed until I spent some time working in an economically depressed community. Here’s what I saw.

4. **Add** information that clears up students’ confusions:

**Clarify** the purpose of the course or the discussions that trouble them. This simple strategy can have unexpected results. An Asian American professor told me the story of a resistant white student in one of his multicultural literature classes who went through an entire course very defensive and upset, thinking that everything about multiculturalism must be bashing him. His papers were confused because he was trying to argue a point of view he clearly didn’t believe in, and as a result, he didn’t do very well in the class. “And then,” the professor continued, “for some perverse reason, he signed up for another course with me, and I thought, boy, this is going to be a waste! He’s sitting in the back of the class, all sullen, and one day I happened to remark, ‘I hope you all understand that we’re not talking about racial superiority here, if we’re talking about African Americans or Asian Americans, or Native Americans, or Latinos. We’re talking about looking at things equally.’ And that must have made a difference to him because suddenly I could see, in the back of the room, a spotlight going on for him. And he came up after class and said, ‘You know, I think I misunderstood everything for a semester and a half! I thought you were talking about all these different cultures because you thought they were superior to whites!’ I said, ‘What? No way!’ And he said, ‘Wow, everything is different now!’”

**Reassure** students that their opinions and political perspectives won’t affect their grade as long as they can show that they thoroughly understand the points of view of those who disagree with them.

* * * * *

**Now What?**

All these exercises, assignments, and advice about how to engage students in real conversations about race may seem overwhelming, especially if experiential teaching is new to you. But if you add even one of these ideas to your classroom practice you’ll be off to a good start. Try out a technique or discussion topic with several of your classes, modifying it for the different audiences. Get some feedback from your students, either by observing their reactions or by asking them in conference what they thought about the discussion. Then choose another technique to try so that you gradually discover the teaching style and resources you’re most comfortable with. You might try keeping a teaching journal for a semester to record the activities or readings you used in each class, the issues students brought up, who was silent and why, what were the points of tension, and so on. Start a support group, even if it’s only you and one other instructor over coffee once a month, where you talk about the discussions you’ve attempted in your classes, the readings you’ve assigned, the reactions of your students, and the questions and feelings you’re left with. Then spread the idea throughout your department or school. Start conversations among the faculty about ways to include race-related topics in the curriculum or to teach such issues more knowledgeably. To initiate these conversations, you might use the “Critical Incidents for Faculty Discussion” that you’ll find in the Appendix. You also might want to refer to
the following summary of the advice I have given, sometimes implicitly, throughout this book.

**Summary of Advice**

- Think about the goal/s you want your students to achieve. Any of the following goals are worthy, in my view. But it’s important to articulate, at least to yourself, what you want to accomplish. Then let your goals guide your selection of texts, videos, and formats for discussion.

  - Do you want an exchange of all points of view where everyone’s opinion, however wrong-headed, is given equal respect and worth?
  - Do you want the experiences and views of people of color to be given more space and understanding?
  - Is your primary objective to make white students more conscious of their own racially biased assumptions and privileges?
  - Is it important that your students develop skills in argument or debate?
  - Do you want to concentrate on facts: suppressed histories, present-day oppressive practices, and specific examples of how racism is institutionalized?
  - Do you want to promote “raw, honest dialogue” where students argue passionately and often feel uncomfortable?
  - Or do you want to stress the creation of safe spaces for the exchange of feelings and experiences?

- Think about the amount of class time you can devote to issues of race and racism. If time is limited, try to find ways to integrate discussion and/or background reading into the other topics you must cover. Use the “Annotated Resources” for ideas.

- Think about the teaching style you are most comfortable with. If you want to let students argue openly and passionately with each other, be sure they are starting with facts—good, accessible texts and videos—and from experiences—both their own and those of outside speakers who might be called in to present viewpoints and backgrounds that are underrepresented in your class. If you want to have a certain amount of control over the discussion, use ground rules developed by students themselves, discussion formats that allow controlled expression of many points of view (coins, fishbowl, debate, small groups, etc.). If you want
to completely control the discussion or must do so because of the large size of the class, use lecture, film, texts, and other formal means of instruction that present various points of view, allowing students to grapple with the material through short papers and other writing activities.

- Start with students where they are. You can gauge something about your students’ racial identity development from their written responses to class discussion, the arguments and source material they use in their papers, their comments, questions, tone of voice, silences, and body language in class and in conference. Remember that identity development is not linear: anyone can revisit stages they previously passed through and even be in several stages at once—perhaps on different issues. Adjust your goals, readings, videos, visitors, discussion formats, and responses to your students’ comments (especially their writing) accordingly. Students in classes that deal exclusively with the subject of racism appreciate reading Beverly Tatum’s (1992) article on racial identity development and determining for themselves where they are at the beginning and the end of the semester. Tatum alerts readers to common reactions (feelings of guilt, shame, avoidance, or burn-out) that students sometimes prefer to know about in advance.

- Consider where you are in your own racial identity development. No matter how many friends of color white instructors have, or how much reading we’ve done or classes we’ve taught, we’ll never finish learning—and un-learning—about race. Develop patience and openness for feedback from students and colleagues of color about the ways you’re not quite as sensitive as you’d like to be.

- Learn more about ethnic groups you don’t know enough about and show your enthusiasm for diversity and multiculturalism. Actively promote cultural events on campus, go to them yourself, make friends with colleagues of different ethnicities, let them know what you’re trying to achieve, seek their guidance and perspectives.

- Since most of your students, especially your white students, will be in the first stages of their identity development, start slowly, with positive, safe, egalitarian sharing about identities and cultures. Give students good reasons to want to get to know people from different identity groups. They need to see each other as human beings with similar
interests, goals, abilities, and interests before exploring differences in cultural and class backgrounds and experiences around race. After some trust has been established, help students set their own guidelines for discussion and introduce them to present-day inequalities through videos, novels, history, and the personal experiences of willing class members and visitors. Choose readings that move students gradually into the emotions and conflicts; if you start with angry, accusatory pieces by people of color or sarcastic anti-racist pieces by whites, stage one white student will fume silently, or follow their example by taking on a tone of bitterness or ridicule, or worse—turn off entirely. Passionate readings are more valuable after students have learned some facts, definitions, and histories and are more attuned to present-day realities.

- Challenge all students—but especially white students—to deepen their understanding of racial inequalities after your class is over. Since whites are in the majority and since there is great pressure in society to ignore racism and blame people of color themselves, for any difficulties they might experience, whites need to be prodded gently but firmly, to acknowledge that the world they know is not the world as seen through the eyes of many people of color.

- Show understanding and encouragement for angry, exasperated, or frightened students in various stages of their identity development. Learning about racism in greater detail inevitably arouses emotions in both whites and people of color. Reassure students that emotion and conflict over these issues are normal. Talk with students of color about why white students don't recognize racism and about the power of whiteness in our society, using stories from your own experience. Help white students deal with feelings of guilt or anxiety by reassuring them that it is normal to have racist thoughts and assumptions when you grow up in a society so permeated by unacknowledged racism. Encourage them to move beyond guilt by taking action against racism when they see or hear it.

- Model sensitive cross-race/cross-cultural interactions both with your students or in role plays with colleagues of different ethnicities. Show how tone of voice, argumentative stance, generalizations, and assumptions can irritate and insult people of color, while respectful questioning and listening for understanding can further the dialogue. Stress the importance of educating one's self on the issues as well as asking respectful questions of people of color—who get these questions all the time.

- Remember that international students, even students from Canada, may be unaware of many of the racial issues in the U.S. and/or may experience race and racism differently in their home countries.

- In teaching about present and past injustices, include stories of whites who have fought against injustice and have successfully forged deep friendships across racial lines. Help students see how they too can get involved in reducing prejudice and working for social justice on campus and later, in their professional lives. Invite student activists who have started multicultural organizations on campus, crossed boundaries, and educated others. Talk about what it means to be an ally and have students generate their own plans for anti-racist action.

- When confronted with very difficult conflicts or negativity in the classroom, ask the advice of colleagues, bring in colleagues of color to present their perspectives, and allow plenty of opportunity for students to express frustrations privately, in journals, to you in your office, or to a colleague or counselor of color.

- If students or administrators try to undermine your promotion of frank talk about race in the classroom, take heart from the words of James Baldwin (1988) in "A Talk to Teachers":

[Y]ou must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending this won't happen... The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change. (pp. 3–4)
Notes


3. This exercise is described by T. Alexander Aleinikoff, who has used it in his law school classes, in Schoem et. al., (1995, pp. 81-82).

Annotated Resources and More Ideas for Assignments and Discussions

(*V* indicates video)

Human Origins

Wade, N. (2000, February 1). What we all spoke when the world was young. *New York Times*, Science Times, D1. “In the beginning, there was one people, perhaps no more than 2,000 strong, who had acquired an amazing gift, the faculty for complex language. . . . Their] epic explorations began some 50,000 years ago and by the time the whole world was occupied, the one people had become many. . . . Differing in creed, culture, and even appearance, because their hair and skin had adapted to the world’s many climates in which they now lived, they no longer recognized one another as the children of one family. Speaking 5,000 languages, they had long forgotten the ancient mother tongue that had both united and yet dispersed this little band of cousins to the four corners of the earth.” Dr. Joseph H. Greenberg’s appealing theory, which traces words and concepts from modern languages back to a possible common origin, has attracted the attention of geneticists and anthropologists but is eyed skeptically by linguists. Interesting controversy for science and non-science students alike, and a positive, “safe” way to begin to approach the subject of race.