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Teaching Note

Dear Solitary Black Student

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Dear Solitary Black Student,

Some days I worry that I'm harming you. As I speak about society's negative stereotypes of African Americans and how our culture is built on racism my mind is on you and how what I'm saying may be impacting you.

I'm very sorry that you are a visible minority in our class. In a way, your aloneness makes you the visible representation of all that is wrong in our society: a society where 34-38% of the "correctional population" is Black in spite of Blacks making up roughly 13% of the overall population (NAACP, The Sentencing Project). I'm sorry your sister is no longer in class with us; I wish she hadn't been taken by the criminal injustice system. But I know that as much as I wish, the impact is hitting you so much harder and it must be harder still coming to a class where these systems are talked about, a class where the majority have no idea about these things that are an everyday part of your life.

I'm writing this because I've come to a point where my fears about hurting you and my commitments to you and to all of my students seem to be colliding and I'm questioning myself about whether what I'm doing is right. I know it's not for you to reassure and teach me; in a way, that's actually part of the problem. I don't know how long ago it was, but I made myself a promise consisting of my commitments to my students of color. Namely,

*I would not tokenize, asking students of color to speak as if they are the representation of their race.

*I would not ask certain students questions that I don't ask others. For example, when students are from different parts of the world, I won't ask where they are from unless they bring it up and want to talk about it.

*I would say the hard things first, meaning I wouldn't leave it to marginalized students, or any students for that matter, to bring up difficult topics around racism, classism, etc. and systems like criminal (in)justice, education, economics.

While I recognize that there is always more work I can do, I think I do a pretty good job. But it's that last commitment that I'm having trouble with right now. I'm not questioning my commitment or the need for it. I think the Trump era we are living through is making me think about it more and more as this administration makes race and other marginalized statuses ever more salient and life ever more a struggle.

I'm stuck between not wanting to make you have to deal with these issues in my class because I know that they are literally your life and my need to bring awareness to the rest of the class ensuring that students know, undeniably, that these issues exist. That they understand that these issues are not as they appear in mainstream media, that they learn how to recognize privilege and oppression, that they learn to recognize and move beyond stereotypes and to question themselves, their beliefs, and their attitudes along with those of the institutions they are embedded in, and the larger culture itself. I cannot, in good faith, allow students to leave without at least attempting to foster these understandings.

But I believe that as I do this work I may be hurting you, which violates my general belief in doing no harm and working to mitigate harm that I may inadvertently cause. I don't know how to mitigate the harm in your case and in the cases of my other marginalized students. Sometimes, as I'm speaking, I feel your eyes on me. I always try to be careful and to question how I'm phrasing things. But now, with these thoughts in my head, I'm starting to stumble as I try to search for the right words to teach and impact some and mitigate harm for others. I'm afraid these stumbles reflect poorly on me and that students won't take my words as seriously, that I'm less affective. I need to do better but I hope you know that I'm doing the best I can every moment, that I never want the burden of educating others placed on you in class, and that I do what I can to not let it be. And that I'm regularly working to improve myself and how I teach.

Sincerely,

Your Instructor

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