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‘Reading the Cultural Landscape’ in the ‘Birthplace’ of Modern Race/Racism: Using hooks to Invite Students in as Critical Knowledge Producers & Co-conspirators

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…the critique of multiculturalism seeks to shut the classroom down again... It's as though many people know that the focus on difference has the potential to revolutionize the classroom, and they do not want the revolution...

-hooks, *Teaching to Transgress,* 1994, p. 144

INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

This activity was co-constructed while moral panic over critical race theory (CRT) and fury over pandemic-era shut-downs peaked in the U.S., spotlighting increasingly polarizing narratives about race/colonization, history, nation, and public/education. Against the backdrop of ongoing racial unrest and reckonings, amidst elite conservative punditry's lambasting of college classrooms as sites of indoctrination, I drew adaptive inspiration by returning to the wisdom of bell hooks' student-centered, democratic, loving, and critical pedagogy. Partly in response to my encounters with logics that targeted higher learning as a threat to the well-being of youth and their future/s, I initiated a novel, student-driven, and open-ended teaching/learning exercise in my interdisciplinary, undergraduate Race & Racisms seminar. Instead of permitting the "debate" of fearful, fabricated claims about CRT contaminating the minds of youth with 'un-American' thinking, rigid classifications of 'oppressors' and 'victims,' and 'trauma'-inducing or 'leftist' 'brainwashing' of youth (perhaps thereby, breathing life into a specter), I opted instead to ask students to record their experiences at a handful of nearby highly charged or 'haunted' historic sites, permitting student voices to lead our encounters with their *own* interpretations of politically-charged historical relationships and events.

In fall 2021, my students and I learned in the Hampton Roads metro ("the 757"), a place/space along the southernmost Virginia coast, thick with military presence, and offering unparalleled pedagogical opportunities via nearby historic sites—the Jamestown colony, Bacon's Castle (site of the first conflict between landowners, European and African tenant farmers, and Indigenous populations), Colonial Williamsburg (established after Jamestown burned), and the Great Dismal Swamp (where thousands of "maroons" refuged from empire)—central to the origins of modern race/racism. Our chosen sites feature prominently in stories of United States (U.S.) 'race-making,' so I encouraged student-analysts to confront/probe participants laboring to celebrate, preserve, and visit these sites for their perceived role in 'what really happened' by documenting, analyzing, and

critiquing the social, meaning-making processes that construct the U.S.' racial empire.

While "the 757" is a place offering unique teaching prospects for unfolding white supremacist settler colonialism, the exercise described below is adaptable to any number of historic landscapes/sites in the U.S. with ties to empire—particularly, places pointing to legacies of slavery, genocide, eugenics, or imperialism. "Reading the Cultural Landscape in Hampton Roads," was designed to realize two goals highlighted by hooks (2003) as central for democratic, liberatory education: 1) making explicit and visible the institutionalized, implicit normativity of white supremacy, and 2) privileging living in the 'now' of the present—perhaps even with attention to the immediate, embedded residue of past moments—beyond the obsessive future-orientation of late capitalism.

RATIONALE

bell hooks' (1994, 2003) descriptions of teaching and learning included liberatory, communal, reciprocal, horizontal, hopeful, joyful, exciting, critical, disruptive, boundary-crossing, risky, and deeply engaged experiences. She refused the colonizers' mind/body split embedded in normative educational practices by insisting embodied teaching and learning are performative and affect-laden phenomena; rejecting "social amnesia" (hooks, 1994, p. 31) that permits forgetting "antagonisms" (hooks, 1994, p. 31) imbuing processes of knowledge construction; committing to transgressive, decolonial, anti-bourgeois classroom praxis that models raucous laughter, tears, loud and rowdy speech, the challenging of instructors' authority, and love (hooks, 1994, 2000); applying feminist, antiracist, and solidarity-centering theory as a healing balm; radically privileging democratic cooperation over individualistic competition (hooks, 1994); and sharing personal experience in the classroom as a "coming to voice," (hooks, 1994, p. 148) whereby students learn to claim entitlement to authoritative knowledge production.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The project was initially conceptualized to demonstrate the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of racial meaning-making, categories, and hierarchy. As the project evolved, students encountered the ideologically fraught manner through which collective, contested historical

narratives are fashioned, self-reflecting on the ways they'd either participated in or contested these processes. We further engaged questions about how the past becomes embedded in the present; how institutionalized white supremacy was conceived *and* is perpetuated; as well as the continuous tethering of the racial order to capitalist exploitation. Mastery of the above learning objectives was demonstrated via the content of students' classroom discussions, treatment of these themes in their written final analyses, and mobilization of the critical lenses acquired in final examinations.

EXPLANATION

Students began the term by learning about the "social construction" of race through the lenses of the outcome of the Jamestowne Settlement, the uprising of Bacon's Rebellion, and the subsequent VA Slave Codes—which, together, congeal in the contemporary concept of race as heritable, genetically-encoded, and biologically 'essential,' laying the foundation for the character of U.S. slavery and the globally unprecedented statuses ascribed to racial categories treated as discrete. Among other materials, we viewed the animated miniseries, *The History of White People in America*—which highlights that "whiteness" did not conceptually exist prior to Bacon's Rebellion—rendering otherwise sanitized/disembodied accounts of the U.S. legal code into feeling, thinking, lived human experiences. In keeping with hooks' (1994, 2003) vision for participatory classroom exchanges that privilege the students' experiences as sources of generative knowledge, I first asked students to tell me what they'd *already* learned (from teachers, family, media, peers) about the sites' cultural landscapes. As instructors' personal narratives also occupy a place in hooks' process, I offered tales of my own personal encounters at/with these sites, relaying what had moved, surprised, or haunted me as a ghostly matter (Gordon, 1997). I then proposed they visit these places—in groups—and observe the present/visible while noting the absent/invisible, analyze what's celebrated alongside what's whispered, and examine how/why those invested in the preservation of these places sought to conserve their 'legacy.'

I then proposed group site visits—ensuring safe accessibility/transportation for all—and I requested students commit to learning systematic field research methods: taking descriptive and analytic fieldnotes, conducting informal interviews, sketching spatial maps, workshopping collective findings to make generalizations/draw conclusions, digesting other assigned analyses with similar

place-based landscape 'excavations,' and collective authorship of evaluative standards for their final written analyses. I was surprised when *every enrolled student* responded with enthusiastic consent. Only later, I realized students envisioned ways to be together and *present* with one another at these outdoor sites (amid rising COVID transmission) in ways they could *not* in the classroom, as they deeply craved such educational experiences—demonstrating the value of hooks convictions that affect and interpersonal connection are vital for the learning process.

After some online research and a subsequent collaborative workshopping session, we together crafted the following questions to guide data collection:

1. What is the value or significance of this place, as it is communicated to visitors? What narratives are told about what happened there, from whose perspective/s, who is involved/named, and why was/is important to *remember*?
2. What does the site tell you about the origins and development of the U.S., national identities/cultures, regional identities/cultures, and from whose perspective? How does the site encourage visitors to understand themselves, their communities, and the nation/s?
3. Upon noting what is visible/present, what is perhaps invisible, or NOT present? What are the significant silences or omissions at your site?
4. Can you get a sense of how the "story" of the site's import/context has evolved over time, either through visual cues, asking people at the site, or via independent research?
5. How are the people you witness at your site (visitors, docents, staff, workers, etc.) engaged with each other, with the structures, and with the land/scape? How do participants explain why they came, what they're doing, what they like/dislike about the site, and what they're experiencing?
6. How do YOU engage with the site, and what feelings or thoughts does it evoke, as you approach and are present?

Each group of students—which included self-selected combinations of those working alone, some in pairs, and some in triads on their final write-ups—was to visit no less than two sites, though many elected to visit all four. After students returned from site visits, they individually uploaded all fieldnotes for

instructor commentary. After receiving instructor feedback, students were offered an opportunity to resubmit fieldnotes with requested revisions. During a subsequent class, each of the groups presented an overview of themes identified, which next helped us to discuss and analyze as a full group to identify the following *five common themes across their findings* (we'd decided that students should address at least three of the five collectively-identified themes in their final projects—quoted as follows from a summary document detailing the recurrent, emergent themes in their first-pass analyses of data from the workshop phase):

1. **Whiteness** (normativity/'unmarked' status, discourses, privilege, institutionalization, in racial analysis/ethnography, etc.),
2. **Capitalism/"industry"/commodification** (both as processes and value-systems/worldviews represented in your sites; sites as commodities (tickets, cost, the "experience") themselves,
3. "**Civilization"/colonization/imperialism** (Indigeneity in the U.S., the Transatlantic slave trade, Africa in the popular imagination),
4. Uses of **history**/the **past is present**/parable of the Sankofa bird/reading **culture from the landscape**, and/or
5. Your *personal* **heritage/inheritance** (identity and social location).

Once students had drafted their final project, they were given one class session to pair with another to provide "peer reviewer" feedback, crafted using a distributed rubric. Students then used the above peer feedback, the guiding themes, and instructor-provided, general standards for clear writing to produce final analyses.

Assessment & Debrief

When remitting their final project, students submitted the project itself, their written feedback prepared for colleague/s, and a final memo that asked them to reflect on their process via the following prompts:

1. What did you learn about yourself as a writer, as a student, and as a budding/nascent race scholar, from the process of peer review and in completing the final project, or in general?

2. How did you seek to improve your observations and your written work at each stage of the process? What strategies did you deploy to improve your own work?
3. How did you seek to improve the work of others, and what strategies did you deploy via the process of peer review? How did you approach the task of offering a peer constructive feedback on their work, so that they might improve their skills, their critical vision, their capacities as a racial analyst, and their confidence as a scholar?
4. What did you change—in your own work—from your initial draft to your final draft, and why? How did you know what needed changing, and how did you approach revisions?
5. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of your completed final project? Why?
6. What are the most important lessons you learned through our process? Why?"

Excerpts from student commentary about the project:

I was not completely aware of what "white culture" was and how that manifested in society until this class. This was really important for me to learn and realize that whiteness is evident in so many regards- in ways I was not even aware of because of my white blindness. I am now better able to see… the urgency of needing to decenter this whiteness.

…most importantly I've learned that we are never done learning. Race is so multifaceted and layered and nuanced; I imagine one could be in the discipline for a lifetime and still learn something new every day. It's complex and most of all never easy.

Overall the biggest lesson I learned from this was to question everything in life and stop letting the world feed us lies!

…had I gone to Williamsburg and the Great Dismal Swamp, and believed everything that was told to me at face value, I would be at a serious loss. Williamsburg does a really, scary, good job at feeding their audience exactly what they want to hear, and if I did not know otherwise about the

> *true history of these landmarks, I would easily believe them. The whitewashing of these historic landmarks does more harm than people realize.*
>
> *The way we center whiteness and the white experience has become so normalized that it was easy to assume that's just the way history has to be taught but that's not the case at all. It is pervasive the way race is taught and upheld despite how much people like to act like it doesn't matter, and I don't think that's something I'll ever be able to get over or stop bringing up to people in my life.*
>
> *Going to those sites with the lenses I have picked up and the analysis I could do was astounding and it really made me realize how much I was missing even as being someone who is pretty "aware and liberal."*
>
> *I think that the most important thing that I learned in this course and project was how to develop empathy for others, but also a sense of justice for what needs to happen in the society we live in. There is so much broken in this world, evident in colorblind racism, the telling of our history, and more. I am leaving this class with a charge to speak.*

Students' final scores for the project were assessed as a combination of: 1) their degree of self-reflexivity as evidenced in their final memo, 2) the extent to which they contributed to the *collective* process of building *and* completing the assignment, and 3) via grading standards that were collectively edited in class on the basis of an instructor-provided template, including/not limited to: clarity in writing, theory application, practical applications, and analytic creativity/originality.

Aside from general conventions for clear writing, students were asked to consider the following when evaluating their own/their peers' final product: "Does the thesis/introduction clearly and adequately connect content to some combination of the prompts identified in the proposal instructions, or are there relevant omissions? (Generalizing or compare/contrasting about the "cultural landscape" across the two historic sites? Noting the most significant patterns in the observations/data, and explaining their significance? Relaying the main "lessons"

learned regarding race/racial history/racial legacies in the U.S.? Conveying what these sites/cultural landscapes communicate to participants, and the contemporary significance of those messages?)"

Overall, and most importantly, aside from lessons collectively realized by the whole learning community, I learned the power of hooks' insistence that students may be powerful knowledge producers and co-conspirators, especially when we trust them by making permeable the 'traditional,' yet colonial, imperialist, classist, and white supremacist dividing hierarchy between teacher and learner. Such strategies may only grow in their salience and power, particularly amidst moments of heightened political contention and cultural upheaval.

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