

Beyond the Pale: Pedagogical Strategies for Analyzing Race and Whiteness

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Abstract:

The roots of American sociology of race and ethnicity run deep, but a focus on whiteness has matured in recent decades. This body of research is diverse: Whiteness is understood as simultaneously omnipresent, ubiquitous, rigid and flexible. Moreover, students enrolled in courses on race and ethnicity have difficulty grasping the conflicting and ambiguous character of whiteness that is exacerbated by their own misconceptions and ideological baggage they carry into the classroom. To empirically identify common student misconceptions, and to illuminate effective pedagogical interventions, I analyze two different sociology of race and ethnicity courses, offered twelve times over an eight-year span, at two different University institutions. Based on in- and out-of-classroom exercises and assignments completed by students in these classes (N = 406), I outline four patterned interpretative dilemmas and concomitant pedagogical interventions to aid students' understanding of whiteness. Results indicate that these four intervention exercises found overall success amidst a variety of classroom sizes, disparately ranked public universities, different US regions, and amongst classroom contexts high in racial diversity to majority-white student course enrollment.

Keywords: race and ethnicity, racism, whiteness, identity

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Beyond the Pale: Pedagogical Strategies for Analyzing Race and Whiteness

The social scientific study of race and ethnicity runs deep, but a focus on whiteness has been rapidly maturing in recent decades (e.g., Bell, 2021; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Duster 2020; Garner, 2019; Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll, 2009; Hughey, 2021; Hughey and Rosino, 2022; McDermott and Ferguson, 2022; Torkelson and Hartmann, 2021; Twine and Gallagher, 2008; Withers 2017). Several trends emerged within this diverse research corpus. Some question the growing claims of white victimization that fail to square with whites' continued privileges (e.g., Bloch, et al., 2020; Hughey, 2014; Isom, et al., 2022; Nelson, et al., 2018; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Others indicate how whites are both assumed highly intelligent and perform well on varied intelligence measures, but that both these "subjective" and "objective" interpretations benefit white interests (e.g., Chan, 2022; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Hunt and Merolla 2022; Womack, et al., 2021). Other strands of research demonstrate a growing interest in both white racist and antiracist endeavors (Blee, 2002; Hazel, 2018; Hughey, 2021, 2012; Jupp, et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2007; Srivastava, 2024, 2006) that many translate as a morality tale of "good" vs. "bad" whites (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2021; Bonnett, 2000). And still others wrestle with how whiteness can be both "invisible" and normative yet also marked and highly-recognizable (cf. Alicea, 2024; Becker and Paul, 2015; Cebulak and Zipp, 2019; Fritschner, 2001; Sweet and Baker, 2011; Vidal-Ortiz, 2021).

Across this varied and complex scholarly landscape, many students enrolled in courses on race and ethnicity have difficulty grasping the social construction of race in general (e.g., Dixon and Anderson 2018; Khanna and Harris, 2009; Kishimoto 2018; Lynn 2022) and whiteness in specific (e.g., Evans-Winters and Hines, 2020; Hawkman, 2020; Matias and Mackey, 2016; Matias, et al., 2014; Wooddell and Henry, 2005; Zembylas, 2020). Prior research

indicates that some white students exhibit extreme defensiveness upon confronting the privileges of whiteness (Alicea and Kessel, 1997; Chaisson, 2004; Hawkman, 2023; Pence and Fields, 1999; Wilson and Falla, 2023; Zembylas, 2022), while other studies indicate students of color may feel marginalized and become silenced (e.g., Alemán and Gaytán 2017; Chaisson, 2004; Chu, 2024; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, et al., 2024; Sears, 2024).

To empirically identify student misconceptions and dilemmas with sociologically coherent and empirically-based understanding of race in general, and whiteness in specific—and to illuminate effective pedagogical interventions—I analyzed two different sociology of race and ethnicity courses, offered twelve times over an eight-year span (overlapping with the Obama campaign and presidency and just before the birth of “Black Lives Matter”), at two different Universities. Based on in- and out-of-classroom exercises and assignments completed by students in these classes (N = 406), I outline four patterned misinterpretations and analytic dilemmas that commonly arose in students’ engagement with race and whiteness. Resultantly, I proposed and tested four concomitant epistemological interventions to aid students’ ability to develop a sociological understanding that links the personal troubles of whiteness to the public issues of both historical and modern incarnations of white supremacy and racial inequality.

The Faces of Whiteness

Recent years bear witness to an increased focus on whiteness within the wheelhouse of sociology and the social sciences more broadly (e.g., Bell, 2021; Duster 2020; Garner, 2019; Hughey and Rosino, 2022; McDermott and Ferguson, 2022; Torkelson and Hartmann, 2021; Withers 2017). That scholarly amplification does not resound absent serious complications in the teaching of race and ethnicity that have plagued the social sciences for decades. First, teaching the sociology of race is difficult given the “hot button”, politicization of the topic, “color-blind” interpretations of racial inequalities, and defense of “post-racialism” (wherein

social scientific analyses of race are viewed as outmoded, inapplicable, and/or inappropriate) (e.g., Call-Cummings and Martinez, 2017; Garrett-Walker, et al., 2018; Mueller, 2020, 2013; Wahl, Perez, Deegan, Sanchez, and Applegate, 2000).¹

Second, research indicates that many students have difficulty understanding how whiteness (and race more generally) could be both “socially constructed” yet “real” in its significance and consequences (e.g., Hochman, 2021; Marques, 2017; Schaffer, 2017). For instance, Alicea and Kessel (1997), Obach (1999) found it difficult to convince students that racial categories are arbitrary distinctions yet remain consequential in terms of life outcomes and quality of life. Regarding “racialization” (the *process* by which race is socially-constructed), Hochman (2019:1245) finds that “questions about its meaning and value have been raised, and a backlash against its use has occurred. Rosa and Flores (2017, 634) contend that a “significant misunderstanding is the notion that race is an epiphenomenal social construction or a hyper-politicized, US-centric category that should be avoided in favor of categories some scholars view as more empirically verifiable and analytically significant such as ethnicity, class, and gender.” Relatedly, students tend to over-determine causal arguments and assessments about race (e.g., Altman and Coe, 2022; Beaman, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2021) as well as conflate concepts with outcomes (e.g., Adkins-Jackson, et al., 2022; Johnston-Guerrero, 2017; Monk, 2016), wherein “students have confused having a critical discussion regarding race with being racist. This particular misunderstanding of the concept has often perplexed us” (Halley, et al., 2022, 14).

Third, not to be overlooked, conventional or established pedagogical exercises designed to deconstruct processes of racial formation can jar students (Eriksen 2022; Khanna and Harris, 2009; Reisman, et al., 2020), easily derail without a racially and ethnically diverse classroom (Haynes, 2023; Townsley, 2007), or remain susceptible to “bad faith” criticisms as antiscientific, politically-biased, or emotionally-disturbing (e.g. Grayson, 2020; Ray, 2023; Reed, 2021).²

The aforementioned issues invade sociological instruction on race, especially when addressing whiteness. In addition, courses that center on the study of whiteness have engendered both public and academic backlash (e.g., Anreassen, et al., 2023; Cazenave and Maddern, 2000; Liu, et al., 2021). Also, Lucal (1996, 245) argues that scholars' concentration on race often translates as a "... tendency to focus only on racial 'minorities' and the oppressive aspects of race. This approach overlooks how whites are affected by race and indeed receive privileges through race." Following suit, Fritschner (2001, 110) finds introductory sociology courses commonly approach race via an "absence/presence" model in which "... race is treated as something possessed by people of color. In this view, white is not a race and whites are not affected by race." And even in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in which "White academics renewed their wokeness", as Bates and Ng (2021, 2) forcefully point out, that while "the academy is considered to be an arena where progressive views are fostered . . . we tend to overlook the performance, networks and power structures of White academics and their White hegemony on a profession that is often held up as steward for racial justice and social change."

To address these gaps, many scholars now embrace a critical stance that emphasizes power, ideology, and material inequities and focus not only the racially under-privileged but on the over-privileged of the racial order (e.g., Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hunter and Van der Westhuizen, 2021; Lewis, 2004; Matias and Boucher, 2023; McDermott and Ferguson, 2022; Roediger, 2020; Twine and Gallagher, 2007). Many of these approaches are often lumped under the umbrella term, "Critical Whiteness Studies" (CWS). Yet, such a "field" is broad and incongruous. Scholars in this tradition employ materialist, deconstructionist, cultural, and/or psychoanalytic approaches in which whiteness is a concept to be abolished, destabilized as the "norm," and/or critically analyzed on the level of consciousness and meaning (cf. Nayak, 2007).

Yet, adherents of CWS generally share two tenets: First, white supremacy and racial inequality are reproduced through banal social structures and practices and second, scholarship that investigates these areas holds potential for disrupting the social order through student consciousness-raising and alternatives for policy (Beech, 2020; Hughey, 2023; Matias and Boucher, 2023). Both traditions attempt to render visible the creation and maintenance of whiteness as a category marshalled to support systemic inequality. For example, both Lucal (1996) and Fritschner (2001) designed a pedagogical approach that calls attention "... toward race relationships with an emphasis on the advantages and privileges that membership in the dominant cultural group bestows. It makes whiteness visible by calling attention to the privileges that whiteness confers" (Fritschner, 2001, 110). Wooddell and Henry (2005) and Sweet and Baker (2011) maintain that instructors should highlight whiteness via social "advantage" to shift from the traditional focus on the relative paucity of nonwhite status and resources to the "... societal resources, actual or potential, material and symbolic, that are disproportionately enjoyed by a group or a category of individuals in conjunction with discriminatory practices" (Wooddell and Henry, 2005, 301). Becker and Paul (2015, 185) indicate that in "the context of what many see as a "postracial" America, where overt bigotry, segregation, and discrimination are not publically acceptable, this often means examining the subtle or covert logics that exist around race." In relation to "the new racial ideology of 'color-blindness'" as Cebulak and Zipp (2019:102) argue, "white college students have difficulty recognizing the racial privileges that are obscured by this color-blindness." And more recently, Vidal-Ortiz (2021) identified "whiteness as a root for the challenges in current pedagogical approaches at my institution" (2021, 223), before contending that whiteness "is a current that resists any articulation of different trajectories of knowledge production, one that refuses to interrogate its own tenets" (2021, 225). Hence, engaging how these "visibility" and "privilege"

currents function is now considered *de rigueur* for the critical teaching on race and whiteness (cf. Berker and Paul, 2015; Cebulak and Zipp, 2019; Frankenberg, 2001; Leonardo, 2002; Nicoli, 2004; Vidal-Ortiz, 2021).

While the critical focus on making whiteness visible as a privileged identity is vital, this approach may afford too little theoretical resolution of the paradoxes of whiteness. Trainor (2002, 631) contends, "... there are contradictory representations of whiteness in the literature on critical pedagogy and ... a deeper engagement with these contradictions can help critical educators." Whiteness is simultaneously omnipresent, ubiquitous, invisible, and hyper-visible (Frankenberg, 2001). Whites increasingly and simultaneously claim victimization and superiority (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997). Attitudinal measures show whites cluster together as a coherent group yet are fractured and intersected by gender, class, and political differences (Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll, 2009). And whiteness holds rigid boundaries of inclusion yet can also possess an attainable, flexible, and "morphing" property (2020). Toward this end, Allen (2004, 122) calls for a more substantive pedagogical engagement with whiteness:

In the 1990s, some critical pedagogists did in fact take on the problem of whiteness ... Unfortunately, this race-focused period of scholarship ended as quickly as it came and seemed like a tack on to preexisting critical pedagogy. Moreover, these critical pedagogists neither questioned why whiteness had been previously omitted from the discourse nor did they significantly retheorize the base assumptions of critical pedagogy in light of this historical blindness.

Additionally, Charbeneau (2009) stated, "... there has been significantly less focus on Whiteness and the actions of white faculty in higher education. . . and a particular scarceness of literature looking at how Whiteness intersects with faculty members' pedagogical practices." Others have more recently echoed this position (e.g., Jennings 2020; Kenyon, 2018; Matias, 2014) while Evans-Winters and Hines (2020, 4) plainly state that most continue to perceive whiteness as "invisible, rooted in innocence, normative, and altruistic . . . the norm of society."

The lack of research on higher education-based pedagogical strategies on teaching about whiteness is exacerbated when considering how the prism of viewpoints on whiteness can, in the classroom, transform into an epistemological labyrinth in which many a student may become trapped. Rather than ask students to rest content with an understanding of whiteness as, “... *simultaneously* Janus-faced and multifac(et)ed—and [that] also produce a singularly dominant social hierarchy” (Duster 2020), or to expect the vast amount of contradictory literature to perform such heavy lifting on a concept so rife with paradox, we are in need of data on the common pedagogical dilemmas and potential solutions to those difficulties.

Patterns of Student (Mis)Interpretations

Students bring ideological baggage and folk understandings of whiteness with them into the classroom. In general, four inter-related dilemmas mark contemporary students’ engagement with whiteness. First, as Warren and Fassett (2004, 413) outline, despite the critical pedagogical tradition that attempts to render whiteness “visible,” many students still struggle with understanding whiteness as a racial category in its own right. More recent research affirms their finding (e.g., Bloch, et al., 2020; Hughey, 2014; Isom, et al., 2022; Nelson, et al., 2018; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Many still see whiteness as the implicit norm against which people of color are often compared (Dozono, 2020; Halley, et al., 2022; Landsman, 2023). A telling example is afforded by Lewis’ (2004, 624) encounter with a white student named “Sally” whereby Sally “... had just stated that she was glad she had taken my Race and Ethnic Relations course because she had learned a great deal about ‘minority groups.’ When I asked her what she had learned about her own group she replied, ‘What group?’” McRae and Warren (2012, 56) repeated this finding: “Our experiences teaching about whiteness ... have resulted in a wide spectrum of responses from students. We are troubled in particular by the overly resistant and compliant student responses to this subject ...” In specific, McRae and Warren extend the

examples of white students' inability or unwillingness to acknowledge their own race or to see race as effecting their life chances: "A woman sitting in the center of the classroom, looking annoyed by my constant questioning, responds without hesitation something to the effect of: 'It [race] doesn't make any difference. We're all Americans' " (2012, 62).

Second, students often expressed frustration with understanding whiteness as an invisible category of normativity while it can also manifest as explicitly marked white racial projects such as white nationalists and white conservative political groups (e.g., Blee, 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2021; Hazel, 2018; Hughey, 2021, 2012; Jupp, et al., 2023; O'Brien, 2007; Srivastava, 2024, 2006). For many students, it is flatly illogical for whiteness to exist as an implicit and invisible norm while it is also most easily seen as an anti-normative and explicitly marked form of identity politics. As Fujikawa (2008, 3) argues, "... whiteness is simultaneously visible and invisible in a broad range of circumstances including academia." And a vast array of studies recounts the difficulty in teaching students to see that whiteness exists both as a supposedly apolitical and objective backdrop and as the loud and abrasive manifestation in front of that very backdrop (cf. Allen, 2004; Kincheloe, 1999; Leonardo, 2002; Sue, 2004).

Third, sundry students have difficulty understanding how whites simultaneously claim a victimized yet superior status (e.g., Bloch, et al., 2020; Hughey, 2014; Nelson, et al., 2018; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). On the one hand, many white students now believe that whites act in a plurality of ways *except* from a privileged or superior standpoint (e.g., Bridges, 2019; Knowles, et al., 2014; Yadon and Ostfeld, 2020). Many state that race matters in terms of white victimization due to an overly politically correct culture that bows to the dictates of both multiculturalism and a black president (Carstarphen, 2017; Lawrence, 2015; Twine and Gallagher, 2007; Parks and Hughey, 2011; Paul, 2021; Yudice, 2018). Gallagher (2003, 300) asserts:

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

Moreover, Leonardo (2002, 35-36) finds that white students often “feel minimized under the sign of multiculturalism, victimized by affirmative action, and perceive that they suffer from group discrimination ... whites react with both intellectual and nationalist nativism ...” Many students refute the notion that whiteness is privileged or that whites possess any type of superiority complex because they increasingly see whiteness as an aggrieved or stigmatized status (e.g., Isom, et al., 2022; Wetts and Willer, 2018).

Fourth, an array of studies document students’ difficulty with understanding how racism can result from whites who explicitly claim a non-racist or even anti-racist identity (Blee, 2002; Hazel, 2018; Hughey, 2021, 2012; Jupp, et al., 2023; O’Brien, 2007; Srivastava, 2024, 2006). For example, Warren and Hytten (2004) found that some white students often sidestep or elide acknowledgement of their own involvement in an unequal social order because they fail to see how racism might result from progressive or even anti-racist identities to which they lay claim. Indeed, Trainor’s discussion of critical pedagogy and whiteness (2002, 632) found that both teachers and students often hold:

... static, stereotypic pictures of white, middle class students and their values and beliefs. In doing so, they violate Henry Giroux’s injunction that critical teachers avoid “good/bad” “innocent/racist” dichotomies ... [which can reproduce] a facile multiculturalism predicated on an essentialized binary of oppressed/oppressor. Such “illiterate” practices are easily appropriated into more subtle forms of racist denial in white students.

And McRae and Warren (2012, 63) found that when students engage in dichotomous renderings of whiteness, “... the consequences of a discussion about identity in terms of these fixed identity categories, include a separation or distancing of individual identities from the systemic questions of power and privilege.” “White racism” is too often seen as the product of “bad apples” within

whiteness, rather than a structural and relational problem (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Bonnett, 2000).

Given these documented pedagogical dilemmas, I first advance an empirical examination of these same problems that commonly arose in the teaching of whiteness in different collegiate contexts. Second, I test the success of specific pedagogical interventions. Third, I demonstrate how those interventions work fruitfully and what factors delimit success. Last, I end with a brief review of the implications.

Research Design: Data and Methodology

Setting

Data was collected from two different institutions of higher learning. The first institution was located in a mid-Atlantic area of the US, at Declaration University (DU),³ from the summer of 2005 through the spring of 2009. During the time of study, DU was a top-ranked public institution with an undergraduate population of 14,000 (73% white, 12% Asian, 7% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 3% “multi-racial” or “other”). The racial composition of DU suggests, given the lack of structural opportunities for cross-racial interaction, that most white students had minimal contact with students of color. At DU, I taught two different classes pertaining to race and ethnicity five times. One class was a second-year (sophomore or 200-level) classes on general “race and ethnic relations” (RER). Needing no prerequisites, this was a required course for sociology majors whom were encouraged to take the course during the second or third year. The other class was a fourth-year (senior or 400-level) seminar on “sociology and whiteness” (SW). The course had no prerequisites and was not a required course for sociology majors. Most students were sociology majors or minors. RER was taught during summer 2005 (Class 1: students # 1-22; 15 female, 7 male; 17 white, 5 nonwhite), summer 2007 (Class 2: students # 23-50; 18 female, 10 male; 23 white, 5 nonwhite), and summer 2009 (Class

3: students # 51-79; 24 female, 5 male; 22 white, 7 nonwhite) for a total of 79 students. SW was offered during the spring 2009 (Class 4: students # 80-97; 17 female, 1 male; 18 white, 0 nonwhite) and fall 2009 (Class 5: students # 98-118, 15 female, 6 male; 18 white, 3 nonwhite) for a total of 39 students. 118 students enrolled in these five courses.

The second institution was located in the Deep South of the US, at State A&M (SAM), from the spring of 2010 through spring of 2013. During the time of study, SAM was a lower-ranked public institution with an undergraduate population of 20,000 (70% white, 2% Asian, 21% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% American Indian, 1% “multi-racial,” and 2% non-resident alien). White students at SAM were more likely (than at DU) to encounter African American students given the large amount and active presence of co-curricular black student groups. While at SAM, I taught a second-year (sophomore or 200-level) class on general “race and ethnic relations” (RER). The course had no prerequisites, but was a required course for sociology majors whom were encouraged to take the course during the second or third year. However, sociology majors did not dominate the course because it satisfied a “diversity” course requirement for all undergraduate majors in the College of Arts and Sciences. RER was offered in spring 2010 (Class 6: students # 119-160; 29 female, 13 male; 35 white, 7 nonwhite), summer 2010 (Class 7: students # 161-200; 25 female, 15 male; 20 white, 20 nonwhite), twice in fall 2011 (Class 8: students # 201-245; 36 female, 9 male; 26 white, 19 nonwhite and Class 9: students # 246-300; 40 female, 15 male; 24 white, 31 nonwhite), fall 2012 (Class 10: students # 301-340; 31 female, 9 male; 10 white, 30 nonwhite), spring 2012 (Class 11: students # 341-380; 30 female, 10 male; 14 white, 26 nonwhite) and spring 2013 (Class 12: students # 381-406; 16 female, 10 male; 9 white, 17 nonwhite). 288 students enrolled in, and completed, these seven class offerings. In sum, 406 students took these 12 classes across DU and SAM [236 (58%) identified as white and 170 (42%) identified as students of color/nonwhite]

Learning Goals and Objectives

Prior to my arrival at DU and SAM, most of the RER courses were based on “classic” approaches to the subject matter: readings centered on immigration, assimilation, stratification, and various social problems associated with urban communities of color (I proposed and added the SW course to the DU curriculum).⁴ Breaking from these institutional traditions, and in line with sociological pedagogy on ethnicity and race (cf. Chaisson, 2004; Fritschner, 2001; Johnson and Mason, 2017; Khanna and Harris, 2009; Martinez-Cola 2018; Mueller, 2013; Seguin, et al., 2017), my learning goals and objectives were four-fold. First, I provided an understanding of race and ethnicity as socially constructed phenomena that emerged within specific historical eras and conditions (i.e., racial correlation with traits, characteristics, or outcomes were shown to be neither innate nor natural). Second, I taught that race is an always changing and morphing categorical system in which claims to a particular identity are more or less tenuous in consideration of the social context. Third, I emphasized that claims of racial victimization, superiority, and inferiority are often used to rationalize and legitimate access to unequal resources. Fourth, I wished for students to understand that racism, prejudice, and discrimination are rather logical outcomes of racialized societies.

After teaching my first RER course at DU, I found most students could relate to the aforementioned four goals when discussing people of color, yet many students had difficulty applying these same principles to whiteness. First, akin to (Anderson, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Christian, et al., 2019; Lewis, 2004; McRae and Warren, 2012; Seamster and Ray, 2018; Warren and Fassett, 2004), many students were quite unaccustomed to studying whiteness as a free-standing racial category, instead of the standard against which people of color were implicitly compared. White students often became quiet or defensive when they read an explicitly defined author of color and/or an author who took a critical stance on whiteness or white racism. Next,

in-line with (Allen, 2004; Chan, 2022; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Fujikawa, 2008; Hunt and Merolla 2022; Leonardo, 2002; Sue, 2004; Womack, et al., 2021), students often expressed frustration with understanding whiteness as an invisible category of normativity alongside views of explicitly marked white racial projects such as white nationalists and white conservative political groups. Third, echoing the experiences of scholars' prior engagement ((e.g., Bloch, et al., 2020; Gallagher, 2003; Hughey, 2014; Isom, et al., 2022; Leonardo, 2002; Nelson, et al., 2018; Parks and Hughey, 2011; Twine and Gallagher, 2008), some students had difficulty with whites' simultaneous claims to superiority and victimization. Fourth, and in consort with extant research (Blee, 2002; Hazel, 2018; Hughey, 2021, 2012; Jupp, et al., 2023; McRae and Warren, 2002; O'Brien, 2007; Warren and Hytten, 2004; Srivastava, 2024, 2006), many students interpreted white racial identities through a pop-psychology or moral framework in which "racism" resulted from only the "bad" whites who held ignorant or supremacist views, whereas there were whites who refrained from such beliefs and were thus "good." For shorthand purposes I label these dichotomous misunderstandings: (1) "Seeing vs. Seen", (2) "Invisible vs. Marked", (3) "Superiority vs. Victimhood", and (4) "Good vs. Evil."

Pedagogical Intervention Strategies

To address these students' interpretations, I designed pedagogical intervention strategies and implemented them in the three aforementioned courses at DU and SAM.⁵ Data are culled from four in- and out-of-class assignments and journal exercises over the course of the entire semester in which they were enrolled. Journals served as the unit of analysis and were drawn from the students that completed at least one of the journal exercises. The resulting data was 1227 journal entries.

At least three of the four aforementioned interpretive dilemmas emerged over the length of each course. The first dilemma (#1 "Seeing vs. Seen") was addressed by instructing students

to watch the film *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible* (Producer/Director: Shakti Butler, 50 min, 2006) in three sections. First, I show 15 minutes of the film and ask the following questions: “What were the parts of the video that brought up feelings for you, such as shame, guilt, envy, anger, sadness, recognition, joy, satisfaction, hope or other feelings?; What is your response to the Audre Lorde quote about the ‘painful and necessary experience of excavating the truth about racism’?” I then allow 15 minutes for journaling. Second, I show the next 15 minutes of the film and ask students to journal on the following: “What is your own story of becoming familiar with other races and acknowledging your own racial identity?; When did you first come to these realizations?; Who or what in this segment was easiest for you to identify with? We heard the words of a Black professor who had said, ‘I wake up every single morning of my life and think ‘I am a Black person.’ There is another saying: ‘Being White is not having to think about being White.’ Do these relate to your lived experience? If so, how?” Third, I show the remaining 20 minutes and ask students to address the following: “One woman said about racism, ‘We created it; we can end it.’ What is your response?; Did anyone say anything that particularly expresses your own views on race and your racial identity?; Why or why not?”

The second dilemma (#2 “Invisible vs. Marked”) was addressed by assigning two chapters (“Ethnic Difference in Cognitive Ability” and “Ethnic Inequalities in Relation to IQ”) from *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). After reading these chapters, students came to class and I had a short (10-15 minute discussion) about the readings, particularly on racial and ethnic differences in IQ scores. I then give students an abbreviated and updated version (25 questions) of the Dove Counterbalance Intelligence Test (known less delicately as the “Chitterling Test”⁶) and ask them to take it.⁷ After the test, in a subsequent class, I anonymized and tallied the results and displayed them in aggregate racial group scores (African American and Latino/Hispanic students regularly outperform White and Asian students).⁸ After discussing

these findings, and in that same subsequent class, students are assigned two chapters (“Understanding ‘Intelligence’” and “But Is It Intelligence?”) from *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Fischer, Hout, Jankowski, Lucas, Swidler and Voss, 1996) and asked to journal on the two readings and the “counterbalance” test.

The third dilemma (#3 “Superiority vs. Victimhood”) was addressed by assigning students two chapters (“Introduction” and “A White Man’s Town”) from *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (Nevels, 2007) and “The Killing Fields of the Deep South” (Beck and Tolnay, 1990). I then asked students to visit the website (www.WithoutSanctuary.com), a website that displays eighty-one photographs of lynchings made into postcards. I ask students to first read three short excerpts from (1) “Lynch Law in Georgia” by Ida B. Wells, (2) *Dusk of Dawn* by W. E. B. Du Bois, and (3) “Not Without Sanctuary” by Linda Tucker. I then ask them to attempt to examine the images (as many as they can given the grotesque and violent nature of the subject matter). I then ask them to repeat the viewing with a friend or family member not enrolled in the class and to again, write a four to six page journal response based on their own initial viewing and collective discussion and interpretations with their friends or family member.⁹

And the fourth dilemma (#4 “Good vs. Evil”) was addressed by assigning three chapters (“Does Black and Male Still = Threat in the Age of Obama?,” “Obamanation? Implicit Beliefs about American Nationality and the Possibility of Redefining Who Counts as ‘Truly’ American,” and “Black Man in the White House: Ideology and Implicit Racial Bias in the Age of Obama”) from *The Obamas and a (Post)Racial America?* (Parks and Hughey, 2011). In conjunction with this reading, I ask students to visit the “Project Implicit” website at Harvard University (www.implicit.harvard.edu) and to take the demonstration test. I ask students to printout a copy of their results and to write three to four pages on their interpretation of their results as they

relate to their racial identity.¹⁰ These exercises were used because they carry a common thread that aligns with my four main teaching goals of race as: socially constructed; a changing identity; a rationale for exploitation or resource control, and; a cause and consequence of inequality.

Analysis and Assessment

I analyzed all journals (N = 1227) by designing and applying an eight-part coding schema. This schema was constructed deductively¹¹ and inductively.¹² The coding schema contained definitions of whiteness as: (1) “seeing” (a standard and neutral position or viewpoint), (2) “seen” (a racial category like any other with differing access to resources), (3) “invisible” (an unmarked category of unearned privileges), (4) “marked” (an overtly and recognized advantaged position), (5) “superiority” (a category aligned with claims to superior biological and/or cultural traits), (6) “victimhood” (a group unfairly attacked and victimized by others), (7) “good” (a group dominated by unbiased, fair, and equitable people), (8) “bad” (a group dominated by narrow-minded bigots and prejudiced discriminators). After constructing this schema, I applied it to the data (N = 1227) to determine their presence (0 = no, 1 = yes): (1) seeing (702; 57%), (2) seen (267; 22%), (3) invisible (536; 44%), (4) marked (349; 28%), (5) superiority (484; 39%), (6) victimhood (513; 42%), (7) good (261; 21%), and (8) bad (403; 33%). Coding was exercised judiciously as the presence of a theme was marked present only when it aligned with the inductively and deductively derived definitions.

To examine the effect of my intervention strategies on students’ collective interpretations of their readings about whiteness, I considered two general questions: First, did the exercises have a quantifiably measurable impact on students’ perceptions and interpretations about whiteness? Second, if so, what was the qualitative form of that alteration?

In answering the first question, 209 of 406 students completed all four of the journaling assignments (Group 4), 67 students completed only three of the assignments (Group 3), 65

students completed only two (Group 2), 60 students completed only one (Group 1) and 8 students completed zero (Group 0). This tiered completion rate allows for the comparison of students' interpretations based on their increased exposure to the assignments. I operationalized pedagogical intervention effectiveness as a dichotomous variable (0 = no, 1 = yes). For dilemma 1 ("Seeing vs. Seen") success was students' ability to conceptualize whiteness as a visible racial category rather than a nonracial normative standpoint. For dilemma 2 ("Invisible vs. Marked") success was the ability to understand whiteness as an identity always in crisis and flux. For dilemma 3 ("Superiority vs. Victimhood") success was understanding how white claims to racial victimhood (real or imagined) can often result in claims to white superiority or power. For dilemma 4 ("Good vs. Bad") success was students' understanding that many whites outside of official hate groups (e.g., the Klan) may also hold implicit racial biases and stereotypes. For the Group 4 (the 209 students who completed all four intervention exercises [836 journals]), results indicate a high rate of success (Exercise 1 = 67%; Exercise 2 = 76%; Exercise 3 = 65%; Exercise 4 = 79%) when compared to Groups 3-1. There is a statistically significant relationship (at the .01 and .05 level) between exposure to the intervention strategies and student success (See Table 1).¹³

Even amongst the highly successful Group 4, 69 journals from Exercise 1 (6%), 50 journals from Exercise 2 (4%), 73 journals from Exercise 3 (6%), and 44 journals from Exercise 4 (3%) were found unsuccessful (in total 236; 19% of entire journal population). Of those 236 journal entries, 209 (89%) were written by non-social science majors, 215 (91%) were fourth- or fifth-year seniors, and 102 (43%) were enrolled in a summer school course at SAM. A lack of social scientific training, inculcation in other majors, and the fast pace of summer school at a lower ranked institution may have negatively influenced this subsample.

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

To ensure coding accuracy of success/failure, I compared my coding against two research assistants' coding of a random sample of twenty-eight percent of the population of journals ($n = 348$). Coders used the same schema and definitions I employed. There was an overall pairwise agreement of 94.25% and a Cohen's kappa of 0.877 and Fleiss' kappa of 0.877 that together denote a high coding reliability

[TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE]

My own social positioning certainly played a role in the effectiveness of these strategies. My confident teaching persona is likely to have enabled my authority (cf. Chelser and Young, 2007; Pace and Hemmings, 2007). My gender identity as male certainly solidified that authority, especially when understood through the patriarchal cultural logic of the Deep South at SAM (cf. Pittman, 2010). My racial identity was often confusing to students, as many remarked that I was some combination of white, black, and/or Latino/Hispanic. I utilized my racial ambiguity as teachable moments, whereby I emphasized the porous yet firm boundaries of race that could be marshaled, in one context, toward my definitive "whiteness," whereas in another context I was seen as anything but "purely" white (cf. Brandon 2003; Solomon 1997).

Dominant Dilemmas

In answering the second question about the qualitative forms of successful intervention strategies, I provide below a few examples for how students from Group 4 responded.

Seeing vs. Seen: Whiteness as Subject or Object?

Upon enrollment in RER courses, many students expressed the assumption that the course would concentrate entirely on people of color. Stemming from years of academic analysis and layperson habit in which people of color were the objects to be studied, the examination of race often leaves whiteness unscrutinized. In watching the film *Mirrors of Privilege* and responding to questions based on the film's content, many students begin to "see"

whiteness as an unique racial category rather than a norm to which other racial groups can (or should) be compared ($n = 140$; 67%). For example, in RER (SAM, Spring 2010), student 144 (white male) wrote:

I never thought much about my race, except when I was around different races. [...] I think its [sic] interesting how little we talk about “white” as a race when generally “race” means things related to black people. [...] there are definately [sic] issues unique to white people, like those related to privilege and NOT being discriminated against regularly. [...] I can see how being white shapes how I see the world. [...] Being white is not just “normal” but has racial implications like other people too.

In the same class, student 124 (black female) wrote:

I never really thought about how white people think about race, and I guess I assumed that they did a lot. After hearing others [in class] and watching the video [*Mirrors*], I’m amazed at how little white people think about their own race. [...] I’m a little ashamed to admit that I didn’t think too much about how I saw white people as normal, whereas I and other people that aren’t white were the “racial” ones.

These two students express a common sentiment. After watching the video and journaling they were able to see white racial identity as a racial group rather than as a nonracial default category for abstract human characteristics.

So also, in RER (DU, Summer 2009) student 55 (white female) wrote:

I guess I thought being white was really no big deal, and that every racial group had it’s [sic] own issues and problems [...] It’s important to remember that when one racial group, in this case white people in the US, gets power, then that’s a lot different than an oppressed group. While we’re all the same, because race isn’t biological, we’re not all treated the same because of what race means to us all.

And in RER (SAM, Fall 2011) student 241 (white male) wrote:

I never thought too much about how we always compare diferent [sic] racial groups to white people in terms of how much they make, or what problems they supposedly have. [...] After thinking about it, I realize this sends a strong implicit message about who we think is the norm and right people, without having to explicitly say ‘white people’.”

Students were eventually able to identify particular aspects of whiteness and the problems with treating whiteness as a default category by which others are compared.

Invisible vs. Marked: Toward Whiteness as Crisis?

Some students seemed fascinated by the idea that whites could be unconscious of the racial group to which they belong ($n = 66$; 32%). For example, student 288 (white male) in RER (SAM, Fall 2011) wrote: “I really don’t get how I, as a white person, was never really that aware of race. [...] it makes we question what factors led me to be so unaware.” On the other, many made a different interpretation. Students of color often remarked that they were hyper-aware of whiteness while some white students argued that they in fact think of their race with a mixture of pride, guilt, and confusion on a regular basis ($n = 98$; 47%). For instance, student 261 (black female) in RER (SAM Fall 2011) wrote, “As a black women there’s not a day that goes by where I’m not conscious of how white people might be looking at me. [...] it’s like I’m always thinking about how the world is made to benefit white people at my expense. That’s not invisible at all.”

Rather than think of whiteness as entirely visible or invisible, I directed students to consider whiteness as a category always in a legitimation crisis (cf. Habermas, 1973). I asked students to engage in an exercise that pushed them to understand how white normativity (i.e., white intelligence) was neither essentially invisible nor visible, but was rather in a constant state of rationalization and legitimation through specific mechanisms (e.g., IQ testing).

After reading excerpts from *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994) on race and IQ, and after taking a twenty-five question alternative IQ test (from the Dove Counterbalance Intelligence Test), I displayed the findings of the test wherein (96% of the time) black students outperformed students from other racial groups. After I explained that IQ tests can be skewed to privilege different knowledges common to a particular group, students could more easily grasp how standard IQ tests functioned to legitimate whiteness as an important, but ultimately arbitrary “normal” or “standard” category. For example, student 305 (white female) in RER (SAM, Fall 2012) wrote:

Tests, especially the standardized tests like IQ tests, rationalize what white people know as the standard that other people should also know. [...] its [sic] like white people are in

such an extreme position where if tests, and institutions, and procedures (like racial profiling, for example) don't sanction white superiority, then there will be a discrepancy between the power white people have and the rationalization for that power. [...] IQ tests legitimize white power.

So also student 360 (East Indian female) who was enrolled in a RER class (SAM, Spring 2012)

wrote:

What is most disturbing to me is the idea that if whiteness does unexamined [sic], especially in areas of influence such as science or government, then there becomes a built in racial bias. I mean to say that the interests of white people can infiltrate their decision making can chose [sic] to ignore problems in white communities while concentrating on communities where people live. Then, those communities can be easily blamed as criminal or "pathological" while white communities escape that scrutiny. [...] This is what IQ tests do. They hide how the things white people know are arbitrary [...] tests legitimate the "superiority" of whiteness.

This exercise assisted students to understand how white racial identity is not an essential set of invisible privileges or overtly superior traits, but is rather a category in crisis that must be legitimated by culturally sanctioned practices (such as IQ tests).

Superiority vs. Victimhood: Whiteness under Threat?

In the privacy of their journals, some white students came to place the blame for the aforementioned legitimation crisis at the feet of an increasingly anti-white world. As student 170 (white male) in RER (SAM, Summer 2010) wrote, "I'm NOT arguing that white supremacist groups are right ... but I do wonder what might be going through some of their heads if they found their jobs taken by racial minorities. ... wouldn't any of us feel angry if our job was taken and given to someone else?" Moreover, many students of color had difficulty with grasping how whites could make claims to white supremacy given large amounts of the white poor. Student 311 (black male) in RER (SAM, Fall 2012) wrote, "It's almost laughable that white people claimed they were better than others in the 1800s when most whites were barely able to keep clothes on their back. ... if that was 'superiority,' then they weren't trying to be superior over much."

To intervene in this dilemma, I concentrated on the *fragility* of white supremacy. As Alastair Bonnett (2000, 39) once wrote, “Whiteness has often been experienced as something very vulnerable, as an identity under threat. Its fragility is a direct product of the extraordinary claims of superiority made on its behalf.” That is, understandings of whiteness as unfairly under attack (and thus reactionary assailments directed at people of color) are dialectically tied to unattainable claims to white superiority.

I asked students to both read select chapters from *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (Nevels, 2007) and to visit (www.WithoutSanctuary.com), a website of eighty-one photographs of lynchings.¹⁴ Students then journaled about the assignments. Results indicate that this exercise enabled most students ($n = 136$; 65%) to understand how the fragility of whiteness enabled simultaneously claims to a superior yet victimized status. For example student 104 (white female) in RER (DU, Summer 2009) wrote:

After looking at those photos, I was sickened. I kept wondering how people could do that [sic] another human being. ... having the readings to contextualize the pictures helped, because I see how lynching was not just an attempt to control African Americans, but that lynchings were like rituals where “almost white people” like Italians, Jews, and others, were trying to pass and fit into the dominant group. ... they were participating in lynching to belong to a group of people that gave them purpose and identity by claiming to be naturally superior.

Also, student 392 (white female) in RER (SAM, Spring 2013) wrote:

The article seemed to show that “split labor markets” where more expensive white labor would be undercut by cheaper black labor created a hostile environment when cotton prices fell. ... Whites had an ideology of white supremacy but were doing badly economically, so that mismatch created a kind of schitzophrenia [sic] among whites. ... acts of racial violence like lynching was kind of like a temporary remedy to that, in that it was a strong ideological message of white power and a real attack on black job competitors.

Many students were able to articulate understandings such as the above, including the poignant line by student 82 (white female) in SW (DU, Spring 2009): “Whites always felt attacked because they couldn’t live up to how great they told themselves they were.”

Good vs. Bad: Shared Prejudice Across Ideology?

Many students bring a bifurcated worldview of politics and morality with them into the classroom. When connected to whites, these views transform into images of “racists” as swastika-wielding Nazis or hood-donned Klansman, while they picture “antiracists” as civil rights-era Freedom Riders or as modern sign-wielding and hashtagging activists. Such a rendering is a seductive vision of a world bookended by diametrically-opposed white people.

I addressed this misunderstanding by assigning readings on race, nationalism, and civic belonging, as well as asking students to take the “implicit bias test” at Harvard University (www.implicit.harvard.edu), after which students journaled about their scores. Most students were surprised that they, along with other students, held some racially biased views ($n = 166$; 79%). For example, student 330 (white female) in RER (SAM, Fall 2012) wrote, “I never thought of myself as having prejudicial views. ... I thought only racist people had those types of thoughts or held those stereotypes.” And student 224 (black female) in RER (SAM, Fall 2011) remarked, “It’s disturbing to think that I could hold biased views about my own race, but its [sic] eye opening at the same time.”

After the pedagogical intervention, students came away with an understanding of prejudice not exclusive to the domain of overt “racists,” but as a consequence of racialized social orders. Student 395 (white female) in RER (SAM, Spring 2013) wrote:

I didn’t score racially biased, and that honestly surprises me. ... I wonder what influences I had, in terms of family, education, religion, etc. that gave me a more neutral point of view on race. ... I think most of us who grew up in the US have some racial prejudices. ... Even though we have come a long way and elected Obama, just take into account how he was treated. ... the chapter stated that “Obama’s hybrid ethnicity, his unusual name, Muslim middle name, internationally traveled childhood, and family tree” were translated as signs he was too different from the “typical Anglo-Protestant American.” That wasn’t just racists doing that. Lots of people were “othering” the president.

And student 60 (white female) in RER (DU, Summer 2009) wrote, "... we often act like other people are just entirely good or bad, when the reality is, we're all a little bit of both... most of us have prejudices because most of us live in an unequal world."

These students' realizations differ significantly from the classic model of prejudice (e.g. Merton 1949) that permits essentially different types of people—prejudiced and non-prejudiced. The exercises allowed students to move beyond these quixotic paradigms to understand how implicit biases may be exercised unconsciously and under the best of intentions.

Conclusion

These four intervention exercises found overall success as measured by the students' wholesale ability to transcend their "neither-nor" (Barthes, 2009 [1957]) interpretations. While the results of these exercises should be examined *cum grano salis*, they worked successfully amidst a variety of classroom sizes, disparately ranked public universities, different US regions, and amongst classroom contexts high in racial diversity to all-white student course enrollment. They had less success with non-social science majors, fourth- and fifth-year seniors, and those who enrolled in the SAM summer school course. Moreover, to examine the effectiveness of these exercises by race, I highlight that students of color's completion rate was slightly over-represented relative their enrollment; and the converse for white students (cf. endnote #13). Second, in examining the most robust data (from the 209 students who completed all four exercises), I found that students of color ($n=93$) and white students ($n=116$) had relatively similar understandings of the exercises (the largest percentage variance was two points). The only departure from this trend came in exercise #3 in which white students were more likely to view whiteness as victimhood (22%) than students of color (14%). Similarly, white students were less likely to view whiteness as superiority (53%) than students of color (65%).

[TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE]

All in all, these results gesture toward four implications. First, while these exercises were conducted a few years ago, they continue to resonate with recent findings published in the current literature; i.e., “race” (and especially whiteness) remains a paradoxical and confusing concept for many students to engage. That the dimensions of positionality, objectivity, and neutrality (“Seeing vs. Seen”), visibility (“Invisible vs. Marked”), power (“Superiority vs. Victimhood”), and individualized morality (“Good vs. Evil”) continue to function as key dilemmas over which students wrestle. Moreover, despite the supposed cultural sea-changes both brought about by, and animating, the “Black Lives Matter” movement, many students either resist or fail to appreciate the salience of race (especially whiteness) in the modern world.

Next, there is a risk in reducing the teaching of whiteness to the above four dilemmas given the convoluted protean reality of race relations and its instruction. Given this danger, I aim not to advance an exhaustive overview of pedagogical dilemmas and solutions, but rather, to develop exercises that penetrate the problems found common the reception of critical approaches to the social scientific examination of race and ethnicity. In specific, the exercises take into account the *sui generis* dilemmas of race and whiteness found in the modern classroom and seek to resolve them without dismissing the import and utility of their atomistic parts.

Third, the exercises appear to assist students—across the color-line—to better articulate their own social location in an asymmetrical order. Classroom spaces can easily serve to perpetuate neo-liberal constructions of a “color-blind” and “post-racial” world. Students can better dislodge ideological inaccuracies with empirical realities about race when they are intimately involved in studying their own identities and attitudes as both cause and consequence of social forces. Such interactive classroom exercises thus assist students to cultivate their “sociological imagination” in that they help to grasp “...what is going on in the world and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography

and history within society” (Mills, 2000 [1959], 7).

Last, the success of these exercises points a specific way forward. Rather than tone-down critical approaches toward race, we can better unpack how whiteness remains concurrently heterogeneous (cross-cut by class and gender intersectionality) and increasingly homogenous in terms of the dominant obligations associated with authentic membership in whiteness (Author, 2012). By more directly interrogating the ways that laypeople (and some sociological theory) claim that whites are concurrently superior yet victimized, invisible yet marked, or racist yet antiracist, the approach herein does not only aim to teach about racial inequality or the effects of racism on the underclass, but on the formation of privilege and how to intercede in its reproduction (Mueller, 2013). Rather than embrace pedagogical concessions by retreating into classic race relations paradigms, these strategies should be implemented early in students collegiate career if we are to engage in the Fanonian project of “decolonizing” young minds from both academic and folk theories that implicitly idealize Anglo-conformity and normativity.

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Tables

Table 1: Conditional Distribution of Exercise Success

	Number of Assignments Completed				Total
	4	3	2	1	
Exercise 1 **					
Pass	67%	66%	48%	20%	63%
Fail	33%	34%	52%	80%	37%
Total	209	47	31	15	302
Exercise 2 ***					
Pass	76%	64%	50%	31%	69%
Fail	24%	36%	50%	69%	31%
Total	209	53	34	13	309
Exercise 3 **					
Pass	65%	63%	53%	22%	61%
Fail	35%	37%	47%	78%	39%
Total	209	49	31	18	308
Exercise 4 ***					
Pass	79%	67%	55%	14%	72%
Fail	21%	33%	45%	86%	28%
Total	209	52	34	14	308
Total					
Students	209	67	65	60	401
Journal Entries	836	201	130	60	1227

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (χ^2 , $df=3$)

Table 2: Intercoder Reliability Measures

Avg Pairwise Percent Agreement	Average Pairwise Percent Agreement		
	Pairwise Percent Agreement 1 and 3	Pairwise Percent Agreement 1 and 2	Pairwise Percent Agreement 2 and 3
94.25%	94.25%	96.26%	92.24%
Average Pairwise Cohen's Kappa	Average Pairwise Cohen's Kappa		
	Pairwise Cohen's Kappa 1 and 3	Pairwise Cohen's Kappa 1 and 2	Pairwise Cohen's Kappa 2 and 3
0.877	0.876	0.92	0.835
Fleiss Kappa	Fleiss' Kappa		
	Observed Agreement	Expected Agreement	
0.877	0.943	0.534	

Table 3: Coding of Exercises by Race

Coding of Students Completing All Four Exercises (<i>n</i> =209 students; <i>n</i> =836 journals)		
	Students of Color (<i>n</i> =93)	White Students (<i>n</i> =116)
Exercise #1		
seeing	39 (42%)	51 (44%)
seen	45 (48%)	54 (47%)
Exercise #2		
invisible	42 (45%)	54 (47%)
marked	41 (44%)	52 (45%)
Exercise #3		
superiority	60 (65%)	62 (53%)
victimhood	13 (14%)	25 (22%)
Exercise #4		
good	42 (45%)	55 (47%)
bad	39 (42%)	49 (42%)

Endnotes

¹ Despite increased scholarly attention to race and ethnicity (and especially “whiteness”), via either the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement, the spate of injuries and deaths to people of color at the hands of law enforcement, and political debates over “critical race theory” (CRT), a substantial body of literature indicates that many students feel there is either “too much” and/or “wrong” attention paid to the subject of race. Case in point: in a course entitled “ethnicity and race” (one of the classes analyzed in this paper) a student evaluation read, “Professor [redacted] talks too much about ethnicity and race”. One wonders what the student would like a course entitled “ethnicity and race” to instead address? Moreover, research indicates that a non-trivial amount of people symbolically appeal to and “support” the BLM movement in order to be perceived as moral and progressive (sometimes labeled “performative allyship”) or out of fear for being labeled “racist” (e.g., Blair, 2021; Clark 2019; Hughey, 2021; Luttrell, 2019; Wellman, 2022) and that both supporters and opponents of CRT indicate poor if not erroneous understandings of its basic principles (e.g., Hughey, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Vaught and Castagno, 2020).

² There is no conclusive evidence for the efficacy of “trigger warnings”, although the concept itself has been politicized in recent years (e.g., Boysen, et al., 2021; Bruce, et al., 2023; Kimble, et al., 2021; Robillard, 2020).

³ All names are pseudonyms per IRB approval at both DU and SAM. All participating students gave their informed consent.

⁴ Based on a review of available syllabi [DU held syllabi eight years prior (1998). SAM held syllabi five years prior (2005)].

⁵ Some of these assignments are designed to be challenging, in particular, the exercise that deals with lynching and their symbolic and economic commodification. Here I follow Zembylas (2020) who calls for “both a decolonising and a critical affective approach to pedagogies of discomfort” whereby methods that speak to affect (not simply intellect) are employed to assist students better understand the “affective, material and discursive assemblages of race, racism and whiteness.”

⁶ The “Dove Counterbalance Intelligence Test” was designed by Adrian Dove, an African American sociologist. Aware of the dialect differences, he developed an alternative IQ exam as a half-serious attempt to demonstrate that all children vary in cultural knowledge.

⁷ A sample question: “‘Juneteenth’ is June 19th and many believe it should be a legal holiday because (A) that was the day slaves in Texas heard they were free, (B) Martin Luther King was born on that day, (C) California banned slavery on that day, (D) Rose Parks sat on the bus on that day, (E) that was the day the Civil War started.”

⁸ Out of 255, only 10 (3.9%) White or Asian students have outperformed Black students. See note 10 for additional information.

⁹ Given that the display of historically documented racial violence (e.g., lynching) could be traumatizing, I allow students varied pathways for engaging that material (viewing as many of the postcard images with which they are comfortable, watching a short film about lynching on the website, viewing the reverse side of the post-cards [with prose], only, etc.) Of the four exercises, I ask students to rank the exercises in which they feel they learned the most. Students report (aggregated from both direct and anonymized evaluations) that engaging the “Without Sanctuary” site (in exercise #3: “Superiority vs. Victimhood”) is first (31%), followed by exercise #4 “Good vs. Evil” (28%), exercise #1 “Seeing vs. Seen” (26%), and exercise #2 “Invisible vs. Marked” (15%). Qualitatively, students have explained that engaging with this assignment pushed them to learn both intellectually and emotionally and that they feel as though this assignment treats them as equal partners and adults in the classroom, rather than experiencing a paternalistic approach to sensitive issues.

¹⁰ Displaying data from “IQ” and implicit bias tests in classrooms in which some racial groups may be underrepresented might lend to feelings unfairly singled out. Before beginning the exercise, I assure students that I will neither display individual scores nor aggregated scores if a low *n* from particular ethnic/racial groups would identify individual students and/or identify students with their answers.

¹¹ (1) Fritschner (2001), Lewis (2004), Lucal (1996), McRae and Warren (2012) and Warren and Fassett (2004) on the invisibility of whiteness; (2) Ahmed (2004), Allen (2004), Fritschner (2001), Kincheloe (1999), Sue (2004), Sweet and Baker (2011), and Wooddell and Henry (2005) on whiteness as privilege; (3) Dunham, Cannon, and Dietz (2004), Leonardo (2002), and Twine and Gallagher (2007) on whiteness as normative and comparative category; (4) Chaisson (2004), Trainor (2002) and Warren and Hytten (2004) on defensive reactions toward examining whiteness; (5) Gallagher (2003), and Mueller (2013) on whiteness as a victimized identity.

¹² Based on eight years of observational notes teaching RER and SW at DU and SAM.

¹³ Out of 406 students, 236 (58%) identified as white and 170 (42%) identified as students of color/nonwhite. From those 406 students, 209 (51.48%) completed all four exercises. Out of those 209 students, students of color’s completion rate (*n*=93; 45%) was slightly over-represented relative their enrollment; and the converse for white students (*n*=116; 55%) [of the 406 students, 236 (58%) identified as white and 170 (42%) identified as students of color/nonwhite].