

Writing a Pedagogy of Whiteness: A Relational Ethic of Teaching

Chris McRae and John T. Warren

Our experiences teaching about whiteness in communication classrooms 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, as we desire to engage with our students in a critically nuanced and potentially transformative dialogue about race and racism. This essay builds from our experiences in the classroom and works to articulate the dilemmas we often face as we teach about whiteness in our courses. These dilemmas mirror similar concerns we face in our own scholarly practices of reflexivity. By troubling our reflexive practices, as well as our student responses, we offer a pedagogical strategy for engagement that seeks to avoid resistance and compliance through the development of and commitment to a relational ethic of teaching and learning.

Keywords: reflexivity, whiteness, critical communication pedagogy, performative pedagogy, relational ethic



As members of the dominant culture, we cannot construct socially just educational practices alone; it is arrogant and preposterous to think we can. (Kathy Hytten & Amee Adkins, "Thinking Through a Pedagogy of Whiteness" 448)

My vision of critical performative pedagogy values the transformative, the critical, the reflexive, the bodily, and the belief that, with possibility, there is hope for all students. (John T. Warren "Performative Pedagogy, At Risk-Students, and the Basic Course" 110-11)

Postlude (of sorts) as Prelude (of sorts)

You and I were/are trying to be reflexive about our pedagogical performances, to raise questions about reflexivity, whiteness, and critical approaches to communication pedagogy, and to account for the resistant and compliant responses from our students

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when we taught and raised questions about whiteness.¹ You and I were/are trying to create and call for a relational pedagogy in order to reevaluate the ways we approach questions of whiteness and reflexivity in our scholarship as teachers. You and I were/are troubling our acts of reflexivity as a perfunctory scholarly practice in order to theorize a relational approach to reflexivity that might be concretely extended to pedagogical interactions and conversations regarding whiteness, privilege, and difference.

Now, I am trying to frame what “we” set out to do prior to your death, not only in terms of the specific singular you of the “we” in the following stories, but for a broader more plural you who might encounter our stories.² Now, I am trying to present a relationship between our two writing projects. The one we set out to write together, and the one I set out to write after your death. Now, I am trying to perform the same kind of relational pedagogy I hear us arguing for in our teaching about whiteness by writing our story as an invitation for the beginning of a relationship with a broader “you.”

What follows, then, is how I choose to narrate, frame, and imagine what you and I were/are attempting. However, it is important for me to acknowledge that my telling and framing of this story is partial. You (both the specific “you” and the broader “you”) might frame and narrate this story differently. You might make sense of our arguments some other way. But how you would (or might) tell this story has slipped from the realm of the possible to the realm of the imagined. My story of our essay is only one version, but it is a version that is only possible for me to write in relationship with and to you. It’s worth me noting that this introduction is written chronologically after the writing of our essay together. Your words and my words are intertwined to an extent, but the conversation we were having is a conversation I am now trying to carry on and forward with a commitment to the echo of your words, your teaching, and your friendship. So, this is a beginning that, because of the ways our relationship

¹ The method of critically considering classroom experiences used in this essay falls within Warren’s call for “a renewal in reflexive, ethnographically centered research that takes our labor in the classroom as a vital site for investigation” (“Reflexive” 140).

² The use of pronouns in referencing the authors here is not entirely unlike the way Scott William Gust and John T. Warren highlight the ways the use of pronouns and citations in personal narratives and scholarly writing can be considered a commentary on naming practices and claims of subjectivity (116). Deanna Fassett and John T. Warren also contend the narration of their coauthored text, *Critical Communication Pedagogy*, strategically does not reveal the specific narrator (Deanna or John) as a means of implicating the reader in the meaning making process of encountering the text (14-16). Based on John’s approach in these two examples, and based on our argument for a relational pedagogy, I take a similar approach in this essay. The relationship you develop with us (the narrators) is as much about you as it is who we are or might be. As Fassett and Warren state, “Often the characters we meet on the page, including and perhaps especially the narrators, are composites, are collages themselves. Look carefully and you just might see yourself” (16).

is constantly changing (often times in ways that are devastating and dramatic), will always only ever be a postlude (of sorts) acting as a prelude (of sorts) to our story.

Imagining a Relational Pedagogy

So, you and I were/are trying to be reflexive about our pedagogical performances, to raise questions about reflexivity, whiteness, and critical approaches to communication pedagogy, and to account for the resistant and compliant responses from our students when we taught and raised questions about whiteness. In the midst of our collaboration and attempts at writing these narratives, you were diagnosed with stage four esophageal cancer. You received disheartening and disappointing news from countless doctors, and yet you still sent me a message wishing me luck on an upcoming job interview and letting me know that you still wanted to finish this essay.

So, you and I were/are trying to be reflexive about our pedagogical performances

...

And two weeks after your diagnosis, we were sitting in your living room together. My partner and I had just come inside after playing an intense game of pretend pirates with your two sons. They had found the buried treasure, escaped numerous shark attacks, and safely navigated their ship back to the house in time for their afternoon naps. A few more of your friends and colleagues arrived, and we all sat around your living room talking and laughing with you, telling stories about students, the challenges of the Graduate School dissertation formatting requirements, and the joy of conferences. You offered to share with us some of your favorite candy from a care package sent from your friends in California. You smiled when we gave you your mail from school: the final copy of a dissertation, a few new journals, and at your request, your notes for this paper.

So, you and I were/are trying to be reflexive about our pedagogical performances, to raise questions about reflexivity . . .

And two weeks after your diagnosis, after an afternoon of stories, you fell asleep, my partner and I left, and eight hours later we received a devastating phone call informing us of your death.

So, you and I were/are trying to speak to the relationship and connection between our work in pedagogy and our interests in performance. . .

And this relationship and connection is, for me, best understood in the story of our relationship, and perhaps is best explained in the story of how you and I came to write this paper. It's a story about pedagogy, performance, and reflexivity. It's a story that puts on display the relational, critical, and transformative potential and possibility we feel and find in the relationships that are enabled by performance.

This story might begin when you and I decide to write a paper together. However, the "you and I" part of this story probably began during lunch on the Wednesday of orientation week during my first year as a graduate student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. We were standing in line at Subway in the Student Center, and talking about shared acquaintances. We were establishing common ground and reveal-

ing the limits of what combination of vegetables, cheeses, cold cut deli meats, and various condiments we were willing to ingest on six inch loaves of freshly baked bread. This brief initial encounter revealed empirically very little. I ordered ham, and you ordered veggies. We learned that we both knew Tony Adams, Keith Berry, and Stacy Holman Jones. The “you and I” part of our story began, in abstract terms, at the level of desire: desire for connection, for friendship, and for lunch.

You and I decided to write a paper together, but in order to understand where this decision came from, it is important to know just a little bit more about how our relationship started. You and I met again, in a graduate seminar you were teaching called “Teaching as Performance.” On my first short response paper in the class, a comment you made struck me as strange, but in a way that was memorable and meaningful. You wrote, “Nice to meet you on paper.” I imagine you might have said this to all of your students, but I was struck by the honest friendliness of your greeting and I realized how nice it was to meet you on paper too.

A few semesters later, you and I decided to meet each other for lunch and coffee to discuss the possibility of collaborating on a project together about teaching and whiteness. You ordered either hazelnut or chocolate coffee, which I refused to try. Instead I stubbornly avowed my essentialist preferences for pure, unadulterated, black coffee. This became a shared and ongoing joke between us. As we each drank from our respective carafes, we made arrangements for you to visit my intercultural communication class on a day when we would be discussing the implications and consequences of whiteness.

I should probably mention that this experience was simultaneously exciting and terrifying for me. You are kind of a big deal, and although we might have joked about our taste in coffee, I was a little intimidated to have you come to my class. I didn’t want to disappoint you or embarrass myself.³ I acknowledge this now, because this is how I am choosing to write you and me, and that matters. It matters because this story of you and me is full of choices about who you and I are going to be when we meet on the page. And it’s in that meeting on the page between you and I that is really interesting, generative, and full of possibility. Who will *you* be? Who will *I* be? What will happen when *we* meet?

You and I meet each other on the page, as we draft an essay regarding the resistant and compliant responses from students as we introduce and enter into conversations with them about whiteness. You provide me with a copy of your book, *Performing Purity: Whiteness Pedagogy, and the Reconstitution of Power*. You sign the copy, “A place to start. . .” It’s a place to start thinking about the ways whiteness happens in

³ Fassett and Warren argue the construction of heroes, especially in terms of teachers, often creates unrealistic expectations that cannot be met by the hero figure (140-43). They say, “Building heroes leads to disappointment and places unfair expectations on those we claim to love” (142). The challenge of this argument is in recognizing our own practices of creating and constructing heroes. Treating a teacher, friend, or co-author as a hero always points more to my desires and experiences than the realities and experiences of the other.

and through performance. It's a place for you to start sharing your ideas. It's a place for me to start reading you. It's a place for you and me to start.

You and I start to write ourselves together. You send me a first draft, and in that first draft I find myself written by you (and as "remarkably" similar to you nonetheless). I am worried about the opening paragraph because you and I don't usually discuss things like our class, sexuality, or ability. But here it is on the page. You've been thinking about me. You've been writing about me. You've been writing me. You say that I should let you know if anything needs to be changed, but it doesn't. I am worried because I am not used to leading with this sort of statement of my identity, but here we are on the page, listing and confessing the various identifications that might afford us a variety of privileges in various contexts. The discomfort I feel in this moment is in part a function of the very privilege you and I are working to critique. It's not that I don't try and write about my privileged positions in the world, but there's something about this relationship between us and this particular writing. When you write me, that act of critique takes on another level of accountability. This reflexivity is relational.

I imagine this relationship, our relationship, might teach us something about the pedagogy we are struggling to articulate. This is a relational pedagogy, a pedagogy that imagines, that desires, and that works for places to start, to meet, and to write together. This relational pedagogy is a pedagogy that functions to modify or qualify the struggles we articulate in the following narratives and teaching experiences regarding our questions about whiteness and reflexivity.

Writing this pedagogy of whiteness with and without you works to enact the kind of change and critique I believe we were/are trying to develop. This writing and our pedagogy are acts of imagination and performances of possibility. As Jill Dolan explains, "Writing, like performance, is always only an experiment, an audition, always only another place to practice what might be an unreachable goal that's imperative to imagine nonetheless" (168). Writing this essay with and without you is, therefore, an experiment based in and on our relationship. Similarly, as I work to connect our examples by writing and re-writing, it is this spirit of experimentation informed by relationships and new possibilities that I imagine might propel or push our story forward.

Writing (our essay) a Pedagogy of Whiteness

In many ways, we, the authors of this essay, are remarkably the same. We are white. We are male. We are of middle class, or at least are classed in such a manner as to hold middle class values. We are formally educated, one of us holds a doctorate for the past decade, and the other has just earned his. We are able-bodied and have no known mental illnesses or stigma. We identify slightly differently sexually, one identifying as bi and the other as straight, though both are currently partnered with women. In many ways, our repetitions of these reflexive statements, though at times seem redundant, are new acts, acts that function, in the context of this essay, as a critique of our practices of reflexivity (Warren "Performing Difference" 297).

In many ways, we are remarkably the same. We both are teachers. We both have our formal training in communication and culture, performance, and critical communication pedagogy. We both have published in these areas and find great potential in education, making our life goals similar as we both look to our pedagogical sites as important spaces for critical interrogation, interruption, and innovation. In many ways, we both have adopted the classroom as our primary site for doing the work of social justice.

In many ways, our goals for this essay have been the same. We both have invested our teaching with issues of culture, issues of power, issues of whiteness—trying to complicate culture, unmask power, and denaturalize whiteness. Our attempts vary in time. The first author has been doing this work for a few years; the second, well over a decade. Yet, the need to reinvest, reimagine, and recommit to this work remains. Whiteness is slippery—to meet the shape-shifting tendencies of whiteness as it moves and changes the moment you try to name it requires an understanding that one simply never knows enough about it, especially if that “one” is a white constituted subject such as ourselves. We know this as much as we can know anything—we know that we are always behind, always unable to see our blind spots even as we squint, strain, and stare. We are subjects constituted and, even in our attempt to reconstitute, are not capable of always seeing what has been so carefully obscured through time. We assume part of this blindness is our defensiveness, our own not wanting to see it.

In many ways, the location of our own subjectivity is the point of this essay, even as it really is about setting up an argument for classroom practice that works against the machinery of whiteness that churns around us. Who we are is always the foundation for how we do our work, always the premise that we use to build our classroom engagement on for we believe that if we are to do the work of progressive education, we must first understand, reflexively, where we stand in relation to it. In this way, our pedagogy is necessarily limited, reminded, as we are by Hytten and Adkins that our positionalities mean that we need community and dialogue, that we are constrained by our locations as white men (448).

Who we are and how we make claims about and towards our identity in our teaching and writing has material consequences for ourselves and our students. The language we use in naming ourselves matters, and is significant for research practices that value and employ reflexivity as a critical practice. As Jennifer S. Simpson contends, talk about ourselves is always connected to larger structures of power. She explains:

Indeed, anytime white or racial minority students or instructors speak with language that reproduces racist inequalities and representations, the “I” is in fact supported by existing power structures that normalize and support this “I.” In other words, an “I” that invokes the discourse of whiteness is in fact an implied “we.” (195)

Acknowledging these relationships amongst our always changing identities and larger structures and systems of power is then a challenge that we must continue to negotiate by critically considering our own reflexive practices.

In the following sections, we spin our argument from our pedagogical experiences with students, creating autopoietic narratives that we hope demonstrate critical dialogue as two teachers talk about teaching, learning, and negotiating whiteness in relationship with our students (Alexander and Warren 328-43). This negotiation begins with a critical consideration of the effects of our own reflexive practices. In the end, we argue this kind of engagement is necessary, though in need of critical adaptation, for teachers as we strive for a more socially just world. The question of efficacy, building from the resistance and complacency we see in our students' responses, leads our concerns.

Resisting: Just "Americans"

Today, in my public speaking class, we are discussing audience analysis. I stress the importance of using a variety of techniques to determine the various perspectives, values, and experiences of an audience when preparing a speech. If the author is dead as Roland Barthes suggests, then the reader or the audience is of critical importance when it comes to the text of a speech, of a lecture, of a paper (or of this paper) (142-48). I want to make this point clear. It seems so obvious to me. Your audience matters; what your audience thinks, feels, and believes will shape the way they engage with your words. It's all clearly explained in chapter five (Jaffe). But there's nothing like a little repetition and extended class discussion to help make the point again.

So, we are first discussing demographics: age, gender, sex, political and religious affiliations, major, employment status, ethnicity, race, etc. I try and engage each demographic category critically by drawing attention to questions of context, power, and privilege. What does the fact that ninety-five percent of this class falls between the ages of 17 and 19 tell you about your audience? What does the fact that the majority of you are all currently employed? What do we know about each other based on the fact that all but one of you owns a cell phone? We then come upon the category of ethnicity and the class develops a list of potential ethnic groups that might be represented in the class. They are for the most part European ethnicities: Polish, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Irish, etc. We each raise our hands as we avow the category that is most representative of our identity.

Many students raise their hands for multiple categories and have difficulty recognizing and claiming an ethnicity. I ask, "What does this teach us? What does our difficulty with these categories reveal to us about *this* audience?" A woman sitting in the center of the classroom, looking annoyed by my constant questioning, responds without hesitation something to the effect of: "It doesn't make any difference. We're all Americans."

I am sure that with this statement the look on my face was one of puzzlement. Shaking my head, as if I had just bumped it on a low ceiling, I inhaled and I found myself . . . stuck. Not sure where to begin. Not sure if I heard correctly. Not sure if the red, white, and blue streamers, fireworks, and cheers of uncritical patriotism were in my imagination or in the classroom. I don't really remember what happened next. I

am pretty sure that I continued questioning the position held by this woman, trying to get at a more nuanced understanding of what it might even mean to be “American.” But I wish my response was the memorable part of this story. I wish my critical arguments and pointed questions had made the academic highlight reel of great moments in pedagogy. I also wish and hope that my questions are what stuck with the students in that interaction.

Judith Butler refers to what she calls the “embarrassed ‘etc.’” at the end of lists of possible identity markers (white, male, middle class, etc.) in order to emphasize the endless and indefinable nature of identity (196). In this class discussion about audience analysis the “etc.” following the various identity markers in our conversation has just become especially embarrassing. I am embarrassed at my slow reaction time. I am embarrassed by my inability to relate to this student in this moment. I am embarrassed by my lack of imagination in addressing this attempt at erasing difference. And beyond this specific micro-moment in this class, I start to realize how embarrassing the list of identity markers can be at a macro-level.

At a macro-level, 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. My attempt at developing a space for a discussion about the broader implications of our identities in this moment has fallen short. In part this failure is driven by the questions I am asking the students to consider. The identity categories I suggest for our “classroom demographic analysis,” mirror my own listing of demographic identity markers that I often include in my attempt to practice reflexive scholarship. However, as in this classroom experience, this practice does not always adequately address questions of context, power, and privilege that always enable and constrain my position in the world.

The embarrassment of this moment might also point to a need for a new point of entry or a new way of relating to and with the students in the class, as well as to and with these questions about difference. I recognize in my embarrassment a desire for new possibilities and new starting places for conversation. Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer suggest the development of imagined utopias or goals in striving for racial justice (261). One of their imagined goals is the creation of a society that values multiculturalism in which differences are acknowledged and respected (263). They incisively contend that arguments for considering everyone the same, “assumes that assimilation melts everyone equally into a new something, even if, in reality, that ‘new something’ is the dominant group projecting itself as the universal American” (265). This point might, in the future, provide a specific response to the kind of comment made by the student in my class. However, it is the project of creating and imagining goals and ideals that seems like a potential starting place for creating common ground and relationship with students. How might a conversation about imagined ideals invite a more careful and nuanced understanding of the consequences of our communication about difference? Or, what might happen if students were invited to relationally puzzle through the questions about difference, privilege, and power *with* rather than *for* me?

Teaching Politics

I'm interested in how students (their desires, their opinions, their rhetorical weight) influence my own teaching—in this case, in the ways that I have felt restricted in the very context and content of my courses. What I present here is a story—my story—one of my stories—of teaching in/with/and at times against the millennial student of our campus.

I was teaching Interpersonal Communication (IPC) 310—a junior level “communication criticism” course. The nature of the course, as one might suspect, is to develop skills that enable students to uncover various aspects of texts: the values it promotes, the ideologies embedded, the persuasive messages and/or techniques employed, as well as the accurateness a text may represent. It is a fun course—one I appreciate and one I enjoy teaching, though in these days increased administrative responsibilities, I find less and less time to teach it. So I was teaching IPC 310 and I realized something, something that I wonder about, something I think may not be localized to the specific context of NW Ohio.

I was teaching IPC 310 and we were reading Mark Orbe's essay on MTV's the *Real World*—I love this essay not only because I just believe it is good scholarship, but because I have watched *The Real World* regularly over the past several years and find his critique of images of black men in that TV text are almost always, *almost always*, directly on target. It, in a sense, has predicted how most of the seasons of the show would (and have) played out, including, most significantly, a recent season in which a black man is accosted by police and left unsupported by his white roommates (32-47). The piece connects with a text that these students know—most of the last class I taught knew the show, watched the show, and kept up to date on the show's happenings.

So I was teaching IPC 310 and we were talking about *The Real World* and that's when it happened. Perhaps that is a dramatic beginning—I mean, this was not the first time; it was but a repetition—another time, another moment where it surfaced. The pattern, re-made, and repeated, in the moment was the happening—it was recreated and resolidified in a student question, a student statement. “Dr. Warren?” Now I stop here to note that I am almost always, almost always, addressed in undergrad classes by my preferred “John” and, yet, here the “Dr.” was being used and it did not seem accidental... I just knew it could not be accidental. The use of the formal, the title, the Ph.D. is not only about respect; it is also, in this moment, I believe, about locating my subjectivity in the room. That is, the critique that is coming is not only about the content, but will inevitably be about my location in the room, my teacherly subjectivity being called up, interpellated in the moment—as if it couldn't be done any other way.

So I was teaching IPC 310 and we were talking about *The Real World* and that is when it happened, the question, the call, the moment of my content, meeting Orbe's argument, meeting this student's question. “Dr. Warren?” Yeah? “So, not to be a pain

or anything...” the opening, the comment to disavow the potentiality, the potential painfulness of his inquiry, the implication of his white male body asking this question about bodies that are not white, not privileged, not at all able to voice back from this classroom essay. “So, not to be a pain or anything, but this essay is ridiculous.” Ridiculous:

\Ri*dic"u*lous\, adj. 1. Fitted to excite ridicule; absurd and laughable; unworthy of serious consideration; as, a ridiculous dress or behavior. 2. Involving or expressing ridicule.

Syn: Ludicrous; laughable; risible; droll; comical; absurd; preposterous.

“So, not to be a pain or anything, but this essay is ridiculous. I mean, this essay is so politically correct; it is so out of touch; it is so clearly advancing a liberal agenda; it is so clearly biased.”

So I was teaching IPC 310 and we were talking about *The Real World*, and that is when it happened, the question, the call, the moment of my content, meeting Orbe’s argument, meeting this student’s question and I realized that the problem is that critical thought fosters a more leftist position—not in content necessarily, but in form. The left (at least for now), like the academy (at least for now), asks questions, goes deeper, understands issues have different contexts, different possibilities, and different consequences. The right relies on easy solutions and binary logics. How does the conservative movement on campuses by undergraduate (and at times graduate) students work against my goals in the classroom—not as a political person but as a teacher asking students to engage complicated social issues (like racism, like heterosexism, like sexism, like classism), when asking questions at all gets me lumped and dismissed as a liberal professor doing politics? This has been complicated by the increasingly sound-byte culture we live in, where a 30 second (“Kerry voted for the 87 billion before he voted against it”) byte works better than contextual understanding. I don’t think this is about politics as much as it is (and will become more so) about pedagogy and the nature of intellectual backlash. In other words, how could *The Real World*, a show based on the premise of the sound-byte, the brief decontextualized flashes of lives thrown into the most hostile situations (youth culture, different values, alcohol, and shared living spaces 24-7), be anything else than the perfect metaphor for my academic engagement: perfect as a site of analysis within the logic of critical theory, but at the same time the perfect example of the “it’s just a show, let’s not talk about social relevance, why are you making a big deal out of nothing but a TV show” logic that stands in defiance of critical theory and remains void of social or academic accountability?

So I was teaching IPC 310 and I realized that critical thought, critical pedagogy, critical thinking are now liberal politics. And my job as an educator just became even more contentious, even more the object of critique, even more the object of those aims to regulate educators working to create a more equitable, socially just classroom environment.

The politics of whiteness as a system that diligently works to maintain the status quo informs acts of resistance to critical thought, critical pedagogy, and critical thinking; imagining new ways of relating to and with students in this context is even more important than ever. By searching for common ground and embracing the ongoing process of a relationship, it may be possible to critically and reflexively engage with students, to engage resistance, and to develop understandings about humanity that might begin to exceed questions of politics.

Agreement: Nobody's Squirring

Today, in my intercultural communication class we are discussing the importance of history in our understanding of intercultural communication. I show the video: *Eyes on the Prize II*, which is a documentary about civil rights in the United States of America, including the Montgomery bus boycott, Rosa Park's refusal to move to the back of the bus, and the murder of Emmett Till. The images are familiar to me, but the stories are still as horrifying as when I encountered them for the first time. Afterwards we discuss the importance of the film, the civil rights movement, and the idea of racism as a systemic rather than individual problem. We discuss the legacy of racism as it pertains to our current social and political climate. The conversation goes smoothly. Nobody seems offended or upset by the arguments being made, and nobody seems to be making offensive arguments. The class seems to agree that these issues are important, that history has current implications, and that we are accountable for the effects of history.

Something seems wrong about how easy this is. Maybe I am doing something wrong. Maybe I am not being nuanced enough. Maybe my own whiteness is getting in the way of my ability to present a complicated and challenging perspective on race. Am I missing something? Are these students missing something? Shouldn't a conversation about accountability (particularly of white people) for the effects of history, be uncomfortable? Isn't a conversation about whiteness supposed to make people (especially white people) squirm?

My desire is not necessarily to cause students to feel uncomfortable regarding discussions about whiteness, but I do want to present them with the productive challenge of difficult ideas. I want to engage in what Megan Boler refers to as a pedagogy of discomfort in which we "examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment" (179). It might in fact be "easy" for some students to understand that racism is systemic, and that there are varying degrees of accountability we each may have for reproducing racist systems; however, I worry that this easy recognition and understanding works to prevent the potentially more productive challenges of a complex and nuanced conversation about racism. I worry that this recognition is somehow incomplete.

Alexander and Warren present a similar argument in their criticism of a specific experience with a university's mission to discuss the relationship between the university's core values and course content. Alexander and Warren explain:

Consider the first value the university promotes: “respect for one another.” It is amazing how I can look at the value and feel bad for hating it. It is not that I don’t value this quality; that I don’t want people to respect one another—it’s not like I’m a jerk that hates the idea of everyone getting along. It’s just that I worry that any “core value”—any pledge that we sign, feels not like a commitment to these values, but a refusal to engage what these values mean. (331)

This discomfort with seemingly “easy” concepts or “good” values works to foreground the importance of critically thinking about and recognizing the ways consequences of actions and interactions might exceed intentions. It is this kind of discomfort I desire for the students in my classes to experience and engage.

Similarly, I am not comfortable with the idea that the disclosure of my identity should be an easy sentence at the beginning of an essay. Reflexivity should not be a cursory confession of privilege; this too should be challenging. In regards to a pedagogy of discomfort, Boler makes the distinction between spectating and witnessing. She explains, “Spectating thus signifies a privilege: allowing oneself to inhabit a position of distance and separation, to remain in the ‘anonymous’ spectating crowd and abdicate any possible responsibility” (184). For Boler, the goal of a pedagogy of discomfort is to create an awareness of the ways in which we are always related collectively (176-77). A relational pedagogy would strive for this kind of collective awareness, or witnessing, in the classroom and in acts of reflexivity. Posing questions about the relational aspects of privilege and history might produce a more productive classroom conversation. A relational pedagogy may not cause students to squirm, but it might create conversations and practices of reflexivity that avoid an easy stillness.

At a Conference Hotel Bar

It was a moment in the bar at a conference. As a regular at conferences, I often find myself at the bar talking in impassioned voices about issues and points of tension—it is, in many ways, my favorite part of the conference experience. The conversation was much like the ones I have with my own students, though perhaps a bit more sophisticated than most of my undergrads. The question of whiteness is one that sparks great emotion, great excitement, great interest. Indeed, the students I work with often find themselves arriving at the same central point of these conversations: what the hell am I to do now that I know what I know? Indeed, the question of what to do is complicated and not easily answered; the desire to do less violence in the world is truly felt, I believe, though the answer is elusive, tricky. Indeed, the question itself has long been considered part of the problem.

On the one hand, some research says to construct an ethic of interaction and daily reflexivity. That is, use the lessons learned to reframe our work, our lives, and allow “whiteness studies” to affect what we do and how we interact with each other across difference(s). Often, this is quite individualistic—that is, change what you do on a local level. Think globally/culturally, act locally. On the other, some research says it is not about you—when you think you hold the answer, you usually do more harm than

good. I'm struck by a grad student who, upon a semester of research dealing with culture and whiteness, notes that, as a result of this course, she wanted to go tutor native Americans in English language and writing: "I just want to help them!" (Kathy Hytten & John T. Warren 65-89). A little bit of knowledge can be a bad thing.

This conversation in the conference hotel bar, along with recent engagement in my own classroom, continues to bother me. The story of my class: we read a book by Sandy Grande, a Native American education scholar who wrote a book entitled *Red Pedagogy*. And the class discussed, in very complicated ways, the various arguments and historical processes that produced Native American education as a mode of colonization and violence. The discussion, if I abstract from it, really became centered on a reoccurring question: "what do I do?" And, of course, the class recognized the quandary: 1) the desire to 'fix it' or solve the problem or 'do something' as a result of reading Grande's argument is a very white thing to desire; and 2) that realization, as a response to the ethical question of how should I be in the world as a result of my own constituted self, is less than satisfying. When the response to 'how can I be less of the problem' is "don't ask that question," my students, my bar friend/intellectual, (and my own self) can feel less than fulfilled. I understand the pickle—one's concern about how power and violence has affected some leads one to want to do something to rectify the injustice; but, as a pedagogical question, the need for a response, a fix, a rectification to this historical, cultural problem can cause more violence.

Yet, the need for possibilizing from such stories, such critical analyses, might be worth talking about. I believe that if we don't engage this in some meaningful way, students might find answers elsewhere and I suspect we might find such "solutions" scary—especially if the answers recast oppression. A change I would like to see us think about consists of addressing this issue not as a prescription for the solution, but as a possibilizing that makes space for students who genuinely (even if naively) desire some possible way of engaging in their everyday that does less violence to others. These need not be huge movements, but the idea of alliance and coalition building should not be off the table. The classroom is a rich site for considering these possibilities.

I was struck in that bar, that conversation, by my own lack of ability to respond to, with any sophistication (or intelligibility), the question. I had no good answer. Indeed, it was the genuine goodwill of the question, the passion of the moment, and what I understood as a commitment to asking hard questions of his/her own interactions that made me pause. My ready line of 'the question itself is the problem' felt a bit flat and not really up to the true power of the moment.

Desmond and Emirbayer offer possible answers to this question of action in their proposed sites of change in striving for racial justice. These include suggested action taken at the level of the individual, the inner circle, the institution, and the nation (273). Additionally, a relational pedagogy might offer new possibilities for addressing concerns about action. The cultivation of relationships that emerge in and from a desire to enact more socially just worlds and ways of being is not a kind of action that should be overlooked or underestimated. Continuing these conversations beyond the

classroom and conference hotel bars functions to constitute relationships of accountability and reflexivity. In part, this means imagining ways for these conversations about the value and importance of difference to continue. This also means working to recast reflexivity as a relational act rather than an individual one. A relational reflexivity is not an act of policing, but rather is an act of coming to and creating knowledge with others in a way that allows for greater accountability for and awareness of the effects of power and privilege.

Provoking: Your whiteness is showing

We collaborate and decide to introduce the concept of whiteness to the introductory intercultural communication class I am teaching by providing students with a copy of Tim Wise's blog entry, "This is Your Nation on White Privilege," in which Wise provides a list outlining clear ways to recognize white privilege. This list is satirically made up of various characteristics and biographical facts about Sarah Palin. For example:

White privilege is when you can claim that being mayor of a town smaller than most medium-sized colleges, and then Governor of a state with about the same number of people as the lower fifth of the island of Manhattan, makes you ready to potentially be president, and people don't all piss on themselves with laughter, while being a black U.S. Senator, two-term state Senator, and constitutional law scholar, means you're "untested."

We also provide excerpts from Christian Lander's book, *Stuff White People Like*, including: white people like Barack Obama, Wes Anderson movies, having black friends, yoga, gifted children, Wrigley Field, and "public transportation that is not a bus."

Wise doesn't hold any punches, and if you're white and belong to a certain socioeconomic class and political affiliation, Lander probably has your number on every page. The following class discussion is not particularly heated, although the students are challenged by these readings. For some, white privilege is a personal attack. They quickly recognize themselves as benefiting from the privilege of their whiteness, and are quick to respond with confessions of the colorblindness of their daily lives and their plethora of "black friends." Other students are uncomfortable with the readings because the satire fits within their notions of what constitutes a racist discourse.

A relational pedagogy might still be possible with the use of these satirical examples. However, our relationship with each other as teachers and with these texts might be the more productive example for students to consider because of the ways we continually struggle with and are held accountable by each other and these texts. The challenge of a relational pedagogy is in inviting a conversation in which students are not merely provoked by examples, but are encouraged to puzzle through the challenges of critically thinking about whiteness with us.

Toward a Politics of Dialogic Reflexivity: Whiteness and the Rituals of Positionality Disclosure

In many ways, this essay is about naming our location—each story crafts a moment where we locate ourselves within the context of our pedagogy. By telling a story where students resist or comply with our teaching of/about whiteness, we attempt a kind of reflexivity about who we are, what our politics in the classroom enables (or constrains), and the difficulty of communicating across our experiences (an effort we believe is essential for creating an effective classroom pedagogy for disrupting whiteness’ invisibility). So our effort here is, largely, about owning our experiences, reflexively engaging them, as well as calling out the moments of tension and ease that characterize our classroom. We are trying to model a kind of action that we find hopeful—a kind of action that has been useful to us as we try to hone our own pedagogy. By talking and writing together, we have learned more about ourselves and about how our efforts to do this critical work actually produce the kind of classroom learning we desire; we hope such an effort is productive for others who desire the same kind of dialogue.

In many ways, we fear that this essay, like others that we have read (or written), too easily allows us off the hook, allowing us to safely reflect without having to put too much of ourselves on the line. We offer these narratives with a genuine gesture of self-examination, knowing that this work demands that we be accountable for what we do and the ways those actions meet world; yet, like the list of positionality descriptions that begin this essay, we worry that the disclosure serves less to hold us accountable and more to dodge it. If we tell you that we are white men, well meaning and appropriately self-critical, do we get off the hook for our errors, our failures, our inability to see beyond our own self-named locations? Does the naming of positionalities deconstruct our privileges and name our situatedness within power or does it re-solidify the illusion of reflexivity, reduced to ritual, cliché? Certainly, we are quick to call our students out when they begin a turn at talk in the classroom with “I know I’m privileged, but...”; yet, how does the obligatory self-statements and self-narratives not replay these diversions, dressing them up in more sophisticated dress?

As teachers who have committed to engaging white supremacy, racism, and power in the classroom, we are not sure how to model a critical dialogic reflexivity when the models have, in some ways, become tools that may obscure power more than unmask it. The power of conservative logic in the popular imagination is that they take progressive and critical discourse and use it to reinscribe power—this is clear in affirmative action, GLBT marriage rights and feminist debates as the Right co-opts the discourse of the Left and uses it against progress. The reframing of Marriage Equality movements as an effort for same-sex couple to gain extra privileges (or that affirmative action is now framed as giving an unfair advantage to minorities) demonstrates this power. Has the discourse of reflexivity, of naming and being accountable for one’s position in system of power, been co-opted by the Right, used now to shield the mechanisms and reconstitution of power all while appearing to be reflexive? And,

does that make essays like this one part of the overall problem, erasing the efficacy of critical autopoietic scholarship that attempts to locate the self in culture?

We end this essay with a call to action: we believe that to discard the reflexive turn in our scholarship (and in our scholarship of teaching and learning) is unacceptable. That is, we hold the potential of scholarship such as this to enact social transformation is relevant and essential in our effort to write and live a pedagogy of whiteness, a pedagogy of interrogation and interruption. We contend that more can be garnered by continuing this labor, even in the face of questions of legitimacy and concerns of how such work deflects our privilege—we contend this because we still find the labor to be self-transformative.

However, we also call on our scholarship to meet the concerns spun out above—that is, the reasons students comply or resist (and the methods we use for creating contexts for such reflexivity rituals) need to adapt to meet the complacency we articulate. Whether it is the student who names the subject matter as ridiculous or the student who accepts their role in white supremacy as unavoidably status quo, we need to find new ways of encountering our students (and ourselves) in ways that not only hold us accountable for where we are (our positionalities) but also for where will be tomorrow. Such a reframing in relational terms might shift us from the stagnancy of today to a vision of tomorrow that creates spaces for students to see their lives as ones of agency and meaning. It might also help us move beyond the narrative of “this happened to me” to a narrative of “as a result, I choose to do...” It is not to foreground “actions” over critical reflexivity; rather, it is about seeking a kind of critical and relational reflexivity that, in dialogue with others, might begin the theorizing and imagining of possibility.

Coda: The Privilege of a Relational Reflexivity

Now, as I attempt to write “you and I” on the page, it’s my relationship with you that really demonstrates for me this dynamic potential of identity and reflexivity. As I try to write “you and I” on the page, I can’t help but realize the countless ways meeting you (on the page and elsewhere) continues to change me. As I write you and read you as my teacher, my mentor, and my friend, I am forever altered. Yours is an indelible mark on my story. Meeting and interacting with you challenges for me the whole practice of reflexivity because meeting and interacting with you changes me over and over again. This is the power of a relational ethic of teaching. It is a teaching that desires and develops connections. It is a teaching that searches for places to start, to write, and to learn together. Finally, it is a teaching that over time and space imagines new ways of entering classrooms and conversations about privilege, power, and difference

That little list of our remarkable similarities at the beginning of our essay doesn’t account for the differences you make in my life, and it doesn’t account for all of the ways I only wish I could be as remarkable as you. You and I writing together, asks me to be reflexive about my identity, but always in relationship. It starts in line at Subway.

It starts in your class. It starts with two different types of coffee. It starts with a meeting on the page. It starts with me writing you, and with you writing me, and that is a privilege for which I am infinitely grateful.

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