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Teaching About Whiteness

Why teach about whiteness?

1. In the past, teaching about “race” or “multiculturalism” has usually meant only focusing on people of color, as if “whiteness” had no place in the story. But it’s impossible to understand the history and socio-cultural effects of racializing classifications without studying the category of “whiteness.” (Just remember those signs on the water fountains.) Who invented it? Who has been included? How was it written into our laws? What positive and negative effects does it have on those it supposedly names? How can “white” people play productive roles in undoing the legacies of racism?
2. While today’s white students and teachers may be honestly and consciously against racism, studying whiteness opens our eyes to the persistent privileges given to whiteness that continue to influence our culture and society, and to how the material benefits of whiteness get passed down from generation to generation in unacknowledged ways. The persistence of these benefits raises ethical and moral questions we need to struggle with, for they have profound effects on the larger effort toward social justice and democratic equality.
3. Studying whiteness means studying institutional and cultural racism, especially racializing practices that create “white privilege.” Since white privilege is systemic and not personal, this approach can combat the tendency to get stuck in the “white guilt” syndrome (which involves both confessions and denials).
4. Studying whiteness can change the dynamic of any classroom, whatever its ethno-racial makeup, by moving the conversation from personal attitudes (and guilt) to the objective analysis of historical events, legal codes, social institutions, and cultural practices.
5. Silence about whiteness lets everyone continue to harbor prejudices and misconceptions, beginning with the notion that “white” equals normal. Whiteness oppresses when it operates as the invisible regime of normality. Thus making whiteness visible is a principal goal of anti-racist pedagogy.
6. Whiteness has been a significant legal and political category, and thus a powerful reality even if it is based on a fantasy. Whiteness is a way of distributing wealth and power according to arbitrary notions of biological difference. The history of whiteness is a history of racialization; it reminds us to think of “race” as a verb, not a noun.
7. Whiteness has been a significant aesthetic and cultural value (or symbol or commodity), and thus requires a defamiliarizing or deconstructive interpretation, especially in analyzing art, literature, popular culture, and other media where whiteness is privileged.

8. Teaching about whiteness helps move classes beyond the "celebrate diversity" model of multiculturalism. "Diversity" is often a topic that leads us away from candid examination of how the invention of "race" was primarily motivated by economic and political interests that exploited one group of people at the cost of another. It is difficult to celebrate diversity if diversity is the result of slavery, genocide, sexism, imperialism, or other structures of oppression.
9. Teaching about whiteness moves antiracist education in new directions by presenting challenging the existence of "race" and moving the focus to "racialization" or "social construction." It can also open up global horizons when we look at the preference for whiteness that has spread within cultures around the world, where in many nations we find many examples of light-skin privilege.

 *Approaches to whiteness, questions to ask:*

1. Always historicize: who invented "white" people? when was the term first used as a racial category? in Europe? in the United States? Who was included? Has the list of the included ethnicities changed since then? Why? (See my essay, "Who Invented White People?", online at <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/whitepeople.pdf>).
2. When does "white" enter into usage as a legal term in laws, statutes, court decisions, etc. in the United States? What are some significant milestones in the legal history of whiteness? (See the three-part documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion*.)
3. Who are "Caucasians"? When was the word first used as a racial category? What associations or meanings does it imply? Are "Caucasian" and "white" the same thing? What about "Aryan"?
4. Is "white" a term for a racial group or a cultural group? Is there any such thing as "white" culture? Are all its practitioners of the same skin color?
5. Is "white" a "panethnic" category along the lines of "Asian American" or "African American" or "American Indian"? Or should we speak of "European Americans," even though not all of them are "white"?
6. If "white" is not a coherent cultural or ethnic category, what kind of category is it? Social? Economic? Political? National?
7. Can "white" be used as a group name without invoking connotations of white supremacy? Or are whiteness and white supremacy fundamentally linked?

 *Exercises, Activities, Projects, Inquiries:*

1. Consciousness raising: Begin with Peggy McIntosh's essay on "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Sample some or the entire documentary *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible* (on YouTube). Read other deconstructions of

whiteness in David Roediger's anthology *Black on White* to establish the long history of African American theorizing about whiteness. Sample contemporary white writers on whiteness and mixed-race writers on the complexities of identity.

2. Screen the video *Blue Eyed*, which records a whiteness workshop for teachers run by Jane Elliott, inventor of the famous brown eyed/blue eyed classroom experiment. Or try one of Elliott's other videos, such as *Angry Eye*, her workshop with college students. Also recommended is white filmmaker Macky Alston's PBS documentary *Family Name*, in which he seeks out the extended black family of Alstons and explores his relation to the color line.
3. Keyword exercises: have students collect the entries on "race," "white," "Caucasian," "Aryan," "black," and "Negro" (for example) from at least two dictionaries and two encyclopedias. Compare the results, and ask students to now try writing their own definitions of some of these terms. Or have them use an interview technique, in which they record definitions of these terms gathered by interviewing other students, family members, teachers, librarians, etc.
4. Historical research: have students find uses of the word "white" and "black" (or "colored" or "Negro") in legal or political documents, such as acts of Congress, Supreme Court rulings, state and local statutes, etc. Discuss "whiteness" as a legal category (or legal fiction). Investigate the laws on interracial sex and "miscegenation" (see the anthology *Interracialism*, ed. Werner Sollers).
5. Life analysis (based on the questions in McIntosh's essay): have students make a list of ten things they normally do during the week. Then have them imagine that they woke up one day to find that their "race" had changed to [fill in the blank]. Going through their lists, students should analyze how each thing might be different for them were their "race" different. Would they be able to go to such places, talk to such people, enjoy such events, etc.? Would they feel comfortable doing so? What would be the chances that people of that race would be found doing these things in these places in these ways? What other things might they be doing instead? What real differences, in other words, does "race" make each day in our lives?
6. Cultural Identity paper: This assignment challenges students to examine their identity in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity. Typically, white students have tremendous problems with this assignment at first, since they have unconsciously coded "culture" as something that only "people of color" have. "I don't have a culture, I'm just white, just an American" is a fairly standard first response. By exploring their own race and ethnicity, and by thinking critically about the notions of culture and identity, students gain both a vocabulary and a method for taking on the larger issues raised by multiculturalism and whiteness studies. (For an account of this assignment see Gregory Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, chapter three, "Taking Multiculturalism Personally," also available online at: <http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/jaymulticulturalism.pdf>.)
7. Media analysis (read excerpts from Richard Dyer's book *White*): look for images of whiteness in the media. What kinds and types of whiteness appear most often? Are there different classes of white people? If so, how are they represented differently by the media? How long can one watch television or read a newspaper or magazine without encountering anything but white people, or mostly white people? Have students bring in

copies of major newspapers and magazines and analyze the distribution of images of whiteness, blackness, or of ethnicities such as Latino/a, Asian, Native American. Make a list of the top grossing films of the last five years and consider whether their characters and presumed audience show a bias toward whiteness. Consider screening such films as *King Kong*, *The Jazz Singer*, *Pinky* or *Imitation of Life* (1934; remade 1959).

8. Literary analysis: read portions of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Using texts by white authors, analyze the way whiteness gets constructed through comparisons to a dark or black "other." Debate whether or not schools should offer courses with names such as "Major White American Authors" or "The White Tradition in American Literature." Compare texts by white and black authors to analyze what difference whiteness makes (for example, compare Franklin's *Autobiography* with Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, or the poems of Langston Hughes with those of Robert Frost, or the stories of Alice Walker with those of William Faulkner). Have students rewrite particular stories or passages by changing the race of the narrator or main character. (For a substantial overview, assign Valerie Babb's book *Making Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*).
9. Ask difficult critical questions about white-centered "liberal" books on race, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Imitation of Life*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Help*. Do these books really challenge white privilege, or do they once again place the white character at the center of the story of race? Is the popularity of this genre due to the way the books make white people ultimately feel good about themselves? In making emotional sympathy for people of color the main lesson for whites, do these texts obscure the economic and political factors that are the real causes of racism?