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Racial Literacy, the Black-White Binary, and an Equitable Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

The American education system is still using the black/white binary as the primary racial paradigm when the United States itself has become an increasingly multiracial and multicultural society. Even within this paradigm, African American histories and accomplishments have received a lower-tier treatment which is often tokenized and presented uncritically. This article acknowledges the pivotal role the black/white binary has played in American racialized history while challenging educators to include other binaries – e.g., the indigenous/settler and orientalism/war binaries in Andy Smith’s categorization – in the US education system. Because the ideology of white supremacy operates differently in each binary, it is important for our students to cultivate racial literacy of American history as framed not only through the black/white binary, but also through the indigenous/settler and orientalism/war binaries.

KEYWORDS

black/white binary, orientalism/war binary, indigenous/settler binary, differential racialization, race essentialization

Because histories of racial minorities often receive scant coverage or are not included in mainstream textbooks, learning about the fundamental aspects of histories and narratives of racial minorities is vital not only for white students but especially for students of color. Understanding African American history critically (for example, not painting slavery as a relatively tame institution,) and understanding the alliances formed between Asian and African Americans during the civil rights movement will help Asian Americans to better understand their own history. Similarly, understanding how the “yellow peril” myth served to encourage discrimination and violence against Chinese workers, including lynching in some cases, that culminated in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act would help African Americans find historical moment of solidarity in resisting white supremacy. What this means in terms of teaching and learning is that students must attain literacy of minority groups and instructors must be adequately prepared to teach them.

Accomplishing the goal of teaching racial literacy to our students may entail a curriculum change if a university does not offer a required survey course on American racial or ethnic minorities. If a curriculum change is not possible, the next possible step is to form an ad hoc Diversity Committee, with the support of the administration, to compile a list of ways in which different departments within the university engage in diversity and inclusion issues: courses already being taught, other curricular initiatives, lecturers sponsored by various departments, extracurricular activities (including programming, e.g., workshops, art, music, dance) related to race and diversity, immersion programs, study abroad programs, film series that explore diversity, and so on. More often than not, adjustments are required to create a less-biased curriculum so that students receive a holistic introduction to cultures and histories of the various racial groups in the United States.

The same ad hoc Committee, or another committee, may have to do the heavy lifting of getting faculty buy-in and organizing activities for faculty development. Some development can focus on faculty attaining literacy about minority groups that they are not familiar with. For example, a keynote speaker for faculty development day could offer pedagogies on teaching a diverse population of students and faculty who have training in specific racial/ethnic groups could lead concurrent sessions throughout the day. These faculty members could provide background materials, resources, as well as be mentors for their colleagues throughout the year.

The Black/White Paradigm

To cultivate students' racial literacy one cannot ignore the black/white binary paradigm that has operated in the US since the time of slavery. The black/white paradigm posits that African American history and experiences are so distinctive that African Americans constitute a prototypical minority group. Within this framework, African American experiences take center stage in any discussion of race to the extent that the word "race" itself has become a code word to mean African American (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 75). Critics of this form of exceptionalism hold that the African American experience is distinctive, but does not structure the racialization of other minority groups. They assert the tenet of differential racialization in which every minority group in the US has been racialized differently (77). For example, few African Americans will be seen as foreigners or be made objects of ridicule by the manner of their speech, just as few East Asian Americans will be seen as dangerous or untrustworthy individuals that require close monitoring in stores and other settings. The differential racialization of American minorities demands that students learn about the histories and narratives of various racial minorities while not minimizing the historical suffering of slavery and ongoing discriminations endured by African Americans.

Feminist scholar Andy Smith argues that the black/white binary is the central paradigm in the system of white supremacy. She also maintains that any attempt to "go beyond" the black/white binary is tantamount to replacing "an analysis of white supremacy with a politics of multicultural representation" (Smith 2006, 70). The focus on the politics of multiracial inclusion can obscure the system of white supremacy operating in the black/white binary in a decisive manner. As Smith points out, any understanding of white supremacy must take the black/white binary into account (71). Besides the black/white or slavery/capitalism binary, Smith identifies two other binaries in which African Americans play a subsidiary role in the operation of white supremacy: in the indigenous/settler binary, "where Native genocide is central to the logic of white supremacy" and in the orientalism/war binary, where "Asians, Arabs, and Latino/as [are seen] as foreign threats, requiring the United States to be at permanent war with these peoples" (70-71). What this means is that having some understanding about the histories and experiences of various American minority groups constituted by these three binaries would be beneficial to our students living and working in the multicultural milieu of the US. By advocating for our students to think more critically about racial dynamics, we are teaching them how to function in a multiracial environment in ways that can disrupt white supremacy operating within their own respective binaries. Education is key for people of color to avoid falling into the "divide and conquer" trap, a classic method employed by a dominant group to pit one minority group against another, exemplified by the model minority myth.

Emerging in the mid-1960s during the African American civil rights movement, the model minority myth highlights individual achievements of Asian Americans while diverting attention away from structural and systemic racism confronted by all racial minorities. In addition, the stereotype pits Asian Americans against African Americans in particular because the function of the myth is to show that institutionalized racism is not an insurmountable barrier because Asian Americans

are able to successfully overcome it. This tactic is a variation of the “divide and conquer” principle employed by the dominant group to set Asian Americans up as rivals of African Americans; the model minority myth deflects attention from social structure. Thus, those in power and those who benefit from white supremacy avoid the responsibility of dealing with racial inequality and anti-black racism in particular. Understanding this racial tactic can enable African Americans and Asian Americans to work together to disrupt the white supremacy that affects all racial minority groups.

The black/white paradigm is evident in any discussion dealing with race, diversity, and inclusion. The addition of Latinx or “brown” to diversity and inclusion initiatives is a welcome recognition that the national conversation about race in the US must include orientalism/war binary as well. Asian Americans are often overlooked because they are perceived as a model minority; the high incomes of Asian American professionals and the high percentage of Asian American students in elite universities across the country may give the impression that Asian Americans do not suffer from racism. Yet this portrait of Asian achievements is also deceptive as Southeast Asian immigrant groups, such as the Burmese, Bhutanese, Hmongs, and Cambodians experience the highest poverty and high school dropout rates among all racial minority groups and are often left out of diversity and inclusion programs and conversations. For example, among Burmese Americans, 30 percent live below the poverty line and an alarming 39 percent are high school dropouts (Vang and Trieu 2014, 6-7). This means that Asian and Asian American faculty must make our voices heard: not only at professional conferences and speaking opportunities but also on our campuses, in ad hoc and official committees. We must highlight the structural disadvantages and racialization of Asian Americans without ignoring our own roles in anti-black racism and settler colonialism. These opportunities are “teachable moments” as Asian American faculty have much to teach about the complicated ways in which white supremacy has operated within racialized communities. As Brando Simeo Starkey (2016), an African American associate editor at *The Undeclared*, emphatically put it, “We must understand that a national conversation about racism that ignores the plight of Asian Americans carries an unforgivable omission.”

Black/White Binary Caution

A word of caution about the black/white binary paradigm in teaching and learning is in order. The black/white binary can suggest that the experiences of non-black minorities contain racial components only insofar as they are analogous to those of African Americans (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). This can result in the tokenized addition or the systematic exclusion of the experiences of non-black minorities in undergraduate curricula about American minorities. In the courses I have taught over the years that included race and racism in the US, my students consistently asked, “How come we weren’t taught that Asian Americans experienced racism as well?” This kind of comments indicate that students have had limited (or no exposure at all) to Asian American history and experiences in other undergraduate courses. In this scenario, the black/white binary might have become the only framework employed to consider all American problems of race and diversity. This is not to minimize the incomprehensible suffering of slavery and ongoing antiblack racism endured by African Americans which is at the heart of the black/white binary. However, we also need to attend to the indigenous/settler and orientalism/war binaries through which the structure of white supremacy has operated. In other words, the ideology of white supremacy operates differently in relation to each nonwhite racial group to the degree that no person or group’s experience is so paradigmatic that it can encompass all other experiences. Students of all races and ethnicities can benefit from learning about the three binaries proposed by Smith (2006) and the experiences of racialized groups within the US. Having some understanding of the experiences of people whose lives are structured within these three racial projects is crucial in learning to live ethically in a multiracial America.

The differential racialization approach to teaching and learning is still a work in progress. Most instructors who teach diversity and inclusion in their courses are confident in their racial literacy. Although many may know African American history and some aspects of Latinx communities, most college and university professors know little about Asian American history and experiences. By the time students graduate, many have been exposed to some elements of African American history and the black/white binary (though admittedly insufficient), yet many of these same students know hardly anything about the experiences of other nonwhite groups— those seen as permanent foreigners (orientalism/war binary) or those who have become invisible in the US landscape (indigenous/settler binary). As Starkey notes, “By not studying how racism impairs Asian-American lives, we underestimate and miss crucial intelligence on how white supremacy sabotages the

hopes and dreams of people of color” (2016). In other words, to live in a multicultural and inclusive society, our students must cultivate racial literacy of American history as framed not only through the black/white binary, but also through the indigenous/settler and orientalism/war binaries.

At the local institutional level, nonblack minority instructors, especially tenured faculty, must work in concert with African American colleagues to ensure that students foster racial literacy of various ethnic minority groups. We need to move beyond “oppression Olympics,” which tends to focus on which group suffers the most, to a differential racialization approach which recognizes the different ways in which power, privilege, and white supremacy has operated in the lives of all groups. Moreover, any university committee or group that has a majority of faculty of color must be attentive so that it does not become a way for the administration to “manage” minority grievances or become another committee for minoritized members to participate in with no consequential impact on the curricula and student programming of the institution.

In a classroom setting, a pedagogical approach that helps my students to better understand the Orientalist logic of the Asian American experience is sharing information that has been excluded from mainstream textbooks. For example, most Americans do not know that it was nearly impossible for Chinese women to enter the US in the 1800s, that the vast majority of Chinese women who did manage to come in the US were slaves (kidnapped for prostitution), or that American brokers in Southern Chinese ports captured, kidnapped, and indentured thousands of Chinese as slaves and transported them on American ships to Cuba, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Panama, and Mexico (Pfaelzer 2007, 5, 26). Promoting racial literacy through storytelling also functions as a powerful means for discussion and reflection. Stories ensure that students speak from their own experiences rather than acting as native informants or speaking on behalf of their racial or ethnic group. As an Asian American who grew up in an inner-city black neighborhood, I am hardly a dispassionate interpreter of issues concerning race and diversity. Having my students read my own autobiographical theological reflection “Life in the Fishbowl!” (Cheah 2020), and watch eighteen-year-old Canwen Xu (2016) tell her story “I am not your Asian Stereotype,” makes the Asian American experience concrete and alive. Telling stories and sharing experiences also helps me to reclaim teaching and learning as an essential part of faculty-student dialogue. This kind of “talk-story” approach can build connections and community.

Race Essentializing

Corollary to the black/white paradigm is “race essentialization.” Essentializing, in many ways, is like stereotyping as both involve generalizing what it means to be of a particular race. Some examples of race essentialization include: “Asians are inscrutable,” “Blacks are lazy,” “Mexicans are wetbacks.” In her qualitative study of teacher and student interactions at a small public high school, Jane Bolgatz offers one way of handling this kind of situation. She observes American history teachers encouraging their students to look deeper into racial assumptions by asking two interrelated questions: “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” (Bolgatz 2005, 70, 79).

I found this approach quite useful when teaching about sensitive yet important issues concerning race and religion. In such cases, the social positions of students play a crucial role. Sometimes white students are afraid to speak up in class for fear that they might offend students of color or that they might not look good in the eyes of their peers. In a class with mostly white students, discussion can devolve into a therapeutic session more preoccupied with individual wounds and hurt feelings instead of with critical analysis of race and religion. To counter this tendency, I depersonalize discussions by talking about the larger institutional dynamics and systemic racism, and encourage students to look deeper into their racial assumptions by asking Bolgatz’s (2005) questions: “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” After years of teaching courses on race and religion, I have become a good facilitator in encouraging students, especially those who must take enormous risks to name their own truth and oppression, to discuss issues of race and religion in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Indeed, in any course exploring sensitive issues of race, oppression, and religious intolerance, creating an atmosphere of trust and respect is vital. Providing ground rules or guiding principles for student discussion is essential.

Race essentialization is not exclusive to the dominant group. A nondominant student can make race-essentializing statements as well. Bolgatz notes a young African American student who said, “A young White man will never

understand. . . what it's like to be a young Black man" (2005, 79-81). The entire class went silent, in part because white students might have been afraid of saying something offensive to their black classmates. In this situation, we can use the strategy of critical interrogation to further discussion. We can ask, "How do you know that a white man will never understand what it is like to be a black man?" Bolgatz observes that students who seem sure what it means to be of another race can see the problem of essentializing when asked to self-reflect and to define what it means to be of their own race. Bolgatz concludes that when they dig deeper, students realize how delicate their definitions of their own race are, and how easily one might contest the meaning they attach to race. In other words, race essentialization shuts down communication through oversimplification and claims that one cannot know others. It removes the possibility of learning from each other and censors the plurality of voices that are so necessary in the discussion of race (Bolgatz 2005, 79).

Conclusion

At the copyediting stage of this writing, Governor Ned Lamont announced on December 9, 2020 that the state of Connecticut to become the first state in the nation to require public high schools to offer courses on African Americans, Black, Latino and Puerto Rican Studies effective fall of 2022. This will make history courses offer at the high school level in Connecticut more inclusive and better reflective of the history of the United States. However, there are some drawbacks to this approach. First, by making it an elective course of study, one wonders how many students who are not African American, Black, Latino, and Puerto Rican would take this class. Second, United States was multicultural from the very beginning: Our students should attain some critical literacy in the histories of the original inhabitants of this nation, those who were brought here involuntarily, those who came here to escape from political and religious persecutions, as well as those who immigrated here for economic opportunities. In other words, the histories and contributions of non-white Americans should be part of the canon of American history textbooks. Such a textbook should include not only the history and contributions of European Americans but also the pivotal roles played by African Americans in the black/white binary, Native Americans in the indigenous/settler binary, and other racial minorities in the orientalism/war binary. Once we have a standard American history textbook inclusive of voices that have been tokenized, distorted, or ignored altogether, it makes sense to offer elective courses on selective minority groups. Otherwise, the inclusion of selective minority groups in the school curriculum would further marginalize those who were excluded. Creating an equitable learning environment for the histories and experiences of various American minorities will ensure that students cultivate critical racial literacy of all Americans. Forming coalitions among faculty for updating curriculum and programming can ensure that students acquire pedagogical skills to resolve the problems of race essentialism that show up in every class on race and diversity and that students are prepared to live and work in a racially and culturally diverse environment.

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