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WHAT RACE ISN'T

Teaching about Racism

The biggest challenge in teaching about racism is to have double vision: on the one hand, to continually point out that the seemingly real, obvious, and biological foundations of racial categories are completely fabricated, constantly shifting, and in spite of their widespread acceptance, not obvious at all; on the other, to explicitly map, over and over again, the devastating injuries brought about by racism and expose the ways that ideas of race are used to justify gross economic and social inequities.

It's a tightrope walk, requiring dexterity in handling contradiction. To expose the notion of biological race as fraudulent, to look at the actual genetics of human diversity and see that there is no such thing as race, no human subspecies, without allowing any quarter to the liberal pretensions of colorblindness, to the literal whitewashing of real differences in culture, experience, power, resources. To demolish the idea of fundamental biological difference and refuse to let anyone get away with "We're all human beings" meaning "We're all like me" or use the true statement that all lives are important to undermine and dismiss the specific power of saying, in the face of systematic and deadly racist violence, that Black Lives Matter.

To bear witness to all of the bloody history of racism, to expose its manipulations and brutalities, the wicked roots of its ideologies and their ruthless implementation, and to make ample space for righteous rage,

without allowing a speck of essentialism to creep into the anger of Students of Color, conceding no space at all to ideas of “blood” determining our moral and political stances.

It is extremely useful to teach students about the flexibility of racist ideology, how adaptable it is to the needs of the elite, to see how it serves those who wield it. What does it mean that in the early twentieth century an attorney in the Minnesota Iron Range tried to classify Finns as “Mongolian” to exclude radical miners, many of them Finnish, from citizenship, but failed, because the broader elite powers didn’t want to raise questions about the whiteness of any Europeans? Or that in 1923 the US Supreme Court ruled, in spite of the expert “race science” testimony of anthropologists, that a high-caste Hindu man might be Aryan but was not white because the “common understanding” of white excluded him? What does it mean that in mid-nineteenth-century debates in California Mexicans were considered white and Chinese people weren’t, not because of their features but because of their relative positions in the economy of the time and place? And see how 150 years has reversed that classification: Mexican Americans are most definitely no longer seen as white, while Asian Americans, economically exploited as the working-class immigrant population continues to be, are considered the People of Color closest to “almost white.” This has everything to do with the economic rise of Japan and China and the industrialization of parts of the Pacific Rim, not any increased tolerance or enlightenment among European Americans. The shifting ground of race serves the shifting interests of class.

It’s in that space of critical curiosity and historical context, in the tension held between layers of truth, that insight emerges. Some of those moments of insight in my own life came from being abruptly shifted across categories in the eyes of others. In 1967 my family moved from rural Puerto Rico to Chicago. On the island my light brown hair was called *rubia*, or blonde, and although I was a Caribbean girl with indigenous and African ancestors and a colonial subject, my middle-class access in a community of farm laborers, my US Jewish father, and my light skin color made me a *blanquita*.

In Chicago, in the private university high school my father’s faculty status entitled us to, my brother and I became *spics* overnight. My skin color got lighter in the long sunless winters, and my English was accent-free, something that people still marvel over in congratulatory voices.

But as a Puerto Rican girl in a big US city, I acquired social color. I was racially recategorized by getting on a plane.

Some of us are dark enough and Spanish-speaking enough to bear the brunt of immediate and constant recognition and unambiguous classification as a target. Others, like me, become the tokens, exotic but conditionally acceptable. We are the ones who are told we don't look Puerto Rican, don't sound Puerto Rican, the ones who are always being invited to collude in despising our own kinfolk, the ones people confide their racism to as between friends.

Redefined by migration as a young Woman of Color, and fortunate enough to find communities of activism where I could give voice to the complexity of my social identities, the loosely knit web of US feminist Women of Color became my home and the root place of my political coming of age. But "Woman of Color" is essentially a political term, not a racial one. It is a name that is not claimed by every female with dark skin and ancestors from outside of Europe. It's a name defined by collective opposition to racism, a unity created by a politicized shared experience. It brings together peoples who have been at war with one another for centuries. It brings together people whose features, colors, languages, and customs have very little in common but who, confronted with US racism, were subjected to similar abuses.

Just as "white" was invented to cover all those invited to partake of the colonial pie, some sooner, some later, it was defined always against someone else's not-whiteness. In 1744, when sailors pressed into the service of England joined with indentured servants, slaves, relocated indigenous people, and others to riot against the elites of New York City and burn their mansions, English sailors spoke of going out to attack white people as if it were obvious that this category did not include them. Many Europeans had already become white in relationship to imperialism. Others came to this country as racialized minorities in Europe: Irish, Eastern European Jewish, Roma, Slavs, and Sicilians, despised by the English, French, and Germans whose elites were the dominant imperialist powers. They became white in relation to specific groups of people who were not.

One of the challenges I offer European American students is to figure out in relation to whom their family took on this identity. For Scandinavians in Minnesota, it was most likely the Ojibwe; for the Irish and the

Ashkenazi Jews of eastern cities it was African Americans; for settlers in the Southwest it was indigenous and mestizx peoples from both sides of the new border who credentialed their whiteness; in California most likely a mixture of people from many indigenous nations, and Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinx migrants. For all their weight in our lives, the racial categories that define how injustice will be measured out are extremely circumstantial.

If we can teach the history of racism in the United States as a history of the shifting needs of empire and class, as a history of both impositions and choices, alliances and betrayals, a history with roots far outside and long before the first colonial encounters, if we can hold the tension between disbelief in race and belief in what racism does to us, we will enable more and more young people to remake old and seemingly immutable decisions about where their interests lie and with whom.