"THE LIMITS OF BEST INTENTIONS," WESTON TERUYA

Beyond Colorblindness and Multiculturalism

Rethinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy in the University Classroom

By Priya Kandaswamy

Nearly forty years after student-led movements began to challenge the racism and Eurocentrism of U.S. universities and many campus struggles later, it has become fairly commonplace, though by no means ubiquitous, for universities and colleges to offer majors or minors in fields such as Ethnic Studies. However, the increased visibility and accessibility of these programs has not translated into a less racist university. Instead, institutionalization has brought about its own challenges. Programs are frequently marginalized within the university, and many of us who teach courses about race are called upon to fulfill university mandates such as "diversity" education that are not necessarily in line with our scholarly and teaching goals. In addition, a renewed attack on the presence of students of color in higher education through the dismantling of affirmative action programs has meant that Ethnic Studies scholars often find ourselves teaching Ethnic Studies in segregated classrooms that are structurally off limits to many people of color.

The fact that universities that are frequently hostile to the presence of students of color on their campuses can simultaneously espouse the virtues of teaching racial tolerance or including "diverse" experiences in their curriculum reflects the convergence of colorblindness and multiculturalism as the dominant discourses of racism within university settings. Colorblind discourse asserts that any consideration of race is itself racist. It protects racism by making it invisible, and has been instrumental in the preservation of white privilege within universities through the dismantling of affirmative action in admissions and hiring, the delegitimization of scholarship that interrogates racism, and the marginalization of those of us who need to name the racism that we experience in our everyday lives. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the heightened visibility of difference without a critical analysis of power. In other words, multiculturalism asks us to explore problematically defined cultural differences while evading the question of racial inequality altogether.

Employing the discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism as a mechanism to reinforce white privilege within the academy is not just the stuff of regents, administrators, admissions officers, and hiring committees. Rather, it is also a strategy that white students, consciously or not, use in classroom discussions about race to deflect challenges to their own positions of privilege. The racial privilege of white students is usually reinforced by institutions that view these students as their primary constituency and by white professors, department heads, and administrators who often identify more strongly with their white students. While many progressive educators strive to create classrooms that are safe havens from racism, sexism, classism and homophobia, it is important to recognize the impossibility of this goal in a society that is organized by inequality. The classroom is not a space outside of society, and students and teachers do not check their histories at the door when they enter it. Rather, the classroom reflects the inequalities in the world around us. In the classroom, just as in the society in which we live, there are no blank slates or level playing fields for any of us.

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The invocation of colorblindness works to mask inequalities within the classroom. I once had a class in which the white students literally sat front and center in the classroom. While insisting that race no longer exists, these students did not even seem to notice that they had pushed the students of color in the class to the periphery of the room until I physically rearranged them. Not only do many white students fail to see racial inequality even when it is right in front of their eyes, their ideas of what racial equality would look like are often informed by their investments in white privilege. As Cheryl Harris has noted, whiteness is constructed in such a way that when people of color "trespass" on the privileges of whiteness, whites often feel a sense of racial injustice.[1] White students often have the racialized expectation that their experience will be centered in the classroom. Therefore, when the perspectives of students of color are taken equally seriously, many white students express a sense that they are being victimized because of their race. This misplaced sense of racial injury is a reflection of their deep-seated desires to keep the privileges of whiteness despite the ideological commitments they may express to racial equality.

On the other hand, employing the tropes of multiculturalism, these same students often express a deep desire to learn about people who they see as different from themselves. When I teach courses like Women of Color in the U.S. or Contemporary U.S. Immigration, white students frequently say that they see the course as an opportunity to enrich themselves by learning about different cultures, as a vehicle toward their own personal growth. Statements like these indicate that white students often view classes about the experiences of people of color as a kind of tourist experience rather than as a place for serious critical inquiry. (This metaphor is particularly apropos, as tourism, while ostensibly about the places and people being seen, is actually about producing a positive experience for the tourist.) These statements are also implicitly based on the assumptions that racism is primarily a matter of individual prejudices rather than a structural phenomenon, and that the goal of a course about racism is to simply counter these individual prejudices. In light of these dynamics, educators must think critically about whom the emphasis on diversity education is intended to benefit. While for white students dealing with diversity means learning about other cultures, for students of color dealing with diversity often means learning strategies to negotiate institutional racism. The fact that these strategies are rarely the subject of diversity education says a great deal about whom diversity education is really for.

Given these challenges, how can educators engage in effective anti-racist pedagogy despite the university's complicity with institutional racism and many students' investments in it? How do we counter the tendency of administrators, colleagues, and/or students to read our work as multicultural education that ought to promote tolerance and expose (white) students to "diversity"? What should the goals of anti-racist pedagogy be? In classrooms that are often organized around white privilege, how do we teach against that privilege rather than to it? Given the current hegemony of liberal thinking, how do we cultivate a critical analysis of power amongst our students and what do we hope our students will do with that analysis?

In this essay, I reflect on these questions by discussing my recent experiences designing and teaching a course on race, gender and the politics of social welfare in the United States. My initial desire to develop this course came out of my own experiences talking about my research on the same topic. I was troubled by the way that people from all walks of life seemed to cling to the image of the "welfare queen"— mythic lazy, irresponsible, and sexually promiscuous black and Latina women who manipulatively abuse the welfare system — even when presented with the wide array of factual evidence that disproved this stereotype. The common assumption that the behavior of the poor needs to be reformed and the ubiquitous language of work, individual responsibility and family values seem to circumscribe our collective ability to imagine an anti-poverty politics. Therefore, I wanted to teach a class that would challenge students to rethink how race, gender and capitalism structure how we see and know the world.

Having had the opportunity to teach the course in three distinctly different settings (a research university, a liberal arts college, and an urban state university), I have learned a great deal about the possibilities and limits of taking apart common-sense beliefs about race and gender. It has been interesting to see what different kinds of students come into my class knowing, how they respond to the material I teach, what ideas they gravitate toward, what ideas they resist, and how different institutional contexts shape all of these things. After discussing my own goals for the class, I will examine some of these responses in greater detail focusing on the insights they offer for anti-racist pedagogy.

In designing my course, I wanted to move beyond the strategy of disproving stereotypes by providing evidence to the contrary. In other words, I did not want to simply expose students to "positive" representations of low-income women of color in order to either counter their individual prejudices or to construct an alternative narrative of the noble and deserving poor — a narrative that might homogenize diverse experiences or easily be assimilated to the dominant discourse as success stories or exceptional cases. Nor did I want to replace demonizing representations with perhaps better intentioned but equally problematic representations of low-income women of color as helpless victims deprived of all agency or as a superheroes who can single handedly save the world.[2] I wanted to move students away from thinking about welfare recipients' character, the question of whether or not welfare recipients are lazy, promiscuous and irresponsible, and toward asking why these particular "facts" matter. Why are the behaviors of low-income people of color constant cause for public scrutiny and why are the rights of certain populations contingent upon perceived behavior? Asking these kinds of questions enables students to step out of the dichotomies of good and bad, deserving and undeserving, and innocent and guilty, and instead work toward problematizing the socially constructed nature of these dichotomies. Drawing heavily on the insights of cultural studies, my class asked students to think critically and politically about representation. This meant deconstructing the discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism and teaching students to see how the different ways we define social problems is an effect of social relations of race, gender and capitalism.

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I began by introducing students to some theoretical approaches and conceptual tools for thinking about race and gender. On the first day of class, I asked students to define race and gender, and we made a collective list of what we thought definitions of those terms ought to include. For example, definitions of race from students who had not been explicitly asked to think about race as a concept before often equated race to culture, ethnicity, or skin color and rarely included social stratification or power. Some more advanced students noted that race was a social construction but upon questioning were often unable to follow that up with an explanation of what social construction means. This exercise proved useful in that it not only stimulated discussion but also denaturalized students' preconceptions and made them aware of the frameworks for understanding race and gender that they brought with them into the class.

Following this exercise, they read selections from Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States.* Throughout the class we used Omi and Winant's concept of the racial project as a way of talking about stereotypes not as misrepresentations, but rather as effects of power. Omi and Winant argue that a racial project is "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines."[3] This framework allows students to move beyond thinking about whether particular representations are right or wrong and to move toward understanding the work that representation does. Seeing the "welfare queen" as a racial project enabled students to analyze how this particular representation was part of a larger social struggle over how state resources should be allocated. Rather than simply noting that the stereotype of the "welfare queen" was wrong, they came to understand that the representation of certain populations as unde-

serving was fundamentally linked to social struggles, particularly efforts to deny social resources to low income women of color.

Another essay we read early in the term was a short piece by Avery Gordon in which, drawing upon the work of Patricia Williams, she suggests the importance of recognizing that "life is complicated." In her analysis of this seemingly simple statement, Gordon draws out the points that both power relations and people themselves are exceedingly complex. Specifically focusing on what Gordon calls "complex personhood" enabled students to see that the violence of racist representations lies in the way that they reduce complicated people into a singular, fixed thing.[4] For example, we discussed the idea that welfare recipients are lazy by talking about times when they themselves have been seen as lazy. Students were readily able to recognize that they can have very complicated reasons for not wanting to come to class or do an assignment (exhaustion, hating the class, having more important things to do, wanting to enjoy a beautiful day, etc.) and that in the public discourse on welfare, recipients are never granted that kind of complexity as people. Rather, they are always already seen as motivated by laziness and a desire to cheat the system despite the fact that we may know nothing about their particular situations. Complex personhood was a concept students returned to again and again in the course and was particularly useful in the way it got students to recognize what they do not know about other people.

Finally, I encouraged students in my course to grapple with the relationality of differences. In my experience, when confronted with difference, students often adopt one of two approaches to make that difference seem less threatening. Either they try to reduce difference to sameness by immediately focusing in on possible points of commonality to their own experience or they treat difference as fundamentally disconnected from their own experience. For example, in women's studies classes, when discussing the experiences of women of color white students often either try to emphasize that they have had similar experiences to women of color or treat the experiences of women of color as separate from their own experiences and therefore as something about which they have nothing to say. Both of these positions allow white students to avoid questioning their white privilege by re-centering their own experience.[5] Emphasizing the relationality of differences allows students to see how different experiences are in fact interconnected. Part of understanding the experiences of women of color means understanding how those experiences are connected to the experiences of white women. As historian Elsa Barkley Brown argues, "[m]iddle-class white women's lives are not just different from working-class white, Black, and Latina women's lives. It is important to recognize that middle-class women live the lives they do precisely because working-class women live the lives they do. White women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do."[6]

After spending a couple of weeks on these theoretical frameworks, we looked at historical perspectives on the U.S. welfare state in the second part of the course. The goal of this section was not only to set the stage for a historically grounded analysis of contemporary issues but also to denaturalize contemporary political debates. We focused specifically on the history of the language that we use to describe poverty exploring how words like dependency, deservingness, responsibility, and freedom have come to mean what they do in racialized and gendered contexts. Finally, we turned to contemporary transformations in the U.S. welfare state. Looking specifically at different representations of the social problem of poverty in news media, film, social science, and texts by radical activists, students used the theoretical and historical knowledge they developed earlier in the class to analyze how these representations worked and the kind of politics they enabled and/or displaced.

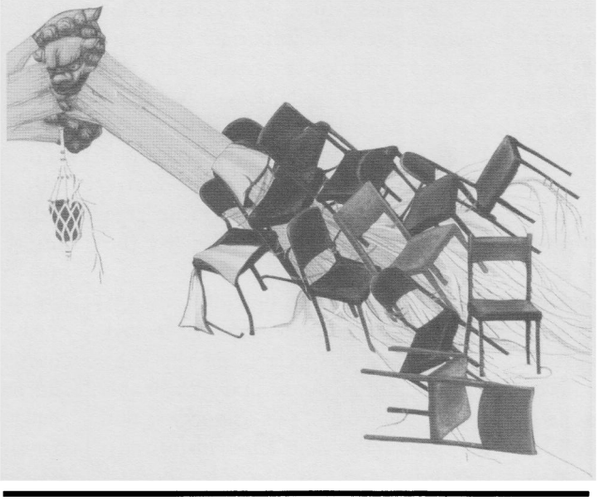
While the class was successful in many ways, it has also raised a number of difficult pedagogical issues for me. Each of the times I have taught it, I have felt that most students left thinking differently than when they came in, and I have consistently received feedback from students (even those who did not seem to always enjoy the class) that they learned a great deal. The class went the most smoothly when I taught it at the research university. This is most likely because most of the students came into the course with some theoretical understanding of race and gender. In addition, the fact that the class was nearly 75% women of color created a dynamic in which the women of color in the course participated a great deal and developed a sense of ownership over the course. The other two times I taught it, students of color made up less than a quarter of the class and, for the most part, white students tended to dominate the discussion and the classroom space. In addition, in both of these classes, it was the first time many of the students had been asked to think critically about race. As such, I was met with a great deal of resistance throughout the course. This resistance was most frequently manifested as a kind of refusal to understand or to step outside of the terms of the dominant discourse. While outright hostility, which also happened at times, is obviously a challenge, I have found this other form of resistance to be far more difficult to negotiate in the classroom.

Granted, resistance to class material can be a very powerful form of engagement and often marks the fact that students are being challenged in an important way. However, with these two groups of students, I often encountered forms of resistance that felt more like resistance to the very act of engagement itself. For example, one of the most frequent complaints voiced by students was that the class was too hard. Students often expressed frustration with the structure of the class and wondered why we spent so much time on theory and history in a class about contemporary social problems. They also frequently complained that "we [were] talking about too many things" when I asked them to think about race, gender, and capitalism together. I do concede that it was a difficult course. However, I think these particular students' frustrations were grounded in an implicit assumption that while you need skills to understand science or philosophy or

literature, knowledge about the social world is somehow self-evident. In addition, I suspect that many of the white students believed that they already knew all there was to know about racism and that it ought to be easy to engage the experiences of people of color either because they are inherently simple or because they couldn't possibly be all that different from their own. When confronted with material that challenges these assumptions, many students chose to shut down. They often stopped reading or more frequently read the texts as confirming what they already thought regardless of what the texts actually said.

Another frequent point of resistance I encountered was around the question of "solutions." While the question of what should be done about inequality is obviously an essential one, students seemed to walk into class wanting to think about solutions before we'd even begun to think about how we might want to define the problem. In particular, when we talked about structural inequality students often complained that the class was "too depressing." As a result, students' preconceived ideas of what constitutes a "solution" limited their ability to recognize and respect activism that moves beyond liberal frameworks. So, while we read work from activists who argue for revolutionary changes from wages for housework to prison abolition, most students tended to dismiss these frameworks as "impractical" and therefore not real solutions. The discourse of practicality in this context works to eclipse any form of activism that is not easily contained within the already existing liberal political structure.

In addition, I found that students were most resistant to recognizing the activist work of working-class women of color. Over the course of the class, we read texts that explore the activism of women on welfare, immigrant women workers, and women who have family members in the criminal justice system.[7] The activism of these women provides powerful models for radical organizing, but students were often reluctant to recognize this. Rather, students were far more comfortable seeing women of color simply as victims who needed saving. When they did recognize women of color's activism, many tended to particularize it and treat it as though it could never effect systemic change. When pushed to articulate what would constitute a solution for them, students mentioned things like legal change, changes in their own lifestyle (especially changes in consumption patterns such as shopping at American Apparel), service work, humanitarian aid, voluntarism and charity. I do think that these sentiments reflect a genuine desire to engage in political action, one that should be fostered. However, they also reflect an inability to recognize political strategies that do not reproduce themselves at the center.



"UNDERSTATED DECOR (FRACTURED ALLEGIANCES)," WESTON TERUYA

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Finally, perhaps, the most significant point of resistance from students in the class was their personal investment in not knowing certain things. How this resistance manifested itself varied greatly from context to context. When I taught the class at the liberal arts college to students for whom white privilege and wealth was the accepted norm, students resisted accepting the idea that they even had privilege. Some clung very hard to the belief that they had earned their privileges while others maintained that there would always be some people who had more than others, thereby naturalizing inequality. In contrast, at the urban public university where most of the students came from white working-class backgrounds, students were much more invested in the idea of upward mobility. For many of the women in the class who had been on welfare in the past and saw their college education as a possible path to economic security, the reading resonated strongly with their own experiences. However, they were simultaneously deeply attached to the idea that education and hard work are the remedy to inequality. For me, this second dynamic was the most difficult to negotiate. While at the liberal arts college students seemed to hide behind their privileges, at the urban university, I could tell that many students had invested in dominant discourses about opportunity and hard work as a matter of economic and psychic survival. I came to see that their investments in not knowing had to do with the devastation of recognizing their lives as deeply curtailed by structural inequalities over which they had no control. When we did eventually work through this recognition, it led to some very productive and unexpected conversations about the relationship between race and class for working-class white women.

I draw attention to these points of resistance because I think that they are indicative of the obstacles educators face when they push students to think beyond colorblindness and multiculturalism and to instead *develop an analysis of power*. These are not necessarily obstacles that we as educators can "solve" or bypass short of transforming the larger power structures from which they originate. However, there are

strategies or principles we can adopt for dealing constructively with these forms of resistance and not letting them dictate the tenor of our courses. First, we need to be particularly vigilant about not catering to white privilege especially in classrooms and institutions where white students dominate. Many educators have stressed the importance of getting white students to recognize their privileges, and this is certainly an important step. Unfortunately, white students, I have found, are often quite content to focus on "working through their privilege" (a phrase I have never really understood given that the nature of privilege is such that it cannot be worked through at an individual level) because it is a process that is still fundamentally about them. For me, as a teacher and as person of color, decentering white privilege includes addressing it but primarily means moving on.

Often, as teachers, we feel compelled to cater to the needs of the demographic that is in our classroom. However, in a context where higher education is becoming increasingly inaccessible to many students of color and working-class students, this is a dangerous move. I advocate that we design our courses and teach our classes with the students who are not always physically present in the classroom in mind. The best way to decenter whiteness in the classroom is to ask ourselves what we would want to teach if our classrooms were truly representative of the population of the world and insist on teaching those things.

In addition, it is essential that we assess our work by asking ourselves what those most marginalized by structures of race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism would learn from taking our courses. I want to stress that this is a question of social justice, not accessibility of class materials. I make this distinction because I am very wary of the ways that students and instructors can easily fall back on common racist, sexist, and classist perceptions of what particular people are capable of understanding. For example, students are often quick to critique feminist texts by women of color that they find difficult on the grounds that "most women of color couldn't understand it anyway," and they often charge that certain texts are "too academic" or "too theoretical" to be authentically about the experiences of women of color. Not only are these kinds of statements grounded in the belief that women of color are inherently less capable, they implicitly situate women of color as perpetually outside of the academy. Because I firmly believe that given the time, the training and the desire anyone can read anything, my concern is that we not try to simplify, but rather concentrate on doing justice to the complexity of people's lives.

Finally, I believe that we as teachers need to actively resist the hegemony of the language of liberalism in our classrooms. While many of us are accustomed to challenging students when they make explicitly racist or sexist statements, we are not necessarily as vigilant about resisting the implicit racism and sexism within liberal concepts like individualism, responsibility, opportunity, independence, upward mobility, and tolerance. Part of cultivating a radical consciousness among our students entails persistently asking them to evaluate the assumptions and criteria by which they measure what society ought to look like. If we can show our students how to imagine beyond the constraints of liberal discourse, we might lead them to ask more complex questions, which is the first step to developing a more radical vision of how the world could be.

NOTES

1 Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707-1791.

2 For an excellent discussion of this problem, see the introduction to Miriam Ching-Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory* (Boston: South End, 2001).

3 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 56.

4 Avery Gordon, "Theory and Justice" in *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004) 99-105; see also Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) 3-30.

5 For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Patti Duncan, "Decentering Whiteness: Resisting Racism in the Women's Studies Classroom" in *Race and the College Classroom: Pedagogy and Politics*, ed. Bonnie Tusmith and Maureen Reddy, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 40-50.

6 Elsa Barkley Brown, " 'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 298.

7 These texts included Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue" in *Welfare: A Documentary History of U.S. Policy and Politics*, Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2003) 373-9; Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy* (Boston: South End, 2000); Willie Baptist, "On the Poor Organizing the Poor: The Experience of Kensington" available at **http://www.kwru.org/educat/orgmod2.html**; Ruth Gilmore, "You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post-Keynesian California Landscape" in *Transforming Anthropology* 8.1&2 (1999) 28-46; Asha Bandele, *The Prisoner's Wife: A Memoir* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2000); Jael Silliman, et. al., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: South End, 2004); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Beth Richie, "Queering Antiprison Work" in *Global Lockdown: Race Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Julia Sudbury, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 73-86; Julia Sudbury, "A World Without Prisons," *Social Justice* 31.1 (2004) 9-30; and *This Black Soil: A Story of Resistance and Rebirth* (Bullfrog Films, 2001).