Race and Resistance in the Communication Classroom

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"It seems like that's all we talk about here." "Do we need to waste time on that again?" "I don't think that's relevant anymore." "Aren't we through with that yet?" In over ten years of teaching about race and ethnicity at four different universities, these are the types of responses I have encountered. White students especially resist discussing the topic of diversity. These responses in part reflect the fact that on many campuses an increasing amount of time is dedicated to the topic of race. It is no longer segregated to classes in ethnic studies departments. Similarly, within communication departments the topic is introduced in many classes outside of interracial or intercultural communication. Harris (2001) points to the importance of a 1997 NCA summer conference when principles were developed to "address the process of honoring diversity in the development and implementation of communication education programs, courses, course requirements, and pedagogical practices" (quoted in Harris, 2001, p. 102).

Incorporating the topic of diversity in the communication curriculum includes requiring it be introduced in basic courses. Many textbooks for basic courses in public speaking (DeVito, 2006; Nelson et. al, 2007), interpersonal communication (Wood, 2007; Verderber et. al. 2007), and communication theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005; Rothwell 2004) now contain at least some mention...
of race. Treinen (2004) notes the requirement that all undergraduates take a basic communication course makes it an ideal place to incorporate anti-racist pedagogy. Integrating race into the discussion at an early point in an academic career is also important because many students come from schools and neighborhoods with relatively homogenous populations. For white students especially, college is the first time they have significant interaction with people different from themselves. Learning about race in basic courses will thus provide a foundation for their experience both in and out of the classroom.

Including a discussion of diversity in basic communication courses is certainly a positive development, but it also presents challenges. While communication scholars have begun to consider strategies for presenting the sensitive topic of race to students (Hendrix et al., 2003), more attention must be paid to the frequent resistance by students when the topic is raised—a resistance reflected in the statements that introduce this essay. This resistance can be especially difficult for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who are just developing their confidence in front of the classroom. Treinen (2004) rightly calls for GTAs to be trained in anti-racist pedagogy since they frequently teach basic communication courses, but whether GTAs or full time faculty are teaching, the problem of resistance must be addressed. This essay considers various responses to the unwillingness of students to become engaged with the topic of race. The first section argues that an important source of white student discomfort comes from the increasing visibility of whiteness—an aspect of their identity that often has negative connotations. The second
section evaluates two important strategies used to address this discomfort: insuring a safe classroom environment and emphasizing the complexity of student identities. While valuable in some contexts, these strategies ultimately limit the ability of students to understand the power of race in contemporary society. The next section considers how various diversity educators envision their students challenging racism in society. Although many acknowledge that racism is a structural phenomenon, most rely on individually based solutions. The essay concludes by suggesting how students might be motivated to end racism in coalition with others, not out of individual self-interest, but out of a genuine desire to create a more socially just world.

WHITE STUDENTS RESIST WHITENESS

Many scholars note that a central point of resistance for white students comes from their unwillingness to recognize their identity as racialized (Dalton, 2002; Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Cooks 2003). In their research on the feminist classroom Maher and Tetreault (2001) write “[Whiteness] appears to be a safe, well-marked path, powerful because it is invisible to whites, which allows discussions of race to slide effortlessly forward as notations of features of the ‘other’” (p. 230). Consequently, a central goal in many classes is to make whiteness more visible. For example, Cooks (2003) asks students to share personal narratives of how they have experienced race in their lives. In doing this, white students become more aware of race by learning how it constructs the experience of nonwhite students (p. 251).
A similar result emerges in the performance studies class that Warren (2001) examines: when an African American student's performance includes the characterization of an upper class white woman, according to Warren, it "interrupts the everyday performance of race by calling attention to its performative nature—race is allowed to be seen as a social construct, a socially informed performance" (p. 100).

Yet, these classes were not completely successful in making whiteness visible. Or, more precisely, at times by making certain types of whiteness visible, students evaded describing elements of their own white identity. In Cooks (2003) class, white students often emphasized how they were not racist by pointing to other whites who were "ignorant." Similarly, in the class Warren (2001) studied, several white students performed stereotypes of southern or rural whites who were overtly racist. In both instances, students reaffirm their own normality and erase their participation in the creation and maintenance of a white identity. In short, their own whiteness remains invisible.

A more explicit strategy for revealing the nature of whiteness and in particular the sometimes subtle power it gives to white people, involves listing the specific privileges attached to being white. One article that has become quite popular as a means of exploring these privileges is McIntosh's (2002) "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Beginning from the recognition that men often do not view themselves as privileged in society, McIntosh (1995) first set out to consider the way white people like herself also do not acknowledge their privileges. In her article she lists 26 specific benefits (to which she later added) that she con-
siders part of her "invisible package of unearned assets." These benefits include such things as the ability to "turn on the television . . . and see people of my race widely represented," and "do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race" (McIntosh, 2002, p. 98-99). By providing white students with this list, privileges that they likely never considered are made visible.

As opposed to those who argue that whiteness is largely invisible, Henry Giroux (1997) claims that contemporary politics has in fact made whiteness quite visible. In the early 1990s whiteness became significant not only in the university as a topic among academics but also in the broader society among conservative groups who saw a need to respond to perceived "reverse discrimination." These groups saw efforts to address the legacy of racism, such as affirmative action, harming whites (Giroux, 1997, p. 377). Accompanying the politicization of whiteness in the 1990s was the increased discussion of race in the college classroom, and one of the commonly used articles was the article on white privilege by McIntosh. This of course reinforced the visibility of whiteness among students. However, in contrast to the discourse of conservative commentators, in the university classroom whites are told that they are members of an oppressive group, or, at minimum, that they benefit unfairly from their race. This leads to a resistance that goes beyond the simple denial of white identity.

Frequently resistance to the discussion of white privilege manifests itself as anger or resentment. Cooks (2003) quotes a student who felt the need to point out that whites suffer just as much if not more than people
of color, "It is unfair to say everything about white-
ness—and not anything about the fact that Whites have
the poorest neighborhoods" (p. 254). Similarly, white
students that responded to the film Color of Fear in
classes studied by Harris (2001), Johnson and Bhatt
(2003) and McKinney and Feagin (2003) felt that the
viewpoints of whites were treated unfairly in the film.
The film focuses on a diverse group of men who discuss
issues of race during a three-day retreat. Over the
course of the retreat a white participant named "David"
has an emotional breakdown after which he moves from
being skeptical about the existence of racism to being
understanding of the struggles faced by people of color.
A student from Harris's class writes, "As I watched . . . I
felt anger. I was able to relate to David when he said he
didn't like being grouped and stereotyped because he is
a white male" (Quoted in Harris, 2001, p. 109).

White students also resent what they perceive as in-
stitutional biases favoring people of color. Students of-
ften present anecdotal evidence of friends or family
members who lost a job or college admission to a "less
qualified minority." Other students claim they were un-
able to get any scholarships because they are white.
These comments parallel the rise of the conservative
white backlash Giroux (1997) describes emerging in the
1990s. This backlash is often referred to as "new racism"
or "modern racism" (Sears et. al., 2000). In contrast to
the old racism, which legitimated discrimination and
segregation with the view that nonwhites were inher-
ently inferior, modern racism is more inconspicuous.
While ostensibly rejecting ideas of racial difference,
problems of racism are regarded as largely in the past,
and efforts to address these past inequities, such as af-
firmative action, are now believed to harm whites (Giroux 1997, Batt 1998).

In this context, some white students consider classes on multiculturalism adding insult to injury. Moreover, since basic communication courses such as public speaking are often a general education requirement, these students may wonder why they must face the discussion of diversity in these classes as well. From their perspective, while students of color are now receiving all the benefits, whites are under attack in the classroom by "liberal" professors. This attitude is reflected in the angry responses of white students who feel that discussions of race serve mainly to attack whites. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (2000) write, teachers should not be surprised to find "white students who vehemently resent multicultural requirements as anti-white restrictions that subject them to charges of racism merely because they are white" (p. 186).

The other side to this discomfort with white privilege is the feeling of guilt and sadness. This guilt can paralyze students and inhibit the exploration of diversity issues (Cooks 2003). In the context of multiculturalism, sadness frequently emerges from the purely negative connotation associated with whiteness: negative, not just in the sense that it is associated with racism, but also because it seems to represent a cultural void. As Frankenberg (1993) found in her interviews with white women, whiteness is often viewed as boring or empty. Cooks (2003) finds a similar outlook among many of her white students. She quotes one who states, "I feel like I have nothing, no culture, no identity. I have no story. I don’t see that as a privilege" (p. 254).
RESPONDING TO RESISTANCE

Several strategies have been suggested for responding to the resistance of white students to the discussion of race. Since much of the literature about diversity education is grounded in the tradition of critical pedagogy, these strategies do not necessarily call for "overcoming" or even less "neutralizing" this resistance. In contrast to traditional classroom pedagogy, which emphasizes keeping students focused and under control, critical pedagogy seeks to empower students both within and outside of the classroom (Sprague, 1992; Sprague, 1993: Cooks and Sun, 2002). Critically oriented educators reject the "banking model" of education where knowledge is deposited into student minds by a higher authority. Instead, students are encouraged to think critically along with the teacher as "co-investigators" (Freire 1993).

In the critically oriented classroom a dialogue between students and teacher allows for mutual learning, a model that seems especially fitting for multicultural education. Here, students and teachers of diverse backgrounds can learn about cultural differences as they share their experiences with one another. However, while promoting discussion usually allows students to express their resistance in a productive fashion, the challenge often comes when the highly sensitive topic of race emerges. Here is where white students especially fall silent or signal in other ways their discontent.

The Dangers of Safety. In order to avoid this silent dissent, many educators have emphasized the need to construct a safe classroom environment whenever the
topic of diversity is discussed (Harris 2001, 2003). In this view safety is crucial to encourage open dialogue. Critics of the traditional academic environment such as Tannen (1998), note how the emphasis on competitiveness can be a form of exclusion that shuts down dialogue. In contrast to this competitiveness, Sprague (1993) argues successful teaching emerges when student learning is collaborative and the teacher fosters a caring rather than authoritative relationship with students.

In the context of courses teaching diversity, various strategies are used to give students this feeling of safety. Kees (2003) lists several techniques for creating a safe classroom environment including "norming [setting participation guidelines agreed to by students on the first day of class], self-disclosure, de-emphasizing evaluation during practice, seating arrangements, drawing students into discussions, and cutting off or redirecting students" (p. 57). Ramsey (1999) suggests using exercises that simulate power relationships between groups before discussing the power relationships between specific groups. A similar distancing is used by Harris (2001), who shows films depicting cultural conflicts, which allows students to discuss race without feeling personally involved.

While most diversity educators support the idea of inclusiveness, not all agree that achieving inclusiveness requires "safety." Hooks (1994) criticizes the notion that teaching multiculturalism should simply be about learning to get along with everybody's differences. Precisely because these issues are linked to painful historical struggles, one should not expect to eliminate disturbances from the classroom. As Johnson and Bhatt (2003) write, "In critical cultural work, invoking discom-
fort usually means one is doing something right” (p. 241). Moreover, the idea that the instructor can provide a neutral space for students to express deep social conflicts runs against a central goal of critical pedagogy: that is, linking the classroom to the outside world. Thus, it is important to ask, if one creates a safe environment, for whom is it safe?

Cooks (2003) provides a troubling answer to this when she asks white students how they would have reacted differently if their instructor was not white. One woman responds, "I would feel defensive. I speak out in class because I feel comfortable" (p. 236). In this case, it is fair to ask whether students of color in her class felt equally comfortable to speak. In his autoethnography on experiences as a black teacher, Alexander (1999) notes how black students often described a safety they felt in his classes that was lacking with white teachers. Recognizing that comfort level may vary among students, Johnson and Bhatt (2003) are explicit about their efforts to create an environment that supports participation by those marginalized in the traditional classroom. "We take it as our responsibility to foster a climate in the classroom that de-centers dominance, thereby creating speaking space for students who are traditionally silenced” (p. 240).

The danger of attempting to maintain a neutral space became clear to me when I first taught "Gender and Communication" at a west coast university with a diverse and critically engaged student body. Given the sensitive nature of many topics covered by the class I began very conscientiously with the goal of creating a safe classroom environment. The primary text for the course was the highly praised Gendered Lives by Julia
Wood (2001). Using Wood's book as a starting point I made sure to use neutral language and construct open ended exercises, not wanting to press students into sharing aspects of their identity—especially sexual orientation but also race and ethnicity—that they felt uncomfortable sharing.

After a while I noticed a distressing division—in fact multiple overlapping divisions—emerging in the classroom. Keeping in mind these divisions were not rigid—involving overlaps and alliances—splits fell along the obvious lines of gender but also race/ethnicity and sexuality. I was confused by the responses but fortunate to have several students approach me with their concerns. One student told me that, as someone who identified as bisexual, she felt marginalized by the white heterosexual bias of the class. She was especially critical of Wood's book, which she argued was written from a liberal feminist perspective. In addition, several Latina students felt the book completely ignored the writings of Chicana feminists.

The students' criticisms of *Gendered Lives* were very perceptive. Indeed, before I chose the text I recognized how it failed to seriously challenge a binary view of gender. While the book asks students to question society's expectations for men and women, its primary emphasis is on describing gender differences, and these differences matched most easily middle class white men and women. The book provides only a token discussion of gays and lesbians, African Americans and there is only one reference to "Hispanics." These references serve primarily to normalize the experiences of straight white men and women. Despite these flaws, the book appeared to me a good starting point for students who might find
the challenge to traditional gender roles troubling. Over time, my intention was to fill in the books gaps with class discussion, films and other readings. The response of queer and Latina students revealed that in my attempts to make the class a safe space to talk about the sensitive topic of gender, I was primarily making it safe for straight white students. My failure to directly and continually challenge the norms constructed by Wood's book meant students who did not fit these norms felt marginalized.

After my discussion with these students, I spent more time emphasizing the oppressive nature of gender norms. The second text I had chosen for the class was Kate Bornstein's (1998) *My Gender Workbook*. This book takes the form of a self-help book, with many quizzes that explore identity, but the intention of these quizzes is to challenge deeply held ideas about gender. While this book made many students uncomfortable, the queer students welcomed it and felt at home discussing the ideas that emerged from it.

The point of this experience is not just that the goal of creating a neutral setting should be seriously questioned, but also that the dynamics of each class can vary depending not just on the instructor's multiple subject positions—including race, gender and employment status—but also the dominant culture of the university and the diversity of students within a particular class-

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1 While the race, class and gender of the instructor is often mentioned as an important classroom dynamic (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003), employment status—teaching assistant, part time, non-tenured or tenured faculty—can also influence class dynamics. In particular, it can influence the willingness of the instructor to experiment or truly challenge students.
room. The positive reception I received the two times I used Bornstein’s book contrasts dramatically with the strong resistance to the book by students in Cook’s class (Cooks and Sun, 2002) and reveals the openness of my university’s student body.

The expectation of my students that issues of race and sexuality would be seriously addressed can also be seen as a product of the early introduction of these topics in basic communication courses. While for some students returning to the discussion of diversity throughout their college career can be frustrating, for others it can feel appropriate and even necessary. In this sense the initial challenges of introducing the subject of race to the basic communication class can bring tremendous rewards if students bring a critical lens toward future classes.

My experience may also be a product of a university where more than half the students identify as other than white. It is significant to note that many of the studies done on diversity education are conducted on predominantly white campuses. Harris (2003) criticizes communication scholars for making generalizations based on mostly white subjects, but her own classroom research relies on students that are 84% white. This is true not just of studies done by communication scholars (Warren 2001; Hendrix, Jackson, Warren, 2003) but also of those done in the fields of education (Subrahmanyan Hornstein and Heine, 2000) and sociology (Chesler, Peet and Sevig, 2003).

Celebrating Complexity. In some ways the focus on how to teach in a predominantly white classroom makes sense given that white students are still the majority at most U.S. Colleges and Universities, and it is white stu-
Students who often resist the discussion of race (Cooks, 2003; Lewis, 2003). While many students in my gender studies class were prepared to challenge societal norms, classes at predominantly white institutions probably need to be introduced more slowly to concepts that disturb strongly held beliefs. In other words, even if the instructor rejects the goal of constructing a safe classroom, adjustments still must be made to account for the willingness of students to address issues of diversity.

For students who display a reluctance to engage in the difficult topic of race, one adjustment that can be made is to first discuss other aspects of their identity. Since a central source of resistance for white students comes from the feeling that their identity is essentially a means of oppression, emphasizing the complexity of identity can help counterbalance this feeling. This complexity can be revealed through participatory exercises exploring students' personal and social identities. These exercises take various forms, each with different merits, but the following example is one that I learned from the Intergroup Relations Center at Arizona State University and have since used in my own classes.

The exercise has two parts. In the first part, students complete a "personal identity wheel" describing aspects of their identity that help to make them unique, such as the number of children in their family and their favorite food. The instructor then asks students to share answers. After a student volunteers, students who share the same answer—such as having three siblings or liking pizza—raise their hands.

In the second part, students are asked to stand in a line or circle and told to step forward if they belong to a particular group. The instructor begins by naming social
identities such as "student" or "football fan" and moves to more sensitive identities such as "Mexican American" or "U.S. Citizen." Each time a group is named and members step forward, all students are asked to look at who has stepped forward and who has not. After the exercises the instructor leads the class in a discussion of the differences between personal and social identities. In particular, a central goal is for students to recognize that social identities are connected to power and that some social identities are more privileged than others.

This two part exercise is designed to inspire students' appreciation of their own complex identities, making the obvious but no less valuable point that we can not judge people by a single aspect of their identity—people are a product of not just their ethnic or gender identity but innumerable other experiences and choices that help to form who they are. The exercise also has the merit of working from more comfortable discussions of personal identity to more sensitive discussions of race and nationality. Equally important, white students recognize aspects of their identity not connected to race—aspects that they can feel positive about. According to Hendrix, Jackson and Warren (2003), this positive affirmation of student identities encourages open dialogue and creative thinking in the classroom.

However, a potential problem with the exercise comes during the discussion of power: that is, students do not always agree about which groups are privileged and in what ways they are privileged. Indeed, as noted earlier, some whites now believe measures such as affirmative action have made them less privileged than people of color. Bringing these attitudes out may lead to a productive discussion, but it might also lead to a tan-
gential debate that misses the overall scope of inequality. One way to circumvent this problem is to provide students a list of what Batts (1998) calls "target" and "non-target" groups. Students are told to mark themselves as a part of the group targeted by oppression or the group receiving privilege in several categories including race, gender, class, education level and age. While white students are once again labeled as privileged by their race, because other aspects of their identity have been positively affirmed, racial privilege need not be central to their conception of themselves. Moreover, in contrast to exercises that come out of the McIntosh reading, which ask students to only think of white privilege, here students are allowed to see themselves as privileged in some areas and less so in others. As Johnson and Bhatt (2003) argue, by learning "how folks can experience both privilege and oppression simultaneously," students appreciate the complexity of identity (p. 234).

While emphasizing that race is only one part of identity may lessen resistance to the topic of diversity, this approach has the disadvantage of equating various forms of privilege and diminishing the distinctive power of whiteness. For example, while youth may have its disadvantages, it is not something that harms whites more than others—indeed youth of color continue to be targeted more by the criminal justice system and segregated into poorly funded schools (Fotsch, 2002; Lipsitz, 1998). In other words, aspects of identity always work in conjunction with one another. Likewise, the impression that every person can claim a form of oppression hides the way divisions form within target groups. In fact, it is in part through her efforts to explain to male colleagues
how they are privileged that McIntosh (1995) begins to understand how women of color feel excluded by white feminists, thus leading her to list the privileges brought by her white skin. In short, students who can claim oppression due to class, gender or language must still confront how these identities intersect with race.

At first, introducing these intersecting power structures may seem daunting in a basic communication course, but the goal is to develop student skills in seeing these intersections. Rather than just discussing race in one or two class sessions at the beginning of the course, students should be pushed to continually consider the power of different identities. So, for example, in a public speaking class, a student who chooses to speak on urban pollution should be encouraged to consider the higher likelihood that people of color will live near toxic waste sites (Lipsitz, 1998). In other words, this requires acknowledging the presence of race throughout contemporary society.

**Personally Transforming Society**

In contrast to pedagogies that respond to resistance by reducing student discomfort, some scholars suggest classroom discomfort can be productive. Hooks (1989) describes painful experiences for students during her classes, but she does not expect a transformation to emerge during class. "Most positive feedback I receive as a teacher comes after students have left the class and rarely during it" (p. 102). In contrast, according to Cooks (2003), the "frightful experiences" of students in her Interracial Communication class by the end of the course...
led students to "recognize the misguided nature of their assumptions" (p. 254). This narrative of personal transformation is found in the frequently shown film *Color of Fear* and is commonly described as a central goal of diversity education.

For Harris (2001), who uses *Color of Fear*, an important goal of her Interracial Communication course is to change student racist attitudes and behaviors outside the classroom (p. 104). According to her, "almost every student" experiences "personal growth at some point during the semester" (p. 115). She envisions societal change taking place "one relationship at a time" (Harris, 2003, p. 312) and assumes that through increased awareness of racism students will be motivated to act against it (p. 311). In a similar way, Johnson and Bhatt (2003) argue their interpersonal relationship can be the foundation of struggle for social change and, as a model in the classroom, a way to "examine the dynamics of power that bind and divide us" (p. 231).

While the value of personal growth and intercultural friendships should not be dismissed, the problem with this approach to diversity education is its tendency to blur the distinction between personal prejudice and systemic racism. In fact, this confusion can be found in the response of a white woman to *Color of Fear* recorded by Harris (2001): "I was really able to relate to David when he said he didn’t like being grouped and stereotyped because he is a White male . . . . But this is a societal problem, assuming one person is like the rest of a group" (p. 109). In this student's view prejudice is something that is perpetrated by all members of society and impacts whites as much as people of color. Because Harris (2001) focuses primarily on individual transforma-
tion, there is no effective way of responding to this confusion. In a similar way, Kees (2003) fails to address the racism/prejudice distinction in her pedagogy of self-exploration, so it is no surprise that she is "paralyzed" and unable to respond to the negative comments of a white student regarding a film on diversity. She concludes her essay sounding much like Harris's student by saying of her class "We experienced the sad reality that no one is exempted, or safe, from the effects of bigotry and prejudice, and that on an individual level we all are capable of hurting each other" (Kees, 2003, p. 62).

As many have pointed out (Wellman, 1993; Sears, Sidanius & Bobo, 2000; Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2001), it is precisely the claim that racism is simply a personal attitude to overcome that underlies the new racism. In this view, as long as individuals treat one another equally and do not discriminate, problems linked to race will disappear. However, as Giroux (1997) points out, this colorblind perspective allows whites to also be blind to how racism found in social institutions continues to produce structural inequalities. Recognizing the role of this colorblind attitude in underlying modern racism Batts (1998) emphasizes the need to distinguish four levels of racism: personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural (p. 6). Ultimately however Batts focuses on the individual need to "unlearn racism", which entails the ability to "recognize, understand, and appreciate differences as well as similarities" (p. 13). Most troubling, in addition to describing racism as a psychological disorder, Batts describes a parallel disorder among people of color, which she labels "internalized oppression" (p. 11). Not only does this allow whites to frame racism as a problem that impacts everyone in proportionate ways, it
revives a discourse that pathologizes the actions of African-Americans—actions that can be interpreted as strategies of resistance (Kelley, 1994; 1997).

A more promising approach to teaching the structural aspects of white privilege comes from communication educators influenced by theories of performance. Building in particular on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, these scholars recognize whiteness as a social construction whose power works upon and through the body as it is directed to follow scripts of normalization. The diversity educator must work to denaturalize this performance and reveal how inequalities are continually reproduced by everyday actions (2001).

Several researchers have recognized the potential for the instructor's own performance to aid in challenging racial normalization. In her class, Cooks (2003) attempts to make visible her performance as a white person and by doing this show how whiteness is a privileged way of experiencing the world. Similarly, Alexander (1999) shows that African American teachers can use their performance of blackness to both challenge stereotypes and reveal their marginalization: "In this move [the teacher] uses the individual self as an agent of social change" (p. 327-8).

By recognizing the omnipresence of white power, performance oriented pedagogy reveals the need to distinguish systemic racism from individual prejudice. Warren (2001) argues the focus on eliminating prejudice severs the body's performance from its meaning in historical context. However, while recognizing these micro-level workings of power is important, missing is the link to societal institutions of white privilege. In her sharp critique of trends in whiteness studies Anderson (2003)
writes concerning much cultural research: "Useful as such studies have been in underscoring the social construction of race, when they fail to connect whiteness to material structures and the operation of power, they provide hollow understandings of the structural foundations of racism" (p. 27)

Furthermore, Anderson argues, although research on whiteness frequently emphasizes the complexity of identity—pointing to the manner in which race is linked to gender, class and sexuality—these studies still tend toward essentialism (Anderson, 2003, p. 28). Thus, focusing on whiteness as an abstract category can potentially obscure the role that some people of color play in the perpetuation of racial hierarchies. Ward Connerly and Clarence Thomas are just two of the most prominent civil rights opponents who demonstrate, as Lipsitz (1998) puts it, "not all white supremacists are white" (p. 148).

Moreover, concentrating on white privilege and white performance disconnects race from the way it functions in different contexts and varies in power for different people. This is true, for example, of McIntosh’s essay on white privilege. "Whiteness" becomes an abstract category that functions like a "knapsack", with benefits that can be used without fail in particular circumstances. This view also serves to equate benefits of very different quality, such as "buying postcards with my same race" and "renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live" (McIntosh, 1995, p. 79). Some of the resistance to this article from white students comes precisely from their sense that not all the benefits described apply to them: so if they claim, for example, that their history
books did not focus primarily on whites, this becomes a way of dismissing privilege in other categories. In their response to McIntosh’s article McKinney and Feagin (2003) write, “Although a recognition of all levels of privilege is important, young whites should be reminded that white privileges not only make their everyday lives easier but give them major economic resources and stability” (p. 250). The point here is that these benefits should not be discussed abstractly, instead they must be grounded in policies that can be shown to aid some people, including students and their families, more than others.

Another danger associated with the growth of scholarship analyzing whiteness and hence teaching that builds upon it, is the possibility that white people are made authorities on the topic of race and racism. As Ellsworth (1997) writes "If I, as a teacher or scholar, take up this academic work of naming—the work of becoming one who 'knows' whiteness—I assume yet again the position within knowledge that has been historically reserved for me given my white skin” (p. 265). Likewise, instead of recognizing the central role people of color have played in overcoming their oppression, the focus on whiteness serves to reposition white people as leaders in the struggle against racism. Related to this, Anderson (2003) notes that studying whiteness could mean marginalizing the lives of people of color.

The question of what role whites can play in social struggle is significant because educators who emphasize the need to reveal white privilege often claim that it is key to social change. According to Maher and Tetreault, (2001) literature on whiteness helps students to see themselves “as participants in social and ideological
networks," and through this recognition they can "come to understand and challenge them" (p. 245). For Cooks (2003) "Repositioning whiteness also invokes a social responsibility to engage another, to invest the time and energy that moves beyond the superficiality of stereotypes and the stubbornness of our assumptions" (p. 257). Ironically, while these theorists recognize the limits of personal transformation and the role of individual performance in reinforcing structural power, in the end their strategies for social change do not sound significantly different from the strategy of simply making students more aware of racism. Put differently, it is not clear how teaching students to challenge racist attitudes and teaching students to challenge racism as a socially reinforced discourse lead to different political activity.

Two studies of college student attitudes toward race provide reason to be skeptical about the link between awareness of white privilege and social change. In their analysis of "racial autobiographies" written by white college students, McKinney and Feagin (2003) found that while many saw the continuing presence of racism, few saw a way to change the world beyond ending individual prejudice. Similarly, based on interviews conducted with University of Michigan students, Chesler, Peet and Sevig (2003) argue the same students who claim to oppose racism resent programs like affirmative action that are meant to challenge white privilege. Most troubling, Anderson (2003) has found that in some cases the focus on whiteness in the classroom merely increases the defensiveness of white students with regard to their privileges.

Clearly, this does not mean efforts to teach white privilege should be dismissed. Indeed, even simply re-
ducing racial prejudice among whites is a positive outcome that might lead to concrete actions to end systemic racism. Furthermore, no matter how inspiring an educator might be, some students will resist the idea that they enjoy privileges or that they should act to challenge these privileges. Recognizing these qualifiers, how might educators encourage white students to move beyond simply changing prejudicial attitudes to becoming involved in social change?

For Giroux (1997), white students must be given a stake in the struggle against racism, which requires linking racism to forms of oppression that impact whites as well as people of color. In addition, he argues whiteness must be linked to positive meanings and not just identified as a source of oppression. "Cultural critics need to connect 'whiteness' with a language of possibility that provides a space for white students to imagine how 'whiteness' as an ideology and social location can be progressively appropriated as part of a broader politics of social reform" (Giroux 1997, p. 384). Giroux rightly asserts that more attention must be paid to the complexity of white identity, so that, for example, the oppression of working class whites is recognized along with their power. However, it was precisely the ability of white workers to be constructed as racially different that led to their advantages throughout U.S. history (Roediger, 1991; Feagin, 2001). Thus, attempting to recondition whiteness, which was invented solely to divide and exclude, seems to be a form of historical erasure.
THE REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS OF LOVE

Giroux seems to assume, along with many others looking for a way to include whites in anti-racist struggles, that there must be some element of self-interest motivating whites to act. While it is likely true that the decline of white supremacy will ultimately benefit the lives of white people, can this really be the basis for white people's activism? Activism based on self-interest seems to conform more with an individualist and neoliberal ethic which, in a later article, Giroux (2003) argues serves to justify the dismantling of programs meant to address racial inequality.

According to Freire (1993), actions motivated out of self-interest, for example to relieve a sense of guilt, often lack any real desire to understand the oppressed and instead lead to a paternalism that maintains social hierarchies. Someone in power can only challenge these hierarchies, Freire (1993) argues, "when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love" (32). Sandoval (2000) describes the role of love in revolutionary politics as deepening our sense of connectedness both to those who have oppressed and who have been oppressed. Here, "love is understood as affinity—alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body" (p. 170). This does not mean denying the different privileges that have accrued to us as individuals. On the contrary, we are called to specify in detail our privileges and acknowledge our complex dependence on the exploitation of others, but affinity entails recognizing the pain of others caused by this exploitation as our pain. For
Morales (1998), rather than creating a feeling of guilt this specification can be liberating. "Deciding that we are in fact accountable frees us to act. Acknowledging our ancestors participation in the oppression of others (and this is ultimately true of everyone if you really dig) and deciding to balance the accounts on their behalf leads to a greater integrity and less shame: less self-righteousness and more righteousness, humility, and compassion" (p. 76).

Constructing a theory of revolutionary politics based on love may be useful for a "methodology of the oppressed" as Sandoval calls it, but applying it to the contemporary college classroom might appear unrealistic. McKinney and Feagin (2003) suggest that students often become frustrated because they learn about the "disease" of racism without being offered any "cures"; therefore, they argue, instructors must provide concrete recommendations for ways students can work toward dismantling racism. (p. 241). This points to one of the more challenging questions in regards to Freire's pedagogy: what role should the instructor play in leading students toward revolutionary inquiry? For example, if students are unaware of the historical and contemporary role of organizations like the NAACP in working for civil rights, it seems appropriate for instructors to share this information with students. On the other hand, students will likely be more invested in their social activism if they come upon it through their own investigations.

Student directed investigation could be one way basic communication courses inspire an interest in social justice motivated out of compassion for others. As noted earlier, in public speaking courses, when students
choose a topic for a speech, they can be encouraged to consider how that topic is relevant to race. For example, if students choose to give an informative speech on the dangers of sub-prime loans, they could be directed to consider the history of housing discrimination and research showing that African Americans have much more difficulty securing a home mortgage (Feagin 2001, p. 157).

Students could also be assigned to analyze a speech and directed toward speakers addressing some form of social inequality or discrimination. Ideally, it would be an activist working to change something students have researched, thus providing a sense that individuals can make a difference. Perhaps they could hear an environmental activist battling the location of a waste dump in a low-income neighborhood, or they might attend a presentation from a fair housing organization that explains methods of uncovering discrimination.

Of course, pushing students to consider race in their assignments will not necessarily lead them to political action as Friere describes. Indeed, it could simply strengthen student resistance to the topic of race. But if students are open to learning from the struggle of others, they may develop a commitment to working for social change that is rooted in a concern for other people's suffering rather than self-interest.

In conclusion, this essay has critically assessed some common strategies used in teaching the topic of race and suggests an alternative that can be specifically applied to basic communication courses. A central goal of all these strategies is to motivate students to incorporate what they have learned inside the classroom into their everyday lives. Sprague (1992) has argued that as com-
munication educators we must critically reflect on what we want our students to take from our classes, so if we simply want them to work better with people of diverse backgrounds, perhaps making them comfortable discussing race is the most useful approach. However, if we hope they will become involved in struggles for social justice, merely teaching them to appreciate our different privileges will probably come short of this goal. To achieve this more challenging goal we may have to risk anger, resentment and even poor student evaluations. Or, to spin it in a way that rewords Freire, we may have to risk love.

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