

White Students and the Meaning of Whiteness

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Audrey Thompson's essay raises important questions about the "anti-racists" pedagogy of white professors in predominately white college classrooms. Thompson's concern is with what she calls the "terms of address" that shape the "anti-racist space" or classroom and configure how white antiracist teachers engage all students but white students specifically in regards to race and racism. For Thompson, many white antiracists teachers assume themselves to be "exceptional" white people in relation to their white students. Rightly so, Thompson criticizes "road or journey metaphors" of address as a basis for antiracist change. Thompson's main criticism is that "white exceptionalism" presumptuously assumes that the journey of white teachers toward antiracist awareness functions as the standard for the antiracist development of white students. Racial progress in this instance is defined in relation to white exceptionalism, which Thompson says, "thinks of anti-racist awareness and agency in terms of a definite destination." This undermines she claims the possibility of new forms of white teacher-student engagement.

Thompson proposes forms of address not premised on road or journey metaphors, but forms of address that think of antiracist change relationally. Thompson, however, distinguishes her conception from those conceptions that reduce, if you will, relational antiracist change to motives, arguing that "[t]hinking relationally means addressing antiracism in terms of our ontological, political and ethical, as well as intimate relationships." But what is not completely clear is whether Thompson is arguing that relational antiracist change is without or not constitutive of intentionality or motive. At one point though Thompson does mention that in terms of addressing the ontological terms of relational antiracist change notions about individual intentionality including some others, for example, agency and responsibility, independence are socially constituted, and seems to imply that each of these intersect with the other terms of address that Thompson identifies: ontological, political, ethical, and intimate relationships. However, intentionality is incidental to Thompson's conception of relational antiracism.

Intentionality is not incidental but is constitutive of the ontological relationality that Thompson describes when she says, "Ontologically, we are thrown together, caught up and entangled with one another." But the making of thrown togetherness and entanglement are related to human choices, and of course, choices are limited by the social; in this case, limited by not only how white teachers and white students represent themselves as white people but how they discursively construct their whiteness and define and have controlled definitions of themselves (and others) in and outside of the classroom.

Interestingly, what is conspicuously absent from Thompson's relational antiracist pedagogy is a philosophical exploration into the lived reality and patterns of the existence of whiteness or being white not only in the classroom, but also in terms of

how “classroom whiteness” is shaped by the white makings of whiteness in Western culture. What comes to mind is an existential phenomenological exploration of the lived reality of whiteness. By not considering fully the significance of the intentionality of relational antiracism, Thompson may neglect the linkage between our choices, intentionality and consciousness of something, and in this particular case, white people’s consciousness of themselves as white people.

After reading Thompson’s essay, I continued asking myself why the distraught comments by white students towards white antiracist teachers and theorists. And while Thompson’s analysis of white exceptionalism is perceptive, the student’s comment that stuck me the most was the one directed at Ruth Frankenburg’s *White Women Race Matters*. Thompson writes:

After reading Ruth Frankenburg’s *White Women, Race Matters* for my class a couple of years ago, M. observed, “Her attitude troubles me — why is it her place to categorize all of these women’s view on race? They trusted her with their interviews and then she stands at a distance and tells us what to think about them.”

This student’s comment struck me because Frankenberg’s ethnographic study shows how the existential choices, if you will, that white women make in making their whiteness is simultaneously shaped by racial discourse, social geography, age, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Frankenberg illustrates how these various elements shape and are shaped by different constructions of white women’s bodily consciousness as white. As there are problems with Frankenburg’s white exceptionalism, as indicated by Thompson; Frankenburg’s claim that there are different patterns of existence or lived realities of whiteness suggests possibilities for constructing patterns and ways of living whiteness that oppose white supremacy and support solidarity with nonwhite people’s struggles for the recognition of their personhood and status as moral beings.

Perhaps white students perceive antiracist white teachers and theorists unfavorably; because, students associate whiteness with racism; white students and white teachers alike overlook the existential possibilities of constructing forms of whiteness that are antiracists. By only associating whiteness with racism, white students evade race and deny their awareness of themselves as white people often by claiming their ethnicities: Irish, German, or Italian. Maybe the unfavorable comments by white students directed at white antiracist teachers and theorists, in Thompson’s classroom, have also something to do with contestation over conflicting meanings, attitudes over racialized bodily schema.

When white teachers address white students as “people who don’t get race the way we get race” we position those students as characterized mainly by a lack of understanding, information, or critical thinking rather than as people thrown into and caught up in a multitude of complex and confusing but potentially provocative relationships. It is easier to pin them to the wall with their ignorance or coax them into change with our charisma than to engage them in new intellectual and pedagogical relationships. This she maintains undermines the possibility of new forms of white teacher-student engagement.