

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Taking Action: Writing To End White Supremacy

by Michele Fazio



The subject of monuments and their historical value in the present, a topic of great debate both politically and culturally in recent years, has brought to the forefront how prevalent white supremacy is in contemporary society. This subject hit close to home for me and my students as the toppling of confederate statues in downtown Durham and Silent Sam on the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's campus—both results of protests against the rise of white nationalism—occurred just two hours north from our campus, the University of North Carolina-Pembroke. Known as the most diverse campus in the UNC system with nearly 60% of its undergraduate student population identifying as non-White, UNC-P has a rich history steeped in American Indian culture (its school was created by and for American Indians), and it was difficult to ignore how these two local events along with national news coverage of hate crimes and blackface rehashed racial divisions not only in the South, but across the country.

I wanted to give my first-year students a platform to discuss race and racial inequities as they impact their lives, so I made dismantling racism a theme in my composition course. Offered in the Fall 2018 semester, the course introduced students to the intersections among power, race, and class by assigning *Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox* by Karen Gaffney. The book provides an historical overview of the invention of whiteness and its ideological power culturally, legally, and politically from the 1700s to the present. Rather than review the syllabus during our first class meeting, I instead asked my students to participate in a free-write assignment answering the following questions: Which social issue concerns you the most and why? What do you think should be done to improve the situation and enable transformation? And how would you implement change? After sharing their answers in small groups, the students composed a sizable list of possible research topics that ranged from the Black Lives Matter movement to transgender and migrant rights. The remainder of the session was spent establishing ground rules to encourage discussion that reflected multiple perspectives related to the study of race, and this included instituting a course etiquette policy.

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I drew upon several advocacy groups (<https://colorofchange.org>, <http://www.dismantlingracism.org>, and <https://www.tolerance.org>) to formulate my approach to the course—one that encouraged critical thinking to move

beyond binaries in considering racial oppression and injustice in American society. I explained to my students the goal was not to convert them or instill guilt or blame, but rather to explore how systemic racism functions on many levels in everyday life in which we all play a part. And because of the volatility of the subject matter, I underscored the importance of listening and reflecting before speaking, for all voices to be heard. The uncertainty of class discussion—that conversation would evolve organically rather than by a set agenda—would be challenging for everyone, including myself, but that this discomfort is a necessary part of gaining an understanding of white privilege and how it silences vulnerable communities. Crafting this etiquette policy together, including the use of a signal if class discussion became too much to handle, involved my students in co-producing course content, indicating our engagement in radical discourse from the outset. Course enrollment reflected UNCP's diversity; in a class of twenty, nearly three quarters of the class were students of color, and although I had expected some resistance to the course theme, no one dropped the course—a fact that surprised me. While a few students expressed initial concern over whether talking about racial inequality would make any difference beyond the classroom, most seemed relieved to be able to talk openly about race and injustice, admitting that this class would provide an opportunity to delve into topics that were off-limits in other social settings.

To begin their reflection on the role public space plays in preserving history and, in this case, the historical context of white supremacy, we analyzed Laura Roberto and Joseph Sciorra's essay, "Recontextualizing the Ocean Blue: Italian Americans and the Commemoration of Columbus" (2017). A particularly engaging discussion followed the reading given that UNCP's population is nearly 20% American Indian (Lumbee); moreover, I drew upon my own ethnic background as an Italian American to illustrate how the invention of whiteness impacted the assimilation of Italian immigrants in the early 20th century and helped to preserve dominant culture. We also read Robin DiAngelo's essay, "White Fragility" (2011), to see how these same issues manifest in the workplace. Next, students began reading Gaffney's *Dismantling the Racism Machine*. To review her introduction of systemic racism and how it operates in society, I distributed slips of paper containing one word for each student to define and to provide at least one example for. As we sat in a large circle, students began offering an explanation of the terms "Caucasian," "internalized oppression," "intersectionality," "implicit bias," "heteronormativity," "social construct," and "racial hierarchy," and the examples they provided electrified the class. As we moved through the book's five steps ("Chip Away at the False Ideology that Race is Biological," "See the Racism Machine, Examine the Racism Machine's Powerful Mechanisms," "Analyze the Racism Machine's Recalibration after the Civil Rights Movement," and "Take Apart the Racism Machine"), students wrestled with real questions about history, culture, and legal policy, asking "how did we get here?" and "how could people allow these things to happen?"

Over the course of the semester, students became frustrated. Some shared their own experiences confronting white supremacy and outrage over bias and prejudice, while others revealed deeply personal stories about being stereotyped. One male student, who rarely spoke in class, raised his hand and quietly stated, "I have to speak first today." We were discussing Michelle Alexander's introduction to *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and Ava DuVernay's documentary, *13th* (2016), which made clear the statistic that three out of four black men would be incarcerated in their lifetime. He pointedly addressed the three other males in the room: "Which one of us is going to escape this reality? This is my life. I can't escape being a black man." No one spoke, yet the silence was not uncomfortable; rather, it was a moment rife with reflection, of students recognizing, perhaps for the first time, how systemic racism works individually and collectively to divide and conquer. Admittedly, it is extremely difficult to talk about race even under the best of circumstances and I bear great responsibility for creating a space in the classroom that acknowledges the existence of structural racism. However, it is important for college students, and first-year students at that, to open up and name these often unspoken truths, which proved to be a revelation. Students were beginning to have these conversations on campus and at home and, understandably, some found it uneasy, but necessary territory to navigate.

Toward the midpoint of the semester, students were required to attend UNCP's annual Social Justice Symposium, a campus-wide event that raises awareness about social justice issues, and write a reflective essay about Gaffney's keynote address, who was this year's featured speaker. My students also had the unique experience of Gaffney visiting class beforehand, which gave them the chance to discuss their research projects in progress, ask questions about future solutions, and learn about her own writing process in publishing *Dismantling the Racism Machine*. The invitation to learn together alongside the author of our assigned textbook lessened some of the anxieties they faced in addressing polemical issues such as "reverse racism," stereotypes, and social constructs. At one point, a student exclaimed to Gaffney, "This book really makes me think!"

Inside and outside the classroom, I believe writing can be a form of activism—a time of self-awareness and collective action. The course's final project, "Taking Action," required students to choose a contemporary social problem that emerged out of the reading materials and explore its impacts on American society. Topics included mass incarceration, environmental racism, racial profiling, migrant farmworkers, and economic precarity, examining how local advocacy groups and government agencies addressed these issues. Individual conferences helped students to strengthen their positions as they synthesized academic sources and developed a strategic action plan to effect change. As students presented their work in progress, each had to reflect upon the proposal's efficacy. I made it clear—as Gaffney did during her talks—that change will not

happen immediately, but that we could begin the lifelong process of self-reflection that moves us toward transformative thinking, of learning to undo what we have been taught in order to understand more fully how power and privilege shape the world in which we live.

This assignment was more than simply a grade to be earned—my students' ideas about race and racial justice mattered and I had the pleasure of hearing their voices emerge clearly, articulating valuable claims on revising existing policies that could potentially change people's lives. Class ended by having students compose a formal letter to a politician, media outlet, or organization based on their arguments (part of Step 5 in Gaffney's book). Unfortunately, I did not require them to send the letters, and I realized too late that I should have. I erred on the side of protecting the parameters of my class and learned a valuable lesson about taking the same risks in teaching that I ask my students to tackle in their writing. They wrote courageously and unflinchingly about what needs to be done and their words filled me with hope. Teaching writing in this way sustains me not only as a citizen, but influences my commitment to social justice on campus, where I am developing campus-wide programming focused on working-class and first-generation communities. I owe it to my students to be as unrelenting as they have shown themselves to be by continuing to make the composition classroom active and activist in its approach to resisting the racism machine.



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