
“Why Are All the White Students Sitting in the Back of Class?” A Critical Race Theory Approach to Race Dialogue in Ethnic Studies[†]

ABSTRACT Ethnic Studies classrooms in many respects are spaces wherein healing, solidarity, and social change occur, particularly surrounding discussions about race. The discussion around race is a language in itself—complete with levels of engagement. Students from privileged groups may not have many opportunities to explore the language of race and marginalization, thus being an “outsider” to the language of these experiences. This often times leads to miscommunication and missing meaningful engagement toward collective social action and change in classroom spaces. As a result, students have powerful emotional responses to these topics, and if students’ affective and intellectual responses are not acknowledged and respected, teachers can be met with what is perceived as impermeable resistance. Drawing from the framework of Critical Race Theory, this qualitative work presents tenets of race as a language that allows for understanding identity formation and entry point into conversations of race and ethnicity. Furthermore, consistent dialogue as a way of gaining proficiency and a space for marginalized identities to share their lived experiences as a way to build upon their proficiency. This research assists in expanding the work in the pedagogy of Ethnic Studies as a space to radically connect, heal, and implement social change.

KEYWORDS: Critical Race Theory, dialogue, classrooms, Ethnic Studies, language, listening, pedagogy

My introduction to Ethnic Studies is a case in point of this language of experience. I teach Ethnic Studies courses—cultures, lived experiences, and topics of ethnic identity are the central components. There is however, the other component of the class that is often met with fear and misunderstanding: race. The classroom is one area wherein the complexity of discussing race arises quite often. The following vignette of an experience in an Ethnic Studies classroom provides the context of this research.

SCENE: An Introduction to Ethnic Studies classroom situated on the campus of a small Liberal Arts learning community in the Midwest. The campus is situated in a postindustrial town with the college as a focal feature of the community. Students are introduced to the field of Ethnic Studies in an interdisciplinary manner.

SOCIAL PARTICIPANTS: The classroom is comprised of about 40 students, the majority of the students in the classroom are white, college-aged students, many of whom are enrolled in an Ethnic Studies course for the first time to fulfill the college requirements necessary to graduate. In some respects, the class is just that—a class wherein students

[†]The title of this article draws inspiration from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s seminal text “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*.”

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simply acquire the components necessary to graduate and receive their degree. While the majority of the students are white, there are also students of color in the class, though in low numbers. For some, this class opens their eyes to many of the realities that exist within society, but privilege, advantage, or social or geographical distancing have not allowed them to engage in these topics. For many of the students, this is their first time engaging in facets of their identity they have not had to think about, mainly racial identity, power, privilege, and racism.¹ At the front of the class is a Black male professor of Ethnic Studies, who in some respects, knows the topic both scholarly and on a personal level. He approaches the topic of race how he does every other time: with uncertainty. How will the information be received? Will he be the only person talking in the room? This particular class begins, and the professor introduces the topic of discussion for the week: Critical Race Theory. Unlike other topics of discussion in this class, the topic of race and racism in many ways proved to be a week filled with tense stares, and unaddressed emotions, and a fear that consumes a majority of the students present. This week is particularly quieter than most other weeks, students are apprehensive about the topic of racism. The professor looks out to see the students to gauge their response, only to be met with students who avert their eyes to the scenery outside of the classroom in hopes of not being called on, or giving attention to the glow of phones sneakily (or so they think) as an easy escape to avoid what feels like an agonizing hour of class discussion in addition to the thick, heavy silences of fear that hangs in the room. The professor at the front of the class, complete with lecture notes, struggles to find ways to get students engaged in the topic. The professor begins the topic of race by sharing a story of his personal experiences with race and racism in hopes of easing tension in the room, and providing a space for students to inquire about the topic in a safe, inclusive learning environment. In the back of the classroom, a white student raises her hand with a concerned, puzzled look on her face. The dialogue is what follows.

STUDENT: *(student has a face of exasperation) I'm confused. You in your lecture you mention the experiences of Black and Brown people and systemic racism in American society.*

PROFESSOR: *That's correct.*

STUDENT: *I guess I'm confused about the language you're using to discuss people's racial identities. Are the terms Black and Brown the correct phrases to discuss African Americans and Hispanic people? I feel like if I use these terms as a White woman, people might think I'm a racist. There have been times when I want to talk to others about race, but because I said something wrong, the conversation has been shut down.*

PROFESSOR: *(Long pause. The professor contemplates a response.)*

It was in this moment I understood the complicatedness around the language used to engage students in a conversation about race. Why might it be so difficult to discuss race? What challenges come with a classroom of learners engaging with discussions about race from various experiences and entryways? This led me to the conjecture that the varied dialects and engagement with race dialogue in an Ethnic Studies classroom leads to a

1. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," (1988).

cacophony of conversations that may lack in understanding, compassion, and a baseline language of communication around an important yet rarely discussed topic.

RACE TALK/CRITICAL RACE THEORY

In an Ethnic Studies classroom, conversations of race and racism are a main feature in course discussion and content, which Derald Wing Sue defines as race talk.² Paul Taylor suggests “race dialogue” is, “complex meanings that surround the concept of race.”³ Like race, dialogue around the topic is complex and ever changing. Race dialogues look different [inter]racially, [inter]generationally, across time, and location, further adding to the complexity of race dialogue. While conversations of race happen in many contexts, the purposes of this study is to examine conversations of race in a college classroom, which provides particular contexts at the merging of race and educational environments. Language, according to Ngugi Thiong’o, is a means of communication as well as a carrier of culture.⁴ As such, race dialogue is space for two things most Americans are uncomfortable engaging with: race and varied cultures. Race dialogue pushes the boundaries of making others uncomfortable through engaging with the things that make people uncomfortable, yet allows for the deepest and strongest connections of the human experience. Language is a shared, learned behavior. If raced language is not an aspect of culture being discussed, the silencing of racialized experiences upholds an aspect of culture that overshadows experience.

The theoretical and conceptual framework for the purpose of this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT).⁵ In higher education, CRT is used to “make meaning of systemic racism and suggests transformative social action. American higher education, as a self-replicating system, promotes many norms and values worth questioning under the lens of CRT.”⁶ Ethnic Studies classrooms are by extension a part of the system through which students can examine the role of race in American society in a classroom context. CRT consists of six tenets: (a) the ordinariness of racism,⁷ (b) challenging of dominant ideology,⁸ (c) intersectionality,⁹ (d) unique voice

2. Derald Wing Sue, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

3. Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2013), 5.

4. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishers, 1994).

5. D. G. Solorzano and O. Villalpando, “Critical Race Theory, Marginality, and the Experience of Students of Color in Higher Education,” *Sociology of Education: Emerging Perspectives* (1998), 211–224; D. Solorzano, M. Ceja, and T. Yosso, “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students,” *Journal of Negro Education*, (2000), 60–73.

6. R. Hughes and M. Giles, “CRiT Walking in Higher Education: Activating Critical Race Theory in the Academy,” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, vol. 13 no. 1 (2010), 42.

7. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

8. Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* vol. 8, no. 1 (2002), 23–44.

9. Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* (1991): 1241–1299; Lisa Bowleg, “When Black+ Lesbian+ Woman≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research,” *Sex Roles* vol. 59, no. 5–6 (2008): 312–325.

of color/knowledge of experience,¹⁰ (e) colorblind ideology,¹¹ and (f) a commitment to social justice.¹² Collectively, these tenets offer a model through which race dialogue can be examined.

A component of CRT is the knowledge of experience from marginalized groups when examining the role of race and racism in social contexts.¹³ Thus, CRT supports unique voices from the margins of society as valid and necessary authorities of their lived realities, specifically in a classroom context. Additionally, CRT provides a framework for examining classrooms in higher education, the pedagogy and learning experiences of students; challenging dominant ideologies; and exploring the usage of language surrounding race amongst college students, and how these concepts inform how college campuses engage in dialogues of race and identity.

I argue that in addition to there being race dialogue, conversations about race can be viewed like that of a foreign language. Geneva Smitherman contends, “A language reflects a people’s culture and their world view, and thus each group’s language is suited to the needs and habits of its users.”¹⁴ Communities of color have an experience with race that can be articulated through words that highlight their experience. While students in my Ethnic Studies classrooms for the most part speak the same communicable language, a common ground for the discussions around race barely exists. As such, Frantz Fanon suggests, “Every dialect is a way of thinking.”¹⁵ Each student who enters into an Ethnic Studies classroom has a language by which they use to see and make sense of the world around them, but rarely are words given to the experience of race, or have had the experience of articulating it with others. bell hooks argues that “language is a place of struggle” and classrooms are spaces wherein people struggle to engage in a language of experience around the topic of race.¹⁶ H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman extend this notion arguing, “Unlike race, we have no national public dialogue on language that recognizes it as a site of cultural struggle. . . . Yet its [language] central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy lies largely beneath the average American’s consciousness.”¹⁷ As a result, the goal is to conceptualize race talk to that of a language. Classroom spaces such as that of Ethnic Studies provide the setting through which a race language can be developed and utilized so that the discussions on race can be productive and forward moving. As Troy Duster suggests, classrooms such as Ethnic Studies “provide all students with a range of safe environments and options where they can explore and develop terms that they find comfortable. In the absence of such opportunities, the

10. Christopher Dunbar, “Critical race theory and indigenous methodologies,” *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (2008): 85–99.

11. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

12. Derrick A. Bell, “Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory,” *U. Ill. L. Rev.* (1995): 893.

13. G. Ladson-Billings and W. Tate IV, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *The Teachers College Record*, vol. 97, no. 1 (1995), 47–68.

14. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The language of Black America*, Vol. 51. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 196.

15. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 25.

16. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 28.

17. Alim, H. Samy, and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

tendencies remain for each group to see the others from a distance, in terms of images, stereotypes, stories, and myths that are not informed by direct contact and experience.”¹⁸ By providing a space for students to develop and practice a race language allows for some of the crucial conversations we lack in society with regards to race. In these spaces, students can learn some of the skills necessary to communicate and engage in race language with others. These spaces allow for exploration and self-development. Beverly Tatum suggests, “We must provide opportunities for students to practice, opportunities to understand multiple perspectives, as well as individual ones during the college years.”¹⁹ Ethnic Studies classrooms provide just the locale for students to learn to engage in race dialogue, practice, ask questions, make mistakes, as well as do the introspective work not only to connect with others, but also to understand their necessary role in these conversations. Race dialogue allows for people to see the world in which they live more clearly.

METHOD

The question the student posed in the vignette above engendered many questions and roiled for me the many ways in which race talk can occur. As a result, this study gave way to an understanding of my own teaching experience as an Ethnic Studies educator, reflecting critically on classroom discussions and student engagement. The present study utilized qualitative methods to explore how students engage in topics surrounding race in an Ethnic Studies classroom. For this current study, I was interested in understanding how students thought about discussing race as well as their experiences within an Ethnic Studies classroom on the campus of a predominantly white institution. The open-ended interviews were conducted individually in a location on campus in a dialogue format rather than structured, and I casually talked about what I observed regarding race talk in Ethnic Studies classrooms. Students who participated in the study had completed the Introduction to Ethnic Studies course. As teaching courses on race and ethnic identity can be difficult, I wanted to learn more beyond what might be shared in a course evaluation. I sought to understand how students thought about how discussions on racial identity looked from their experiences. This included how students thought about what language they used, and how they thought about articulating those experiences not only with me as an instructor, but also with their classmates. From my interviews with students and engagement with scholarly research, I amassed a large amount of information about the ways in which students think about race dialogue in class.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, my interviews included only 15 students, and there were no balances on race or gender. The participants were selected based on participation in an Ethnic Studies class. The dynamics of discussing race can be applied in a number of settings (workgroups, K–12 education, public institutions, community groups, and other settings), so it is important to note

18. Troy Duster, “An Emerging Reformulation of ‘Competence’ in an Increasingly Multicultural World,” *The Social World of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching a New Century* (1999): 245–255.

19. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 214.

that these findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, geographic location, intergenerational, and other contexts could perhaps add nuance and complexity to how conversations on race might look. It is important to note that race dialogue is contextual. Future studies might address educators' role in facilitating race dialogue, how students learn mechanisms to engage in race talk outside of the classroom, or how race dialogue might assist in building race allies and other intersections of identity. In the following sections of this article, I discuss the prominent themes that surfaced by centering on race talk.

"¿Puedo ir al baño?": Lessons on dialogue from high school Spanish

The conversation about engaging in race language harkens me back to my first time entering a foreign language classroom. In high school, I was eager to take Spanish; I was told it would make me competitive in college and in the workforce, and that America would soon have more than English as a dominant language. Not only would I be learning a language, I would learn about culture, geography, and the experiences of the people who spoke the language.

La maestra for the class was a native speaker; she and her family were from Mexico. I would be learning Spanish from someone who has been speaking the language her entire life. Feeling a bit intimidated, I went into the class excited about the challenge. That first day, la maestra spoke the entire class period in Spanish. Confused, scared, and feeling awkward, I looked around the classroom feeling like the challenge was bigger than expected. I wondered whether other students were feeling the same things I was experiencing. With a few minutes left in the class, la maestra began to speak in English. She let us know that she purposefully began the class speaking exclusively in Spanish for several reasons explaining that no one who begins learning a language is fluent on the first day; language acquisition takes time, and we need to be patient. She assured the class that there were going to be times when learning the language would feel overwhelming and that the classroom would serve as the space to learn, practice, and master the language. One of the most important lessons from that first class session—empathy. She asked us to imagine how people might feel living and learning in a space where everyone around you spoke a language you had no familiarity with, and you were expected to keep up. Knowing that, she encouraged us to utilize one another, to rely on one another as resources.

As the class progressed, several lessons about language acquisition were becoming apparent. First, this one Spanish class was not going to be the only one I needed to begin a mastery of the language; many classes would be necessary. Additionally, a mastery of the language was going to take work. This meant not only reading and learning vocabulary, but also practicing what you learn. la maestra would invite us to have conversations with her after school or during lunch hour to build our proficiency in the language. She also encouraged us to explore the language outside of school, be it through watching television, conversing with people in our community, or engaging in cultural activities.

La maestra also let the class know we were going to make mistakes and that the classroom would be the space to learn from our mistakes. She did not expect perfection, but she did expect effort. During oral exams, I remember having a fear of using the wrong words, or sounding like I made no sense. I often thought I would offend La maestra, engaging in a language she knew so well, yet I had a few weeks of class. I would whisper words and phrases under my breath in hopes that the utterance would suffice my participation in the class. La maestra reminded

me that mistakes would be made and assured me that with consistent and persistent effort, the language would come easily, but it was up to me to take those initiatives.

At the end of the semester, I was nowhere near a complete mastery of Spanish. What happened was a better appreciation of the language, and the opportunity to expand my learning to more courses, and continued practice. If I ever were to become fluent in Spanish, I would have to maintain patience, not become too frustrated when mistakes were made, and to appreciate the process.

FINDINGS

What follows are a series of themes that offer insight into how race is discussed in a college classroom. I present findings from my in-depth interviews with students who have been in an Ethnic Studies classroom.

Theme One: “The Deafening Silence of Racism”

Ellis Cose wrote, “Racial discussions tend to be conducted at one of two levels—either in shouts or in whispers. The shouters are generally so twisted by pain or ignorance that spectators tune them out. The whisperers are so afraid of the sting of the truth that they avoid saying much of anything at all.”²⁰ This quote best sums up the experience of race talk in an Ethnic Studies classroom. The experiences discussing race, whether firsthand accounts or from those who feel as though their involvement in race talk is at a distance, happen simultaneously across several demographics. Generalized language neglects to acknowledge the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups. According to Ignacio Martín-Ibaro, “In many speeches and declarations the term ‘the people’ is obviously nothing more than a euphemism for those in power or their direct beneficiaries. . . . Understood this way, the concept of ‘the people’ in a malicious (though not necessarily conscious) blindness, can in one fell swoop cut away the irreconcilable conflicts that may exist among a nation’s different sectors.”²¹ Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that the “process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.”²² This generalized language and lack of nuance around the discussions of race normalize racism itself, and allow for a neutral assumption that racism is something that is of the past, or that those who do not have an engagement with power work to disrupt this presumed normalized experience. Words that may appear to be varying in their approach such as *diversity*, *inclusion*, and *multicultural* are often words used without complexity to their meaning, maintaining the notion of a neutral, raceless, or colorblind society, often maintaining systems of inequality that advance some and marginalize others.²³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva suggests this colorblind ideology is exhibited in several

20. Ellis Cose, “The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why are Middle-Class Blacks Angry? Why Should America Care,” *New York: HarperPerennial* (1993), 9.

21. Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

22. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text publishing, 2015).

23. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “4 Getting over the Obama Hope Hangover: The New Racism in ‘Post-Racial’ America,” *Theories of Race and Ethnicity* (2015), 57; Charles A. Gallagher, “Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-Race America,” *Race, Gender & Class* (2003), 22–37.

canons: abstract liberalism (“reverse racism”), naturalization (“people choose to live in specific neighborhoods and communities, not as a result of systemic racism”), cultural racism (“Black people are poor because they are lazy”), and minimization of race (“We live in a ‘post-racial’ society—we’ve had a Black president!”).²⁴ Language around race and the experiences therein are presented only in a post-racial manner so that topics and experiences around race are of the past.

Theme Two: “Whiteness Controlling the Conversation”

With no assigned seating chart or fixed arrangements, students visually communicated their thoughts about race without using a word. White students upon entering the Ethnic Studies classroom were found to be sitting in very particular spaces in the classroom, particularly on the perimeters or the back of the classroom. Visually, this looked like what often happens in conversations about race—white people feeling as if they have no space in these conversations. By sitting on the perimeter or in the back, this was a way of visually excluding themselves from important and critical discussions. This visual spacing of white students on the edges echoed what is often stated among white people in acknowledging whiteness. For some students, an Ethnic Studies course was the first time they noted having an experience thinking about their whiteness and connecting this to aspects of white supremacy or institutional racism. “It felt like every conversation was about how White people did this thing or oppressed that group. As a white man, I felt like I was responsible for everything we talked about in class. Some days I felt like I was always the problem.”

Part of the difficulty in teaching race is the acknowledgement of one’s social and racial privileges and advantages. White students often enter the class feeling as if they do not belong in discussions about race, or that race is not about white people. The assumption is that because marginalized groups are often affected, that only they could engage in discussion. Additionally, Tatum explains this first encounter with understanding one’s whiteness happen early on in the stages of White racial development.²⁵ For some white students, an Ethnic Studies classroom is the first place that the understanding of whiteness becomes a conscious thought that allows students to see themselves as part of a racial group. Coates illustrates this point wherein he explains how white people do not recognize their whiteness: “The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, and even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”²⁶

To add to this, for many white students, Ethnic Studies classrooms are the first spaces that conversations about race and social identity happen in a public forum, if at all. As a result, the discussion about race is approached much like how people encounter a foreign

24. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

25. Beverly Daniel Tatum, “Teaching White Students about Racism: The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope,” *Teachers College Record* (1994).

26. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 7.

language for the first time, particularly in a classroom setting. Much like in foreign language classrooms, students share varied experiences of anxiety, fear, and embarrassment in the process to learn a language. M. B. Horwitz et al. describe Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.”²⁷ The language itself is not foreign, but the experiences associated with the language around race are foreign. “I stayed quiet because I didn’t know what to say. . . . I would hear (students of color) talk about their experiences, and I was honestly in shock. I didn’t know about these things. I didn’t want to offend them.” For some white students, this was their first time experiencing being an outsider. The silence some white students conveyed about engaging in race dialogue often did not lead to a dialogue, but rather a monologue from students of color, because of the silence of their white counterparts who were afraid of engaging with a new topic and experience. “There were a few times I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know if I was going to say the right thing. . . . Do I say African American, or Black? . . . Back home I would hear people say Colored, but I learned in class that’s no longer acceptable. I think about all of that, then end up not saying anything.” More often than not, White students found comfort in observing rather than participating, which often times made the group conversations much more of a challenge. The lack of input on conversations would, although not explicitly stated, serve as the guide for how conversations would go. There were White students, however, who would engage in dialogues that centered on race, however, a common theme that presented itself among this phenomenon was that they each were socialized in spaces and or communities that are racially diverse, allowing for opportunities to converse in cross-racial settings (school, grocery stores, churches, etc.).

Once white students begin to hear about experiences of race, or how institutional racism gives them privileges that students of color may not have, feelings of white guilt or what Richard Delgado calls “false empathy” occur.²⁸ Students begin to negotiate the ways in which they may or may not have contributed to institutional racism. This critical moment in learning the language of race is where students who have had social and institutional advantages face options; they can choose to learn the language and acquire the tools necessary to effectively have a dialogue with others, or they can maintain their positionality, further maintaining inequality. On the contrary, there were White students who were comfortable with engaging in race dialogue in the classroom, given their positionality and experiences they had before entering the class. “My hometown was pretty diverse. I grew up with Black people and Mexican people all around me. I feel like where I grew up in some ways prepared me to have those talks we had in class. They [classroom discussions] felt familiar.” In learning to engage in race dialogue, white students were learning

27. M. B. Horwitz, E. K. Horwitz, and J. Cope, “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety,” in E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young eds., *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 31.

28. Richard Delgado, *The Coming Race War: And Other Apocalyptic Tales of America after Affirmative Action and Welfare* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

to not only practice being conversant on the topic of race, but to also active listening and attempting to hear their classmates lived experiences.

Theme Three: "Opportunity and Onus"

Contrary to the social and physical location of white students in Ethnic Studies classrooms, students of color, and people who have been traditionally marginalized, particularly within higher education, usually sat front and center in the classroom. In some symbolic way, their sitting front and center served as a visual representation of the course content and conversation wherein people from the margins found their way to the center of discussion. Historically, institutions of higher learning have excluded several communities from educational social mobility, and Ethnic Studies classrooms seek to change that narrative. Ethnic Studies courses offer the corrective and counter-narrative of dominant identities. Tara J. Yosso asserts this as Critical race counter-storytelling, which is "a method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people."²⁹ These courses center the experiential knowledge from communities of color and their experiences within the American landscape. To add to this, students of color in these classes have varied experiences in class. For some, Ethnic Studies serves as an opportunity to share their lived experiences with others who, by privilege or context, do not encounter one another. Students of color share their lived experiences in an environment that, in many cases, allows for others to listen to firsthand accounts of their experiences with a racialized identity. Consequently, students who engage in counter-storytelling with others in classroom settings allow for an expanded worldview and an opportunity to transform the world.³⁰ This agency is often something that marginalized groups have difficulty gaining access to. "Personally I like talking about my experiences in class. It lets them (white people) know that we (Black people) don't have the same experiences, but I also get to learn about other groups and their experiences." Having spaces where race dialogue is utilized allows for students of color to unpack and contextualize their personal experiences, but also frame their experiences within course content and discussion. As a result, white students are able to learn not only language associated with race, but also to practice utilizing the language in an educational setting.

Students of color who have experience engaging with race through experience or discussion could be seen as native speakers on race in an Ethnic Studies classroom. Hans Heinrich Stern contends native speakers (a) have a subconscious knowledge of rules, (b) an intuitive grasp of meanings, (c) the ability to communicate within social settings, (d) a range of language skills, and (e) creativity of language use.³¹ Further, Vivian Cook posits native speakers are not necessarily aware of their knowledge in a formal sense.³² In an Ethnic Studies class, this might translate into students of color having a connection possibly

29. Tara J Yosso, "Critical Race Counterstories along the Chicana," *Chicano Educational Pipelines* (2006), 10.

30. L. Fernández, "Telling Stories about School: Using Critical Race and Latino Critical Theories to Document Latina/Latino Education and Resistance," *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 8, no.1 (2002), 45–65.

31. Hans Heinrich Stern, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Applied Linguistic Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

32. Vivian Cook, "Going beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching," *TESOL Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1999), 185–209.

indirectly with articulating an experience with race, or having direct knowledge of a racialized experience. For some students of color, they have had a familiarity with talking about race that occurred well before entering an Ethnic Studies classroom. Years of discussing and having experiences with race have given some students the ability to be fluent in race dialogue, articulating experiences with ease and fluidity that often unfairly places the responsibility of leading discussions on students of color. This is not to say that white students are not able to discuss or articulate experiences with race or engage in race dialogue, but rather, native speakers on race have an experiential knowledge that should be centered and viewed as valid by teachers in an academic setting.

There is a language of lived experience that subordinate/underrepresented communities know, but may not have proficiency in articulating with others. As M. Devitt suggests, one “can be competent in a language without representing it or knowing anything about it: she can be totally ignorant of it.”³³ As such, communities of color have experiences with race or being racialized, but may not have the proficiency to articulate their experiences. Ethnic Studies courses provide students language that may equip them with the tools, verbiage, and space for them to share, identify, and build their proficiency with safety and the opportunity to teach others of their lived experience. Furthermore, the classrooms allow for varied engagement with language of lived experience, further dispelling notions of neutrality.³⁴ Conversations involving race are never universal, and the experiences of traditionally marginalized students are far from universal. Having a nuanced conversation allows for a more complex conversation that draws from multiple spaces of experience. “There were levels to my frustration. On one hand, I’m explaining to a white student about race, but then I would have to tell [a Latino man] about what its like being a Latina woman. We got some things similar, but I have things as a Latina that you aren’t understanding.” These counter spaces allow those who may not engage with the language of race the necessary learning space in which they can actively listen to the experiences of being racialized and encountering racism.

On the other end of the experience of opportunity is that of onus. Students often discuss the pressure to share their experiences of being a person of color among their white counterparts. The onus of sharing parts of their lived experiences can be empowering—having a space wherein their lived experiences are validated and placed in an educational context. To discuss one’s racialized experience in a classroom setting allows for students of color, some for the first time, to have representation in a classroom beyond that of biased history or stereotypes. Students of color noted the unfair onus of sharing their experiences with others who did not have similar experiences, or were not participating in discussion because of whatever anxieties or insecurities they had when discussing race. “I would leave out of class so tired! It felt like no matter what we talked about, I was the only one talkin’. It felt like all eyes were on me, and that whatever I had to say was taken as the only experience . . . like . . . are you here?!” As this student highlights, racial battle

33. M. Devitt, *Ignorance of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2006), 5.

34. Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 87, no. 8 (1989): 2411–2441; G. Ladson-Billings and W. Tate IV, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *The Teachers College Record*, vol. 97 no. 1, (1995), 47–68.

fatigue, “examines the psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses from racism-related stressors that are often related with being a person of color.”³⁵ When conversations are going only in one direction, students of color feel as if they are the only ones engaged in dialogue, which can be tiring and not productive. Dialogue requires more than one voice in the conversation. To engage in race dialogue across racial and other facets of identity allows for rich and intricate conversations with many voices included.

DISCUSSION

The dialogue around race is a language in and of itself that for some students occurs for the first time in an Ethnic Studies classroom. As Sue et al. suggests, classrooms serve as one of the best settings through which to engage students and begin the necessary conversations on race. These conversations include lived experience, active listening, and validating experiential knowledge, compassion, and empathy.³⁶ In these spaces, it is important to understand that everyone has an experience with race, be it through firsthand experience, or the privilege of a distant engagement. While language acquisition that centers race as part of the conversation should occur before and outside of educational settings, classrooms such as those of Ethnic Studies offer opportunities to critically think about these experiences, and to build proficiency in conversations that go beyond the space of classroom learning. Adding to the complexity of race dialogue, intersections of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and other facets of identity add more nuance and depth to how conversations are constructed.³⁷ As with foreign language acquisition, Florence Myles posits learning early allows for students to expand their cultural understanding, build their confidence, improve literacy, and prepare for work and being a global participant.³⁸ It includes not only learning course material, but also applying what is learned toward connecting with others. This same logic can be applied to race talk. When students are exposed to discussing race and its impacts on the human experience from an early age, not only will anxieties and fears about engaging with race talk lessen, students will also build a proficiency that will be beneficial not only in personal interactions, but in their professional and scholarly development.

After examining the experiences of students discussing race in an Ethnic Studies classroom, it is best to see the classroom environment similar to a foreign language classroom. This means treating the discussions around race like that of a foreign language. Surely, the first few times engaging with the new language will feel uncomfortable, awkward, and strange, but with consistent practice, the language becomes easier to utilize. Such is also the case when incorporating varied levels of engagement with race dialogue into your

35. Jeremy D. Franklin, William A. Smith, and Man Hung, “Racial Battle Fatigue for Latina/o Students: A Quantitative Perspective,” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2014): 303–322, 4.

36. D. W. Sue, A. I. Lin, G. C. Torino, C. M. Capodilupo, and D. P. Rivera, “Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2009), 183.

37. Jung-ah Choi, “Unlearning Colorblind Ideologies in Education Class,” *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, vol. 22, no. 3/4 (2008), 53.

38. Florence Myles, “Learning Foreign Languages in Primary Schools: Is Younger Better?” *Languages, Society and Policy* (2017).

everyday discussions. There are those who are more “proficient” in the language and there are those who have no experience in conversations around race. Once it is established that everyone in the class has varied experiences with race dialogue, both students and the instructor have the opportunity to build upon this to conceptualize spaces where everyone is not only present, but involved. Maureen Linker argues, “Dialogues and debates about social identity and social differences are not simply cerebral exercises abstracted from who we are. They are personal. For that reason, they engage us intellectually, emotionally, and physically. But for the same reason they can also give us some of the most significant opportunities for critical thinking.”³⁹

Understand that, like learning a language aside from one’s mother tongue, mistakes will be made. As students have noted, conversations about race can appear daunting knowing the reality of mistakes being made, while at the same time those who are more advanced in race dialogue can learn to develop a call-in culture rather than calling out. The fear of making mistakes as well as the reaction from said mistakes is often what stifles or completely eliminates the possibility for race dialogue. Through a development of a “call-in” culture in classrooms, educators can foster spaces through which the fear of making mistakes while learning race dialogue is a reframing of how dialogue could happen rather than that of shutting out particular voices from what should be a very intersectional conversation.

Through the engagement of dialogues on race, Ethnic Studies classrooms provide the spaces Paulo Freire envisions where both the instructor and students are co-creators of knowledge.⁴⁰ Additionally, students of color construct new knowledge with their peers as well as develop their proficiency in race dialogue. White students and students from advantaged social positions have the opportunity to engage in race dialogue as well as see themselves as part of the racialized discussions and all students engage in honing their skills of active listening, compassion, and empathy, all of which are necessary in race talk.

The concept of race dialogue presents larger implications that extend beyond classroom learning and practice. Lisa Delpit encourages institutions to examine how they might maintain a “silenced dialogue” that might exist in educational settings, including historical, political, social, and curricular notions that includes some people, but may exclude others.⁴¹ This includes physical locations, student and faculty demographics, and institutional practices or traditions that have been embedded in the oppression of one group for the advancement of another. R. Hughes and M. Giles refer to this as “CRiT Walking,” where race practitioners and institutions “connect CRT as a theoretical construct to a livable, observable, teachable process of critical consciousness, knowing, and doing.”⁴² As the concept suggests, this examination of how race plays a role in society requires action not just an observation. This can only begin when conversations begin, and a language that

39. Maureen Linker, *Intellectual Empathy: Critical Thinking for Social Justice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 168.

40. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000).

41. Lisa Delpit, “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children,” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 58, no. 3 (1988): 280–299.

42. R. Hughes and M. Giles, “CRiT Walking in Higher Education: Activating Critical Race Theory in the Academy,” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2010), 41–57.

includes race and racialized experiences is included. Conflict and misunderstanding occur because communication between groups is not established or persistently maintained. On an institutional level, this includes actively listening to the experiences of historically marginalized groups and assessing to see whether campuses are inclusive, diverse, and meeting the needs of students, faculty, and staff. ■