

# **Beyond the breach: transforming White identities in the classroom**

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Efforts aimed at promoting multiculturalism in the classroom are often pedestrian and ineffectual. When instructors do succeed at facilitating honest discourse, they frequently fail to anticipate the great deal of pain, frustration and anger that is invoked. Rather than sustain a false sense of community, we argue that a dialogic, multicultural community can only be achieved by fostering breach of mainstream norms. Using cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's notion of social drama as a theoretical framework, we document the intense conflict that erupted in our classroom when students were pressed to engage one another regarding issues of race. In order to both acknowledge and make public our students' emotional responses to the dialogue, we implemented a 'recursive loop', a pedagogical strategy designed to provide immediate feedback and enable students to come to a richer understanding of how their experiences of race are inextricably linked. By analyzing the students' discourse, we demonstrate how these voices do not occur in a vacuum; to the contrary, they are articulated in response to one another and to grand narratives used to make years of oppression appear invisible. Ultimately, we contend that White Identity Transformation is necessary for a multicultural community and that such transformation is facilitated, ironically enough, by conflict.

## **Introduction**

I will not continue to show up to your class if I am forced to hear how white people are the oppressors. I feel like this is being crammed down my throat. (Student's anonymous confessional)

Racism can change lives but more frightening it can take lives and even that doesn't seem to bother people much. What amazes me most about racism is white people's indifference to the souls it destroys and lives it takes to this very day. (Student's journal entry)

After two weeks of not talking about race, there is a tangible sense of tension in class as the dialogue between an African-American student (Jeremy) and a White student (Steve) begins to escalate. Despite attempts to engage the class in discussion about

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contemporary racial issues by assigning provocative readings, most students have been silent. Their journals, however, reflect increasing levels of frustration. White students typically note that they are tired of reading about oppression and the perceived privilege they receive in the United States. Conversely, many students of color are outraged at what they see as White students' disinterest and inability to engage in a meaningful discussion about race. As one African-American student noted:

Class discussion on the issue of racism was very flat and boring ... I had a hard time figuring out if that was because of fear or disinterest ... When you discuss race with White people you are basically saying, 'come here, sit down and I will only take up the time that you can spare to sit back and begin to understand me'.

Within this simmering classroom context, Jeremy details multiple experiences of being pulled over by police officers, and the poor treatment he has received as an innocent person. In response, Steve consistently challenges the notion that Jeremy is being singled out because of skin color. Steve explains that because of his own alternative lifestyle (punk rock), attire and haircut, he too is frequently stopped by the police. Jeremy notes that he has been pulled over twice while riding his bicycle, numerous times while dressed conservatively and even placed in handcuffs and accused of hiding drugs.

You could change your hairstyle. I can't change the color of my skin. I am being pulled over because I am Black. It's not the same thing.

I would never change my hairstyle—it's just as much a part of me as your skin color is to you. You could put white makeup on and appear white if you really wanted to.

Steve's last comment creates an audible gasp among the students. Tim, a White student who has been silent for over a week, is visibly agitated. He does not want to talk, but he finally relents after repeated coaxing, 'You want to know what I think, well here it is!' Over the next few minutes Tim explodes, expressing the anger that he, and many of the White students have been feeling for weeks. His monologue and the subsequent classroom reaction sparked what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner terms a 'social drama'.

Social drama occurs when the relative tranquility of norm governed social interaction is upset and attempts are subsequently made to establish new, or re-establish old modes of behavior. Because this story documents an actual experience that unfolded in one of our classrooms, and also represents other, nearly identical experiences we have had, we feel it denotes a significant moment in race relations that merits further exploration. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to shine a light on the conversations about race (not) occurring among our students at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region in the US (southern California). By using a social drama framework, we hope to illustrate both the need for and the effect of promoting dialogue between students that breaches contemporary (White) conventions for conversations about race. Our belief is that a transformative understanding of what it means to be White in this day and age rarely occurs in those classroom communities where such risks are not run.

### **Your students said that too?!**

As educators committed to exploring racial issues and facilitating social change, we have made racial discourse a significant component of our college classes. As co-researchers and officemates at California State University, Long Beach, an urban university in close proximity to Los Angeles, we have learned that there is great opportunity—and risk—associated with challenging students to come to terms with issues of racism and privilege.

Our own dialogue began when we shared stories of the frustrations we experienced when trying to cultivate dialogue about race in our classrooms. Almost immediately we were struck by the commonalities of our students' responses to racism. Our experiences were so similar that we soon recognized the value in attending more carefully to our students' voices. Consequently, we asked students in our performance and social change class to keep a journal of their reactions to course discussions and presentations. Despite the fact that students were told during the first class meeting that we would be dealing with race, many of their journals revealed a reluctance to seriously engage the issues. Hence, we invited students to utilize anonymous written and audio-taped 'confessionals' so that they could openly and honestly share their feelings without fear of repercussion. Our class consisted of 24 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 23. In this course we had four African-American students, five Latina/o students, three students of Asian descent, two students of mixed heritage and the remainder were White. The course met every Monday and Wednesday, and students were expected to attend class.

When we listened to the voices that emerged, it became apparent that the stories told and arguments made by our students were not occurring in a vacuum. To the contrary, compelling connections were evident. In several different classrooms, students of color vocalized experiences and arguments that seemed developed in response to what our White students were saying, even though these particular students had not yet been brought into conversation. Indeed, before the breach and the actual dialogue, these student voices were communal and dialectic. This relationship is understandable when we recognize that race is a social construction and that racism and responses to racism are socially reproduced in discourse. As van Dijk (1987) explains, 'what people say about ethnic minorities is seldom based on unique, personal experiences or opinions. Rather, the topics as well as the ethnic models or attitudes they are based on are socially shared and stereotypical' (p. 61).

'We need to continually break the silence about racism whenever we can', Tatum (1997) argues, '... but how do we start?' (p. 193). In our classrooms, we have chosen to start by using a method we call a 'recursive loop', a strategy that not only entails collecting journals and anonymous confessionals, as we have just described, but also feeding back these voices to the students themselves in public, dialogic displays. We theorize that the effect of such a technique is three-fold.

First, this immediate and public sharing of students' voices makes potentially abstract concepts concrete for students. For example, generalizations about racial oppression are quite different than talk of a neighboring student denied service at a

restaurant. Second, because most students have been raised within a (White) mainstream culture that emphasizes individualism, it is typically difficult for them to understand that their experience is profoundly shaped by and connected to others. As the saying goes, no person is an island, and witnessing such a public display of comments about race-related issues may encourage more collectivistic thought. In this manner, White students brought up in a supposedly colorless world, where race doesn't make a difference, are given an opportunity to see how color does indeed provide a standpoint for viewing race. According to Bell (2003), 'While both Whites and People of Color are likely to be aware of the public transcript regarding race, Whites as the dominant group are less likely than people of color to be aware of the hidden transcript' (p. 5). Third, and perhaps most importantly, a recursive loop provides a rich environment for breach and subsequent reconsideration of White identity. Highlighting the ways in which their own discourse has historical roots in White supremacy (and the resistance of White supremacy) implicates students in uncomfortable ways. When this occurs, students may face a crisis of identity that creates a rich environment for heightened dialogue and conflict.

### **Why invite conflict?**

Although we have not systematically gauged whether a recursive loop is more successful than traditional pedagogical techniques at concretizing race-related issues or helping students toward a more collectivistic understanding, we can attest that it does indeed provide a rich environment for breach. Even so, an important question remains: why should we invite conflict into our classrooms? In his poignant article about Japanese internment narratives, Nakagawa (1997) explores the sociopolitical aspects of breaking the silence around historically muted issues in order to promote healing. Some respondents in his study felt that sharing stories about the internment would lead to even greater pain:

'Why must you reopen old wounds?' We re-open those wounds precisely because they have never healed, and they must never be permitted to heal—for healing is only in once sense a covering over (hence, a closure); healing is also, importantly, revelatory and enunciative ... And if the wound is anesthetized and the scar forgotten or cosmetically concealed, does not the healing moment likewise recede? (1997, pp. 29–30)

In our classrooms, the deep rift between White students and students of color are always present. As educators we have an opportunity, and perhaps even an obligation, to expose this rift in order to foster a truly dialogic community. Many of our White students have been raised on a healthy diet of US grand narratives, stories that represent a colorless world where anyone can make it if s/he simply tries hard enough. These pervasive stories minimize the gains stolen from African-Americans and other people of color for over 400 years and provide a view of the US as a fair country where racism no longer flourishes. Grand narratives are monologic stories meant to represent an objective Truth. Because no dialogic community can ever be built on these misrepresentations, we must break down and risk whatever community we

initially inherit in order to create a classroom environment where all voices are equally valued.

### **Social drama**

Maybe racism isn't important. There are so many other things going on anyway. Worldwide hunger, gang violence, drinking, September 11, bear market, recession, economy. Blah, blah, blah. That's probably what white people begin to hear when they hear more than a few minutes of people of color talking about racism. Blah, Blah, Blah. Kinda wish I felt that every time I felt I was being called a nigger. Blah, blah, blah. Must be nice. (Student's journal entry)

I have not given my opinion in class nor do I ever intend to. My opinions and feelings will never be accepted under any circumstance. Once I open my mouth to speak, my opinion will be judged because of the color of my skin. I am sick and tired of hearing how American, Christian white males are the oppressors over any person of color. The only way someone can be oppressed is if they allow themselves to be oppressed. (Student's anonymous confessional)

When we first engage students about racial issues we are usually met with silence, or pedestrian comments that suggest that everyone is getting along fine. Journal entries from the first few weeks of class suggest that students are willing to consider issues of race as long as the discussions remain comfortable:

Everything seems to be going well in class. Everyone seems to be getting along.

I'm excited to begin talking about interracial dating—I think it's a really important topic.

After the second day of class I already know that I'm going to enjoy this class immensely. In fact I have to stop and think how incredibly perfect and appropriate this class and its content is to me.

I know we are going to be dealing with some touchy subjects that most people would want to keep in the closet. I'm really looking forward to this. I feel like a lot of my points of view on issues are similar to those in this class.

I am at ease. I like working with people to accomplish a common goal and this course will help to do that.

On the surface, things initially appeared fine in our class. We have learned, however, that deep conflict and anger lies just beneath the surface for both White students and students of color. Cornel West (1993) believes that 'The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice' (p. 28). For many White students, meaningful discussions regarding race are difficult because they 'struggle with embarrassment about the topic (racial issues), the social awkwardness that can result if the "wrong" words are used ...[and] the painful possibility of being perceived as a racist' (Tatum, 1997, p. xvi). Rather than ignoring this chasm or pretending that it does not exist, we believe that it is our job to expose the rift and rupture the silence that exists around issues of race.

Most students will agree to some extent that racism is/was a problem and that we all

need to do/did something about it. As we continue to discuss the systematic nature of oppression and the concept of White privilege however, we find that the classroom dynamic shifts as students become increasingly uncomfortable. In his observation of a community struggling with issues of uneven power distribution Goodall (1999) explains, 'There was quiet resistance, subtle anxiety and displays of nonverbal concern, but there was no action. Nothing was always said' (p. 483). However, as we push students—especially White students—to dig deeper, to truly consider how racism functions in this country, such awkwardness is inevitably transformed into anger and chaos.

Since all communities experience conflict, Turner (1986) argues that social dramas are a 'fact of everyone's experience in every day human society' (p. 65). When social dramas occur, they unfold in four observable stages: (a) breach; (b) crisis; (c) redress; and (d) reintegration or spatial separation (Schechner, 1977, 1985, 1988; Turner, 1982, 1985; Turner & Bruner, 1986). Turner (1982) explains:

A social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm governed social life is interrupted by the breach of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. This leads swiftly or slowly to a state of crisis which, if not sealed off, may split the community into contending factions and coalitions. To prevent this, redressive means are taken by those who consider themselves or who are considered the most legitimate or authoritative representatives of the relevant community ... The next phase of social drama ... involves alternative solutions for the problem. The first is reconciliation of the conflicting parties ... The second, consensual recognition of irremediable breach ... (p. 92)

In the course described earlier, breach occurred when we confronted Tim by making visible the privilege that White students have in this country. Rather than glossing over the subject and maintaining the status quo of silence, we attempted to raise the stakes by employing the recursive loop in an anonymous, public account of what several students were saying and feeling. Once the silence was broken, the class quickly and dramatically entered the crisis stage. This can be a difficult stage to encounter for teachers because it creates a true sense of disarray in which students are visibly angry at each other and the instructor. After Tim expressed his anger and prior to the next class meeting, we sent an email message to all of the students asking each person to compose an anonymous confessional about their feelings and bring it to the next class meeting. As we read each confessional it became clear that we had entered the crisis stage and that factions were being formed along color lines.

The students' confessionals revealed that a number of individuals were angry and saddened by the events of the class. Many White students were beginning to shut down, with some even threatening to drop the course. For example, one student said, 'Sometimes no matter what you say it won't make a difference. Sometimes no matter what you say people will not care. I choose not to engage in this battle. I forfeit.' One White student reflected on the impact of September 11 and argued that we needed to stop focusing on what s/he saw as derisive issues like racism:

United we stand divided we fall. Ever heard this saying before? The United States will not survive if we are fighting amongst ourselves over race and other issues. People need to put aside their differences. For the people who continually trash talk this great nation, they

need to either get the hell out or go and visit any other country. Many people would love to live here. Look at how many people illegally come into our country. People should feel grateful to live in the US. Minorities in the US live better than some white people in Europe.

Some White students felt like they were being victimized by students of color and being treated unfairly by their peers. This is consistent with Jackson and Heckman's (2002) claim that '... some Whites feel they are being targeted as the evil nemesis when they feel they are not responsible for racism' (p. 448). As one student exclaimed:

Minorities hate to be stereotyped yet they do it too! They stereotype whites!! I don't know how many times I feel like I'm such a horrible person and feel entirely blamed simply because I'm white. It's like minorities are pitting me against them in their mind. News flash!!! Not all white people are the same!!!!

Another student echoed the same sentiment:

African-Americans look at whites as the automatic enemy, simply because they are white, and African-Americans feel as though white people will never understand their situation in this country.

One White student concluded that s/he was being asked to end communication with family members who frequently made racist remarks. After assuming an extreme position never advocated in class, s/he then argued that White people are marginalized:

So, what am I supposed to do, just ... cut all ties with my family? That's ridiculous. Fuck that! ... All white groups are challenged and called racist if they don't include a person of color. Yet it is OK for blacks to have only black people. Shoot, there is a black entertainment television channel. A strictly white entertainment channel would be questioned and not allowed.

In our class we had African-American, Latina/o and Asian-American students. In their journals and confessionals students of color expressed the pain and disappointment they felt at what was perceived as White students' inability to understand the dramatic impact of racism on their lives. One student explained how tiring it is to encounter racism on a daily basis: 'White people turn other ethnicities into an exotic circus. Whites want to touch our hair or ask why we do certain things. It gets annoying being treated as an outsider or circus freak. I have been treated that way my whole life'. Another student reflected on the discussion that occurred between Jeremy and Steve by asking, 'Do you know what it feels like to have a police car pull along side you or drive by you and you have your heart drop even though you are doing nothing wrong? Do you fear for your life in those circumstances?' A second student also detailed her/his anger toward the White students in class who were not able to understand what it feels like to be followed around in a store or denied equal access to education: 'Are you telling me my experience was not racially motivated? How far are you willing to go? I almost got the impression that if I were called a nigger they would fail to see the racism in that'.

## Redress

During the class session that followed the heated exchange between Jeremy and Steve we opted to employ the recursive loop again, only this time more fully. When students arrived for class, we asked them to stay outside for a few minutes. This created a heightened sense of awareness among the participants who sensed that something out of the ordinary was unfolding. The night before class, we went through the students' anonymous confessionals in order to ascertain recurrent themes. We then selected a number of representative passages and put them on large poster boards in dialogic juxtaposition. Some of the passages were handwritten in bright colors; other statements were printed out in different sized fonts. Before students arrived, the poster boards were placed around the entire classroom creating a museum-like exhibit. Once the students entered the space, they received immediate feedback about how their classmates were privately responding to a range of class readings and discussions. In addition, this display also gave students the opportunity to see how their voices came together to create a dialectic exchange on race. As Nakagawa (1987) explains, 'It is this reflexive move that opens the possibility for a genuinely dialogic play of recursive and discursive moments ...' (p. 21).

As students entered the classroom they were asked to silently walk around the room for 15 minutes and read the passages that were directly quoted from their own confessionals. The atmosphere in the room was intense as students moved from poster to poster, visibly shaken by what their peers had said. Many students shook their heads in disbelief; others had a difficult time even reading the posters. Some students were in tears.

In creating this display, it was important for us to show to students how their words were linked. For example, one student responded to a reading by stating:

The part in the article about dreadlocks when it says, 'No you may not touch it, don't ask' makes white people out to be little children exploring a strange new world. What does touching a person's dreads really have to do with racism?

A second student responded to the same article independently but provided an answer to the first student's question when s/he wrote, "No you may not touch it, don't ask" is just plain rude, and infers that all white people are fascinated by dreadlocks when actually I wouldn't touch that shit if you paid me!!! When these quotes were juxtaposed with one another, a clearer picture of the disturbing aspects of deep-seated racism began to emerge.

Since White students and students of color seemed to disagree about the current status of racism in the US, we also chose to highlight some of these differences on the posters. For example, in one passage a student reified the US grand narrative of progression, while in a second passage another student challenged this mainstream belief:

People of color should celebrate the fact that they are able to get an education and to live in such a privileged land. The truth is that America is progressing so let's not digress by constantly drudging up the past and shoving it in the so-called oppressors face. I am a serious when I say that I'm sick and tired of all this.



Maybe I'm stupid but I failed to see how things are getting better. We lived in a highly racist society in which people who look like me are a threat or the object of ridicule.

Through the display, we also wanted to showcase how the course readings and subsequent discussions were creating tangible pain for a number of students. Some noted that the sense of community that they had felt just days before had dissolved. Others explained that they were struggling with interracial friendships that were formed during or even prior to class now that serious issues had been made public. We placed entries around the room that clearly illustrated this pain that lied beyond the anger:

White people are like, get over it, it's the past. As if they are tired of hearing our stories. We want them to understand that it is still hurting us and it's not going to stop any time soon.

I don't want to feel alone.

I feel like I am going to start to cry and I will not want to stop talking because I even feel pain in my chest from carrying so many things.

Sometimes I just want to scream. I want to scream so loud that the earth itself feels it and weeps for me. Sometimes I think maybe we are not victims and it's all of figment of our overactive imaginations. But deep in my soul I know that my skin is my sin like so many other people of color.

After students were given 15 minutes to read all of the entries, and a few additional minutes to process what they had read, we asked that they self-select one of two groups: students who appear White or students of color. The two groups then met in separate locations and each was given three questions to consider: (1) how are you feeling as a group; (2) how do you believe the other group is feeling; and (3) what can you do to positively impact the classroom community. Each group was given a large poster on which to note their responses.

Although it might seem disadvantageous to separate the class along color lines, especially considering the fact that factions were already formed during the crisis stage, we felt that it was important for both groups to have a safe space to process what they had read and if necessary, vent their feelings. The communication had by this point completely broken down. Some students were talking past one another, others were silent and most were becoming even more entrenched in their positions. Furthermore, whereas many students of color were willing and able to engage racial issues, a number of White students were angry or completely shut down. We both felt that any further attempts at fostering dialogue, without first trying a radical intervention, would be doomed to failure. We recognize, however, our choice to divide the class into separate groups had potential consequences. By separating the groups were we reifying the very binaries we were trying to deconstruct and creating an even greater distance between 'self' and 'other?' Although we were sensitive to these concerns, we recognized the power behind conventional racial ascriptions and the need to leverage them when appropriate; we believed at the time that the class would remain in the crisis stage if we did not provide an opportunity for students to

meet in separate groups. Our ultimate goal was to move toward a dialogic community, and we were willing to take some risks to accomplish this objective.

Since frustrated White students typically project their anger toward us, the instructors, we opted to bring in a guest Professor, Julia Johnson, to facilitate the White group discussion. Julia has expertise in critical White studies and as an outsider was able to help make the discussion less threatening. We also chose Julia for strategic reasons. We have found that White students frequently use diversion strategies when discussing race. We have seen White female students divert the conversation to a discussion of feminist issues, White gay and lesbian students equate racism with homophobia and students with body types that do not fit the cultural norm turn their attention to weight issues. Although we certainly acknowledge multiple forms of oppression and the ways in which they are interpellated, we have noted that in this context, these discussions are typically diversionary and occur with surprising regularity. As a self-identified 'Fat, White, lesbian',<sup>1</sup> Professor Johnson is committed to considering racial issues and White privilege. Hence, she is in an ideal position to challenge students who try to reshape the dialogue. After allowing the White students to list their complaints and concerns, Julia gently, but firmly, showed how their very complaints were rooted in White privilege. At first some of the students argued vehemently with her; however, during the course of the discussion nearly all of the students began to recognize how they were participating in racial discourse and benefiting from privilege. The recursive loop coupled with the session facilitated by Dr Johnson was the turning point for some White students. The opportunity to be reflective about their discourse and social position proved unsettling and potentially transformative. As one White student explained in his journal: 'Today we definitely had the most tense class session. Normally after class I ... go straight to work or home. Today I just wandered around because there is something really uncomfortable (sic) about what went down'. It is our belief that the feelings of disequilibrium expressed by this student are necessary for change.

### **Reintegration or spatial separation? The role of transformation**

After breach, crisis, and redress, the last stage in a social drama involves a coming together (i.e., reintegration) or a pulling apart (i.e., spatial separation). In our experience, the critical difference separating these two outcomes in the context of conversations about race is a process we call 'White identity transformation'. This sort of transformation occurs when people who are informed largely or exclusively about race by (White) mainstream US culture (i.e., those who believe the 'hype'—see Chideya, 1995) come to rely upon a larger, more historically grounded viewpoint that permits appreciation of contemporary forms of oppression. In this context, the term 'White' does not refer to one's 'racial' classification, but rather the standpoint from which s/he views the world. Thus, we do not seek to transform all White people and no persons of color. Instead, we seek to move any person naïve to the ways in which power operates in a racialized manner within the US. More specifically, White identity transformation is an abdication of 'colorlessness' coupled with an intent to

work toward social justice. When identities are transformed in this way, social dramas typically result in reintegration; when this sort of transformation is resisted, spatial separation is often the end result.

Because the idea of transformation is so central, it merits further consideration. Indeed, transformation is so important that the mere possibility of achieving it is the very reason we encourage social drama and accept the associated risks. Classroom life is certainly more manageable and pleasant without the drama, but such transformation rarely, if ever, occurs in the absence of a breach. What then does it mean to be transformed in this context?

Theoretically, White identity transformation is nothing more than the development of intercultural communication 'competence' or cross-cultural 'effectiveness', a state anticipated with surprising banality in most social scientifically-grounded models of cultural training and education (see Warren & Adler, 1977; Bhawuk, 1990; Seelye, 1996; Samovar & Porter, 2001). According to such models, a lack of awareness, knowledge, and behavioral skills is all that keeps people from transforming from a state of ethnocentrism to a state of ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1993). Consequently, all that trainers and educators need to do is to provide the relevant instruction. Very little, if any, mention is made of factors encouraging resistance to such a transformation (e.g., stereotypes) even though these factors are well documented (see Cargile & Giles, 1996). In our experience, it is precisely that resistance which frames the pedagogical challenge, not the mere supply of information. Thus, although there are important similarities between White identity transformation and the development of intercultural competence/effectiveness, we prefer not to treat transformation in these terms because they distort the process we witness in the classroom.

A third concept that more closely represents what we mean by transformation is that of *mindfulness* (Langer, 1987, 1989). According to Langer, mindfulness is defined by three characteristics: (1) creating new categories; (2) being open to new information; and (3) being aware of more than one perspective; it is the opposite of mindlessness—the habitual following of scripts, norms or stereotypes. Positioned as such, mindfulness is difficult to achieve given the acknowledged human tendency toward mindlessness. As Pinker (1997) argues, our brains are shaped for fitness, not for truth. Because we want our version of the truth to prevail, maintaining an openness toward different perspectives and those we label as 'others' is a constant struggle. In the context of conversations about race, White identity transformation involves the fight to wean ourselves from mindless dependence on those knowledge structures offered by (White) mainstream US culture. Simultaneously, it also means embracing ambiguity where certainty once existed and listening patiently to others as we build new scaffolds for information that are less self-serving and more reflective of a plurality of experiences.

Mindfulness, to be sure, offers important insight regarding White identity transformation. Even so, it remains such a thoroughly cognitive and largely modern concept that it is important to supplement our meaning of transformation with at least two additional concepts: *liminality* and *vzhivanie*.

Conventional, Eurocentric views of transformation describe a subject undergoing

change to get from A to B. In this framework, liminality is a transitory time/place/space that subjects navigate en route to a newer, usually higher status. The limen is thus often seen as a route to transformation qua closure. However, other views challenge this modernist trajectory. For example, Park-Fuller (2001) contends that liminal spaces do not possess 'endings and beginnings' with 'clear, clean borders', but instead may be seen as 'messy voids in between' (p. 33). Likewise, liminality may be understood not only as a temporary, transitory 'betweenness', but also as a transfiguration that never ends. It is this later, more postmodern sense of the limen that we evoke when understanding White identity transformation; it is a sometimes confused and ongoing change that continually affects.

Lastly, White identity transformation can be represented as *vzhivanie* ('living into')—a Russian concept popularized in academics by Mikhail Bakhtin. Very generally, *vzhivanie* means to enter another's place while still maintaining your own place, your own outsideness, with respect to the other (Morson & Emerson, 1989). Bakhtin insists that we cannot, nor should we try to forget our own standpoint when attempting to understand others' because real understanding emerges only in the limen. As Morson and Emerson relate, 'a meaning can only reveal its depth when it encounters another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings' (1994, p. 99). Thus, in transformation, 'one should not become the other. But we can add without contradicting his/her position that in transcultural acts one does become other than one's previous once-occurrent being' (Bakhtin, quoted in Min, 2001, p. 16).

This more postmodern view of transformation describes students—White students and students of color—who are moving through liminal spaces and who are undertaking changes regarding their perspectives on race. Within this context of vulnerably transforming identities, an authentic classroom community becomes attainable. As bell hooks (1994) eloquently states, 'The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility' (p. 207).

Back in our classroom, we asked all of our students in their final journal entries to chart where they were in their own understanding of race. Their discourse and final entries suggest a multifaceted definition of transformation as an ongoing process of both growth and frustration. Although a small minority of White students were still angry at the conclusion of the semester, the majority seemed to be opening up to new ways of thinking about race. According to one student:

I have learned that I don't have all the answers and that in fact I have a long way to go. I have more to learn and more to work on. I have become more open and accepting but I'm still very closed and judgmental below. I am beginning to analyze who I am, where I'm from, the effect of my background, and what that has shaped my mind and thoughts today. Hopefully my baby steps will turn into normal strides. I have already seen a change. For example, my roommate made some comments at dinner about black people. In the past I would have completely agreed with her, I found myself instead arguing with her and trying to explain the error in her reasoning. I would say this class pushed me to stretch much further than I ever thought I could.

Another White student finished her journal with the following entry:

I am not quite sure what is happening with me. I just know that some of my anger has subsided and shifted and I'm realizing I am not alone. Today is the first day I have taken down my defense barrier and actually listened with an open heart rather than a closed or defensive heart. I'm not sure if I can put this into words but I'm going to try. I want you to understand that people of color are going to face obstacles that I might never experience. I want to people of color to understand that I don't want to be ignorant, that I am a person that does not want to be heard saying or repeating racial slurs, comments or jokes. I want people of color to know that I'm aware and not blind to their experiences and feelings. Things are changing for me. I always thought of myself as one who tries to see no color and tries to be accepting of all people. But as I read my previous journal entries, I read words and phrases from an angry person. I'm not claiming to be totally healed or free from prejudice, but I am aware of my actions. I feel I have a new group of people to stand up for and that is the members in my class who I listened to and heard their frustrations.

The previous two journal entries hint at the initial stages of White identity transformation. Both students are beginning to change their thought processes and behaviors, with recognition that they have undergone significant change but still have a long road to travel.

Students of color also noted the personal growth that was experienced by engaging in critical discourse about race. One student stated that he learned a great deal from the 'everyday dialogues within the class. I've grown so much, and I will not take this experience for granted'. A second student also reflected on his growth, but made it clear that he expected White students to work harder to understand his life experiences:

I've learned a lot about people and myself. I learned that white privilege hurts white people in ways most people fail to see. I still think it is unfair that I must extend myself to those who would more than likely not give me the same courtesy in terms of understanding racism. It was funny to me how everyone was asking for understanding on our last day of class. I hope everyone was not confusing understanding for agreement.

## **Conclusion**

To be honest about race demands that one be honest about one's racial attitudes. The fear of revealing these dirty secrets has hindered race talk for decades. The irony is that it only by revealing such secrets that race talk can be effective. (Berger, 1999, p. 180)

If one of our goals as educators is to create a dialogic community where racial issues just beneath the surface are made public, we should invite conflict and the social dramas that may ensue. It may seem easier to skirt issues of race but it is at our own peril. We believe that teaching students how race and privilege are perpetuated can potentially lead to lasting transformations. For some students, the transformation may begin during class. For others, perhaps, the seeds have at least been planted.

Two final journal entries manifest the complexities and uncertainties that, as educators, we need to consider if we truly desire a community founded on authentic dialogic exchanges:

I feel like we are almost there.  
There isn't always a happy ending.

## Note

1. Professor Johnson asked that we include her real name in this study. In addition, she explained that she uses the term 'fat' as a rhetorical strategy in the same way that a gay or lesbian individual might use the term 'queer.'

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