

# Pedagogy, Performance, and Positionality: Teaching about Whiteness in Interracial Communication

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*This article examines the relationships among bodies, identities, and performances of whiteness in an Interracial Communication course. The article uses the concepts of positionality and performativity to discuss the shifting articulations of White identities in relation to whiteness as a pedagogical concept. In doing so, the study focuses on the class' narrative, positionality with regard to the narrative (including resistance), and positionality regarding the teacher of the course. The study draws from theoretical work on whiteness, critical pedagogy, pedagogy of discomfort, and the pedagogy of performance. Davies and Harre's (1990) discussion of positionality with regard to narrative and identity provides the framework for the analysis of student narratives and focus group conversations. **Keywords:** whiteness, performance, pedagogy, position, race*

"No one is telling you what they really feel," she said, looking around at the class in exasperation. "If I was that woman, and I saw something suspicious, you better bet I would be on the phone to the police. You don't think if I could have prevented what happened on September 11th, I would have? That's what it means to be a good citizen."

It was the anniversary of September 11th, 2001, and my Interracial Communication class had been discussing patriotism, race, and what it meant to be an American one year later. We were discussing a recent (at that time) incident in Florida in which three medical students had been detained for 17 hours after their car was pulled over and they were taken in for questioning by the state police and the FBI. According to news reports, a woman in a restaurant (in Georgia) at which the men were eating had overheard their conversation and had become anxious. She called the FBI to warn them that the men were terrorists and plotting an attack. Several hours later the men were pulled over on a major interstate highway in Southern Florida. Although the men were eventually released, the hospital in Miami at which they were to continue their schooling (and the destination of their long road trip) now denied them admittance. While a few students in the class protested the treatment of these men and racial profiling in general, the majority of students sat silent, not wanting (or possibly not caring) to enter into the dangerous territory of this conversation.

As the instructor for the class, I raised the possibility that fear played a part in the (White female) tipster's response to the three men and was now playing a role both in how the students were interacting and in how they were judging others' responses. What seemed known to all, no one dared to say: how the men looked played a major role in how their actions were assessed. Their words were already

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coded, just as their bodies were already marked. Patriotism and citizenship were at stake here, but something else framed the larger episode. What was invisible in this conversation, for this student and others who voiced their fears and concerns over “suspicious people” at that point in time, is the subject that was the focus of the class and the subject of this paper: White identity and positionality. I use the term “positionality” in conjunction and in conversation with other terms such as “identity negotiation,” “location,” and “performance” as a tool to emphasize the contexts in which White identity and culture are signified as what is normal, invisible, and, for some, empty.

My concern in this paper is both with students’ experiences of, and negotiations with, their own racial identities and with the pedagogies that can address the performative dimensions of racialized bodies: the emotional and invisible aspects of what we have come to know as the “social construction of racial identities.” Before I go further, however, a caveat is in order. Because this paper focuses on White identity and positionality, I am centering primarily on the experiences of the White students in my class. I do so because I feel that the goals and learning processes of students who did not identify as White in the class were significantly different, although all students purportedly wanted to learn more about, and become better at, interracial communication.

Whiteness, as a set of rhetorical strategies employed to construct and maintain a dominant White culture and identities, has always shifted to incorporate dissenting or divergent voices, to render invisible that which it cannot swallow. One year after September 11th, the discourse had again morphed—this time into profiling for protection, safety, and most dangerously, patriotism. In the student’s comment above, and those of others who agreed with her reasoning for racial profiling, the ability to prevent the catastrophic destruction of lives and property, of one’s home and people, lies in the ability to accurately predict suspicious behavior based on racial characteristics. Cultural and social coding of skin tone thus determines one’s intent, motives and degree of humanity. Histories of subjugation, of marginalization and oppression based on skin color do not absolve one of guilt, but serve as further evidence of evil intention. At the risk of oversimplifying the complexities of marking the other, it should be noted that the discursive position of “other” had moved once again, in endless fluctuation on the continuum between extreme visibility and invisibility: foreground or background in a dance with whiteness. White behavior was, is, and remains, unremarkable.

Pedagogies that speak to whiteness, that foreground the ways that structures of racial categorization always point away from White as a referent are much needed in communication education. Often, discussion of the communication of whiteness or of racial difference is subsumed under the auspices of intercultural communication and, occasionally, in other courses such as interpersonal communication or organizational communication. In my predominantly White department and university, I felt that rhetorical strategies that maintained interracial communication as about the non-White other needed to be deconstructed, while strategies that maintained (White) invisibility and normalcy needed to be highlighted. White, in other words, needed to be marked in bodies, experiences and in words. This meant that from the first day when I, a White, heterosexual, middle class woman walked into the Interracial Communication class, I wanted the White students to see me and think about race. I pointed out to them that if I were Black or Latina, race would already be a part of how every issue was presented; I wanted them to be

aware of how their assumptions might have been changed or altered by my whiteness.

In the first part of this essay, I build a theoretical and methodological argument for a pedagogy that addresses the performative dimensions of whiteness: one that focuses on bodies and emotions as equally important in understanding the ideologies of race as are “rational dialogues” on social justice and democracy. I look briefly at the contributions of critical and feminist pedagogues with an interest in the body and performance as a dimension of pedagogy and then build on these ideas the notion of a pedagogy of discomfort. In the second part of the essay, I use the conceptual frames of position and narrative to analyze the performativity of whiteness and the possibilities for pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy, Performative Pedagogy, and the Pedagogy of Discomfort**

Movements toward or away from scholarly recognition of the politics of identity negotiation have much to do with the dynamics of power and ties to other highly valued terms in the United States such as community, citizenship, culture, democracy, etc. Research on pedagogy and the process and outcomes of education in this country is no exception, and in fact, over three decades of research on critical pedagogy has been overtly dedicated to examining power, identity, and ideology in traditional teaching and learning methods. Critical pedagogy has been defined variously as a movement toward empowerment and liberation for students, an educational practice in opposition to the practices of the “New Right,” a critique of schooling as social and cultural production, and an examination of how knowledge is produced. Giroux and McLaren (1989) describe critical pedagogy as a means of exploring what people know, what powers contribute to this understanding, and how this knowledge is organized within the institutional context of schooling. Much of this research, while expressing a need to liberate students from the educational regime, and calling on “rank and file” teachers (Giroux, 1988) to rise up against the status quo, has been critiqued for merely alienating those who it purports to help (see Ellsworth, 1992). Although critics often point to the “opaque” nature of the theoretical writings of critical pedagogy, they do not dismiss its aims or values. Indeed, feminist and performance scholars have used these theories as starting points for analysis of the tensions at the site of experience—between bodies and institutions, teachers and students, liberation and discipline. These tensions are importantly not dichotomous, but multiple, leading to complexities in the positions and consequences of all involved in the educational process (Cooks & Sun, 2002). Here, and throughout the paper, I use the idea of position and positionalities to discuss the ways identities are negotiated interactionally and contextually, as opposed to subjectively or unilaterally, and with regard to social and cultural location, place and space.

In the past decade, critical and radical pedagogy has begun to shift its focus increasingly to the body and the performance of identity. Much of this work has focused on gender and sexuality, and, after Judith Butler (1993), has looked at the ways bodies are always already constrained by their social location, even as we may (or may not) contest these positionings. Identity positions, while having actual material consequences, can also be reworked and rewritten to make visible the constraints themselves. Thus, for Butler, agency comes from recognizing that

performance can work from within social categories to reposition identities that are oppressive.

While it is very important to note that social categories such as sex, gender, class, ability, etc. work together with race to form systems of meaning that shape and mark our bodies, for the purposes of this paper, my focus is limited to recognizing the ways race is performative and to begin to construct a pedagogy that makes visible the constraints of whiteness. For most Whites, to think about what it means to *be* White is itself a radical move. To construct for ourselves how whiteness comes to hold meaning or power in specific contexts, how we have gained status and privilege, is to unravel the tightly held promise of blankness, of normalcy.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this means that the concept of race as socially constructed is also consequential. Although most scientists agree that race is socially constructed, people still act on race as if it were natural. If I were to claim myself to be Black, I might be laughed at or seen as offensive at first, but after a time, I would be considered pathological by even the most liberal of social constructionists. Beyond simply acknowledging that the category of race was constructed historically for purposes of domination and oppression politically, socially, culturally, economically, etc., it is important to look at all the forms of (*e*)*racing* bodies. Racism, as Butler (1993) notes, is not simply “discrimination on the basis of a pre-given race” (p. 18), but is itself defined in and through that construction. If we reposition racism as an address to the White body, we have shifted the signified to reflect back on the signifier.

What remains unaddressed in Butler’s (1993) work, and in much of what has been written on performance and pedagogy (see, for example, Fuller, 2000), is the construction of emotion as the invisible, the unknowledgeable and the unknowable that is so intimately connected with the body. Writing about pedagogy and patriotism post-September 11th, Zembylas and Boler (2002) argue for a pedagogy of discomfort, one that combines elements of critical pedagogy with attention to the fears and emotions underlying discussions of citizenship and democracy in the United States today. With attention to a pedagogy that at once seeks to validate the emotional pain that many students experienced after September 11th, while also giving consideration to the contradictory ways citizenship and patriotism are positioned, they posit that

[a] pedagogy of discomfort ... offers direction for emancipatory education through its recognition that effective analysis of ideology requires not only rational inquiry and dialogue but also excavation of the emotional investments that underlie any ideological commitment such as patriotism. A pedagogy of discomfort invites students to ... enter the risky areas of contradictory and ambiguous ethical and moral differences. (p. 2)

Zembylas and Boler’s concern is with the often conflictual ways students experienced their grief over the tragedy of September 11th and their government’s response to these events with military actions. They struggle over the meaning of grief and the meaning of patriotism, as these two different concepts have been connected and confused. Zembylas and Boler (2002, p. 23) observe that “patriotism is as much an emotional experience as an intellectual conviction,” and their words offer an important insight into the linkages among ideologies of race and nationality. For our purposes, it is important to identify emotional experience as intellectual conviction and vice versa. It is imperative that we acknowledge the emotional investment in the concept often articulated among my students that treating

everyone equally erases the differences created through the racialization of bodies. Equally important is the acknowledgement of the intellectual understanding conveyed in the emotional appeal of the student in the opening lines of this paper. For that student and several others in the class, the categorization of non-White, and non-native others was legitimated. Race was equated with the behavior of the non-White other, whereas White was empty of meaning, or, as Nakayama and Krizek (1999) discuss, whiteness was defined in terms of the negative

Here, it becomes important to note, following Garza (2000), that if race is equated with behavior, then the power of whiteness extends to much more than simply racial characteristics; indeed, White culture has the power to define what is appropriate, normal, and permissible. If identities are multiple and fragmented, and take on particular meanings in specific contexts, then it stands to reason that whiteness is more about dynamics of power—the power to define what is normal and comfortable, to give spaces particular meanings and uses, to define what and who *counts* in a culture.

Pedagogically, fear is an important starting point for discussing the performance of whiteness. Many of the White students in my class expressed their fear of not knowing enough about Black culture, of appearing uncool (which, as several students pointed out, was often equated with being White by Black comedians), and most of all, a fear of being attacked because they were White. By and large, these students could not understand how anyone could ever fear Whites in general, or them in particular. They did not understand and were not ready to take responsibility for the power they did have—the power of definition and the power to perform *other-wise*.

Writing about the power of defining the “other,” Garza (2000) observes that

[t]he other ... probably because it has inherited much of its identity from the subject, does need the subject to know itself: the beginning of self-identification comes from the other's position as an “other” ... As the “other” in our society, to understand myself I must understand how the dominant culture understands “Hispanic” people ... Whiteness, however, doesn't have to endure this process in its quest for self-identification. (p. 66)

To begin to address these dynamics in the following paragraphs, I outline a methodology for studying narratives of whiteness and the possibilities for pedagogy to address dimensions of performance and position in White identities.

### **Methodology: Performing Positions**

I use the notion of position in performance in the fashion of Davies and Harré (1990), as a metaphor for discussing the ways individuals are constituted and reconstituted through social interactions and discursive practices. As participants in one another's storylines, individuals, through discourse, either explicitly or implicitly make subject positions available that may (or may not) be taken up by another. Students in my courses often see roles for Whites in interracial relations as victim (of reverse discrimination or other leftist agendas) or perpetrator of continued oppression (which throw many into guilty paralyses). Roles for those other than White on campus seemed equally well defined, and thus it became the purpose of the course and, by extension, this article, to abandon the relatively preset definition of roles to look at position and the possibilities for movement and agency. Davies and Harré (1990) described positioning in discursively produced storylines as similar

to the ways in which readers of stories are positioned in alignment with, or in opposition to, various characters, thus opening up the possibility for multiple, even contradictory readings.

In the analysis that follows, I look at the positions adopted by my students in relation to their own racialized identity. I am interested in the subject positions they adopt as well as those they leave behind. Do the students avow a White subject position, with all the privileges that accrue, or do they place other Whites (ignorant and/or powerful) in that subject position, while rendering themselves invisible—neither self nor other? Here, Davies and Harré (1990) note that, even though a speaker may position another in a storyline, that other may (1) understand the cultural stereotype at work in the discourse differently than the speaker; (2) pursue their own storyline, unaware of the storyline that was implied by the first speaker; or (3) be aware of the implicit storyline but choose instead to resist it. How interlocutors understand the storylines in which they are embedded, then, is a critical element in establishing how positions are taken up, or not. The usefulness of the theoretical concept of positioning “is that it serves to direct our attention to a process by which certain trains of consequences, intended or unintended, are set in motion” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 51).

### **Analysis**

An essay that focuses on positionality must necessarily reflect on the position of its author. As a White woman with a good amount of schooling under her belt, I have struggled to identify dynamics of power that constitute me as privileged or oppressed through socially constructed categories of race, class, size, sexuality, and gender, as well as through education and mobility. I fought for and over knowledge of my own body and, after many years, have come to better know its pedagogy. In my professional life, I have worked to create classroom and community spaces where issues of social and procedural justice could be identified, articulated, and, hopefully, addressed. I have tried to create spaces for agency for my students and to foster in them the ability to identify moves in interaction and intervene in ways that might change the consequences of performances of race, gender, etc. While I found that it is relatively easy for students to have knowledge of privilege, it is much more difficult (and more effective) for them to experience privilege as a bodily act.

The Interracial Communication class was made up of 48 students, a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds, although the majority of the class (78%) identified as White. All were communication majors at a state university in the Northeastern United States. Students were required to read the text for the class, *Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice* (Orbe & Harris, 2000) supplemented by a reading packet.

Toward the end of the semester, I asked students to write and meet in groups to talk about the class. Both of these assignments were voluntary; students were not graded or awarded points. All of the students wrote narratives, and 24 met in four focus group sessions. The narratives were written with two weeks left in the semester. The focus groups met the last week of classes. The narrative papers ranged from a paragraph to four pages of text. Focus groups lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The first focus group consisted of all White students, and the last was made up of non-White students, although the students did not know in

advance who would be attending. Each of the focus groups was tape-recorded, and relevant portions were transcribed for this study.

### ***Re-positioning Whiteness in the Body***

To begin to ground the “idea” of privilege in the “truth” of the body, early in the semester I asked students to write about their first experiences of being racialized. The stories were quite diverse, based on homogeneity or heterogeneity of hometown, gender, class, racial identity, as well as personal characteristics. After I had read all the papers, I took off the students’ names and then handed them out to all the students in the class, making sure that no one had their own paper. I asked the students then to read a few paragraphs from each paper. For many of the White students, this exercise had a profound effect because they began to realize the numerous ways race had shaped the non-White students’ lives, whereas they (the White students) never had to think about race, or never cared to, or cared to but on their own terms. The experience of whiteness, now, was physical—located in the body’s fears, discomforts, and dislikes as well as its desires and yearnings. This location led to a bodily awareness that was reflected in a variety of positions students took with regard to their in/visibility within social and cultural scenes inside and outside of the classroom.

### ***Positioning in Narratives of Change***

I deliberately was not specific as to what I wanted the students to address in their final class narratives; I simply asked them to tell their story with regard to the course. It is noteworthy that I did not ask students to identify whether or not they had changed their opinions regarding race and interracial communication as a result of the class, yet all the students addressed this as part of their response.

In the students’ stories, a self is positioned in relation to a story of White identity/invisibility and culture. Given that this narrative was implicit in all the students’ stories, I use this as the storyline against or with which students position themselves. Adapting the concepts identified earlier by Davies and Harré (1990) to the concept of whiteness and subjectivity, I categorize students’ narratives and focus group conversations in relation to: (1) whether they adopt the subject position implied by the narrative (i.e., accepting whiteness as part of their identities), (2) are somehow unaware of their subject position within the narrative and pursue their own storyline, and/or (3) are aware of the storyline but choose to resist it. In what follows, I look at how the self is positioned and storied in relation to others as well as where learning is located within or without this class narrative. Students are indicated by race, gender, and their initials. As mentioned above, I focus primarily on the comments of the White students in the class.

### ***Adopting Subject Position: Positioning the Self as Privileged, Responsible for Whiteness, and Open to Engaging Others***

By far, the most popular positioning of the self with regard to whiteness narrative located the self as subject in this story. The self could be privileged (although how one acted on this awareness varied), enlightened, or burdened by this subjectivity, but one was, nonetheless, White. Typical of many students’ responses was one Eastern European woman’s comment:

I think this class has opened my eyes to social constructions that I often looked past. I didn’t see how

much I looked past until I heard other people's stories and what others have faced ... I've been a lot more open and accepting when faced with interracial communication, and it makes me feel a lot better with myself.

Here, the movement of understanding social constructions, which could be seen as positive, is countered with the framing of the later comment about being open and accepting. This points to how the complexities of the framing of racial issues sometimes bend back on themselves, recreating structures where acceptance of others denotes one's own "openness" and tolerance of others. This frame appears to *race* the other while the self remains invisible.

*From Invisibility to Visibility.* Many students addressed the movement from invisibility to visibility. The following comment, from a White male, exemplified this position in their stories:

When I look back at myself and where I was in the beginning of the semester regarding interracial communication, I feel I have changed. I don't feel my attitude towards race has changed, but my openness to it has ... I never thought of racial relations. After taking the class, I find myself considering and acknowledging my race within every issue I am involved in. This is a positive change ... (DL)

Bringing visibility back to the body and the performance of whiteness, LH (White female) observed that

Ever since you suggested that we point out the color of skin of a white person when we are describing that person to other whites, I have been asked why I included that in the description of the person. It intrigued me that it is assumed the individual that is being described is White unless otherwise stated.

In the screenwriting class that I am taking, we often discuss which actors we would have to play various roles in our respective screenplays. I was the only one in the class to suggest a dozen black actors, and my classmates, who happened to be all white, as well as my professor, knew none of the actors I suggested. We finally "compromised" and agreed to use Angela Bassett, whom they all thought was great. Yes, she is a great actress, but there are many other talented African American actors that exist ...

In the story above, LH takes up the subject position of whiteness and looks at its performance in various contexts, including interactions with friends and in her screenwriting class. She astutely locates the assumptions embedded in what is or is not considered normal or comfortable in these situations and acts to subvert those assumptions.

*Privilege.* Many students understood the responsibility to own one's privileges as a dimension of whiteness; however, privilege was identified in different ways. For one White female student, it was a "privilege" to grow up in New York City, where she was "exposed to many different cultures, ethnicities, races, other than my own. However, I think that this class has helped me to become more accepting or used to certain racial tensions that I thought I could never change" (DH). For another student, privilege was discussed as coming to terms with responsibility for self-definition as well as defining others.

I know I am privileged, and I also am aware of racist tendencies or thoughts I have at times, which I know were and are part of my socialization. I am coming to grips with my whiteness, and trying to learn what I am as a European American, and how I am influenced by these perspectives. (BP, White female)

### ***Positioning of Other/Object of Discourse***

The next set of responses focuses away from the subject position in the whiteness



narrative to focus on others—either as objects in need of enlightenment, or as others who are racialized. Importantly, these narratives point away from a story of the self as learning about one’s own White position.

One student wrote

I ... never knew that often times, biracial people struggle with their identities. As a white female, I do not have that struggle ... I used to be narrow minded about racial issues. However, after spending a semester in this class, I have learned to open up to other races and understand the differences in them. (MB)

While this student does identify her privilege (of not having to struggle with her identity), her focus is on learning to “open up” and understand the differences among *other* races. In other words, she does not seem to feel that a deeper analysis of her own raced identity is necessary at this point. Similarly, KR (a White female) noted that

When I first started this class, I tended to try to ignore people’s race. I thought it was the best way to interracial relationships. I felt that it was better to see everyone as the same, and that everyone was equal. [Soon] I realized that it was extremely important to recognize people’s race ... Also, I learned that there is a fine line between paying too much attention to race/culture and just enough.

“Othering” crosses many social categories and scenes, occurring in any situation where one distinguishes another from the self. Similarly, in this class, often others were denoted as those who didn’t “get it”:

I am grateful that I didn’t grow up completely sheltered and ignorant. No offense, but some of my classmates’ comments are at times ignorant and offending. I’m thankful that I can hear other people’s views and read their essays. I learned a lot of *real* things that I’ll actually use after college. (KP, White female) (Original emphasis)

Another woman who had been fairly confrontational in class discussions wrote, “I do feel that whites are privileged, but I feel that everyone can and has the chance at some point to be privileged” (JL, White female). Regarding White privilege, CM (Black female) wrote that, “I honestly hope that the white people in the class do realize and recognize that white privilege does exist. People only want to ignore things because they aren’t ready for change.”

Some students seemed confused about what constituted change, and whether learning occurred because other people (not them) became enlightened. Many students (those who identified as White and those who identified as non-White) became convinced that the class would be a success if *other* people overcame their racist attitudes.

*Self as Body, Self as Other.* Another theme under this category of positioning the other reflected on the invisibility of whiteness as bodily performance in other classrooms and contexts. Many of these comments came from students who did not identify as White. In the second focus group, TB (Black female) stated: “I liked this class because this was the first class I’ve had where I wasn’t spotlighted, the white people were. They were the focus. For me, that was important.” MA added, “I really felt that the focus on white people was important. I didn’t say much the second part of the semester because I’m so tired of people assuming that every word I say is The Word for all black men.”

Students who identified as White or non-White in the class reported being stereotyped or “othered” by their classmates, whether during the class or around the campus or town. In the focus group, CM, TB, and JR (all Black females)

commented on situations where they had acknowledged White students in passing around campus and had been ignored or outright snubbed. A few White students, as well, mentioned that they could not say “what I really felt” in class because they would immediately be shot down by other (non-White and liberal White) students if they opened their mouths. In fact, this rarely, if ever, happened in the class. Ironically, these same students expressed equal frustration over the false politeness, or PC (politically correct) climate of the class.

### ***Neither Subject nor Object: Experiencing a Loss of Self/Subject Position***

For some students, learning about whiteness meant confronting feelings that they had no culture or no sense of a space/place in which or from which to construct their identity. They felt that if others could define themselves as “not” White, then who was White? Discussing his grandparents, BH (White male) explained that “they were judged by their ability, not their skin color. The privilege of being European American is something that I have never thought about before. I never thought of something that has been the centerpiece of my life.”

In the same vein, a White male student in the first focus group commented: “I feel like I have nothing, no culture, no identity. I have no story. I don’t see that as a privilege.” Many students commented that the lack of race and culture in their life seemed to make them dull and/or boring; Whiteness performed here in multiple ways, as the standard against which all others are judged, as normal, as everything, and therefore nothing.

### ***Awareness (of the Storyline) and Resistance***

A deconstructionist approach to pedagogy (Lather, 1991) identifies the numerous positionalities that students possess, while remaining committed to action for social change. In the case of this course, it meant deconstructing the multiple identities that students already held in terms of their lack of racial visibility and, consequently, for social responsibility for privileges accrued in their everyday lives. Part of this approach also means deconstructing resistance on the part both of the teacher and her students (Cooks & Sun, 2002; Ellsworth, 1992). Resistance in this class was framed around discussion of privilege, guilt, and responsibility, and occurred both between teacher and students and among the students—as well as in contexts outside the classroom that inevitably shaped the discourse.

A student who started out the semester very interested in the class dialogue seemed to grow more detached later in the year. In his narrative, he commented that,

It is unfair to say everything there is to say about whiteness (I’m exaggerating), and not anything about the fact that Whites have the poorest neighborhoods, and a certain class of whites (a very large and growing one) is the least likely to succeed in the U.S.—not any minority. There is obviously a large gap here, especially since we are talking about the invisibility of whiteness. What about that aspect of invisibility? (RK, White male)

As we attempted to address anger, fear, anxiety, and intimidation through discussing the frustrating and frightful experiences of Whites and non-Whites in the class and their consequences, many students expressed a newfound understanding of the basis for these emotions in their narratives. The process of “becoming more open,” as it was expressed by many, was a process of coming to recognize the misguided nature of their assumptions and the misdirected expression of their

uncertainties. For at least a few other students, however, learning more about whiteness appeared to lead to increased trepidation about communicating. Summing up the opinion of at least one other person in the class, ML (White male) explained: "I feel I've learned a whole lot about why I should feel guilty if I'm white, but little about interracial communication. I have no ammo for both sides!"

An ontological understanding of learning bases it in movement, a way of describing change as well as growth. Recognizing the cultural limitations of such a conceptualization, I also have come to see its power as archetypal narrative. If learning is seen as movement along a path, then a traditional pedagogy for interracial communication would first locate where a student is "at" in their understanding of race as phenomenon and attempt to move them to a "higher" understanding (in this case, a more enlightened understanding of the structuring of race in our society). Indeed, while that was my initial ideal as the teacher of the course, I came to understand that this motion of pedagogy, based on assumptions of false consciousness, can be only partially effective unless it engages students as knowledgeable, active performers in their own lives.

### **Conclusion: The Pedagogy of Position**

The positions taken up by the students of the Interracial Communication class begin to identify the possibilities for a pedagogy of performance that displaces race from the bodies of others and locates it in and through White bodies and knowledges. As students took up subject positions in this narrative, they identified themselves as marked and embodied White. The complexities of this subject position, through the ways they identified their privileges, saw themselves as enlightened, etc., are the starting point for further pedagogy in this area. For those students who displaced their own subject position, either through focusing on others who need to but did not get it or through identifying racial understanding as understanding more about the (raced) other, several possibilities exist. If their subject position is to be understood as students in a class whose goal is to learn, then perhaps these (White and non-White) students felt that an interracial communication course should be about learning more about the racial identities of (non-White) Others. Perhaps other students felt that they already understood their subject position with regard to the class narrative and were merely concerned that other students in the class get to the same space of enlightenment. For those students who adopted the narrative but struggled with a sense of loss of their subject position, the identification of their own cultural space and responsibility within that space becomes important.

Yet, it is perhaps those students who were aware of the whiteness narrative as pedagogical story for the class but who chose to resist the story that we can learn from the most. RK (cited above) refuses a subject position and instead identifies Whites as objects of a totalizing narrative, one that confuses and ignores class issues and assumes that all Whites had complete power over others. Several pedagogical responses are possible, but a primary impetus for me is to address the history of class and race relations, where whiteness functioned as a status privilege for White laborers by conferring an identity of "not slaves" and "not Blacks" (Roediger, 1991).

In this manner, whiteness confers a subject position that has status and normalizes subject-object relations based on skin color. Importantly, though, (as discussed

below), the history of whiteness does *not* mean that it is about race, but rather, it is about power.

Beyond adopting, disregarding, or resisting the class narrative, the idea of *adaptation* perhaps best characterizes the positions of the students in relation to the narrative of whiteness. Adapting one's position acknowledges both the fragmented and changing conceptions of the self in relation to a narrative of White identity that is itself constructed and thus can never be seamless or complete. Indeed, the idea that whiteness is only linked to White bodies takes us away from its performative characteristics and moves us back toward representation and essentialism.

### ***Performance: Bringing it Back to the Body***

As a final thought about what performances of whiteness and of racing and *eracing* people have to do with teaching and the body, I want to join a conversation already begun about the body as teaching's "other." On this issue, Ellsworth (1997) problematizes what is invisible in teaching—knowledges about the body, about desire and emotion, knowledges that the act of teaching itself seems to shut down. Taking up this query, Orner (2002) writes:

I am curious about these knowledges because they speak volumes about the body question in teaching, about embodiment, about teaching with and as—a body. I am curious about the present absences of the body—the controlled, disciplined, micromanaged, technologized body. (pp. 277–278)

Although Orner is addressing what was unspeakable about teachers' (and students') bodies with regard to their size and shape, many similarities can be drawn to the unspeakable "nature" of White bodies. The ontological mind/body dualism, whether critiqued as a product of Cartesian thought, Christianity, Liberalism, Market capitalism, to name but a few, has not only artificially separated mind/knowledge from body/emotion but rendered the (non-White, female, fat, Other) marked body mute. What is speakable (and thus teachable/knowable) about the (White, wealthy, male) body is that which is unremarkable—its whiteness, its heterosexuality, its normalness—its very rationality.

How, then, to embody whiteness? Going back to the beginning of the semester (and the beginning of this paper), I asked my White students why they did not look at me and think about race. In the focus groups, I asked them again how the class might be different if it were taught by someone who did not identify as White? One White woman from the first focus group responded:

I would be more likely not to speak out in class. I would think that you have an agenda. I would feel defensive. I speak out in class because I feel comfortable. I know that you are passionate about this [interracial communication] and that you care. I don't think it would have been the same for me otherwise. (LL)

A White male in the same focus group said, simply, "I didn't look at you [the instructor/author] and see race in the beginning of the semester. I see you and I think about race now" (DD). To those who may argue that this approach to pedagogy simply reifies categories of race, I reiterate Butler's (1993) argument for assuming agency through performing within social categories: to point to their limits and to uncover their boundaries. Through drawing the White students' attention to my White bodily performance, I hoped also to direct their attention to the ways that power and race structured their vision, where White became (for them) an empty signifier.

This approach to a pedagogy of performance also brings with it a need to think

about the ways performance invokes multiple aspects of our identities. Repositioning whiteness also invokes a social responsibility to *engage* another, to invest the time and energy that moves beyond the superficiality of stereotypes and the stubbornness of our own assumptions. In the play among positions, we find what is unspeakable about White bodies, their excesses, imperfections, emotions and their very whiteness. To begin to mark White bodies is to speak them into discourse and call attention to their performance. Only then can we recognize the possibilities for learning about ourselves in relation to others.

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