

Teaching Whiteness in American Literature, Preserving “Truth, Justice and the American Way”

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities – Hawaii 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper asserts that (1) from its inception, American identity has been conflated with white identity, specifically that of Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage; that (2) more than other tribal/ethnic personae, this white identity has been cast as universal, as a paragon of humanity; that (3) this white identity has been so sanctified and normalized as American and human that it has significantly influenced all American institutions and it has been rendered practically indiscernible, unutterable and inviolable; that (4) not confronting the singular qualities, particularly toxic ones, of this racial/tribal whiteness creates insufficient or false readings of American culture and literature; and that (5) these inadequate and erroneous readings weaken academics’ commitments to reality, critical thinking, freedom of expression and social justice. Instead of seeing American whites as whites, as a distinct tribe/ethnicity, whose members possess favorable and unfavorable traits individually and collectively, academics most often perceive whites as quintessentially American and human while they label and judge nonwhites, such as Latinos and blacks, by dubious stereotypes.

The purpose of this research is (1) to disclose individual and tribal traits of whites in American literature; (2) stimulate dialogues on methods to amend overt and covert disparities in the advantages accorded American whites over non-whites in real life; and (3) release the human mind, heart and spirit from inhibiting, destructive artifices of racial identity, particularly hegemonic whiteness.

The principal results would be to critique race, particularly the social construction of racial whiteness, in American literature and culture candidly and draw from this critique the inspiration to promote social justice. The major conclusion is that making the unseen of racial whiteness seen and encouraging activism on the basis of these revelations are positively transformative for teachers and students.

Keywords: White identity, American literature

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Introduction

For most of my life as a student and a teacher, the subject of white people as a particular racial group/tribe with distinguishable characteristics that warrant scrutiny and criticism was avoided by my teachers, peers and students. They would, however, freely examine what they imagined were signature characteristics of nonwhites, particularly their negative stereotypes. My instructors' and colleagues' unbalanced approach to identifying racial differences left gaping holes in their scholarship and pedagogy, which undercut truth, sullied intellectualism and handicapped justice. The purposes of this study are to rectify this problem by stimulating long overdue examinations of the racial/tribal characterizations of whites in American literature and culture, and to inspire from this study candid exchanges on race, which would result in persistent activism to overcome systemic bigotry and promote diversity. To be clear, I shifted my focuses of my American literature and culture courses from the minorities who were victimized by whites to the whites who victimized them. Finding informative works by celebrated researchers, critics and documentarians of racial/tribal whiteness to guide me, I shaped lesson plans to incentivize my students to (1) deconstruct this whiteness wherever and however it was portrayed, (2) challenge and nullify its supremacy in literary discourses and real life, (3) liberate the natural selves and deep humanity of white skinned and other people from its tangling, blinding, muting constraints, and (3) fully embrace America and the world as culturally diverse. The following details the genesis of my revised pedagogy and my primary contentions.

Major Premise

According to Euro-American filmmaker Whitney Dow, creator of the *Whiteness Project: Inside the White Caucasian Box*, which aired on PBS in 2014, "Most people take for granted that there is a 'white' race, but rarely is the concept of whiteness investigated. What does it mean to be white?" (Dow, 2014)

In her *Whiteness Visible, The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*, Professor Valerie Babb answers this question in part by contending that, "being white became synonymous with being American" (Babb, 1998: 2). In his *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*, Professor Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., broadens Professor Babb's assertions by calling this conflation of whiteness with Americanness a "value gap," wherein "our actual lives rested in the gap between who America said it was as a democracy and how we actually lived. Our democratic principles do not exist in a space apart from our national commitment to white supremacy. They have always been bound together, sharing bone and tissue" (Glaude, pg. 9). "The powerful ideals of the American Revolution, which challenged the authority of monarchs and insisted on the principles of freedom and equality in the context of democratic institutions, were reconciled with" (Glaude, pg. 31) and defiled by extreme prejudices and injustices. "People could talk of freedom and liberty and hold black slaves," disparage and oppress white women, men and women of color, the poor, homosexuals, the disabled, and worshippers of creeds other than Christianity for centuries. "Even the first immigration and naturalization act, in 1790, allowed only 'white persons' to attain citizenship, and

that racial understanding of citizenship persisted” (Glaude, pg. 31) well into the late 1900’s and has been voiced in our recent political discourses, notably our 2016 presidential campaigns, which elected a reputed loudmouth, egocentric, fickle, mendacious, reckless, vulgar, bullying, shallow, narrow, puerile, philandering, misogynistic, thin-skinned, vindictive, self-serving, greedy, double-dealing, homophobic, Islamophobic, racist, ableistic, xenophobic, politically incorrect, divisive, demagogic, white supremacist/white nationalist, unstatesmanlike, climate-change-denying, neo-fascist, plutocrat the 45th President of the United States of America.

If whiteness and Americanness are synonyms, Mr. Dow’s statement and question about whiteness apply equally to our American identity, meaning that we know as little about our Americanness as we do our whiteness, or despite our heartfelt pledges of allegiance to our flag and our spirited celebrations of the 4th of July, we cannot know what it is to be American without comprehending what whiteness is, and we cannot know what whiteness is until we reify it, put flesh and blood on it, humanize it and see it as American writers see it, which is paradoxically, as good and evil, true and false, pious and impious, sane and insane, liberating and oppressive, progressive and retrogressive, tolerant and bigoted, peace-loving and militant, beautiful and ugly, cultured and crude, strong and weak, generous and selfish, smart and stupid, brave and cowardly, civilized and savage, and democratic and despotic.

According to Professor Richard Dyer, Euro-American author of *White*, “a study of the representation of white people in white Western culture” (Dyer, pg. xiii), such an investigation of racial whiteness should not be

“done merely to fill a gap in analytical literature, but because there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery. As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.

There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that—they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world.” (Dyer, pg. 1)

The first step toward dislodging this whiteness in America is discernment, seeing it for what it is, identifying its deep-rooted characteristics, which, like the proverbial elephant in the room, stays hidden in plain sight, such as the salient traits of America’s Founding Fathers and 95 percent of America’s presidents, namely their white skin, male genitalia, Anglo-Saxon heritage, English tongue, Christian (principally Protestant) creeds, ownership of land and wealth, and alleged heterosexuality. Essentially anyone, such as President Barack Obama, who lacks one or more of these essential traits is considered

less white and therefore less American and human than someone who possesses them all. Ergo, to some degree, white women, women and men of color, non-wealthy and unpropertied classes, non-Christians, non-native-born speakers of English, disabled people, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities are mistreated as second-class humans and citizens, meaning that they are accorded less respect and fewer rights, privileges, protections, powers and opportunities than certified whites.

Although, in reality white is merely a color, or, more to the point, the absence of color, it has been, is now and will be a formidable ideology and political force, granting white supremacists/white nationalists the authority to determine (1) what are truth and lies, (2) what are sacred and profane, (3) what are law, rights and justice; (4) who can be human, civilized, accepted, enfranchised, respected, beautiful, protected, prosperous and privileged; and, (5) most importantly, who lives and who dies. The tears and blood of untold victims of this egregious nationalism streak from factual history and true life throughout the canon of American essays, plays, novels, short stories, and poetry, insisting that we academics check it before it checks us, that we should not only critique it openly and honestly but also that we should monitor and amend its ill-effects, lest it, like McCarthyism, undermines our students', our institutions' and our society's capacities to be open-minded, honest, reasonable, tolerant, loving, empathic, humane, inclusive, moral, egalitarian, democratic, just, intrepid and progressive.

Minor Premise

A case in point is the objection my Euro-American Dean of Liberal Arts raised against my teaching a new course on black stereotypes titled *Black Image in the White Mind* after a scholarly book by the notable historian George Fredrickson:

“In the White mind? The White mind!” my dean yelped hotly, turning fiery red in the face. “What does this mean? What are you getting at? What are you trying to do?”

Clearly he disapproved of me wanting to conduct what he must have imagined would be a public dissection of the “white mind”, when he, as the head man in charge, wanted the “white mind” cloaked and closed.

To be fair, my dean was not my only would-be censor. Shortly after my encounter with him, I overheard an African-American male student warn an African-American coed not to enroll in African-American Studies courses, several of which I taught, because she might “pick up stuff that would piss off white students—b.s. like slavery and civil rights”. In the spirit of my dean and a classic uncle tom, he reflexively defended the white mind from an imagined black attack. Rather than flinch or flare up, I inferred that despite the lip service academics pay to upholding truth, social justice and freedom of thought and expression, too many demonstrate a stronger tendency to suppress queries into deep matters of race, especially racial whiteness, than they show a willingness to face the reality of them.

While this revelation intensified my awareness that teaching these topics could embroil me in uphill battles toward a Pyrrhic victory at best or revolutionary suicide at worst, it also clarified my mission in teaching and altered the axis of my pedagogy. Instead of focusing mainly on the images of blacks in the white mind, I scrutinized more intently the white mind, asking what makes white people tick, of what is their whiteness made, how does their whiteness work in their lives, the lives of others and my life? What are the positive and negative qualities and effects of this racial whiteness? How can its positives be improved and its negatives overcome?

Methods

To open my students' minds to the hidden white supremacy in American identity and spark their activism to reform its perniciousness, I convey a brief anecdote about the mugging of an unnamed American family by a shadowy assailant while the family were sight-seeing at Times Square. When I ask my students to describe the characters as they imagined them, they denote various traits except race and skin color until I ask them to identify the races and colors of the family and assailant. Initially they are taken aback by the question and become hesitant/self-conscious to admit what they truly imagined. Ultimately, they confess that they saw the American family as white and their mugger as a person of color, namely a black or Latino male. Unwittingly then, by conflating whiteness with Americanness, they substantiate Professor Babb's contention that being white equals being American. Just as important, they become aware of their tendencies to negatively stereotype their fellow Americans of color, and they start to learn to make the invisible visible, to be discerning and candid about race, color, class, caste and other such tribal distinctions in their study of American literature and culture.

Knowing from experience that this lesson takes time to sink in, I deepen it by asking my students to weigh the *Declaration of Independence*, *Constitution*, *Bill of Rights*, *Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag*, *Ten Commandments*, *Sermon on the Mount*, and *Lord's Prayer* against our historical and literary portrayals of our barefaced and subtle disenfranchisement and disparagement of women, Africans, Native Americans, immigrants, LGBT, the disabled, poor and creeds other than Christian. Soon my students begin to see a critical fault in our Founding Fathers' vision of America, one of severe incongruity—"high-pocrisy" as a compelling song in the Broadway musical *1776* resounded. Questions then pop to my students' minds about how flawed were the Founding Fathers, how inconsistent were their words and deeds? How significant were their whiteness, maleness, economic standing, religious creed, sexual orientation, Anglo-Saxon heritage, and self-interests to their establishment of our republic? How true have human and civil rights, faith, equality and justice been in America? How much have institutions of religion, politics, commerce, culture, and even family been compromised by self-interest, bigotry and hypocrisy? And what could be done to change them for the better, to make them live up to our democratic and moral standards?

To address these and most importantly the latter question, "we have to tell stories of those who put forward a more expansive conception of American democracy. This will involve confronting the ugly side of our history, recalling the heroic and representative efforts of

countless men and women who gave everything to achieve our country, and sacrificing the comfort of innocence and the willful blindness that comes with it. This will require a radical reordering of values. Changing our stories is a way of changing what matters” (Glaude, pg. 203), so to keep raising my students’ awareness of “truth, justice and the American way” and making their raised awareness actionable for positive change in America’s outlooks and behaviors, I continuously enable them to think, speak, write and act freely on dilemmas and intersections of gender, race, color, class, sexual orientation, creed, physical abilities, ethnicity, national origins, contradictions between principles and practices, and disparities in the privileges, protections, prestige, powers, prosperity and promise afforded Americans by our *Constitution*, *Bill of Rights* and democratic, Judeo-Christian, humanitarian and judicial codes. Operating under the premise that American culture informs American literature and American literature reflects American culture, I direct them to discern Americanisms, unique American qualities, in the plots, characters, themes, devices and conventions of American writings, and to identify personal, human, tribal and national attributes of protagonists and antagonists as well as in the voices and visions of narrators, authors, critics and theorists. To clarify and substantiate my inference that whiteness plays a major role in shaping American identity, causing Americans to be deeply contradictory in their principles and practices, I assign divergent readings on American dilemmas of identity, internal and external conflict, cultural difference, freedom, conformity, conscience, justice, humanity, aspirations, exceptionalism and morality, such as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* and Theodore Roosevelt’s *American Ideal*; Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* and David Walker’s *Appeal in Four Articles*; Frederick Douglass’ *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* and Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream*; Kate Chopin’s *Story of an Hour* and Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*; William Faulkner’s *Barn Burning* and James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*; and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Finally, to vivify the characters and themes raised by these authors, I permit my students to relate to them personally, to connect them, particularly their incongruities, to my students’ individual experiences in the real world, including their studies in other courses, their involvement with political, social and civic organizations, and their relationships to family and friends.

Results

Over a semester the literature (1) stimulates more candid, spirited inquiries into gender, race, color, sexual orientation, creed, class, freedom, equality, fairness and activism; and (2) provides few indisputable answers to these queries, save one, which is truth, the value of truth, in determining who and what we are, and what we should be about as individuals, members of a specific group, human beings and Americans. Student course evaluations, such as the following from my first class on *Whiteness in American Literature*, circa 1999, remind me that although the journey to enlightenment and transformation is rough, slow, taxing, unpredictable and precarious, I must keep the faith:

“Dear Professor Reilly: I remember before I really understood what you were trying to tell us about cultural whiteness, before I really knew what it was, I thought all the power, prestige and privilege stuff was a bunch of b.s. I thought,

‘Just because I call myself white, you can’t tell me that I automatically think I have power, prestige and privilege over any non-white.’ I didn’t like the fact that it was said that the Bible was a hypocrisy. I didn’t like the fact that our founding fathers were racists and yet had several illegitimate racially mixed children, but we never learned this in school. I got upset a lot, and told my mom about the class several times.

But that was a problem: instead of being a grown up college student, and discussing my feelings in class, I ran to my mommy like a little baby. I almost considered dropping the class. But I decided to be mature and stick with it. And you know what? I am quite happy I did stay. I feel as though my mind has been expanded so much in the past few months. I look at things differently now. All the things we have learned I have now looked back and taken in, instead of disregarding lots of it, like I did at the beginning. I see now that I really didn’t do what you had asked us to do, which is go in with an open mind and a willing heart. I believe that I am one of the most sensitive and big-hearted people I know, and yet for some reason I tried to shut off what we were learning in this class.

One of the reasons I try to be open minded is because I don’t want to be like my family. I know they’re older, and I love them with all my heart, but my grandparents are very offensive. My grandpa called black people ‘jiggaboos,’ like he’ll say ‘Why do you listen to that damn jiggaboo music?’ My grandma calls Asians ‘chinks,’ ‘slant eyes,’ and things like that, and makes jokes. Even my dad can be offensive. He works in the film industry, at Walt Disney Studios, and he always complains about the people. “90% of the industry I work in is Jewish or homosexual”. Sometimes I have a hard time dealing with my family.” (Anonymous, 1999: 3)

Conclusion

Like Professor Thandeka, author of *Learning to be White*, I believe that “this social construction of a ‘white’ [person] requires us to make a distinction between a person’s core sense of self before and after its identity is defined as white” or assimilated into racial whiteness. Contrary to white supremacist ideology, “Before the white identity is established, this core sense of self is not white.” It is quintessentially like my own, human. “Its personal racial identity is, in effect, nonexistent because the socialization process has not yet been undertaken by its white community of caretakers, legislators, and police force” (Thandeka, 2007: 84). By being more human than a racial construction, this core self retains a natural propensity to learn, reason, love, do good works, and to “hold these truths to be self-evident: that all [people] are created equal; and that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (Jefferson, 1776)

In addition to imparting information about the evolution of American literature, my mission in teaching is to help accomplish the revolution initiated by the Founding Fathers by liberating my students from false and dangerous constructions of their “core sense of

self” so that (1) they may nurture their natural proclivity for truth, goodness, liberty, equality, fairness, beauty, love, fulfillment and happiness, (2) they may investigate and discuss any topic freely, comfortably, respectfully, fearlessly and dynamically, with open minds and hearts, and (3) they may transform for the better, into enlightened, independent, compassionate, rational, progressive, contributing thinkers, which America sorely needs to thrive as a democracy and world leader, particularly under the dubious and reputedly dangerous presidency of Donald J. Trump. Demystifying racial whiteness/white supremacy while emphasizing and ensuring the natural rights of all people to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” through our studies of American writings, enables me to advance my students closer to achieving uplifting learning outcomes:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself.
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Whitman, 1865)

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