



## *Teaching Religion as Anti-Racism Education*

### *Spotlight on Teaching*

Sarah Jacoby and Jessica Tinklenberg, Editors

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Image: "Students march because Black Lives Matter," Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 1, 2015. [Photo by Fibonacci Blue](#) (CC BY 2.0).

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Brett J. Esaki** is a visiting assistant professor in the religious studies and classics program at the University of Arizona (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2012). He researches how American racial minorities creatively use religion and art to preserve, reinvent, and discover a sense of their full humanity. He specializes in intersections of Asian Americans and African Americans in areas of spirituality, popular culture, and comprehensive sustainability. His interdisciplinary research involves ethnography, performance studies, psychoanalysis, philosophy of race, ideology, and alternate intelligences. His book, *Enfolding Silence: The Transformation of Japanese American Religion and Art under Oppression* (Oxford University Press, 2016), explores the history of Japanese Americans preserving and hybridizing religious traditions through art. Japanese Americans found that silence is a nexus that avoids social oppression, is marginally accepted in art circles, and houses religious resources. His current book-length project, tentatively titled *Asian American Radical Spirituality*, examines the intersection of spirituality and radical politics among Asian Americans.

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**Richard Newton** is an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Alabama. He received his PhD in critical comparative scriptures from Claremont Graduate University. Among other places, he has published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. His

interests include theory and method in the study of religion, African American history, the New Testament in Western imagination, American cultural politics, and pedagogy in religious studies. Specifically, Newton's research explores how people create "scriptures" and how those productions operate in the formation of identities and cultural boundaries—all of which will be discussed in his forthcoming book, *Identifying Roots: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures* (Equinox, 2019). You can see more of his work, including blog posts, his podcasts, and video at his site, *Sowing the Seed: Fruitful Conversations in Religion, Culture, and Teaching* (<https://sowingtheseed.org/>).

**Tiffany Puett** is the founding director of the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life (IDCL) in Austin, Texas. She holds a PhD in North American religions from the University of Waterloo and an MTS in ethics from Boston University. Her work has analyzed pluralism, multiculturalism, and the formation of religion in the American public sphere as well as issues of identity and the politics of representation. Through IDCL, she researches, develops resource guides, and leads workshops on religious and cultural diversity, equity and social justice. She also directs Religions Texas, a collaborative research initiative to document the religious diversity of Texas. In 2017–2018, she was visiting assistant professor of religion at Trinity University. In 2018–2019, she will teach at St. Edward's University. She also serves as the regional coordinator for the AAR Southwest Region.

**Martha Smith Roberts** is an assistant professor of religion at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Her current research and teaching interests include North American religious diversity and pluralism, race and ethnicity studies, and social justice. Her courses focus on the diversity of the American religious landscape, especially the ways in which race, gender, and ethnicity are connected to religious identities and the significance of material culture and lived religious experience in American life. She is currently researching the display of the human body and religious pluralism in America and working on a collaborative research project examining the various spiritualities within the hula hooping subculture. She researches and writes with *Culture on the Edge* (<https://edge.ua.edu/>), a scholarly working group and peer-reviewed blog that examines religion, culture, and identity. She is the executive secretary and treasurer for the North American Association for the Study of Religion, and she also serves on the board of directors for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life, a nonprofit educational organization based in Austin, Texas.

**Rima Vesely-Flad**, PhD, is an assistant professor of religion and social justice and the director of peace and justice studies at Warren Wilson College. She is the author of *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies: Moral Pollution, Black Lives, and the Struggle for Justice* (Fortress Press, 2017). She is currently at work on a second manuscript entitled *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in Racial Justice Activism*. She holds a doctorate in social ethics from Union Theological Seminary, a master's degree from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and a bachelor's from the University of Iowa. She taught religion courses at Sing Sing Prison from 2004 to 2006, and also spent several years working with direct service organizations, alternative-to-incarceration programs, and political campaigns. Her honors include a 2007 Union Square Award for grassroots activists, a dissertation fellowship from the Forum for Theological Exploration, and the 2017 Teaching Excellence Award at Warren Wilson College.

## Teaching Religion as Anti-Racism Education

Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern University

There is no way to deeply consider religion—its history, definition, impact, danger, and promise—without also thinking about the construction of race. And yet, addressing race, racism, and white privilege in the religious studies classroom is fraught with challenges for faculty and students alike. These tensions have been exacerbated by the contemporary political climate in the United States, but ultimately stem from much deeper historical roots involving settler colonialism, the genocide and forced relocation of indigenous populations, and the enslavement of peoples of African descent. Addressing this maligned history in the United States as well as different iterations of it around the world, considering its contemporary consequences, and envisioning possible futures is part of the important work taking place in religious studies classrooms.

Taking this into account, this *Spotlight* issue is dedicated to sharing a rich variety of pedagogical approaches to teaching religion as anti-racism education. Questions germane to this topic include: How can we break the silence so many of us have been disciplined into maintaining on the subject of race and racism, and open up spaces for meaningful classroom conversations that move beyond trying to say the right thing? How can we best guide students to take risks in talking about and analyzing race and racism in direct and self-reflective ways while also maintaining safe classroom environments? What teaching methods, practices, theories, and student assignments can instructors utilize in order to foster anti-racist education in their religious studies classrooms?

Natalie Avalos's essay "Decolonial Approaches to the Study of Religion: Teaching Native American and Indigenous Religious Traditions" brings her experience teaching her course "Global Indigeneities: Religion and Resistance" to the topic of anti-racism education. She challenges students to deeply understand the causes and continuations of indigenous dispossession in the United States and beyond, asking the important question, "What does it mean to understand the land—and its inhabitants—as sovereign?" Avalos shares several practical approaches to teaching she has found valuable, including her two-pronged method of first introducing students to a particular indigenous religion, then analyzing the rationales whereby that indigenous knowledge has been dismissed. Additionally, she shares her "Decolonial Autobiography" assignment in which she asks students to consider their relationship to the land on which they were born and to its colonial history. Avalos reminds us "to teach about power from your own position. Complicate your positionality and relation to power to your students." In this way, Avalos asserts, we can better serve as models of, and for, decolonizing the production of knowledge in religious studies classrooms.

In "Whiteness Studies—Why *Not* to Teach it (as an Untenured Professor)," Brett Esaki addresses head-on the risks involved in teaching about the construction of whiteness in America, particularly for an untenured professor of color such as himself. Even though a class such as his on the philosophy of race

privileges the perspectives of racial minorities, Esaki points out that conceptions of whiteness and white supremacy cannot be ignored. Rather than promoting a specific pedagogy for teaching whiteness studies, which students have urged him to do, Esaki expresses what he terms a “paranoid” vision of what could happen should he try this, including social media trolling and even job termination. If paranoid, Esaki’s imagining of what could happen should he profess expertise in whiteness studies is also depressingly realistic, given the power of the anti-racism backlash and its endorsement by many in the current White House regime. Yet even though he rejects his students’ proposal to teach a dedicated course on whiteness studies, Esaki’s essay provides important practical advice on how to teach provocative subjects such as the pervasiveness of white supremacy. He guides students to examine the ways in which “scholars in academia and theology have worked to remove systems of racism from the thought, structures, and institutions of their respective fields,” and encourages students to take ownership of classroom content through voting whether or not particular current events should be discussed in class. By shedding light on the operations of what Charles Mills refers to as “white ignorance,” or the erasure of whiteness as a distinctive racial category, Esaki’s essay works to disrupt this ignorance by reminding readers of the possible dire consequences of threatening white hegemony.

Richard Newton’s essay “Skin in the Game: Raising the Stakes with *The Race Card Project*” calls out the silence so many of us have been disciplined into maintaining on the subject of race. Newton describes an innovative teaching strategy he has used to confront this silence called The Race Card Project (TRCP). Developed by journalist Michele Norris, TRCP prompts participants to speak their truth about race in six words as a method for students to find a way to speak critically about social difference. Truth here means words that are honest renditions of their author’s experience. Newton’s essay describes how he invokes this teaching strategy in his classrooms and beyond, inviting students to create their own six-word stories and then share them in class with their classmates. He understands his position as facilitator this way: “My role as teacher is not to bring racial reconciliation. It is to help students reckon why we have yet to do so.” Asking the question, “What opportunities does your classroom present?,” Newton explains how the data from TRCP has allowed for an analysis of the politics of identity on his campus at the same time as his piece invites readers to consider how we can try TRCP or create our own innovative anti-racism teaching strategies.

Tiffany Puett is the founding director of the nonprofit educational organization Institute for Diversity and Civic Life as well as a religious studies teacher. Her essay “Anti-Racism in Community-Based Education” shares how her organization focuses on developing knowledge, strategies, and skills for engaging with contemporary religious diversity. She advocates for religious diversity not in terms of facts and figures, but in terms of an awareness of the unshared power dynamics that condition the social contexts of diverse religions in America. In Puett’s terms, anti-racism education “starts with an awareness of how our society has been constructed around hierarchies and unshared power.” She brings an intersectional approach to anti-racism education that understands racism in conjunction with sexism, classism, and other social structures of inequality. Puett describes how she applies this positioning in practice through a program called “Engaging Religious Difference,” which is an interactive and experiential program for adults to learn how to navigate religious difference and diversity within their communities, organizations, and workplaces. Her program involves self-reflective writing, exercises such as a privilege inventory and social-identity matrix, a historical overview of diversity, tolerance, and religious freedom in the United States, as well as critical conversations about community, boundaries, dominance and structural inequality, as well as ways to promote equity and inclusion.

In “Anti-Racism in the Religious Studies Classroom: Compassionate Critique and Community Building,” Martha Roberts addresses the problem of student reticence to engage in debate and dialogue in the classroom about race, religion, and ethnicity by offering a set of teaching strategies that help her create

a strong classroom community in her course “Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in the US.” For example, in the beginning of the course she introduces students to each other via playing the board game *Taboo*. She uses this game to initiate a conversation about taboo subjects, what types of ground rules students feel their class discussions should follow, and how students feel they should handle situations in which someone makes an offensive or misinformed statement. Roberts shares her strategy for responding to racist comments in class, which she calls “compassionate correction” or “compassionate critique,” involving listening and giving the benefit of the doubt—as well as correcting the problems. Roberts’s essay provides a sense of the content of her course, which infuses students with perspectives on the following important questions: “Is there anti-racist religious studies scholarship? What does it look like? How do scholars do it? What are the methods? Theories? Interactions? Data? Can we dismantle the structures of power in our disciplines?” Through probing these questions with her students, Roberts takes both race and religion off the list of taboo subjects and turns them into meaningful dialogue.

Rima Vesely-Flad’s essay “‘Saying the Wrong Thing’: Experiences of Teaching Race in the Classroom” addresses the common fear among students (and faculty, too) of saying the wrong thing in a classroom discussion about race. Vesely-Flad generously shares a pedagogical strategy she has found helpful in breaking down this reticence and opening up the space for real conversation. After students read about historical constructs of people of color along with several texts from the perspectives of people of color, Vesely-Flad asks students to write responses to a series of questions she created, based in part on Bloom’s Taxonomy, in which she asks students to narrate their personal identity in terms of race, ethnicity, difference, and social privilege, as well as reflect on patterns of racism and classism they have observed. For Vesely-Flad, “reading texts is not solely an intellectual process; it is also an affective process in which students have the space to reorient themselves.” By taking account of race not just in the abstract but as it relates directly to their own personal narratives, students in Vesely-Flad’s classes on race and religion have an opportunity to reevaluate their relationship to the racial constructs they have inherited, and in so doing envision how they can participate in shaping a world that better embodies social justice.

The impetus for this *Spotlight* issue began with the 2017 AAR panel on “Teaching Religion as Anti-racism Education” in which Richard Newton, Tiffany Puett, and Martha Roberts participated, and expanded out to include Natalie Avalos, Brett Esaki, and Rima Vesely-Flad. As Martha Roberts states in her contribution, “The sharing of resources and strategies is a necessary part of anti-racist pedagogy.” We have put this *Spotlight* issue together with this aim in mind, and with thanks to the contributors of this issue for their generosity in sharing their pedagogical insights with all of us.

## **Decolonial Approaches to the Study of Religion: Teaching Native American and Indigenous Religious Traditions**

Natalie Avalos, University of Colorado, Boulder

### **The Decolonial Classroom: Making Power Visible**

The goal of many of my courses on Native American and Indigenous religious traditions is to understand contemporary Indigenous life in relation to colonial histories. I employ both a decolonial and Indigenist approach to these ends. A decolonial approach makes the mechanisms of colonial power visible. It denaturalizes our assumptions about Indigenous peoples and their religious traditions. For example, in my course “Global Indigenities: Religion and Resistance,” we explore contemporary Indigenous movements for sovereignty and environmental stewardship in the Americas, Oceania, and Asia. Initial readings provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding both settler colonialism and Native American and Indigenous religious traditions, followed by regional examples of resistance movements. Once students have the basic theoretical tools to understand racialization, missionization, scientism, natural law, and criminalization of Indigenous peoples/religion as mechanisms of settler colonialism, they are better prepared to understand Indigenous stewardship movements as a profound expression of sovereignty.

As a Chicana of Apache descent, I feel obligated to use an Indigenist approach to pedagogy, which means using critical readings by Native scholars or those that center the voices and views of Indigenous peoples. Native-centered narratives often provide a more nuanced and tribally specific framework to understand sacred and interdependent relationships with land and spiritual power. Teaching these ideas is a layered and cumulative process. Students are sometimes reluctant to take the religious views of Indigenous peoples seriously. When Indigenous peoples frame plants, particularly medicinal plants, not only as persons but also teachers and relatives that provide the people with moral instructions, students are skeptical. Native-centered readings provide grounded examples that resist overly mystical readings. For instance, the Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash are recognized by many tribes within US borders to have a familial relationship that asks these sister plants be grown together. Empirical study has confirmed that their co-planting produces a natural nitrogen cycle that fertilizes the soil, preventing depletion. As students consider the ethical instructions provided by these three sisters, they better conceptualize interdependence as a way of life broadly construed. Students’ curiosity to consider realities that differ from their own compels discussion, even if they remain skeptical.

We then explore, through regional examples, how overlapping histories of settler colonialism produce environmental crises. By asking “what is Indigenous stewardship? What might earth justice look like?” early on, we can later ask “what does it mean to understand the land—and its inhabitants—as sovereign?” Here, the objective is to understand how Indigenous philosophies of land/living serve as the political foundation for challenging settler dispossession. When Indigenous peoples continue to assert the land’s sentience, they are critiquing the dominant assumptions that it is inert—a position that has



historically been used to justify its exploitation. I structure regional examples to include readings on the specific social-political history of the people, their religious worldviews, and their movements for sovereignty. For instance, a unit on Native North America may focus on Lakota water protectors at Standing Rock. The first class reading will explore Lakota/Dakota religion/political history with the United States, while the second reading will include a short ethnographic vignette and/or collection of news stories on the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock. The aim of class discussions is not only to understand these unique religious lifeways but also how they ethically inform Indigenous fights for survival.

I generally reserve five to fifteen minutes of class time to short documentaries, YouTube clips, and other forms of media about these environmental struggles in order to make the voices of those involved salient. For instance, I might show a clip of *Mni Wiconi: The Stand at Standing Rock*, a short documentary made by Divided Films, which interviews Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman, David Archambault II, on the fight for #NoDAPL. Presenting clips in class humanizes discussions that threaten to become too abstract by providing additional context for their human stakes. Judging from their weekly responses, students are most affected by these first-person testimonies, often expressing disgust, shock, or even outrage that Indigenous dispossession continues so egregiously within the United States and beyond.

### **Settler Colonialism, Troubling Knowledge Production, and Anti-racism**

As religious studies scholars, it's critical for us to explore the racialized perceptions of non-Western religious traditions and peoples as well as trace how these peoples continue to be structurally dispossessed as a result. We must provide a basic literacy of these traditions that simultaneously evaluates the lenses we use to understand them. Native American and Indigenous religious traditions were, until fairly recently, perceived by anthropologists and scholars of religion as failed epistemology, the primitive musings of less complex societies. Categorized as "animism," their views were framed as childish, superstitious, and clear evidence they lacked the rationality to govern themselves or lay legitimate claims to their own lands. Indigenous peoples in the Americas were understood to be not only without reason, but also without true religion, making their full humanity suspect. Settler colonial projects relied upon these ideologies to justify Indigenous enslavement, genocide, and dispossession. These ideologies produced legal structures like the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of papal bulls that declared lands not inhabited by Christians open to seizure by right of "discovery" (theft), which became one of the most enduring tools of Indigenous dispossession. By acquainting students with a genealogy of settler rationale, they are better able to understand how the mysterious sleight-of-hand seizure was largely ideological and also squarely religious.

One of the reasons I pursued academia was to develop the social capital and expertise to teach others about how racism and Indigenous dispossession operate around the world. Like Brett Esaki (see page 8), I am hyperaware of how dangerous teaching about white supremacy can be not only to my career but also, as a woman of color, to my personal safety. However, as a light-skinned Chicana, my Native features are less threatening to students/faculty, so I am sometimes (not always) perceived more favorably. As a junior scholar, I use this modicum of power and privilege to center Indigenous epistemologies in order to counter the legacy of Indigenous erasure and gross misunderstanding in the academy. Keeping this in mind, I take a two-pronged approach in the classroom. First, introduce the religious tradition, allow students to dismiss it as a curiosity (not all will, but some might) and then provide them with the intellectual framework to understand why the Western world systematically dismissed Indigenous knowledge. In other words, unpack the politics of this perception as a strategy of settler colonial power—one that has become so naturalized, it is assumed by most in the United States.

Some Native peoples in the Americas refer to the land as Turtle Island, remarking that it rests on the back of a turtle, and as others have said elsewhere, it is turtles all the way down. We can think of a decolonial pedagogy as de-naturalizing all the way down. Critical pedagogies explain how power works as a diffuse network of ideologies and institutions. Power is not just brute force or coercion. Reframing critical and anti-racist analytics with a settler-colonial lens helps us understand how coloniality operates all around us; how power is rooted in perceptions of the world, in “natural laws,” and the social hierarchies they produce. Part of the goal is to denaturalize assumptions embedded in Western epistemology that position Indigenous knowledge—and by proxy Indigenous peoples’ claims to land—as illegitimate. In the process, students begin to recognize how the institutions we take for granted as inevitable, such as the US and Mexican states, are socially constructed. They are also better able to see how racialization and power continue to shape the politics between them. Once students understand that the misperceptions of non-Western religious traditions and peoples operated as a strategy for dispossession, they begin to question their own biases. They may even be eager to explore the possibility that these traditions have something legitimate to tell us not just about inner life but also the complex nature of reality.

### **Speak From Your Own Position**

At heart my courses are about ethics, understanding Indigenous ethics about right relationships to land and community. But also taking the time to consider what kinds of responsibilities we all have to the land and one another. They are one part philosophy and one part anthropological survey with decolonial critiques constituting their creamy center. Religious studies as a discipline has the flexibility to take an interdisciplinary approach to questions of meaning, the sacred, and ultimate concern. As we learn to use new anti-racist analytics, we can better consider how religious lifeworlds intersect with material horrors in the present in positive and negative ways. My particular goal for the course described above is for students to learn enough about Indigenous stewardship that they better understand the overarching relationship between contemporary expressions of neocolonialism/neoliberalism and environmental destruction. When they do, they may begin to advocate for intersectional forms of justice that center the well-being of the land, as they see how their own health and well-being are dependent on it.

My *ultimate* goal in the classroom is to cultivate a space where students learn how power operates and also about how marginalized peoples take their power back; how they empower themselves through their ethics and religious lifeways. In the process, students may reflect on their own relationships to and possibilities for power. It is also to seriously disrupt the stigma around Indigenous knowledge as “primitive” and irrational. I’ve noticed that when I’m teaching about Buddhism, students are often enamored by its own reference to interdependence, an idea rooted in dependent arising, a philosophical framework that describes all phenomena as interconnected. My guess is that racialization works differently here. Our orientalist conditioning allows us to consume the worldviews of the east as “exotic” and enchanting while still viable. Students are sometimes more dismissive of similar concepts rooted in Native America and other Indigenous communities because the stigma of “failed epistemology” is more pronounced. If we want students to understand racism as structural, we have to make these epistemological assumptions legible. We have to illuminate how these perceptions structure the very way we think about the world and the Other.

My only real recommendation is to teach about power from your own position. Complicate your positionality and relation to power to your students. This will model how they can think about their own positionality and why it matters to do so. I will occasionally assign a short paper that asks them to think about their own relationship to power and places explicitly. I adapted this “decolonial autobiography”

assignment from multiple sources and it essentially asks students to answer the following questions in 600 words:

*Think about the land that you were born into. Imagine the land itself has many layers—what is its history? Who were its first inhabitants or peoples? Or even the many inhabitants that coexisted there? What is its colonial history? What is your position in relation to this colonial history? How do you and your family fit in this picture? When did they arrive to this land (if known)? From where? Where do you live now? What is this place's history? What is your relationship to the colonial relations of power in this land?*

While teaching about settler colonialism and white supremacy is dangerous in these times, I find that many students, at least the many I recently taught at an elite small liberal arts college in the Northeast, were hungry for this contextualization, for these analytics. They are bearing witness to a chaotic and violent world and want to know why and how it came to be this way. Many are quite relieved to receive the tools to better understand it. When they do, they are better equipped to re-envision it entirely.

### **Resources**

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 1999.

Denzin, Norman K., Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, eds. *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008.

Kovach, Margaret. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

## Whiteness Studies—Why *Not* to Teach It (As an Untenured Professor)

Brett J. Esaki, University of Arizona

Unlike my colleagues contributing to this *Spotlight*, my emphasis is less on what one could or should do and more on what one should *not* do. Specifically, I recommend that you do not teach a course on whiteness studies as an untenured professor, lecturer, or (god-forbid) as an adjunct. Likely, my colleagues might disagree, and I too hate to take this standpoint, but I ask that you at least consider my perspective as one end of the spectrum, where I advise excessive preparation for the potential negative consequences of teaching antiracism.

### Teaching Strategy: Avoid Teaching a Course Titled “Whiteness Studies” without Tenure

I will introduce my strategy like I introduced it to my philosophy of race class. This course focuses on how scholars in academia and theology have worked to remove systems of racism from the thought, structures, and institutions of their respective fields. The examples are primarily African Americans and Asian Americans because these are my areas of expertise, and these scholars inevitably touch upon the construction of whiteness. Way back in October 2017, I was teaching the philosophy of race course and within the span of one week there were the Las Vegas mass murder and the reigniting of the NFL kneeling debate. In the wake of these events, I opened my class to the option of discussing either or both of these topics using the tools we had been developing in class (a tactic that I use for any course that would appropriately shed light on a recent event). Students voted unanimously that this was okay (and I find that unanimity is important for making these discussions productive), and they all wanted to discuss the Las Vegas shootings.

I reviewed theories that they had studied and that shed light on the event—essentially arguing that while our class’s study of race in the United States focused on the perspectives and struggles of racial minorities, our class was always studying whiteness and how white supremacy functions. I then expanded our toolset by explaining that to understand the Las Vegas shootings we would need to study whiteness more directly. I briefly built on our course’s knowledge-base to illustrate how the normalcy of whiteness oppresses both racial minorities and those with white status. Namely, in order to maintain normalcy, the status must be protected from intrusions from below, but besides these sporadic disturbances, the state of being normal can get boring. As a result, socioeconomically secure white people end up competing with each other to seem more than normal, and attractiveness and self-satisfaction come by rising above the normal with marks of taste, power, and wealth. After the Las Vegas shooting, the brother of the alleged gunman said that he was “just a guy”—a normal guy who was a multimillionaire, high-stakes gambler, and leisure pilot in addition to a gun enthusiast. In class, I did not argue that whiteness was the sole cause of his desire for violent difference, but an important factor and angle of analysis to consider.

Students loved the analysis and ensuing discussion and debates, and requested that I offer a whole course on whiteness. My response was an unequivocal no. Yes, these days are perhaps the most

important time to understand whiteness, but I cannot be that teacher, I cannot do that in my context, and I am not willing to take that risk at this point in my career. I then unveiled my paranoid vision of what might occur should I go against all these calculations.

### **Background and Theory: Know Your Location; Whiteness Studies; Paranoia**

I heard from a psychologist that one of the first diagnoses of someone who expressed that they experienced racism was paranoia. Ponder the possibility that there is a vast conspiracy of wealth and power with great hatred towards you and with the goal to disrupt and/or to end your life—that is paranoid, and it also true of racism. In order to understand my paranoia/reality, it is important to know my social location. I am Japanese American, and during World War II my family's fears became reality when they were forced into internment camps without cause and without due process, in large part because of society's fears of their race. Additionally, being a Japanese American leaves me open to mischaracterizations of my scholarship on race, especially to the tactic of dismissing my critical analysis of past and present racism as revenge for the internment camps. I also am aware that in our political climate, anyone against racism can be regarded as working against all white people. In short, my social location and family history as a Japanese American provides intimate knowledge of the history, presence, and functions of white supremacy, but this location and history also damns me in the eyes of those defending it. Moreover, being on tenure track but without tenure, I am under the threat of termination for offending the politics of university administration—something I have seen happen with devastating results. Retribution would be swift and would likely be even more detrimental for those not on tenure track. In this light, tenure is not just job security and status but a rare protection of academic freedom and sanity, though by no means an impenetrable one.

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With this wisdom, I have my paranoid vision:

When I offer “Whiteness Studies,” students would attend with the sole purpose of disrupting the class. They secretly record lectures and student interactions, and release a selective, edited portion to the anti-antiracism media. Then, my distorted face/voice would be the image of all anti-racism professors, and a portion of an argument or a misrepresentation of an argument would serve as the strawman for all anti-racist arguments in anti-antiracism media. My traumatized students would be media darlings as they recount the idiotic, abusive, and foreign [fourth-generation American] professor who knows nothing about being white yet feels he can teach white people about their own experience. Concerned parents and community members lobby the school to have me fired along with all ethnic studies professors and any others who speak in support of me. Newspaper editorial columns appear decrying the state of the public university where taxes go to frivolous topics and privileged professors. My social media and school email accounts become a cesspool of trolling, while my colleagues, family, and friends are forced to defend me or to distance themselves from me personally and on social media. In response, my university, department, and colleagues may help defend me, but not that much. I get taken to court, lose my job, lose lots of colleagues and friends, stress out my family, worry about my family's safety (and my own), and probably more. Tenure would help with the job part, maybe even with the court part a little bit, but the other stuff not as much as I would need.

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That is basically how I see my life after starting to teach “Whiteness Studies.” In addition to my social location, I have this paranoid vision because the items listed have actually happened to others in recent years. Moreover, I am at a state school in the South and relatively new to the region.\* There are Asian

Americans here but nothing like the support networks in the West and Northeast. And, significantly, the anti-antiracism movement is strong, organized, and endorsed by media empires and the President of the United States. I recognize that my physical, political, and social location puts me at the mercy of asymmetric power—and I should remind you that others are even worse off! Given my own evaluation of my social location, then I put forward that you do the same, and you may end up as or more paranoid; that is, appropriately afraid of anti-antiracism backlash.

I also have this vision because I have studied whiteness and white supremacy; there are structures, discourses, and epistemologies that are designed to protect whiteness, and they would not be deterred by an untenured professor. One key element of this protection has been termed “white ignorance” by Charles Mills, which is the epistemology designed *not* to see whiteness. As he details in his book chapter by the same name, white ignorance has been crafted both on *false knowledge* (e.g., the Civil War was not related to slavery) and an *active denial of evidence* that racism exists and white people contribute to it. Consequently, a course on whiteness would bring white students, university administration, media, and public to react by *embracing false knowledge* that contradicts the course’s knowledge. They would also *reject the premise* that race exists and *the evidence* that white supremacist ideas are openly embraced, that hate crimes are on the rise, and that white people need to understand their whiteness as much as minorities.

To this latter point, Mills argues that white ignorance has long been understood by racial minorities and is foundational to their double consciousness. For survival, they must know the realities of systematic racism *and* know how to see the world through white ignorance, lest they disrupt white people’s whiteless vision which can evoke an angry response. A course on whiteness would purposely carry out this disruption. I could argue to students, public, and the media that this disruption is important for the health and knowledge of all; but, again, white ignorance does not hear any arguments that put itself under scrutiny. Consequently, my intimate knowledge of whiteness along with my study of racial minority scholars who have done the same—even though we have been forced to understand whiteness for generations and have studied it for our careers—would be rendered lies and grievance by white ignorance.

Given white ignorance, the political climate that supports white ignorance and white supremacy in general, and my location as a Japanese American man in the South at a state school without tenure, my teaching strategy is not to teach a course entitled “Whiteness Studies.” Note that I consciously include elements of whiteness studies in nearly every course I teach, such as the historical relationships of whiteness, nativism, and immigration and the popular culture depictions of others to define whiteness, but I do not choose to confront white ignorance more directly.

### **Conclusions and Extensions: Knowable Risks**

When embarking on anti-racism work, do not be naïve. If racism were easy to solve, it would have happened already. And, just because you have the tools and knowledge to teach a course that is explicitly anti-racist (like “Whiteness Studies”), doesn’t mean you should. I advise awareness and a healthy paranoia. Teaching an explicitly anti-racist course at any point in US history has been dangerous; teaching one in today’s political climate parallels the peak racism (post-Civil War) of the 1870s, 1910s, 1930s, and 1950s and 60s.

In this light, if you choose to teach whiteness studies without tenure, consider it on par with the Civil Rights protests in the 1950s: you are at a lunch counter and just waiting for the angry white crowd to gather. Oh, and you don’t have SNCC and Martin Luther King, Jr. to provide a grand strategy, legal

defense, media representation, and moral legitimation. These heroes led an extremely difficult path for civil rights; now imagine that path without that support. If you are willing to confront this paranoid vision, then your sacrifice may be remembered well in a few decades, but it is also possible that you may end up forgotten, with a criminal record, no academic career, and isolated in other ways—which is a current reality for many Civil Rights-era protesters.

I would rather learn from the experience of earlier anti-racist educators: Develop strong networks along with your own skill and fortitude. Develop a map of your network of support, including academic, legal, political, personal, and moral. Identify those who would truly support you and those who would likely not support you or who would likely work against you. Then, cultivate the positive relationships and perhaps try to understand the interests of the unsupportive others in your network. And, like I am sure someone has told you already: handle your business, do solid work in research, writing, and teaching, and, if you are in that increasingly rare position to be on that track, get tenure. In addition to this, make sure your family is on board. Then I would say, you are ready for the wild ride of teaching “Whiteness Studies”—an adventure in the classroom and beyond.

\* Dr. Esaki has recently switched institutions, and at the time of writing, was teaching at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia.

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## Skin in the Game: Raising the Stakes with *The Race Card Project*

Richard Newton, University of Alabama

Recently I had a front row seat at my oldest son's kindergarten graduation. Before receiving their diplomas, the children performed a montage of lessons they had learned during the school year—reading, writing, arithmetic...and world cultures. They conveyed the lessons with a cursory description of major holidays that took place within the semesters.

I don't object to using holidays as a touchstone, but I surely failed at hiding my disappointment in the execution of the lesson. One child told us about the whimsy of Christmas—a winter holiday celebrated by most families present, even those not identifying as Christian. "Jewish people," another child said, celebrate Hanukkah, and preceded to describe the function of a menorah which was depicted on a poster he had colored. Then a child approached the mic to explain how "*Some people* celebrate Kwanzaa," all the while holding a different candleholder scribbled on a poster.

Call this an occupational hazard, but I wasn't disappointed in how little the students had learned about the problematics of comparison, but how much they had taken away from these lessons. In a 187-day school year, they discovered the importance of reading and writing one's name. These kids had to memorize where and with whom they lived and how to get a hold of loved ones in case of an emergency. And every other week, my son and I racked our brains for show-and-tellable ideas that were simultaneously personal and pertinent to a given theme.

You can't tell me that kids are only able to learn so much about a culture. They are trained to master their own. But then why is it apparently acceptable to essentialize another culture by way of kitsch and nameless generics? Rather than use this as an opportunity to present a primer on critical race theory and the history of religion, the more important takeaway from this parable is recognition that these kids were *taught* to judge certain books by their cover. Given the reluctance shown by so many of my students and colleagues to discuss matters of social difference, I have no problem suggesting that our so-called higher education has disciplined us into silence.

My point is simply that the anti-racist conversion for which so many pedagogues pray can only come after the stakes of its implications become increasingly diffuse. Students must have skin in the game such that they can no longer claim a position outside of the politics of identity where naiveté—feigned or authentic—is permissible. In my classroom, this means confronting the socially normative paradigms in which students are schooled all too well.

### Teaching Strategy

My activity of choice for this is *The Race Card Project* (TRCP). The brainchild of award-winning journalist Michele Norris, TRCP is a micro-story telling tool to surface the dramas with which we for better or for



worse identify—particularly in regard to social difference. It sets the table to discuss the many reasons why one’s truth claims do not necessarily constitute truth for someone else. And it’s as easy as this: prompt participants to express their truth about race...in six words. Answers can be funny, profound, creative, or serious. The only rule is that these six-words stories must be honest and true to the author’s experience.

The activity makes clear that there’s a difference between talking about race and saying something about it. To set the tone, I have found success by displaying the online Race Card Wall, which displays random submissions from the tens of thousands of cards collected since 2010 from all over the world.<sup>1</sup> One can even search for a term like “religion,” the name of a world religion, or some religious term to see what appears.<sup>2</sup> I give students a few moments to read the stories as they stream across the screen. Then I invite them to read aloud those that pique their curiosity. Students may feel affirmed, shocked, intrigued, or even disgusted. But they are always interested!

That’s when I invite the class to share their own six-word stories. We maintain silence while students compose and then listen to their classmates read aloud. This makes room for students to express themselves without concern of unwarranted commentary. It also coaxes participants into a posture of active listening.

Part of why we say so little of substance about race and difference is because we know that just like “sticks and stones may break our bones,” words can bring a world of hurt. The optimum forum for sharing depends upon size of the class. My decision to have students go around a circle, pair up, or form small sharing groups is based upon the likelihood that I can (1) maintain a zero body-count as a result of the discussion, (2) assure that students won’t be oppressed (not to be confused with offended) in the process, and (3) help students be less “jerky” than when they arrived.

One might think that last point a little harsh, but I literally say this because they already know that failure here will do more harm than good. They want a space where they can be as honest as they are ready to be, creative as they know they can be in the moment, and prepared to listen as much as they are ready to speak. My role as teacher is not to bring racial reconciliation. It is to help students reckon why we have yet to do so. *TRCP* fosters an awareness of the consonance and dissonance that are products of how we have come to understand social difference.

### **Background and Theory**

Cliché as it may sound, I premise my use of the *TRCP* upon the notion that discourses such as race and religion are learned behaviors. “Hate is taught,” so the trope goes. The problem with this articulation though is that it equates difference—rather than prejudiced evaluations, structures, and actions—with hate, hence why people either avoid substantive conversations about difference with those they perceive as different from themselves (e.g., preaching to “the diversity choir”) or the terms for discussion became so vague that they no longer speak to the nuance of our tortured realities (e.g., “I’m colorblind.”). *TRCP* provides a lexicon for reading and writing one’s truth emphatically.

Yet as a scholar of scriptures, I also understand that the life-texts we study have the potential to attract and repel. We know too well how humans authorize such deeds. A classroom committed to making sense of our issues should have us think twice (and then some) about the lessons we teachers impart.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://theracecardproject.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://theracecardproject.com/?s=religion>

For starters, if we can recall the historic role of religion and race as university cornerstones (however worn), and if we can remember the shadow side of such monuments, are we not warranted to consider the extent to which we are teaching students to be “white”? I am not speaking here about the accident of phenotype as much as the pathology of those James Baldwin says have come to “think they are white,”—those complacent with the fanatical hope of a safety linked to specialness even at the expense of those they deem “other.” I think we too easily forget that white supremacy was and is just as tutored an affair as even the most decolonized syllabuses. The candor required by *TRCP* reveals how this is so.

I don’t come from a particularly activist branch of religious studies, but I suppose my work falls in line with Patricia Hill Collins’s allegorical twist on the Hans Christian Andersen story, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” Her reading associates the emperor with dominance; and each new outfit, the many shapes of social inequality used to keep him in power. In the sharing of stories in the classroom we can do the important work of asking how we became ashamed of our nakedness that we would dress this way or that. *TRCP* unveils the classroom’s potential for reexamining how power comes into style.

### Conclusions and Extensions

I have used *TRCP* in three different higher educational settings over the past six years, and no experience has been identical. I say that as a way of encouraging you to teach with *TRCP* free of the expectation that there’s a “best” way to do so. My only advice is to free yourself from expecting the class to end up somewhere, and just trust that the conversation will go in a way that will complement your larger classroom goals. I can only extend such an admonition with the benefit of hindsight.

That said I need to be honest with you. I have had reservations writing this essay out of fear that *TRCP* will become yet another band-aid applied to the deeper, system-wide cuts inflicted within our institutions. And as I commit words to the page, I am in the midst of an institutional transition that has me wondering whether *TRCP* will work in my new classrooms. Once I give up the notion that some good must come out of the *TRCP* exchange, my composure begins to return. I remember that at the end of the day *TRCP* is nothing more than a way for students to create a frame of reference for critically approaching social difference.

Now I’m switching my focus to a different question that I also recommend to you: “What opportunities does your classroom present?” In mine, the collected stories have provided data for us to analyze the politics of identity on our campuses. For instance, when I taught at California State Polytechnic University-Pomona, in Los Angeles, students in my general education course went away with a greater appreciation for the imbrication of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other social indices. At Shenandoah University, it helped students to ask each other what they had been too afraid to ask. At Elizabethtown College, students puzzled through collected stories to practice discourse analysis and followed up with contributors to learn the background behind the six-word stories as a means of developing ethnographic skills. Each application became high points in my course scaffolding and teaching experience.

What I did not expect was how the frankness of our class exchanges would inspire students to use *TRCP* for their own constructive purposes. For instance, at Elizabethtown College, a few students of color suggested using *TRCP* across the college after an anonymous racialized and homophobic threat was found on a campus marker board. The students—some of whom had been in my classes—believed *TRCP* could help the campus reclaim the signifying power of words. I agreed to help assist students with their campaign while committing my introductory class to the task of analyzing the findings in fall of 2015 and spring of 2016.

By most measures the project was a success. It garnered local media attention.<sup>3</sup> Our campus partnered with TRCP as a spotlight school.<sup>4</sup> Michelle Norris visited our campus and helped students, faculty, staff, and administrators reconceive their commitments to inclusive excellence.<sup>5</sup> Campus leadership even allocated more resources toward student requests for a mental health services and inclusion-focused meeting space. Real talk can go a long way.

However, there can be limits, even costs to stretching the TRCP as teaching tactic into an educational program. For starters, the campus six-word story campaign at times became a victim of its own success. People would benignly ask me what I was planning to do next as if this work was my job and not *our* job. And while my introductory students gained invaluable experience conducting action research, quantitative data from my course evaluations suggests that these experiences lowered their perception of learning and academic performance regardless of their demonstrable proficiencies. In other words, they were worn out. And I share their sentiment. Such is the price of hard work and success.

Even though my students beamed with the pride of a job well done and an expanded skill set, I wonder whether the price was too high? Were I to do the campus-wide six-word story project again (and I absolutely would), I'd think even more carefully about the stakes of playing The Race Card Project in the classroom. At what point do high-impact learning practices become detrimental to the health of students? I realize that the answers aren't black or white. It is more a matter of learning and unlearning the lessons that make difference and make a difference. And that's a conversation worth having. Teachers and administrators need to go first.

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## **Anti-Racism in Community-Based Education**

Tiffany Puett, Institute for Diversity and Civic Life

### **Introduction**

While I teach religious studies in university classrooms, I also direct a nonprofit educational organization, the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life (IDCL), where we offer programs that build understanding of religious and cultural diversity. Many of our programs are geared towards adult learners and, more specifically, professionals who are navigating dynamics of diversity and difference in their organizations, companies, or communities.

These programs focus on developing knowledge, strategies, and skills for engaging with contemporary religious diversity. They aim at helping people create inclusive spaces that accommodate and allow for a range of social identities, backgrounds, and worldviews. We like to think that, at its best, this engagement with religious diversity can help foster a more just and inclusive society where diverse individuals and communities feel seen, heard, and valued. Often, grassroots programs and initiatives on religious diversity are shaped by pluralistic approaches. IDCL's mission intersects with pluralist values in many ways, but we use the concerns and approaches of anti-racism and anti-oppression to probe how religious differences are managed in American communities.

### **Methods and Approaches**

Our community-based educational programming on religion builds off a notion of religious literacy—this idea that people ought to know something about religions and that this knowledge will make them better and more adept citizens. Religious literacy has been a popular concept for years now used to justify the importance of studying religion—whether in universities, public and private schools, or through public programs. Often the case is made in terms of a civic problem: Americans know very little about religions, including their own, and this illiteracy compromises their abilities to be effective citizens in a liberal democracy. To be an effective citizen, one must be educated and informed. A basic knowledge of religion is important for understanding American politics and navigating diversity. Yet, exactly what kind of knowledge religious literacy entails is not entirely clear. Often this essential knowledge is framed in terms of facts, historical figures, events, and theological or religious concepts. However, knowledge of these facts and concepts doesn't equip a person to effectively interact with religious differences. These might be part of the vocabulary of religious literacy, but without skillful use of the grammar, the terms aren't useful. And the grammar in this analogy involves an awareness of the social context in which diverse religions exist. In an American context, this entails structural dynamics of unshared power that mediate encounters with religious diversity and difference.

IDCL's programs focus less on a fact-based approach to understanding religions and more on developing frameworks and skills for recognizing and responding to differences and diversity. Anti-racism and anti-oppression are the lenses we use to parse out what these frameworks and skills entail. Anti-racism

education calls for social transformation. And it starts with an awareness of how our society has been constructed around hierarchies and unshared power.

We take a lived religions approach to thinking about religions. This means decentering an older world religions model that can often focus on religions from the top and misconstrue them as monolithic. There can be a vast expanse between the orthodox theologies, rituals, and customs described in a world religions textbook and the ways that individuals actually experience and live out those religions. A lived religions approach can shed light on the diversity, nuances, and complexities within religions and religious communities. Along these lines, no one experiences their religion in isolation. An individual's lived experiences of religion are mediated through other aspects of their identity, such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability and class. We use intersectionality as a framework to illuminate these relationships. Intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race, gender, and other aspects of identity interact to shape individual experiences. It problematizes viewing racism, sexism, classism, or other social structures of inequality as discrete and independent of one another. It challenges unitary theories of race, class, and gender and other structures of inequality. Intersectionality supports an anti-oppression framework in that it acknowledges a multiplex of structures of inequality and oppression.

Yet, to center an anti-racist framework is to acknowledge that racism is the ground on which other forms of oppression have been built. This was a country built on the genocidal slaughter, destruction, enslavement, and dehumanization of indigenous people and peoples of African descent. Understanding the social construction of American society requires continually asking how these histories of violence and dehumanization shape the social structures and institutions we inhabit today, including American religions. So we emphasize the social context in which religions are lived out. Encounters of religion in the American public sphere typically do not take place in circumstances of equilibrium or on the so-called level playing ground. Intersectionality helps illuminate the intersections of religious oppression or marginalization with other forms of oppression and dominance. It begins to bring to light the complex dynamics at work in the racialization of religious identities.

We work to historicize dynamics of religious diversity, as we talk about Christian privilege or hegemony, the ways in which Christianity—especially Protestantism—functions as the norm by which all other religions are measured and described in American society and how this norm has played a role in the racialization of minority religious groups. We also problematize demands to be known; we work to hold space for those who don't want to be known or to engage, those who instead experience these pluralist impulses as reiterations of historic dynamics of domination.

### **Anti-Racism Strategies in Practice**

We offer a program called Engaging Religious Difference, an adult education workshop that we've delivered in two-day, one-day, and half-day formats. It's aimed at helping people learn how to navigate religious differences and diversity within their communities, organizations, or workplaces. But this process of thinking about religious difference can also help participants critically interrogate all the ways in which they see and assign difference, especially when that difference is attached to hierarchical power arrangements. We strive to ground this knowledge about religious difference in skills for equitable social transformation.

As adult learners and professionals, participants come to our programs with an abundance of insight and experience and often a lack of time in their busy lives. While we suggest supplemental readings, our programs cannot depend on required readings to lay a foundation of knowledge. Moreover, adult

learners do not want to be lectured to. They want to learn through reflection and praxis. So we structure this program to be interactive, experiential, and conversational.

We start with a self-reflexive piece. Cultivating self-reflexivity is an essential component of this pedagogical approach. Much of the critical work of this model probes normativity. People need to be able to recognize what they see as normative. We ask participants/students to look carefully at themselves, reflect upon their own social locations, and consider how those experiences shape the way they interpret the world. And then we ask them to explore how their interpretive lenses inform the ways they view differences and common ground. We do this through exercises and activities, such as a privilege inventory and a social-identity matrix (examples of these can be found in the appendix of *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*), which prompt participants to think about their identities in relation to social structures of dominance or subordination.

The workshop then moves into a brief historical overview of diversity, tolerance, and religious freedom in the United States from the colonial era to the present day. Using short documentaries and media clips, we discuss Christian dominance, religious justifications for racial hierarchies, and religious discrimination, such as anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Longer format workshops often include an interactive case study component as well.

The workshop then circles back to the self-reflexive piece and emphasizes critical conversations about narratives of community—the nation, the state, the city, the workplace, the organization—and the politics of representation. We ask how these narratives draw boundaries and engage in complex processes of inclusion and exclusion. These conversations explore whose interests are served by drawing these boundaries in this way rather than another. They probe how the ways in which we define and describe who “we” are might reproduce patterns of dominance and structural inequality. We talk about how we can construct new narratives of who “we” are that promote equity and inclusion and are formed through equitable processes. And then we engage in conversations where participants work together to think critically about their spheres of influence as well as where and how they can affect change.

## Conclusions

The mission of the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life is to advance understanding of religious and cultural diversity and advocate for a more inclusive public sphere. Pluralistic approaches to religious diversity often claim to be neutral and objective when they are anything but. This can lead to blindly defining differences on our own terms. But anti-racism and anti-oppression frameworks call on us to recognize that we are doing normative work and to constantly and diligently pay attention to the norms, biases, and expectations informing this work.

We’re striving to facilitate an educational process that is democratic, participatory, inclusive, and affirming of human agency as well as the human capacity to work collaboratively to affect change. And through our community-based educational programs, we want to enable the development of a sense of agency and capacity to change oppressive patterns and behaviors in oneself and in the institutions and communities of which one is a part.

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## **Anti-Racism in the Religious Studies Classroom: Compassionate Critique and Community Building**

Martha Smith Roberts, Denison University

Difficult topics are par for the course in the religious studies classroom. Our object of study, the myriad human behaviors categorized as religion, often spark impassioned debate and disagreement. However, the main pedagogical issues I face in the classroom tend to emerge from the absence, not the abundance, of debate and dialogue. This became even more palpable after the most recent presidential election, as students became reticent to speak about issues like race and religion or any of the contemporary political examples that I wanted to use for class discussion. Candidate Trump's proposed Muslim Ban, and the later executive orders meant to instantiate it, are excellent examples of the issues we should be talking about in religious studies courses. However, my students had difficulty engaging with these issues, both in class discussions and in response papers.

In order to get students comfortable talking and writing about topics like race, religion, and ethnicity, I quickly learned that it was essential to create a strong classroom community that provided students the space to try out this new material, make mistakes, fail, and recover without feeling disconnected from their classmates. This idea of community soon became central to the development of anti-racist pedagogies in the form and content of my teaching. While I use this technique in other courses, I will focus on my "Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in the US" class as an example. This course is a cross-listed, upper-division seminar with a general education writing component. Thus, it is at once a seminar, a writing workshop, a religious studies class, and a black studies class at my small liberal arts college. Meeting all of the requirements of form and content while dealing with difficult material provides a challenge, and I find that a focus on creating a classroom community helps to reconcile some of these demands.

In a broad sense, anti-racism is both the form and content of the class. The course analyzes the concept of "race" as a category within the field of religious studies. It is not a survey of race in American history; instead, it is an exploration of race in the study of American religion. The aim is for students to begin to recognize the constructive power of the category of race in religious studies scholarship and to begin to construct their own research questions that challenge the paradigms of the field. In essence, we examine the ways in which talking about race can itself be a disruptive act, an anti-racist project. In order to achieve this, community, support, and open discussion in the classroom are necessary.

### **Teaching Strategies**

The first strategy that I use relates to the creation of a strong community. To cultivate learning, the classroom must be a space where students are able to fail, to correct, and to begin again. We start this work the first week of class in a low-stakes form of play. I use an entire day of class to play the board game *Taboo*, and I have found it is worth the initial time investment. *Taboo* is a word-guessing game in

which two teams compete to correctly guess the most words. Players are given a card with the key word at the top. They then attempt to get their team to guess that word by describing it without using any of the other “taboo” words listed on the card. For example, a player will attempt to get their team to guess the word “lullaby” without using the words baby, sleep, cradle, sing, or rock. If they use the taboo words, another player “buzzes” them, and they have to move on, no points awarded. *Taboo* works well for many reasons, a primary one being that it is an older game that most of my students have never played. This means that they all have to learn it together. I give them a few rules: they have thirty minutes, they must have two teams, and everyone has to participate. I then place the box in the center of the table and remove myself from the game, and I simply observe. Their task is to play the game.

*Taboo* works well for community building in a variety of ways. Students have to work together to figure out the rules, everyone has to participate, and there are alternating moments of low-stakes anxiety, laughter, and competition. They also have to speak, guess, correct other players, and struggle to make their points with a limited vocabulary. The most important part of this exercise follows the game. After we finish, I ask students to reflect on what *Taboo* has in common with classroom discussion. From this we spend the remainder of class developing ground rules for our own discussions. What is taboo for us? How do we engage one another? What do we do when someone needs correction? How do we object without a buzzer? And my students do well with this. They come up with fantastic ideas about how we can speak and listen with respect. I stand at the board and take notes on their brainstorming session, about everything from what kinds of content is useful in discussion (textual evidence? personal experience?) to the responsibility of students to prepare for class by reading so that we have a shared vocabulary. Slowly, a list takes shape.

Together we come up with a set of guidelines that I type up, hand out in hard-copy form, and post to our class website. Ideally, we revisit them several times in the semester. I have consistently found that this type of low-stakes play creates a strong foundation for student interaction in the class. However, it is imperative that the game is contextualized and reflected upon if it is going to be used as a learning tool. This is also a great time for me, as an instructor, to observe the class, learn names, and begin to get to know the students. My seminar classes usually have a maximum of eighteen students, so this activity would have to be adapted for larger classes, though the basic principles of play, participation, and speaking and listening are essential parts of the exercise, whatever game you might choose.

Students definitely feel that there are taboos around the topics of race and religion. This game provides an opportunity for the class to discuss this and decide how to deal with the very real problem of saying something that is offensive or misinformed. In other words, what do we do about racist comments? As this comes up in our brainstorming session, students often have great ideas. They always point out the need to correct misinformation and to educate in cases of ignorance. This is a moment when I offer a few strategies that I want them to use to achieve those goals. The only classroom discussion guidelines that I add to the list (and I bring them up at the end of the session, after they have done most of the heavy lifting), are kindness and honesty. These are the values that inform how we respond to racism in the classroom, a strategy that I call “compassionate correction” or “compassionate critique.” This means listening and giving each other the benefit of the doubt, but also being sure to correct problems. I model this in class, I ask students to do this, and I also remind them that I too, may need to be corrected. We begin to use this language on small things (students have compassionately corrected my spelling on the chalk board) and on more serious issues (when textual interpretations go a bit off the rails, when insensitive comments are made, or when problematic language is used, we compassionately correct each other). Compassionate correction/critique is a way to remain diligent in correcting problematic language and action without slipping into unproductive forms of call-out culture. This creates a space where students are allowed to make mistakes as a part of the learning process, which makes them more

receptive to the critiques they receive.

So what does this look like over the course of the semester? We start by having basic discussions about the definitions and descriptions of race and racism, and then move to religion. Our first readings are classic texts on structural racism from Beverly Daniel Tatum and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. Students are assigned as “experts” on respective readings, and in class they work with other experts, first in small groups to solidify their understanding of the reading, and then as a class to debate the finer points of comparison and contrast between them. I serve as a note-taker at the board while my experts discuss how the concepts are used in the texts, the problems and gaps in the readings, and the things we want to continue to use or discuss as we move forward. Because it is a writing class, we discuss the kinds of evidence and analysis that authors use as well as the ways they organize their arguments. While this may seem like a simple exercise, when race and prejudice are the topics, things go wrong. Students begin right away to use compassionate correction/critique as a way to communicate with kindness. Usually the first example of this comes when students grapple with authors’ assertion that there is no such thing as “reverse racism.” Inevitably some students have difficulty with this; however, with *Taboo* fresh in their memory, students are quick to use their agreed upon guidelines in discussion. First this comes in the form of measured second-order statements, “I think Tatum would buzz you here...” or “Bonilla-Silva might compassionately correct you there...” Later in the semester, they begin to take more ownership of their own objections, especially when they recognize we are critiquing ideas, not people. Then I begin to hear more active, first-person language, such as “I would compassionately correct the author here...” or “I disagree with this argument because...”

This strategy for creating community in the classroom begins with collective development of guidelines for discussion that include models for interactions and interventions. Just as the form of the classroom is meant to reflect anti-racist pedagogies, the content is as well. To align theory and praxis as anti-racist scholarship, speaking and writing projects are meant to give students practice with description (presenting the work as a discussion leader), analysis (short papers), and application (applying theories to examples outside of the texts). We read examples of contemporary scholarship that highlight how race and religion can be analyzed in ways that recognize and disrupt cultural appropriation, orientalism, racialization of religion, and normative religious/racial identities (white supremacy) using a variety of methods (ethnography, history, cultural studies, sociology).

### **Taboos in the Field: Background and Theory**

As I mentioned above, the course is a meta-critical reflection on the categories of race and religion in religious studies scholarship. This content offers particularly rich grounds for thinking about the ways in which both race and religion are not simply descriptive terms, but rather, concepts that construct and maintain power dynamics in the field of religious studies while also having broader cultural, political, and material implications. The theoretical background for the course is in many ways grounded in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s racial formation theory, with particular attention to the “ethnicity paradigm” in American race theory. The ethnicity paradigm is a fantastic example of the power of elision, of the ways in which not speaking about race will not eradicate the problems of racism. To further illustrate this, we read articles in which authors respond to one another—framed as conversations between members of a community of scholars—that highlight the significance of taking race seriously as a category. These readings model scholarly discourse on race and religion in both positive and negative ways, and they add resources to our critical-thinking toolkits. Thinking about readings in dialogue gives students an opportunity to see scholarship “at work” and to analyze the discourse. Students write responses to readings, discuss them in class, and revise and repeat.

Our class readings also illustrate the theory that undergirds my own anti-racist pedagogy. They exemplify the ways that knowledge is constructed and contested by communities of scholars, and we practice ways of entering into these discussions with compassion and critique. One set of readings is Robert Bellah's "Civil Religion in America" and Charles Long's "Civil Rights—Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion" from the same collected volume, *American Civil Religion*. In this pairing, Bellah's classic text on civil religion is the starting point; he uses "religion" to interpret the beliefs, symbols, and rituals of American national identity. Long offers a response that carefully frames the power and possibility of civil religion as an "American cultural language," one that not only creates a unifying American identity, but also renders racial and religious minorities invisible. Long also discusses how this language constructs the field of American religious history, and he critiques scholars' roles in historical elisions as well. Later, students read Nathan Glazer's "The Emergence of an American Ethnic Pattern" followed by Ronald Takaki's "Reflections on Racial Patterns in America." In this pairing, Takaki is directly responding to Glazer's optimistic view of American progress with historical examples that highlight the differences between ethnic and racial patterns in policy, history, and American identity.

The crucial shift of the critical lens in both of these pairings revolves around the conscious acknowledgement of "race" by Takaki and Long, which serves as a response to the ethnicity-centered analyses of Bellah and Glazer. Students are asked to compare and contrast the pairs, looking for the ways in which race, ethnicity, and religion are defined and utilized as scholarly categories. What emerges is often a realization of the constructive power of these concepts. Long and Takaki shift the narrative of American history by simply beginning to recognize and talk about religion, race, and the elision of race. The ways in which paradigmatic structures of power are maintained in scholarship are multiple, and throughout the semester we diversify our readings in terms of scholars, methods, and objects of study. I try to actively be as transparent as possible about the theories I use as pedagogical models for the class by incorporating them into the syllabus.

## Conclusions

Class readings, writing, and discussion allow students opportunities to sharpen their skills as they analyze scholarship, critique it, and practice it. I want them to see how race works to maintain and disrupt scholarly practices and power relations in the field of religious studies. I want students to see that scholarship is powerful, and that how we study religion constructs religion. I want them to ask and answer several questions about the academic field of religious studies: Is there anti-racist religious studies scholarship? What does it look like? How do scholars do it? What are the methods? Theories? Interactions? Data? Can we dismantle the structures of power in our disciplines? This course cannot answer all of these questions. But it is meant to begin the conversation. In the service of leaving the course (and the field) open-ended for students, I struggle to present scholarship descriptively and not prescriptively. Racial formation theory offers us tools for critiquing scholarship, but it is also a theory that ultimately needs to be critiqued.

Our early readings and discussions provide the foundation for our later evaluations of contemporary events and scholarship and set the stage for the more difficult questions that arise. They serve as shared content for the course, but also as models for how to talk about race and religion. One of the guiding questions of the course is whether it is possible to study religion in the United States without carefully considering race. And if it is the case that race has a profound role in what we call American religion, then as community of scholars, we need to be able to communicate clearly about it: it cannot be taboo. At the end of the semester, after building community that can discuss difficult topics with clarity and precision, students leave the class with tools will help them navigate the world inside and outside of academic spaces. This is the aim of all of the anti-racist strategies that I use in my courses.

None of these ideas are truly my own. I have borrowed from many others, and it is important to acknowledge this and to give credit where it is due. This class and the readings I use in the example above were adapted, with permission, from a graduate class I took with Rudy Busto at University of California, Santa Barbara. My contribution here has been to give the course an undergraduate orientation—meaning fewer readings, directed writing assignments, and an introductory approach to both content and form. The *Taboo* classroom activity above is also an adaptation. One of the best discussion courses I took as an undergraduate was a writing course taught by Barrie Talbot at Missouri State University, and it began with a game of *Taboo*. The sharing of resources and strategies is a necessary part of anti-racist pedagogy. A culture of collective learning is exactly what I try to cultivate in my classes, and it is what I hope this issue of *Spotlight* ultimately accomplishes as well.

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## **“Saying the Wrong Thing”: Experiences of Teaching Race in the Classroom**

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### **Introduction**

Students at Warren Wilson College, where I have taught full-time over the past five years, have often told me in office hours that they do not feel “safe” discussing race in the classroom. They are eager and motivated to learn scholarly content and to analyze their experiences, but they are very reluctant to articulate their thoughts out loud. The college is politically liberal and predominantly white (about eight percent of the students are students of color, including international attendees); it is small (about 500 students) and rural. Most students live on the campus. Thus it is a place where students know each other and reputation matters a great deal. To “say the wrong thing” is to potentially be called out, or even labeled a racist.

Teaching predominantly white classes about race in such a context can be challenging. While students self-select into classes and thoughtfully engage with texts, they often feel that they do not have the authority to speak about race. They are often startled to read primary thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, who argued that white people are not a race, and to consider that the term “race” includes white people. Many of these students grow up in homogenous environments in which they rarely encountered people of color, and indeed, that is still often the case on campus.

For several years, I have used informal and formal writing assignments to provoke students to a deeper space of vulnerability in their learning process. I think it essential that students encounter thoughts about race on three dimensions: (1) learning historical constructs of people of color; (2) internalizing the voices of people of color who have deconstructed racist constructs; and (3) challenging their own myopia and behavior. In this article, I will discuss a classroom assignment, as well as new insights I’ve gleaned, to illuminate how students can more deeply discuss race and racism in a homogenous environment.

### **Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching about Race in Predominantly White Classrooms**

In my current academic position, as well as in my last academic position, I have dedicated one class period to stepping back and facilitating conversation about personal identity. I typically do this exercise in the second half of the semester once students have had a chance to learn about historical constructs and to read several texts from the perspectives of people of color (such as W.E.B. DuBois, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin). Students spend approximately thirty minutes writing a worksheet consisting of the following questions:

1. How do you describe your racial identity? How do you describe your ethnic identity?
2. Does your racial or ethnic self-identity differ from how other people identify you? If so, how?

3. What are your understandings of race and ethnicity?
4. How does your appearance relate to social privilege(s) in mainstream society?
5. What are systemic patterns of racism that you observe in general society today? How do you participate (even inadvertently) in these patterns?
6. How would you describe race and class dynamics on campus?
7. How do you *feel* about the information we have covered in class this week?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to add pertaining to your perceptions/ experiences of race?

We then spend approximately fifty minutes discussing the students' responses to select questions. I ask students what question they would like to address first and we open the conversation to the entire class.

I find that this exercise, particularly when students have had a chance to reflect at length after reading personal narratives, as well as political analysis, eases the fear of "saying the wrong thing."

At the same time, students will still stumble and feel awkward, even paralyzed. I can relate to this anxiety, and just recently had an experience with a group of people of African descent in which I felt I had "said the wrong thing."

I recently attended a three-day gathering with a Buddhist organization, during which I had ample opportunity to reflect on the process of creating safe spaces for conversations on race amongst meditation practitioners of color who were coming together for the first time. I am rarely in a position to participate in such groups as a conversation partner, rather than a facilitator. During this gathering, the experience of engaging as a peer rather than guiding as a professor allowed me to gain a greater sense of why students may not feel safe talking about race in class: it can be frightening to say "the wrong thing," as many students have told me during office hours. At one point, participants broke out into racial caucuses to deepen the conversation on identity. The starting question for my caucus—the Black caucus—was provocative: what complicates Blackness for us? It led to an intense conversation that spilled over into a breakfast gathering the next morning.

I relate this story for two reasons: (1) Blackness is complicated for people of African descent; and (2) at one point, I found myself extremely anxious at having said "the wrong thing." Even though I was able to approach the person I triggered at the end of the session, I found myself shutting down and unable to sleep well; I replayed the experience over and over in my mind. I also felt that I learned something extremely valuable: the ways in which I can try to fix other peoples' painful feelings, as well as my penchant to over-intellectualize rather than simply be present with the trauma that is being expressed. I have sat Buddhist retreats for more than thirteen years, but this gathering deepened my awareness of "what complicates Blackness" for people of African descent, how we can trigger each other, and how we can create healing spaces for one another.

The experience of engaging in race-based caucuses with Buddhist practitioners also deeply sensitized me to the experiences of white students who are encountering the worldviews of people of color in intimate ways. I teach several race-related classes at Warren Wilson College. I typically have one or two students of color in each of my classes. Thus my teaching strategies must take into account that many of the students who enroll are white students with little experience engaging readings by people of color

or conversing with students and faculty of color.

### **Background and Theory**

I was motivated to introduce this reflection practice into my courses on race after a student of color approached me in the spring of 2009 and said that she felt there were not many opportunities to discuss race on campus. At the time, I was teaching courses on criminal justice as guest faculty at Sarah Lawrence College. The student and I developed the questions together; I then asked several friends who facilitate anti-racism workshops to look them over and critique our language. The final list of questions is one that I have used each semester for almost ten years.

As aforementioned, I suggest that the texts and questions we bring into the classroom are meant to facilitate growth individually and collectively. Bloom's Taxonomy has been particularly important for parsing the difference between cognitive and affective domains of learning. Lorin Anderson, a student of Bloom's, created a pyramid of the cognitive learning process. Linda B. Nilson adapted Anderson's pyramid to illuminate how it might be applied in the classroom.

Bloom's taxonomy on the cognitive domain argues that there are six categories of developing intellectual skills:

- Knowledge: recall data or information
- Comprehension: Understand the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.
- Application: Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction.
- Analysis: Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.
- Synthesis: Builds a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure.
- Evaluation: Make judgments about the value of ideas or materials.

On a cognitive level in the study of race, then, I want students to know, comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the texts they have engaged. But in teaching on race, the learning process must be much more extensive: it must impact the Affective Domain, that is, the domain in which students engage emotionally and cultivate new values, appreciation, motivation, and attitudes. Bloom's Taxonomy on the Affective Domain is striking in its guidance of how deeply students can engage new ideas, ultimately with the goal of internalizing (or perhaps expanding) new values on race and racism. Bloom states that people receive and respond to phenomena, leading to valuing, then synthesizing, and ultimately shifting their behavior based on these new values.

- Receiving phenomena: Awareness, willingness to hear, selected attention.
- Responding to phenomena: Active participation on the part of the learners. Attends and reacts to a particular phenomenon. Learning outcomes may emphasize compliance in responding, willingness to respond, or satisfaction in responding (motivation).
- Valuing: The worth or value a person attaches to a particular object, phenomenon, or behavior.



This ranges from simple acceptance to the more complex state of commitment. Valuing is based on the internalization of a set of specified values, while clues to these values are expressed in the learner's overt behavior and are often identifiable.

- **Organization:** Organizes values into priorities by contrasting different values, resolving conflicts between them, and creating a unique value system. The emphasis is on comparing, relating, and synthesizing values.
- **Internalizing values (characterization):** Have a value system that controls their behavior. The behavior is pervasive, consistent, predictable, and most importantly, characteristic of the learner. Instructional objectives are concerned with the student's general patterns of adjustment (personal, social, emotional).

The goal of teaching undergraduates about race is fundamentally an affective practice. In my classroom, as I deconstruct familiar constructs, myths, and narratives and introduce students to the profound psychological shifts that people of color have articulated in response to racist constructs, I am working to facilitate changes in behavior. Thus reading texts is not solely an intellectual process; it is also an affective process in which students have the space to reorient themselves.

### **Conclusions and Extensions**

Effective teaching on the study of religion and race must incorporate both the cognitive and the affective domains because we are teaching students about value systems, worldviews, ethical practices, and social justice. We are asking students to encounter different ways of thinking and to challenge to cultural values in multiple dimensions. And we are asking them to put aside familiar constructs and to embrace ideas which may feel threatening (what Charles W. Mills terms "an epistemology of ignorance") as well as exhilarating (James Baldwin writes: "people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.")

I suggest that incorporating the cognitive and the affective domains into higher education is a practice that is becoming more and more widely implemented. Many colleges are expanding advisement so that the whole student experience is prioritized. There are broader initiatives to incorporate community engagement and expand education beyond the college campus. There are calls for "engaged scholarship" in which faculty and seniors think about the community impact of their research. There are increasing numbers of programs that bring students into prison settings to take classes alongside incarcerated students. All of these initiatives suggest that higher education is not solely about an elite practice of reading a canon and introducing new ideas; it is also about cultivating internal awareness in challenging, unfamiliar contexts and reflecting upon privilege and power, and finally, enacting social justice locally, nationally, and internationally.

Awareness of historical racial constructs and the myriad ways that people of color who have been deemed inferior have resisted such constructs is critical to cultivating both cognitive and affective learning. Furthermore, as Bloom notes, the ultimate purpose in education is to evaluate values as well as internalize values: to make judgments as well as to form character. We want students to not only think critically about race and racism, but also to interact in such ways that do not perpetuate racism in micro and macro practices. Thus, teaching on religion and race provides critical avenues for students to engage—to step out and perhaps "say the wrong thing"—and to continue to learn, and, ultimately to change, their psychological orientation towards the social contexts that surround them.

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