

# Foreword:

## On Antiracist Agendas

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It was the second grade, Mrs. Whitmore's class, North Las Vegas, Nevada. It is one of the earliest memories I have of the classroom, perhaps the earliest I can recall in full detail. It is a memory of racism and language. Another student and I were working on something at the chalkboard, writing. The class was busy with their work at their desks. A few were at the small work area in the back of the room where the book shelves sat. Mrs. Whitmore, a white lady, probably in her 40s at the time, with a thick head of long hair coiled up in a bun, sat at her desk several feet from the chalkboard. I don't remember the boy's name, my collaborator, only that he was Black (I'll call him Shawn) and about my size and stature. I was very short and skinny in school. At one point in our work, in a half-joking manner through a smile, Shawn called me a "honkey." I thought nothing of it, had heard the term many times here and there. He said it casually, no threat in his voice.

Slurs like that were common in the neighborhood where we lived not far from the school. We lived in government-subsidized apartments on Stats Street. They were small, made of painted cinderblock, and infested with roaches. Each group of eight apartments formed a grassy courtyard with two trees in the middle, four apartments on each side. Our doors faced each other. All my neighbors were Black. I was brown, but in that context, I was considered white. Race was Black and white, binary, even to seven- and eight-year-olds. It was the first and last time in my life I was considered white. Poverty was the equalizer, something everyone knew. We breathed it. I still remember how it ached in my bones and stomach because we had so little, but I had no way of connecting the having-so-little to larger structures of inequality. I had no way of seeing the difference between my poverty and my escape from it years later, and my Black friends on Stats and their fewer chances of escaping it. All I or any of my friends on Stats could do is live with the ache, maybe blame ourselves in quiet moments. But the classroom was a heterogeneous, liminal space, a space where poverty might be put on hold, but race? It seemed to matter more, or mean more. I was coming to racial consciousness, but it was nascent.

Mrs. Whitmore immediately called us both over to her desk in a loud tone. “You two, come here!” The class stopped in their tracks. I could feel their eyes on us. She was clearly upset. Neither of us understood what was happening. She stood over us, turned to Shawn, and asked, “Do you know what that word means?” I can still recall the feeling of my skin burning from the tacit accusation of something. I thought I was in trouble too. It was confusing for a seven-year-old. Her tone was sharp and accusatory. She was making an example of us in front of the class. “Do either of you know what that word means?” We both just looked blankly at each other, speechless, afraid to say another word. “How would you feel if he called you the N-word?” Mrs. Whitmore continued to stare down at Shawn and gestured my way. I knew that word very well. Things became clearer: *oh, he’s in trouble, not me*. Still I was confused. What’s the problem? It’s just a word. No harm done.

This was my introduction to the whitely ways of many teachers to come, teachers similar to Mrs. Whitmore with her good intentions, careful rules to be followed, and determination to treat everyone the same, even treat the racial epithets we used the same. Shawn and I were just too young to understand what words like “honky” or “nigger” meant, how one of them had heavier historical baggage than the other, how one really wasn’t on par with the other, how honky just can’t hurt me the way nigger could hurt Shawn. They are both ugly words for sure, but one is more magical than the other, used historically by whites to degrade and dehumanize Blacks. Nigger. It’s uncomfortable to even read, to hear in your mind’s ear. Isn’t it? That’s its magic, a residual effect of a long history of inequality, meanness, inhumanity.

To Mrs. Whitmore, I think, the words were simply versions of the same kind of racism. Her heart was in the right place, but her ears couldn’t hear what was happening between us, or what had happened before that classroom. She couldn’t hear the word and weigh it against the word she was comparing it to. She could not see that she was reenacting a familiar racist paradigm, a white authority harshly punishing verbally (and often physically) a Black body, reenacting the ritual of a white body in authority, a white body demanding answers when answering would seem unwise to those being accused. She was a white body in control of the bodies of color around her, a white body using words to shame the racialized others around her and claim authority over them, even in matters of racism. Her attempt to be antiracist in her classroom practice ended up being racist through the strict enforcement of a rule about racial slurs with no regard to who said what to whom or what racial slur was used, and no regard to our linguistic privacy.

I’m not defending the use of the term honkey as a slur. I am saying that Mrs. Whitmore, in her rush (and it was a rush) to stamp out racism in her classroom, didn’t or couldn’t—or didn’t want to—see that those two racial epithets were simply not the same thing because of the racist history and structures that we live in, because of who said what to whom and how Shawn and I came to live differently in the same poverty-stricken area of North Las Vegas. She never bothered to ask

other questions that might have been more profitable to both Shawn and me. How did we use that word at home, on the playground, or in the neighborhood? We used both words and many others. Everyone did. We mimicked the language we heard around us. That's how language acquisition works, immersion and mimicry. She could have asked Shawn about how he felt when using it, why he might feel the need to use it, and how I felt to be called it, and why I might be okay with it or not. But she didn't. She could have talked with us about her own constraints as a teacher, or pressure by her principal or by parents to punish such language in our classroom. She might have talked to us about how she had to be a representative of many different, even conflicting, ideas about what kind of language is appropriate in our classroom. How would our parents feel about such language? But she didn't. She assumed it was simply a universally offensive word, that if she was offended then I must be, or that her sense of propriety was the measure of racism in her classroom. If such a word was used it was used in malice. It was uniformly and always wrong. She may have thought that perhaps when a Black mouth says that word it's always out of malice. A few years later, I'd chalk up such behavior by whites around me as simply being white, shaking my head and saying under my breath, "hmm, white people."

I know, this is all unfair to Mrs. Whitmore and whites generally. She's not here to explain herself. Any teacher who may behave in such ways, who may enforce rules of propriety that are meant to enact antiracist practices in the classroom are looking for rules that promote fairness, equality, and safety. The impulse is the right impulse. It's the method that messes up things, and how and by whom the method is enforced. What gets focused on is the word, which becomes a signifier of intention, an intention placed on the word by a white authority. The intention gets punished by the white authority. The impulse, I think, is that if we are all equal we should be treated equally, which means we should be punished equally for the same class of crimes in the classroom. The problem is, treating everyone equally doesn't make us equal. Furthermore, we can pretend to be equals, but we don't live in a world that sets up Shawn as remotely equal to Mrs. Whitmore or me. So when a teacher treats race as if it is a system of politically equal categories that people fit or place themselves into and see racism as when people associated to one category are slighted or treated differently than those in another, then the method is unfair. That's not how racism works. It works by hierarchical categories, not equal ones. It works by vertically uneven relations to power, not laterally even ones. These things affect rewards and punishments, and in the academy, rewards and punishments mean assessment and grading, opportunities and chances, policies and their methods.

Am I saying that Mrs. Whitmore or white teachers should stay out of the anti-racist activism business in classrooms? No. On the contrary, they should be first in line to do this work. What I'm saying is that white teachers must tread differently than teachers of color. One might think of it as cooking in someone else's kitchen.

You don't know where all the spices are. You don't know what they're saving for next week's dinner. You don't know what set of plates or silverware to use. You don't know that their oven runs a little hot. You don't really know what to bring and cook in their kitchen. I'm reminded of the exchange between Condon and Young in Condon's *I Hope I Join the Band* (2012, pp. 164–176). They discuss the territory of trust and suspicion when whites engage in antiracist work or words. Trust is a paradox. We can give it as a gift, free without someone else's need to earn it, but it is still really hard to give, maybe harder to cultivate over time, as Condon and Young agree must happen, because we all have different relations to the kitchen.

Now, Shawn and I were only seven. There's only so much critical examination a teacher can expect at that age. But we were also old enough to use those words in ways that approached the nuanced ways adults around us used the words. So we were assessing language in similar ways, then deploying that language for particular rhetorical ends. If Shawn wasn't using the word as an insult, and I wasn't offended, was it okay? Should our white teacher have simply minded her own business? Should she have realized that she was not entitled to comment or preside over our exchange, even if she was the teacher? Should she have stayed out of our kitchen, at least this time?

I think many good-hearted, college teachers are like Mrs. Whitmore in how they treat race and racism in their classrooms, especially writing, rhetoric, and communications classrooms. They have their rules about what is appropriate and what is offensive, and implement them top-down, with some discussion, of course. They implicitly tell their students, shame on you for thinking that, or doing this thing, or using that word, with little if any regard for the histories of their students, without understanding the relations those students have to other racial formations and languages in the classroom, without asking students to investigate their racialized histories with words, with others, as others, as whites, as students, as the dominated or the dominating. Students don't get to negotiate the grounds of racist actions or their consequences. They miss the necessary negotiation and dialogue in healthy and fairer methods for antiracist action. They miss the chances to give trust and cultivate it among each other.

It's an easy misstep to make. As teachers, we often take for granted that our authority granted by the institution to teach a class, to grade students' performances, to rank students according to so-called ability gives us the right to also have authority over other aspects of students' lives, actions, behaviors, and words. Communication is literacy is subjectivity is identity. We say it is our job to help students "think critically," so when we are confronted with a student's ignorance or racism, we feel we must name it, critique it, and ask the student to rethink, restate in more acceptable ways (to the teacher), or at least avoid the discussion because it's not okay in this classroom. The ideas offend others (but more specifically, they offend the teacher-grader), so we think. But do they? Or rather, how do they hurt

others? Investigating language as the racially epistemological, or the way in which we articulate, understand, create, and construct concepts of race and racism, which then affect the way real live racial formations and racism as structural occurrences in our lives happens, is important work that is the job of the literacy classroom. So I don't want to suggest that teachers who make such missteps are completely misguided. They are not.

In one sense, I'm arguing, much like many of the chapters in this collection do, that investigating language can promote explicitly an antiracist agenda: what language we use, how we use that language, who uses it, what purposes we use it for, what intended and unintended effects or consequences are there for our language, how are those effects distributed unevenly across different racialized audiences, in what historical ways has language like ours been deployed? These are some of the questions that should be inflected by race in literacy and communication classrooms, and may form the content of antiracist agendas. Because our world is structured historically and economically in racial terms, and we find racism everywhere around us, these kinds of racially epistemological questions are important rhetorical lessons for all students to struggle with?

Let me be even more specific about the kind of antiracist work and agendas I'm referring to that I think any teacher can do. No matter the kind of course, topic, teacher, or group of students, there is one common thing that all teachers must confront in any course: assessment and grading (these are not necessarily the same thing). How do we respond to the code-meshed, multilingual, heteroglossia (in writing and speech) of our students when language is not normalized, when there is no living "standard" English in practice, only Englishes performed, only the infinite varieties of *Parole* without a *Langue* (to reference Saussure's *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics*). This is something that many have discussed and affirmed in other ways (Canagarajah, 2009; Lippi-Green, 2012; Lu & Horner, 2013; Young, 2007; Young et al., 2014; Lu & Horner, 2013; Lippi-Green, 2012; Canagarajah, 2009; Young & Martinez, 2011). These scholars just haven't addressed the ways this knowledge about the infinite varieties of English should be the seeds of an antiracist agenda for all teachers' assessment practices. Yes, our assessment practices should be guided by an antiracist agenda. This means we also might have ideal consequences or outcomes in mind, goals we hope to see accomplished because of our antiracist agendas, but we'll need the help of our students to know this part.

Now, let me be blunt. If you grade writing by a so-called standard, let's call it Standard English, then you are engaged in an institutional and disciplinary racism, a system set up to make winners and losers by a dominant standard. Who owns the dominant standard? Where does that standard come from? What social group is it most associated with? Who benefits most from the use of the standard? How is that social group racialized in our society? Do you see where I'm going with this? To evaluate and grade student languaging by the method of comparing

it to some ideal standard or norm—no matter what that norm is—will participate in racism. Is this avoidable? Maybe. Do I blame teachers for grading by a dominant standard? No, not completely. We're often forced to do so. But that's not a good enough excuse to continue doing it. If you had to break the law in order to save someone's life, wouldn't you? It's really the same principle. We know grading by a standard is harmful and unfair, even unhelpful in teaching students how to write or communicate, we know that grading itself is a bad practice for teaching students anything, but we still do it. We still use standards of language and grades. So if you know this now and agree, it should make your assessment practices in the future more troubling, more problematic in the ways Freire talked about "problematizing" existential situations of writers (Freire, 1970), only I'm saying that writing assessment as a practice should problematize teachers' existential assessment situations.

With statements like *Students' Right to Their Own Language* (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974) by our national professional organizations, we cannot deny the racialized aspects of students' languages used in our classrooms, nor can we deny dominant languages used as yardsticks by which to measure students' linguistic abilities, capabilities, thinking, and competencies. I don't mean to elide the important pedagogical agendas for ESL and some multilingual students and their teachers in my call for antiracist writing assessment agendas (see Atkinson et al., 2015). I'm not speaking of those agendas, which are different. I'm speaking of the majority of monolingual and multilingual students who come to the university classroom from other U.S. classrooms in high schools, who are not learning the rudiments of communication in the language, but learning a new English, learning how to "invent the university" in the ways that Bartholomae's (1985) famous phrase suggests, even though I have reservations about his argument. I'm thinking about the translingual (Horner et al., 2011; Lu & Horner, 2013) and code-meshed practices (Young, 2007; Canagarajah, 2009) that all U.S. college students engage in and that get assessed by teachers according to monolingual approaches—assessment practices that set up many students for failure.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov explains that language has no "inert system of self-identified norms." Any language, such as English, is a "ceaseless generation of language norms." He goes on to say that "language presents a picture of a ceaseless flow of becoming" (1986, p. 66). This means that not only is there no authentic living standard by which we might judge student's articulations, but if we do use a standard to judge and rank, to grade, it is arbitrary and a political move made by a teacher-grader who either misunderstands how language exists in the world, or willfully ignores the way language exists in favor of a comfortable fiction because she thinks she knows what's best for her students. The second is a form of whitely ways that disturbs me more than the first, one based on ignorance. This nature of people's languaging may account for why issues of error in writing

assessment are so problematic, theorized as phenomenological (Williams, 1981) and socially constructed (Anson, 2000). It also explains why grading has been understood as harmful to students' development as writers and learners (Bleich, 1997; Elbow, 1993; Kohn, 1993, 2011). Even perceived error by a teacher, when marked and counted as such, is not simply a superficial move by the teacher, but a claim about the writer's languaging and thus the writer. These claims, depending on how they are couched, and who is making them to whom, can be racist rhetorical enactments that produce unequal social formations in classrooms. They can work against other antiracist agendas and projects of the course, such as all the classroom examples given in this collection.

Failure in writing, in learning to write, in communicating—failure of languaging—in a classroom does not have to be a marker of racism, of course. I've discussed ways that one might retheorize failure in learning to write by rethinking the way one grades and thus the way one responds to students' writing and students themselves (Inoue, 2014). This kind of theorizing can lead to antiracist assessment practices by teachers, which I think is important for all teachers to do, and it should be dictated by one's context, students, courses, and institutional constraints. But teachers should be mindful of the difference between responding to one's institutional constraints, and hiding behind constraints and students in order not to engage in antiracist writing assessment practices that critique the racist structures of the academy and institutions we work in. In the end, each teacher must decide how far he or she is willing to go, what sacrifices to make, what things to focus on, exactly where he or she stands.

The book you have in your hands offers valuable ideas for writing, communications, literature, and cultural studies classrooms. The chapters offer a good mix of the theoretical, the personal, the performative, and the practical (I realize these are somewhat forced distinctions: why is theory not practical, or performative not personal?). What I value most about this collection, and why I'm truly honored to offer this forward to readers, are the various antiracist agendas that come through each chapter so clearly. For several years now in various venues, some published (Inoue, 2009; Inoue & Poe, 2012), some in professional organizations (CCCC and CWPA), I have argued for teachers, writing program administrators, and journals to have an antiracist agenda. In fact, I believe our fields' various professional organizations should have explicitly stated antiracist agendas, with clearly attainable goals and benchmarks, with a philosophy and vision of what social justice in the organization should be.

A helpful antiracist agenda offers an understanding or explanation of race, racism, and the particular racial formations that develop in and around the classroom or program in question. It defines and explains the particular realms of experience that both individuals and groups find themselves involved in at that site or classroom. This means the agenda may discuss how racism tends to be a part of the



structures and mechanisms of grading in writing classrooms, in teacher feedback, in the ways that the school admits and places students into classes, in how and what it values in writing and how those values are related to larger dominant discourses. It explains the particular brands of whiteness and whiteness that occur in the classroom and in assessments. It acknowledges the need and power in telling stories and offering narratives about antiracist struggle, counterstories and institutional ones that may more obviously participate in the hegemonic. These stories do not ignore the evolving needs of students to participate in the dominant and hegemonic, even at the cost of anti-hegemonic and antiracist action—we all have to buy our bread and put a roof over our head. Finally, antiracist agendas should, perhaps through discussions with students, reveal the difference in classrooms between feeling safe and feeling comfortable. When it comes to race, racism, and antiracist work, it is important that everyone feels safe, but equally important that many also feel uncomfortable. It's only through discomfort, perhaps pain and suffering, that we grow, develop, and change for the better.

When I think again about Mrs. Whitmore's class and Shawn's use of the word *honkey*, one could argue that she made us uncomfortable in order that we learn a valuable lesson about racism. And in one sense it worked. Shawn and I never said such words again, at least not around her. It worked because I can think back on it now and see how her whitely ways reinforced patterns of racism by white authorities that I do not want to mimic as a teacher of color—yes, teachers of color can embody whitely ways. But I believe she created more than discomfort through her method (i.e., stern words and accusatory questions meant to shame and blame). The incident was unsafe. Had either of us felt safe enough to engage in a conversation with her about our racist language practices, one of us would have said at least a word in response, but neither of us did. To do so would have risked our safety. And I'm not exaggerating. Earlier in the year, after having taken allergy medicine, I felt asleep in class, only to be woken up abruptly by Mrs. Whitmore shooting a squirt gun—a squirt GUN—at my face, the entire class circled around my desk laughing at me. It was a terrifying and confusing moment, one that made me feel eminently unsafe in that classroom. I never said any words to her after that.

I don't think Mrs. Whitmore was an evil or unusually mean teacher. I think she was trying her best, but wasn't trained to know what to do in a diverse class like ours. In fact, I feel compassion for her and white teachers like her, wanting to do the right thing (to invoke Spike's film title) but not having all the necessary tools in order to do that work. But then I think about the element of truth in the old adage, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Antiracist work in classrooms, as Mrs. Whitmore shows me, is not an easy task. We all will make mistakes.

However, the problems of racism and the linguistic hierarchies that accompany such issues in the academy will not go away if most teachers and researchers do not have explicit antiracist agendas, if teachers do not fold those agendas into their



assessment practices in the classroom, if programs do not think carefully about the ways their program assessments attempt to understand and combat social inequality of all kinds. How we enact assessment, from classroom grading practices to program assessment, is vital to these social justice agendas, but the agenda is the first step. The agenda is the articulated dream, the vision, the goal. It may not articulate what the “promised land” of social equality looks like or will feel like, but it points us in the direction. How can we get to where we wish to go if we don’t know in what direction to walk? This book, through various examples of classrooms and exchanges between teachers and students, shows us possible directions for antiracist agendas in higher education, showing us paths to walk. In short, if a teacher is going to be serious about antiracist struggle in her classroom, then that struggle should not just be a reading or an activity or two. It should be, as many chapters in this collection illustrate, the way the classroom breathes, the status quo of the classroom.

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