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### Building Breathable Spaces

It did not surprise me that in a course called “Difficult Dialogues on Race and Racism” we began the class by discussing the violent tendency of white women to burst into tears in conversations about race. What did come as a surprise, though, was finding myself in that exact position, six weeks into the course, short of breath, tears streaming down my face, unable to think straight about anything, let alone participate thoughtfully in a discussion about race with my classmates.

The situation did not escalate in a way at all similar to examples used in anti-racist education. I’ve heard narratives of crying white women used to point out — with complete accuracy and necessity — the ways that white women will weaponize our assumed innocence to evade accountability and frame people of color as aggressors. Those vignettes provide valuable entry points into intersections between race and gender, but there are also other identities that complicate these intersections.

In online courses, turning off one’s camera is often seen as the equivalent of “leaving the room”. This disengagement is also a tool of whiteness often warned about in race dialogues, in which discomfort, anger, or disinterest peaks and a white participant will feel entitled to simply leave. This dichotomy of engagement/disengagement was central to my professor’s immense frustration at all the white students in the class for the ways that we were not participating in critical conversations about race with the same openness and honesty that our peers of color

were. And he was right — there were moments in the conversation when I could have pushed myself to contribute. Instead, I'd had my camera off, interpreted to some as having “left the room”.

But there was a reason my camera was off: a few months earlier, I was diagnosed with a neurological tic disorder which causes persistent motor movements. Sometimes these movements are extremely painful, and as I am still getting used to the new ways that my body is moving, I have a hard time perceiving myself in a Zoom square when this is happening. In order to better participate in the class discussion, I turn my camera off in these moments. My professors had permitted this accommodation for my disability near the start of class.

While I do not contest that my professor was right to call us out at this moment, the way he tried to get us to participate neglected to acknowledge the multiplicities of his power, and the other identities that his white students hold. He raised his voice and referenced the many forms of violence that can result from uninterrogated racism. One of the examples he used — and the way that he spoke about it — triggered an immediate trauma response in me. This was the moment that I, as a white woman, started crying after a criticism of my participation in a dialogue about race. From that moment until the rest of class, I was completely unable to participate in the discussion. Because my professor had not recognized that he could inflict harm by speaking callously of other forms of identity-based violence, I was unable to engage his criticism as I would have liked to.

What I'm trying to illustrate here is the logic of both/and frameworks. I enter all spaces and conversations as a white woman. I also enter those same spaces and conversations as a disabled person with PTSD. These identities are not additive, rather they are constantly informing each other.

For this reason, the work of educator and writer June Jordan resonated with me because of the way her writing frames our social locations not as distinct, but as relational. Just as Blackness can intersect with gender, so can whiteness. In a single person, power can, and almost always does, intersect with oppression. Jordan writes, “I am saying that the ultimate connection cannot be the enemy. The ultimate connection must be the need that we find between us. It is not only who you are, in other words, but what we can do for each other that will determine the connection.” (Jordan, 2003, p. 14) As my professor sought to encourage his white students to do better, he did not recognize that he had the potential to harm us and inhibit our participation in other ways, overall hindering an important conversation and leaving peers of color more unsupported. My ability to remain engaged was severely impacted by the conversation staying focused on whiteness, “the enemy,” as a point of connection. I would have been much more able to support my peers had my professor pivoted to the ways that the space could be optimized so that both white students and students of color could explore what we can do for each other, and build connections from there instead.

As we engage in critical reflection on both a personalized level, as well as more broadly in regard to considering policy, institutional, systemic, collective issues, and self-reflection, Richard Millner’s framework encourages us to practice asking ourselves “How do I know?”. When asked with sincerity and the intent to honor the response, this question can be a meaningful tool for reflection. When asked in regard to our identities that hold more power, this question pushes us to adopt an interrogational stance of our worldview. It prompts us to examine the ways we learned, often from the people we love as well as societal factors, that the power we hold because of this identity is normal and natural.

In “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” bell hooks notes that this impulse is most prominent in childhood, when one has not yet been educated or punished out of challenging the status quo. Hook’s essay helps us recognize that using theory as a tool for intervention is not a habit we have to learn anew, but rather a natural human tendency we must reconnect with, as Terry Eagleton writes in *The Significance of Theory*, “Children make the best theorists...since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently.” (hooks, 1994, p.1.)

Asking ourselves seemingly simple, perhaps even embarrassingly fundamental questions allows us to interrogate our understandings of not only how we come to receive unearned power, but how we can reclaim power that’s been taken from us. When we ask ourselves the question “How do I know” in the context of our identities that hold less power, we inherently produce counter-narratives, and our voices and knowledge production are recognized as valuable, rather than dismissed. This storytelling is an integral part of Critical Race Theory, as scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings writes “the use of voice and ‘naming your reality’ is a way that critical race theory links form and substance in scholarship.” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pg. 13).

Stories provide members of outgroups with means for self-preservation, and an opportunity to explore how much of “reality” is socially constructed. Yet examining and contextualizing oppression is only the first step. The next question we must ask ourselves is “[LY4] what are we going to do with this knowledge?” Or, in the words of June Jordan, “I felt it was not who they were but what they both know and what they were both preparing to do about what they know that was going to make them both free at last” (Jordan, 2003, p. 16). Jordan reminds us that any work rooted in liberation necessitates relationship building. To illustrate this, I return to the relationships I was working to build in my “Difficult Dialogues on Race and Racism.”

I cared deeply about my peers of color, whom my disengagement during class had impacted. I also cared about my own safety, and that of future students who may be similarly triggered and unable to engage in class should my professors make another off-hand remark. For these reasons, I decided to bring up the instance with my professor after class, in the hopes that by storytelling, by laying bare the gender dynamics between us that had made that comment so inconsequential to him and so deeply distressing to me, I could make the space more breathable for someone else. I use the word breathable intentionally here, with the author Billy-Ray Belcourt in mind. In his autobiography *A History of My Brief Body* writes that “Freedom is a measure of breathability.” (Belcourt, 2020 p.128) I believe in building breathable spaces, for the sake of my own freedom and the intrinsically linked freedom of others.

## Work Cited

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