Can We Talk?

Interracial Dialogue in the University Classroom

By Lawrence Blum

In my experience, students of all races are hungering to be heard, to listen to others, and to have honest conversations about race and racism. I recently taught one course that brought out particularly clearly the challenges of teaching racially volatile material, of integrating personal experience and academic learning, and of negotiating the minefields of identity politics. It taught me the satisfactions of helping students cross racial barriers and of learning from one another.

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The class—"Race and Racism"—met once a week. A master's-level course with a few doctoral students, it raised pedagogical issues similar to those I'd found teaching undergraduates. The class consisted of nine black students, of whom one was African (from Ethiopia), one Jamaican (but had spent most of her life in the United States), the rest African American; in addition, it included one Cuban American, one Filipino American, one Russian Jewish immigrant (seven years in this country), and one Japanese student who had only recently arrived in the United States. The remaining 13 students were white and non-Hispanic.

Illustration by Sherrell Medbery/SIS

People who did not have a certain experience could be helped by others to gain some understanding of what it was like to have it.

I addressed the issue of my own racial identity in the first class. I laid claim to being professionally competent in the area of "race studies" and affirmed that that field excluded members of no race. I was more qualified to teach the course than a black or Native American person who was not expert in that field, just as blacks or Native Americans who studied English history could teach that better than white Anglos untrained in that area.

At the same time, I said, race very much affected the quality of people's experience in our society, and that this experience would sometimes be relevant to the course. I acknowledged that there were forms of discrimination or devaluing that I as a white person would not have experienced, that we all needed to be willing to recognize these and other racially based experiential differences and learn from them. People who did not have a certain experience could be helped by others to gain some understanding of what it was like to have it. The racial differences did not constitute insuperable barriers.

The first five weeks of the course explored the genesis of the idea of race. American slavery was non-racial in origin, and the choice of Africans (over Irish, Native Americans, or pauperized English persons) was based primarily on reasons of social control, agricultural skills, and economic benefit. However, once Africans had become the only slaves in the United States, a racial ideology that essentially created the very idea of "race" itself (in its American form) arose to rationalize it.

In addition, I emphasized that slavery had existed in virtually every society in the world, and that prior to the advent of New World slavery, slavery was not racial in nature. In small groups, the students discussed the question "How could Africans sell other Africans into slavery?" Some students already grasped that the idea of "Africa" as a politically and socially unified entity able to confer a morally meaningful identity did not exist in the 15th to 18th centuries; members of other tribes were not "fellow Africans" to the members of the tribes who captured and sold them to European slave traders. Some students do not like to focus on this question, since they want to see slavery as a uniquely American institution. (Some aspects of American slavery were indeed unique, but not the basic ownership of some human beings by others.)

About a third of the way through the course, I began to keep a diary of each class, in order to have a better record of student reactions....

October 1 (Fifth Week of Class): Using Audrey Smedley's excellent synthesis, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), I ended the historical portion of the course by discussing the way 19th-century natural science had attempted to legitimate the racial world view—alleging that human beings could be divided up into discrete groups, generally marked by certain sets of physical features (called "phenotypes"), and possessing distinct forms of human characteristics such as intelligence, industriousness, trustworthiness, and the like. We then discussed the almost total rejection by 20th-century social, behavioral, and biological sciences of "race" in anything like this sense.

The class reaction to scientific and philosophical arguments against "race" was instructive. For many students, the detailed rejection of the idea of race that forms so deep a part of the way we look at human beings was a revelation, or at least a firming up of directions their own thinking had been taking, and they embraced this view. There were racial differences, however, in the reaction to what we initially called the "no-race" view.

A few white students became so enamored of the intellectual and scientific rejection of "race" that they tended to lose sight of the social reality that blacks are still doing quite badly compared to whites, that blacks of all classes frequently suffer racial discrimination, racial insensitivity, and stereotyping, and that all endure a legacy of historical racism. For some of these white students, the "no-race" argument seemed to provide a way of thinking of themselves as being anti-racist, without either having to engage blacks on a personal level about their experiences or to come to grips with the actual plight of black people in our society.

Counterposed to this small group of white students was a small group of blacks who would not accept the argument against "race." It seemed to deny their own experience and the historical experience of peoples thought of as "black": "Of course there are races; I'm black and because of this I am treated as an inferior in this society, as blacks have always been. Blacks have very different experiences from whites. So how can there be no races?"

Yet several of the black students reacted entirely differently from both of these groups. They did not see the "no-race" view as denying the social and historical reality that particular groups—especially their own—have been treated very differently because of perceived differences in "race." (That is, *racism* can exist, even if there are no races.) What they did feel was that rejecting the *inherent* distinction between groups implied by the term "race" was liberating.

Two black students in particular, Ahmad and Randall (all names of students mentioned in this article are fictitious), brought to the surface the humanistic message underlying the no-race view—that human beings are akin to one another in ways that the notion of "race" denies. This message had gotten lost in my own presentation; in fact, I myself had become so focused on putting the argument against race on a firm *intellectual* foundation that I had lost sight of its moral and political significance. Randall, an idealistic member of the local police department, who struggled with the racism he saw in his fellow officers but was hopeful about racial progress, suggested that we change the name of the view to the "one-race (the human race)" view rather than the "no-race" view, to emphasize the common humanity revealed by the argument.

During the discussions of "race," I had endeavored to promote use of the scientific term "phenotype" rather than "racial characteristics" to refer to those aspects of visible physiognomy that had been given "racial" significance in racial discourse. It was a way of reminding students that the concept of race is itself problematic. A few students continued to use this expression for the remainder of the course, and I felt this constituted progress.

There was a fair amount of in-class and after-class discussion during this first third of the course, often across racial lines. I had hoped that the historical/scientific character of the material—less current, less charged with direct, present-day controversy and emotion—would make it easier for the students to talk and get to know one another before we hit the contemporary stuff. Also, I made a special attempt to treat all students respectfully and with interest, hoping to model the trusting and comfortable atmosphere I wished the students to create among themselves.

October 8 (Sixth Class): We read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Written in 1962, Baldwin's searing eloquence often expresses itself in sweeping characterizations of "whites" in general—that they are sexually repressed, out of touch with reality, that they hold on to their privileges to ward off fear of loss of their identity, that white modes of living do not deserve the respect of blacks. One of my faculty colleagues had found his white students put off by this.

At the same time, the book contains a powerful critique of the anti-white racism of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, and—a thin thread of hope running through the book—a recognition that American history has irrevocably joined whites and blacks in a common fate, and that persons of good will from both races can and must create a humane society together.

I began by asking for students' reactions. Katherine, a bright, engaged, and vocal white student, began by expressing frustration that Baldwin's analysis did not tell us what to *do* about the injustices he so powerfully describes. This remark took the class—primarily the white students—off into the area of practical activities to address injustice. As important as this issue is, I experienced it as an avoidance of the challenge of Baldwin's book, and I steered the conversation back to the level of racial introspection that I thought the book called for from white people. I pressed the idea that whites were implicated in a system that privileged them materially and socially yet harmed them spiritually or psychically. I asked the white students to reflect on this privilege. Ahmad, one of the "one-race" blacks, with whom I had formed a lively e-mail relationship, e-mailed me after the class, affirming and encouraging my attempt to press the white students. (I had encouraged all the students to use e-mail to communicate with me and a few availed themselves of the opportunity. A very few—the techies—also communicated with each other via a newsgroup.)

As a white instructor, I felt a special responsibility to find ways to press white students about their enmeshment in a system of privilege that they did not seek, and which many might wish had never existed, but from which they all benefit (to different degrees), willingly or not. Whites are not routinely taken as "representatives" of their race; they are not barred or discouraged from living in certain neighborhoods by a concern that their presence will drive property values down; they are seldom objects of fear or suspicion; they are not seen as upstart interlopers in a country they did not create. I know that many educators of color press this issue of privilege with their white students. But white students may be more resistant to that message when it comes from a person of color, and may either engage in denial or sink into a debilitating guilt that prevents them from thinking seriously about the issues.

I tried to open a path to white self-scrutiny by talking about my own recognition of "white privilege," how it had been a shocking idea to me at first. A few students, in this particular class session and others, actively accepted the idea of white privilege. Of course, "copping to" white privilege in an interracial

classroom can have an unproductive dynamic of its own—a way for a white student to show how politically advanced she or he is, without necessarily having to do anything about it. I was on the alert for this tone of self-congratulation, or self-righteousness. I don't think I heard it. One white student, Paul—a student who lived in a very racially mixed world and was perhaps the most radical of the whites—was angry. It seemed a genuine anger that racism, and white privilege, existed, though also a genuine irritation at other whites' failure to acknowledge this.

October 22 (Eighth Class): We had read half of Harlon Dalton's *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). Dalton, an African-American law professor, writes in a generous, hopeful spirit about possibilities for blacks and whites to understand each other and their common situation better, and to unite to achieve a more equitable and harmonious society. An early section of the book contains a powerful encounter between Dalton and a recent young Polish immigrant, Jadwiga, who guilelessly asks him racially loaded questions: "Why do the Black students in the school where I work run up and down the hall and make so much noise?"; after Dalton gives a moving description of the slave experience, she asks, "But wasn't that a long time ago?"; after Dalton recounts the oppression and constraint of segregation with reminiscences from his own family, Jadwiga says, "What does that have to do with the way kids behave today?" Dalton insightfully describes the obstacles in the way of fruitful discussion between American whites and blacks on such topics, and sets up the remainder of the book to confront those obstacles.

Some of my students, of all racial groups, were skeptical about Dalton's claim that the Polish woman lacked racial prejudice and was speaking solely from her own experience, not racial stereotypes. Others struggled with whether it was possible for a white non-immigrant American to shed the prejudices Dalton said Jadwiga lacked.

The conversation was joined—or interrupted—by Yvonne, a black student who since the beginning of the course presented her views in a no-nonsense way that implied "This is the truth; if you disagree you are wrong, and possibly suspect." Though by this time several students had become regular contributors to discussion, Yvonne had from the beginning emerged as the most forceful presence in the group. Of Jamaican origin and married to an African, she was quite opinionated. Her outlook tended toward racialism and Afrocentrism. Yvonne believed all blacks possessed an intrinsic connection to one another, as if by nature and certainly by experience; that they all needed to recognize their African origins in order to achieve a healthy sense of self; and that they all had reason to resent and feel rage at white people as a group. Unlike some professed Afrocentrics, however, she had spent a good deal of time in Africa and knew a lot about it. Her contributions to the historical portion of the course were quite valuable in this regard.

Yvonne presented a difficult pedagogical challenge. In one sense, she was a white student's nightmare—giving them reason to fear that anything they said would be taken as racist. (However, she never in fact directly accused any individual student of racism.) In most current interracial settings, that fear is sufficient to silence many well-meaning whites. Yvonne came to see me fairly often in my office, and perhaps I should have tried to get her to do less talking in class. Yet I saw no firm basis for doing so. Her contributions were well-informed, intelligent, serious, and represented the thinking of many black people. Also, I wanted the white students to learn to stand up to her.

Dalton's White Wife. Yvonne said that on page 60, Dalton reveals that his wife is white and that when Yvonne discovered this, she ripped that page out of the book and would not credit anything else Dalton said in the remainder of the book. (She seemed to imply that she had *read* the rest of the book, however.) Yvonne had been, I think, as upset about the fact that Dalton waited until page 60 to tell us about his wife as she was about the wife herself. It was as if every black male author who is married to a white woman had the obligation to mention this immediately, so that people legitimately concerned could choose to read no further. The class was, collectively, stunned by this reaction.

Two students, somewhat gingerly, challenged Yvonne. One was Robert, an older (40s) African-American man who had never spoken in class but had visited me in my office several times. I had required every student to make appointments with me in my office during the first few weeks of the term, partly to help me know them, partly to encourage more in-class contributions, and partly for the students to view me as a resource outside of class. Quite a few students availed themselves of the latter option, Robert among them.

Evidently, Robert spoke in other classes frequently and was troubled by his reticence in mine, but in his most recent office visit had acknowledged that Yvonne was the major

cause. Robert was a coffee-hued man with gray eyes; he had experienced a good deal of prejudice from darker-skinned blacks. Yvonne was very dark-skinned and Robert experienced her as holding the view that darker-skinned people were more authentically black than people like himself (though I never remembered her saying anything like this). More generally, Robert objected to what he saw as Yvonne's race obsession and favored both a more pluralistic view of the black community and a legitimating of non-racial dimensions of identity that could be important to black people.

At the same time, Robert had also experienced a good deal of discrimination from whites, and was currently involved in a lawsuit against the police department of his town for racial harassment. So he felt he was getting grief from "both sides" and, he said, he was worried that if he spoke in class, he would not be able to maintain his composure.

Robert was also leery of being sharply critical of other black students in front of the white students. He did not want to provide a kind of entertainment for them, and he was concerned lest divisions among blacks be exploited by whites to keep them from examining their own attitudes about race. I myself was familiar with the way that many white students, upon discovering that conservative blacks such as Shelby Steele, Clarence Thomas, and Thomas Sowell oppose affirmative action, feel this gives them license to hold on to their own opposition to it without needing to scrutinize the issue further.

As a white teacher, I felt I had to tread lightly in pushing black students to say what was on their minds when it differed from other blacks. Perhaps a black instructor would have the standing to press someone like Robert harder. Yet I also did not want students to muzzle themselves. I was hoping to create a sufficiently trusting atmosphere that the black students would have reason to feel that these particular white students, at least, would not misuse intra-black disagreement. I just told Robert I hoped he would get to the point where he felt he could say what was on his mind.

Yvonne's response to Dalton's book pushed Robert over the edge. He, wonderfully, managed to engage her respectfully and with a good sense of self-control. I can't remember my own response, if any, to Yvonne during that session. I might have managed a way of saying that no matter what one thinks of someone's choice of marriage partner, what counts is the author's analysis of the subject he or she discusses. Clearly Yvonne had lost credibility with the class, at least temporarily, with this outburst. But it sparked quite an interesting discussion of gender relations within the black community. Most of the white students were silent, however.

Yet I was in for an important lesson when I read the students' journals that evening. (I required five ungraded journals, in which students could discuss anything that had come up for them related to the course since the previous journal. The journals served as running dialogues between myself and each student, but also allowed me occasionally to encourage a student to bring up a particular issue from her or his journal to the whole class.) Although allowable subjects for the journal included any topic in the reading in the previous three weeks, anything else in one's life or environment relevant to the course, or any class discussion, all three of the other black women in the class—Latoya, Abedja, and Tiffany—chose to focus a substantial part of their journals on the issue of Dalton's white wife.

None took as strongly negative a view as Yvonne had taken. Yet they were all deeply troubled by it. They brought up the implied devaluing of black women when a black man rejects black women for a white woman; the seeming acceptance of white standards of beauty, with the attendant sense of race betrayal; the demographic fact that since white women show a good deal more interest in black men than white men do in black women (though that gap is shrinking), black women, already more highly educated than their black male counterparts, face a diminished pool of life partners. Each time a black man chooses a white women, it is freighted with these larger meanings.

Two of the three women expressed ambivalence about criticizing Dalton. Who am I to criticize who someone loves? they said. Yet they were still bothered by his choice.

I learned a lot from the serious and heartfelt explorations of these issues by these three women, and felt that, while of course at some level I was aware of the black man/white woman issue within the black community, my "whiteness" had allowed me not to credit it sufficiently.

Thus sobered, in the following class I tempered my affirmation of Renee, a dark-skinned Filipino American, who spoke nervously but very personally and movingly in favor of interracial relationships and their power to humanize and to challenge myths of racism, a view with which I was more naturally in sympathy than that of the black women.

October 29 (Ninth Class): I knew the

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class this time would be a charged one, partly because of the previous tension around Dalton's white wife. In addition, I planned—using Dalton—another attempt at pressing both white and black students on some uncomfortable truths. Dalton organizes the book so that one part is written as if to whites, gently but firmly pointing to various ways in which their whiteness gives them advantages in our society; to how these advantages are often masked by an ideology of individual merit and of color-blindness; to how, for progress on the racial front, whites must see themselves as implicated in an unjust system from which they benefit, willingly or not. I find Dalton particularly impressive for his ability to make these points, yet to maintain a calm and generous tone, the contrary of the "up against the wall, Whitey" spirit that often accompanies the message he delivers.

Dalton then turns, as it were, to his black readers, and suggests that blacks have to face and be publicly honest about some hard truths. He writes that "the standard story" about how all or most of black people's current troubles can be traced straightforwardly to slavery, segregation, other forms of direct discrimination, and changes in the economy has become insufficient and incomplete (if not exactly wrong).

I decided to devote the class to allowing students to create their own version of Dalton's argument. For the first half of the class period, they would set out what *they* saw as "hard truths" that whites had to face. We would then spend some time examining the suggestions. I would firmly stop the conversations halfway through the class period and shift to the same enterprise regarding blacks. I felt it would be difficult for the class to articulate hard truths about blacks—that blacks either would not want to admit them, or would not want to say them in front of the non-blacks, and that the non-blacks would be reluctant to criticize blacks in their presence. But I hoped that having done the "hard truths" exercise with whites would make it easier to engage in a similar enterprise concerning blacks, and that a failure to make the attempt would seem unfair.

Anticipating racial division and general discomfort, I decided to begin the class with a song, for which I chose "Amazing Grace." I passed out the words to all students, though expected few to join in. I was surprised how few students knew the song's lineage. It had been written in the 17th century by a slave ship captain, John Newton, carrying his African "cargo" from England to the New World. En route, Newton, in a religious revelation, was struck by the evil of his actions. He turned the ship around, brought the Africans back to Africa, and returned to England, where the song was written soon after. As Bill Moyers' PBS documentary "Amazing Grace" so beautifully depicts, both black and white Americans have appropriated the song, which thus for me represents not only the rejection of racism, but also harmony between blacks and whites—two central messages I hoped would come through in the course. Happily and to my surprise, almost every student joined in the singing, though Yvonne notably refrained. The students' level of participation seemed a good sign, perhaps (I wanted to believe) expressing the desire for some transracial connectedness.

I had not fully thought through how I would record the students' suggestions, but at the last minute I decided to write them on the board, as a way to validate them and to press other students to think about each one. For the first half hour or so, then, I simply stood at the board and wrote down "what white people need to understand," occasionally pressing the suggester for clarification. The students, of all racial groups, warmed to this enterprise. Blacks, whites, and the others wanted whites to recognize their privileges, of which different forms were mentioned (being able to get cabs, housing, greater assurance of fair treatment in the court system); to abandon white standards of beauty and other white-slanted norms of human excellence; not to overreact to gains made by people of color; to learn more about the culture and history of people of color; and to take responsibility for racism, not to think of it as a "black problem."

About halfway through this portion of the class, I noticed that two black students who seldom spoke in class were contributing to the discussion. One, Tiffany, a young, somewhat light-skinned woman (though not light enough to "pass"), said whites shouldn't think that "I don't think of you as white" is a compliment. The other, Latoya, was a self-contained woman who seemed very centered on the black plight and community and who had not shown much interest until now in bridging racial divisions. (In one of her journals, she was critical of the Civil Rights Movement for opening the doors to blacks' joining "white society," a development she saw as detracting from the strong sense of unity blacks had experienced during segregation.) Latoya voiced the view that whites should not cast themselves as victims, for example, of affirmative action.

I was struck by the tone in which both Tiffany and Latoya spoke. The list forming on

the board could easily be seen as "white bashing"; virtually every item, no matter how accurate or true, would be seen as difficult for white people to face (though clearly many of the white students had begun to try to face them). Yet this particular class had none of that divisive spirit. To different degrees, all the participants—most strikingly to me Tiffany and Latoya—were speaking utterly from the heart. There was no tone of vengeance, of taking advantage of an opening to "stick it to" white people. It seemed much more like the black students' being grateful for an opportunity to unburden themselves of experiences and to voice opinions that they did not normally get to say to white people. There seemed a genuine desire that white people, and the white students in the class in particular, think about these matters.

Only one statement on the board was really challenged. Andrea, a white student, said that all whites are racist; Katherine, the outspoken white student, challenged this remark. The points about white privilege that had dominated the items on the board had not generally been expressed in the language of "white racism" by other students. In a sense, though, Andrea's formulation—it implies far greater personal fault than does the idea of "white privilege"—presented an acceptable target for the discomforts others may have experienced, but not felt comfortable voicing, about the idea of white privilege itself. Certainly, also, white students were abler to take on a remark of a fellow white student than they would have been if the same remark had been made by a black student. In any case, Andrea and some others defended her view, while a few others joined Katherine in attacking it.

When I felt we had done enough, I asked the students to look at what was on the board and think about it, and share any general reflections they had on what was written. At first no one spoke. Then Dan, a white student who taught a junior high class in a largely black and Latino school, said that while no single item was "surprising" to him, the cumulative effect of all of them was very powerful.

I had decided by this time that three of my major goals for this session—providing a safe space for students of color (and more especially black students) to speak their minds; for whites to take in what those students were saying; and for everyone to exercise their critical faculties on the particular items yielded by the exercise—could not all be accomplished within the space of one class. I felt that the third, more intellectual, goal had to move to the back burner, at least for that class session.

I was forced to erase the "white" items to make room for the "black" ones. The black items that emerged from the class centered almost entirely on things the black community needed to do to feel better about itself (for example, rejecting white standards of beauty, knowing its own history). No one picked up on Dalton's worry about the insufficiency of the Standard Slave Story. At the very end, however, one black man, Don, dissented from the implicitly prevailing sentiment. "Blacks cannot always see racism as a crutch," he said. And Latoya, in a striking contribution, said, "Blacks have to stop demonizing other ethnic groups, like Koreans, as predators on the black community."

The items provoking most controversy concerned unity and diversity within the black community, an issue Dalton had in fact touched on. Martin, a gay Cuban American, said blacks should not elevate their racial identity over other identities, such as sexual orientation. Yvonne, a bit later, indirectly responded. "I know not everyone will agree with this," she said (showing a recognition of alternative views, and even their possible legitimacy, that had never been evident before), "but I think commitment to solidarity among blacks must be *absolute*." A fruitful discussion ensued—mostly with blacks, but also with some non-blacks, participating—about what was entailed in and who was embraced by Yvonne's proposed solidarity. "Is Dalton part of your black community?" Robert asked pointedly though amiably, alluding to the white wife. Yvonne, without conviction, acknowledged that he was. "What about their children?" someone asked.

The discussion was a powerful one. Disagreements among blacks had been aired, with a few whites feeling comfortable weighing in. Issues deeply important to the black community had come into the open. Again, however, my original plan had not materialized. The "hard truths" put to the whites were not really analogous to what had emerged regarding blacks; the symmetry in Dalton's account had not been replicated in the class. Again, I felt that I had expected too much in that one class, and had not given sufficient weight to the asymmetry between blacks and whites.

November 19 (12th Class): After several more weeks on anti-black racism, we shifted to looking at different ethnic groups, their experience of racism, and their forms of racial and ethnic identity. Several students expressed relief about leaving the "black/white" framework that had dominated the course un-

phenotype. A Jew, they said, could choose to hide the fact that he or she is Jewish and simply "pass" as white, whatever complexities might lie behind that passing; blacks could not do this.

I felt, but could not find a way to say (nor did anyone else) that, while this point could not be denied, discrimination against or devaluation of a person because she reveals herself to be, or is taken to be, Jewish *or* Latino—by virtue of her name, by what she says about herself, by some cultural or religious practice or sign which she displays, or even by some stereotype about how people in that group are supposed to look—is still a matter of great seriousness and concern. Here, I think the intense salience of skin color in the American consciousness can tend, understandably, to blind black students to other serious forms of discrimination.

In addition, I think some black students resist other groups', such as Latinos', donning the mantle of victim. During this class session, in contrast to conservatives on racial matters, I fully accepted the idea that blacks were indeed victims, and in a sense unique victims, of our American heritage. At the same time, I attempted to emphasize that discrimination against any group should be of concern to all, that the uniqueness of the black experience in America should not translate into an exclusive possession of victimhood. Indeed, I gave no quarter to the view that only whites can be racist, and encouraged the view that racial bigotry was always wrong, even when white people were the targets and blacks the perpetrators.

By and large, I think the course succeeded in promoting this sense of broader concern about racism. I was particularly struck with some of the black students' journals about Jewishness. Several acknowledged an ignorance and a curiosity—a recognition that they might be carrying around ill-founded stereotypes and prejudices—that I found heartening. ("[T]hese questions have plagued me for years and I decided this was as good a time as any to ask them," said Latoya in her journal.)

This class period on Hispanic/Latino identity acutely raised the question—central to any course of this sort—of how to approach an academic issue such as the *social* meaning of a given ethnic or racial identity that is so steeped in *personal* meanings.

I called Martin aside after class and said I

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I took Yvonne's apology as a signal that she had learned from the other students and had come to appreciate the need for some engagement with alternative views.

hoped he did not feel that putting him on the spot had been too painful or counterproductive for him. (I had gotten to know Martin fairly well outside of class, and suspected that it had not; with another student I might not have allowed such a continual focus on that one individual as a "test case" for the issue being discussed.) I reassured Martin that I was not, nor was I allowing the class, to challenge his sense of identity and what it means to him, but only to clarify terms so as to comport with other people's understanding of racial and ethnic categories. I said his solidarity with people of color was admirable, that the class discussion should not take it away from him.

December 18 (Last Class): I asked for feedback about the course. "What most affected you in the course, be it a particular reading, class discussion, something about the course organization or interaction, or anything else?" Bill, a thoughtful white man, acknowledged his discomfort in some of the classes but felt that honest discussion had taken place. Ajume, the lone African, who had often provided a kind of magisterial perspective on racial questions and who appeared (from a U.S. point of view) strikingly unburdened by the complex race-related emotions that so affected all the American students, said we had modeled the kind of dialogue that Dalton, and President Clinton, were calling for. Many students mentioned the Dalton reading as having been especially valuable. Karen, a quiet white woman with somewhat more conservative opinions than the others (as I knew from private conversations and her journals), said she appreciated Dalton's addressing his prescriptions to both blacks and whites. Evidently, she felt that many discussions of racism had a one-sided quality, a feature I tried very much to avoid in the course; from Karen's vantage point, I'm sure I didn't entirely succeed.

Several students mentioned the October 10 class, with the lists of "What whites/blacks need to know" to further racial understanding. Abedja, a black American with African parents, who virtually never spoke in class but wrote long and very thoughtful journals, said she had learned more about her own group from that exercise. Rachel, a lively and engaged Jewish woman, said she had been ignorant about some of the matters that emerged that day.

Drummond, a white man, said that that particular discussion had been the most illuminating but also the most hurtful to him, and it had the effect of shutting him down; he never spoke in class after that day. He had been somewhat active in class prior to that. Drummond had visited me the previous week. I knew what his silence was about and I gently prodded him to speak. He could have declined to go further—I did my best to make sure he was making his own choice—but he spoke and volunteered that he was gay and in a loving relationship with a black man. He had been so offended by the attack on interracial relations (he mentioned no names) that he just stopped speaking. I gently lamented his failure to speak, as I did also the silence of Boris, the Russian Jewish immigrant, who pleaded ignorance of American culture as his reason for not participating, though his journals exhibited extremely valuable understandings of racial matters, drawn partly from the Russian context.

Terrell, a white Southerner carrying a lot of "racial baggage" and (I felt from his journals) deeply confused about racial matters—yet very well-intentioned, open-minded, and eager to learn—had, early in the semester, been the target of one of Yvonne's criticisms. Terrell had never again spoken in class, and another white student said she was sure it was because he experienced Yvonne as having cracked down on him. In this last class, Terrell talked about white Southerners' perspective on race as being very different from urban Northerners'. I think he was struggling with whether this view was worse or better. Terrell said that he anticipated some difficult moments with his family during the upcoming Christmas vacation regarding his new perspective about many racial issues prompted by the class.

When Yvonne's turn came around, a bit later, she began by apologizing if what she had said had offended anyone. (Again, no names mentioned.) She knew she had very strong views and that she was "high-spirited." While this was not the most gracious, self-perceptive, or heartfelt apology I have ever heard, I took it to indicate some progress for Yvonne—a signal that she had learned from the other students and had come to appreciate the need for some engagement with alternative views. Yvonne said that she "loved" all of the readings from the class and that the course was very different from any other she had taken. (After class, I was pleased to see Yvonne and Drummond talking to one another.)

Tiffany, the light-skinned black woman, said the course had raised very important issues for her that she still did not feel comfortable talking about in class, but that she had spoken about them frequently during the semester with friends and family. (I knew from speaking to her privately that she was referring to skin-color prejudice and "inter-

nalized racism," or prejudice against members of a racial group by other members of the group.) Tiffany said the journals, and the exchange with me that they provided for, had been an important outlet for her to explore these issues.

Having gone around once on what the students clearly took as "time for positive feedback," I asked them what they would have liked more of in the course. I said I was struck by how few students had mentioned the more distinctly academic aspects of the course—the historical material about the character of slavery, its relation to the development of the concept of "race," clarification of the seldom-examined concept of "institutional racism"—as having been most significant to them (though several cited the Smedley text as having been valuable). Some students acknowledged that they would indeed have liked more "workshop-like" class sessions, though they recognized that this would have meant jettisoning some of the valuable material we had read. Others, a smaller number, resisted this. Katherine, the outspoken white woman who had challenged Andrea's statement that all whites are racist, said she thought that emotionally intense classes needed to be followed by a "let-down" period, and that she would not have preferred more workshop classes. Some suggested that students be strongly encouraged to attend anti-racist or anti-bias workshops that were being given around the institution and city. Bill wished we could have spent more time figuring out what to *do* about the injustices and problems we discussed.

As for my own closing thoughts, I wished I could have had another semester to continue the course. While I did not question the important task of integrating responsible academic learning with a venue for open interchange on charged racial topics, I wondered whether students were being provided with sufficient space in their lives—and particularly in other classes—for that interchange. A colleague suggested that too few courses at the institution provided space for the sort of conversations the course had allowed, so students tended to load expectations onto the racial dialogue aspect of this course at the expense of more traditional learning. If so, more teachers need to venture into the thicket of America's racial complexities within the framework of their various disciplines and courses.

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