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Deep Understandings and Thick Descriptions: Tackling Questions about Race

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Abstract

In this article, three professors of color speak out in response to the continuation of White police killings of Black people in the United States. We contend that there is a strong need for everyone, professors and educators in particular, to be proactive in confronting racism by tackling not avoiding, difficult questions and conversations. We propose that through the enactment of deep understandings and thick descriptions in our classrooms at all levels we may encourage a critical humanitarian response to the challenges of not knowing the diverse “Other.” We present real experiences from our teaching to illustrate the kinds of activities that can be done to engage our students in developing thick descriptions and deep understandings of diverse Others. When we all participate in the development of deep understandings and thick descriptions, maybe the killings and misperceptions will cease and we will think first before making devastating and destructive actions, statements and assumptions about “Others” because we truly recognize our shared humanity.

Keywords: *Teacher education, critical multicultural education; conversations about White police killings; activities to develop deep understandings and thick descriptions*

But race is the child of racism, not the father.
Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015)

Introduction

Provocative, thoughtful, and in-depth conversations by scholars about why the nation is divided on the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case and the failure to convict the White policemen responsible for the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Samuel Bose, are often difficult to find, or when available, are frequently inaccessible to the communities most impacted by these decisions. Yet, in many cases, where one stands with respect to the outcome of these high-profile cases is obvious because these decisions are symptomatic of a divide steeped in the history, politics, and economics of race and the mass incarceration of Black people (Alexander, 2012; Stevenson, 2015). Lest we forget, the racial chasm has always been there as a permanent feature of U.S. history. “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world” (Coates, 2015, p. 7). Recent events have merely caused race to once again become a part of the national dialogue. The truth is that race is a thread in the fabric of America, the means by which America was built, and the lung through which America breathes.

We are three women of color, university professors who prepare those who will teach “other people’s children” (Delpit, 2006) and prepare “others,” who, like ourselves, will become teachers, teacher educators and scholars (Tinker Sachs & Verma, 2014; Wong & Grant 2014). It is on their behalf we feel compelled to speak out, to show how we—those

who are the so-called “talented tenth” or educated elite (Du Bois, 1932)—are not different from “regular Black folk” or the masses of other racialized minoritized people in America and elsewhere who feel the impact of race intently and regularly. “[R]acism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, and breaks teeth...[But] you must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (Coates, 2015, p. 10). To make our point clear, we share one episode of race within and around the academy that serves as a reminder of how racism is very much a part of the air, the soil, and the blood of America.

Episode: On one occasion, one of the co-authors attended a major academic conference. After making a successful presentation of her current research and serving as discussant for a well-attended symposium session, she prepared to enjoy the breakfast buffet in the Honors Club of a local hotel. While waiting in line, with plate and silverware in hand, she was approached by an unknown but fellow conference attendee. Thinking that this was likely someone who had attended one of her sessions, she prepared to greet her White female colleague. However, instead of engaging in the usual conference greeting, the *colleague* paused just long enough to ask her to “run back to the kitchen and bring out more eggs and sausage.” Until that moment, in *post-racial America*, our co-author thought that acquiring a PhD and having one’s research worthy of selection within this major research conference would somehow protect you from a common micro-aggression—i.e., Whites’ assumption that the only reason you are “in the room” is to service them. Apparently, the color of her skin trumped her professional attire and conference badge.

One might imagine that because we are professors, part of the so-called “colored elite,” we are free from, or that we have immunity to racism. Simply put, “hell to-the-no,” we are not. We write this article to say that post-racial is as much a myth for us as it is for other people of color who hail from all walks of life. We speak out because we take responsibility for raising our voices, to being part of the chorus of scholars and “Other folk” who take action in our classrooms, on our campuses, within our communities, in our nation and beyond our nation, internationally. We speak out to say, *enough!* Not another dead child, not another dead father, or mother, not another dead brother, sister, not one more nephew or niece, not one more uncle or aunt, no more cousins or friends, *enough!* Black lives matter.

This article reflects our desire to lend support to an initiative to encourage deep understandings and thick descriptions for responding to difficult questions and statements people may make about “Other People,” particularly Black people or people of African descent. Black lives matter. We also write for the millions of people around the world who live, work, and exist in places where racial ideologies and racial hierarchies dictate the “natural order.” As women of color we have been personally inspired by Sojourner Truth, Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak, Maya Angelou, Gloria Anzaldúa, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Ida B. Wells, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Claudia Jones, Alice Walker, Arundhati Roy, Maxine Greene, Maxine Hong Kingston, Grace Lee Boggs, and Yuri Kochiyama. We stand in solidarity with Brie Newsome (2015), who scaled the flagpole to remove the confederate flag from the South Carolina capitol building, and the “Dream” youth who are fighting mass incarceration and deportation of their family members (Andrade, 2015; Duque & Hernandez, 2015). Racism diminishes human capacity and strangles potential. Racism lowers moral standards, and if we cannot eliminate it, racism will drive humanity to the edge of oblivion (Baldwin, 1985). It does not matter what you do for a living, or your racial identity, the need to confront ignorance and prejudice on matters of race and other dimensions of difference is imperative for all of us. Legal scholar Bryan Stevenson states, “...the true measure of our commitment to justice, the

character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful... The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored..." (2015, p. 18). If we do not speak up, speak out, and take action, we are indeed complicit because we fail to assume responsibility in unmasking the racism inherent in universities and in society. In doing so, we need to develop thoughtful and purposeful responses and strategies to counter myths, interrogate whiteness, colorism and privilege, false assumptions and "the outright lies" about Black and other racialized and minoritized people of color (Vandrick, 2009).

Racism is everywhere

No matter how hard we try to break through, to encourage a deeper understanding of race and the impact of racism, it may often seem as if we are "talking to the wind." Negativity and stereotyping of Black people exists in every country and within every context (Back & Solomos, 2000; Fanon, 1963; Macedo & Gounari, 2006; Nelson, 2008; Tinker Sachs, 2006). Among the many systems that perpetuate and sustain the symbolic violence of race and racism, institutions of higher learning (i.e., the ivory towers) still play a central role. Although colleges and universities no longer accept donations of "human capital" (i.e., slaves) as endowments (Wilder, 2013), they engage in practices that ensure low numbers of tenured faculty and students of color and fail to implement support structures and resources to recruit and then retain higher numbers of African American students and faculty. Racism permeates every facet of life and is intensified by its intersection with class and gendered inequalities and empire (Motha, 2014). Racism is not only local, it is global, universal, and historically produced by European colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism (Macedo & Gounari, 2006; Prashad, 2007; Sleeter, 2011). In her groundbreaking book on race in the 21st century, Dorothy Roberts asserts that, "Biologically, there is one human race. Race applied to human beings is a *political* [italics in the original] division: it is a system of governing people that classifies them into a social hierarchy based on invented biological demarcations" (2011, p. x). However, as people of color, there is little comfort in this scientific explanation. For us, race is not imaginary, not an illusion. Race is "real" because it can determine whether you receive a ticket for exceeding the speed limit or a reminder to fix a broken tail light. Race can determine whether you are shot dead reaching for your driver's license or given leave to go home and enjoy dinner with your family. As a result, we contend that race and racism diminishes opportunities and the capacity for each of us to be all that we can be and all that we should be.

Deep understandings and thick descriptions

In this article, we are looking to develop what we refer to as "deep understandings" and "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973). What exactly do these terms mean? First, deep understandings are associated with knowing the history of an issue and not just any history but a *critical* history that offers information, voices, and perspectives from both the conquered and the conqueror (Zinn & Arnove, 2004). Deep understandings are related to hearing the real voices and lived experiences of people involved in a given struggle, such as listening to the voices of those who were involved in the civil rights movement (Menkart, Murray & View, 2004; Holseart, et. al., 2010) or listening to the oral histories and narratives of those who were enslaved as well as the slave masters (Rhyne, 1999). Deep understandings come about by talking with the descendants, and involves spending time reading, listening, discussing and writing about the people and the events and

making connections between racist representations of Black people and systems of exploitation (Barton & Coley, 2009; Cohen, 2015; Equal Justice Initiative 2015; Gillispie, 2015; Hall, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Deep understandings of racism cannot be reached without a critique of discourse and power: identifying who holds power, analyzing how it was obtained, understanding how to access it, and examining how power is maintained, shared or withheld (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Understanding power relations is critical for developing deep understandings because ultimately those in power choose not to share it and develop rules, laws, and tests that allow them to keep power out of the hands of the “Others.” Many of the “tools of power” become so entrenched in our governments, courts, schools, and churches that we accept them as “that is the way it is,” while failing to question, examine, reevaluate, or change. Because the racially biased instruments of power and privilege are so embedded in our everyday lives, we accept that it’s okay for a White male to be suspicious of, to hunt down, and murder a Black boy carrying a bottle of ice tea and package of Skittles. Some of us accept that it’s okay for a White policeman to use an illegal choke hold to detain and suffocate to death a Black man suspected of an offense that, at best, would result in a hundred dollar fine. Deep understandings facilitate development of critical knowledge of histories, structures, and capital from several vantage points (Grant & Wong, 2008).

Thick descriptions, on the other hand, is a term found in anthropology, ethnic and women’s studies where the researcher goes into a home, school or workplace, for example, to study something or someone up close and personal for a prolonged period of time (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Grant & Wong, 2008; Tinker Sachs et al, 2017; Wong, Sanchez-Gosnell, Foerster-Lu, & Dodson, in press;). When we conduct this kind of in-depth qualitative research we can then talk in rich detail (not superficially) about what we are seeing (Tinker Sachs, 2013; Tinker Sachs et al, 2017). We then have a different kind of explanation or understanding of the structures, systems, and policies that perpetuate racial injustice and inequality (Nieto, 2009). These thick descriptions come out of our close relationships with the “Other.” This provides us with counter narratives that give us an opposing viewpoint or insight rather than the one that is in the textbook or that is commonly believed and perpetuated to be the “right” one. In other words, “we must rigorously interrogate sources of information” (hooks, 2013, p. 80), and—we would add—guide our students to do likewise.

Deep understandings and thick descriptions help us to see beyond Black and White and reveal our basic humanity; they allow us to see the many ways that we are alike. In the case of Trayvon Martin, jury members might have seen the carefree Black boy trying to return home after visiting the carry-out. Or they might have been able to see Michael Brown as a young man, perhaps with a bit of swagger, on his way to visit his grandmother. So we need to ask, why is it that the majority of people who report the news, who teach our kids, who patrol our streets do not have deep understandings and thick descriptions of Black people? Were the members of the jury in the Martin, Brown, and Garner cases provided with thick descriptions and deep understandings about the victims as young Black teenagers or a Black father and grandfather? Did they possess thick descriptions and deep understandings of the emotional toll that the circumstances of their deaths would have on their families, their communities? Based on the outcomes in each case and public outcry for justice by Blacks, other people of color and many Whites, we can only conclude that the jurors did not.

Thick descriptions and deep understandings provide the opportunity for educators and community leaders to probe more deeply into the meaning and nature of personal and institutional racism. They help us to uncover how racist language, tradition, customs, structures and systems that we take for granted as “natural” and “normal” profoundly influence and impact our lives (Barton & Coley, 2009). They affect our perception, action, and our worldview. Deep understandings and thick descriptions afford teachers and educators to creatively engage in efforts to transform how we think and act and challenge racist perceptions, attitudes, and practices (Ball, 2006; Brisk, 2008; Gay, 2013; Lee, 2007). We endorse the local, national, and global movement for multicultural, multilingual, and multimodal education projects (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2010) and peace (Wong & Grant, 2014).

Our goal in this article is not merely to share our alarm and frustration; we hope to remind readers that we can engage critical inquiry and praxis to create awareness interrogate, and challenge *imperialist white supremacist patriarchy* (hooks, 2013). In the next section, we share perspectives and practice that have proven helpful to our students and us for developing thick descriptions and deep understandings.

Perspectives and praxis

As educators, we are constantly bombarded by questions and statements that reflect ignorance, myths, and stereotypes of Black people, immigrants, the undocumented, people living in poverty, and those otherwise “Othered.” Space will not afford us the opportunity to share, nor do we care to inflect the pain and sadness we often feel by the numerous uninformed, and at times, hate-filled comments that in part, have prompted our efforts here.

Decolonizing minds

To meet the challenge of encouraging deep understandings and thick descriptions within our students, the academy, and ourselves we frame our efforts around the principle of “decolonizing minds.” Recalling the words of Malcolm X, bell hooks states that decolonization is “changing our minds and hearts” and looking at each other with “new eyes” (hooks, 2013, p.19). Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against the “metaphorization” of decolonization; however, we use the term because we believe the repatriation of Indigenous land and life should be the goal for all decolonizing pedagogies. Moreover, utilizing pedagogies grounded in feminism and other critical approaches to inquiry and praxis help in guiding students’ understanding of the interconnectedness and intersectionality of power and domination and the impact on peoples and societies (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). We take care not to essentialize nor use decolonizing as a metaphor to express other dimensions of diversity. We are ever mindful that our students differ in their awareness, knowledge, and investment in human and civil rights and social justice. So while our efforts in some courses and assignments may differ by task and intensity, the goal is creating a learning context across all courses that builds awareness and knowledge by exposing students to critical readings and thoughtful discussion and then engaging them in projects that require that they “get close” to the children, families, and communities under study (Smith, 1999). For those who teach in colleges and universities, this requires adopting a developmental stance to teaching and learning in all our courses, undergraduate and graduate alike. We must meet students where they are in order to take them where we want them to go. We must be willing to shape positionalities and guide development of dispositions rooted in the rejection of “dominator culture.” Our goal here is not to just vent against racist and colonialist ideologies, but to share processes and strategies for

developing thick descriptions and deep understandings. In such a way, we hope to foster critical awareness of our own identities as educators (both privileged and marginalized) as well as systems of oppression and domination in our classrooms, schools, and community so that we can imagine different possibilities. In the next section, we share some of the ways we do this in our courses that are designed to respond to the question: What type of intellectual activities create awareness, build knowledge, and engage in practices that prepare researchers and educators to explicitly challenge the status quo and aim to transform power relations? We contend it is those activities that foster thick descriptions and deep understandings.

Activity One: Identity Self-Study

Rationale: To begin the path to awareness, knowledge, and activism, you must first know yourself.

Task: Write a reflective autobiographical paper to examine your cultural roots demonstrating thick descriptions and deep understandings. You will detail aspects of your cultural identity and explore dimensions of diversity in terms of race/color, family background/heritage, ethnicity, language/dialect/accent, spirituality/religion, gender, sexual orientation, and any other dimensions of identity that are important to your beliefs and attitudes about yourself and “others.”

Details: Consider the influence of broad factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, geographic location, as well as personal factors while exploring the following questions: How have I come to be who I am? How have my experiences of diversity influenced my identity? To what extent have I experienced privileges of the dominant culture or marginalization based on some aspect of my identity? How have my cultural identity and experiences with differences such as race, culture, class, gender and sexual orientation influenced my teaching and/or interactions with Others?

Activity Two: Cross-Cultural Family/ Community Study

Rationale: Deep knowledge, thick understandings and ability to use the major concepts, principles, theories, and research related to the nature and role of culture and cultural groups to construct learning environments are crucial.

Task: Select a student and family from a racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural background different from your own.

Details: (1) Conduct a “cultural tour” of the community, maintain field notes and take pictures of the businesses, hair salons, barbershops, bodegas, liquors stores, churches, community spaces, government offices, etc. (2) Drawing on readings and discussions on the dimensions of diversity, develop a series of open-ended interview questions to learn about the family over the course of 3-4 interview sessions that you conduct in a place convenient to the family. (3) Analyze all qualitative and observational data from the cultural tour, field notes, interview, and home/family visits. (4) Prepare a final report reflecting deep understandings of the family and community.

Activity Three: Getting to Know the People in the Parks

Rationale: Disrupting perceptions and stereotypes about homelessness and homeless diverse Others is crucial for gaining insights into the intersections of race, class, and homelessness.

Task: In pairs, the preservice and in-service teachers will visit nearby parks. They will initiate conversations with the people who frequent the parks and maybe even sleep there.

Details: With the course instructor, students will visit a nearby park. They will select previously discussed critical excerpts from their class texts. They will initiate conversation by asking the respondent to give his or her opinions about the selected text and engage in deep listening and conversation. Conversations may last for one hour. Students may talk with more than one person. Students will tour the park and describe its amenities. Students write reflections about their experiences demonstrating deep understandings with thick descriptions. Upon completion of this task, they will discuss the challenges of overcoming stereotypes with classmates.

Activity Four: Promoting literacies in English – Working in the homes of refugee mothers

Rationale: To develop deep understandings and thick descriptions of the circumstances that impact K-12 refugee students by getting close and personal with the mothers of some of these children.

Task: Develop thick descriptions and deep understandings of a refugee family through teaching English literacy in the home of the mother. Students will collaborate with classmates and the instructor to develop authentic and purposeful curricula to meet the language goals of the mother.

Details: Initial classes in the course are devoted to critical readings, discussions and reflective assignments on refugees and immigrants to challenge deficit discourses and prepare for teaching in the home. The instructor pairs up with a local agency to obtain the necessary permissions. Students are paired with the refugee mothers and work with the mothers' English language goals to develop meaningful curricula. The students meet with the mothers at home for 10 sessions (each lasting an hour and a half) at least once a week. Through weekly one hour in-class discussions, students report on their work and the development of deep understandings and thick descriptions.

Conclusion

In this commentary, we have tried to give a response to the violence and derailing of humanity occurring across the United States against Black people and communities of color. Of particular concern to us are the attacks on the most vulnerable among us—the elderly, children and youth with dis(abilities), and transgendered, and undocumented people (Wong, Sanchez-Gosnell, Foerster-Lu, & Dodson, forthcoming). Some may think that we are missing the point by “blaming White people for all the ills of Black people” and may argue that we fail to address the “real” issues of dysfunctional families, poverty and unemployment, and educational disparities. For example, Sowell (2013) adds weight to this viewpoint when he writes:

To say that slavery will not bear the full weight of responsibility for all subsequent social problems among Black Americans is not to say that it has negligible consequences among other blacks or white, or that its consequences ended when slavery itself ended. But this is only to say that answers to questions about either slavery or race must be sought in facts, in assumptions or visions, and certainly not in attempts to reduce questions of

causation to only those which provide moral melodramas and an opportunity for the intelligentsia to be on the side of angels. (p. 121)

We have not ascribed to “moral melodrama” or “the rant of women of color syndrome” but we have asked readers to consider the development of thick descriptions and deep understandings of the project to decolonizing the mind. By going beyond what may appear to some to be “attempts to reduce questions of causation to moral melodramas” we do want to present a vision of possibility grounded in facts as well as an analysis of the persistence and indeed centrality of racism and intersectionality not only within other systems of domination but also in humanity’s soul. In so doing, we invite our readers to imagine our collective transformation and to stand with us “on the side of angels.”

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