

The Production of Race in the 21st Century Classroom

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Summary. As a social construct, the production of race in America has proceeded continuously through various stages throughout the history of our nation and has taken on new modes in the 21st century. We are already familiar with many of these modes as most have been well-documented, albeit after the fact, by historians and writers, in each subsequent era. As we have seen, each generation of progress in the fight against racism ushers forth a new mode of race production. Now, production of race is no longer attributed solely to racists whose function historically has been the otherization of Black and indigenous people along with other people of color; the process is now chiefly driven by those who believe they are fighting racism, particularly in the field of education, where race is talked of as a construct but commonly felt as ontology. How has this reversal occurred and what is its import for the future? This paper will explore new modes of race production in the 21st century and pose questions about its impact on and implications for education.

Background. For many educators, as with most Americans, the color of skin is mistakenly taken to denote race and that race as ontology must have preceded racism in the natural order of things (Thandeka, 1999, p. 33). The distinction of people's colors in antiquity is often pointed to as proof, although no reference to race was ever made. Hence racism in 21st century America is more often thought of as discrimination against or dislike of a particular pre-existent race of people. Nowadays, races themselves may be as numerous as colors with white always represented as the dominant race and the standard by which to judge all others.

But these notions are incorrect (Thandeka, 1999). Racism spawned race (Coates, 2015, p. 7) in the age of settler colonialism to justify first the taking of land and resources and then later the labor and lifeblood of a people. It was the requisite dehumanization of native people by faithful Christians who sought exemption from the biblical commandment not to kill other humans that formalized the race construct in its first iteration, implemented to permit Papal blessings on the colonization of the Americas. As a result, settler colonialism set in motion race as a process with which to run the alternating eliminative currents of its assimilation and exclusion machine (Wolff, 2016 pp. 14-15).

Production of Race During Slavery and Genocide. This first iteration of race was maintained by force for nearly 250 years. From the earliest days of exploration to the late days of slavery, declaring natives of the Americas wild animals and offering bounties on their slaughter reinforced the image of the European settler as the dominant race and the continent being an untamed wilderness (Wolff, 2016, pp. 141-145). This version was extended to the native population of Africa conscripted into slavery and treated as chattel property. Bred like livestock for specific attributes, the major difference was merely in the religion of the slave holders; Catholics tended to keep family units together to drive agricultural production and required submission to their faith while Protestant slave owners abolished the family as the engine of procreation and handled slaves as merchandise with marketable identities. After all, they were for sale. Whether their genre was derived from interactions with faith or market, the words they chose to describe the slaves further produced race; their own (Bakhtin, 1986).

Production of Race In Early America. With the economic and political upheavals of the 18th century and the great revolutions, the production of race phased into its second mode; the legal recognition of each slave in America was determined to be equal to 3/5 human. This meant that production of race now became the standard for citizenship and legal protection under the law. Now new qualities emerged in the production of race with immigrants being enlisted in its production

(Woods, *Killing for Inclusion*, p. 114). Now the identity of African slaves as property and their function in service to their owner was protected under these new laws while immigrant whites enjoyed new “subtractive” identities, at least not Black or a slave (Lensmire, 2017, p. 12).

Production of Race and the End of Slavery. The ending of slavery as a legal institution created a whole new set of conditions for the production of race. No longer would slaves be considered merchandise and no longer would whites be slaveholders. We got glimpses of these new identities in literature and in cultural appropriations in service to the production of race when words began to replace whips (Ellison, 1995, p. 81). This process was aided greatly by the emergence of racialized sciences seeking proof of race as a legitimate classification and evidence of an intrinsic hierarchy within the construct. The advent of these pseudo-sciences informed the literature of the day greatly as the production of race moved into a third mode of production, one that sought to explain presumed deficiencies by directed rather than objective investigation. As white identities moved out from behind direct forms of domination, they found new administrative, economic, social and extra-legal advantages that supplemented this third mode which extended the production of race by creating conditions within these classifications so that they may be reproduced and reinforced, thus enabling the structural production of race as well as the language of plausible deniability. From redlining real estate we got gerrymandered school districts, poverty, environmental poisoning of neighborhood air and water, infrastructure neglect, emergence of food deserts and the segregation of education (Garcia, Yosso, Barajas, 2012).

Production of Race and Civil Rights. The production of race took on yet a fourth and different mode during the Civil Rights era. Truly, the battle from the victim of racism’s point of view is and always has been not to be recognized as a race but for recognition of their very humanity. The legacy of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. traversing 3 eras of our study, all point in

this direction, the direction of our reclaimed humanity and a people's reunification with its whole as expressed in MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. However, during the Cold War, our nation deemed it necessary to put its best face forward to the world and attempted to pass laws to restrict the effects of racism and grant legal status to all citizens. Unfortunately, too many southern democrats blanched at language dissolving the notion of race and were against this humanization project. What they did agree to, though, is the equality of separate and distinct races in the eyes of the law, creating the legal category for remediation and relief and ultimately the basis for identity parity with white supremacy.

This of course doubled down on the problem by cynically creating an economic incentive to maintain a moribund and inhumane classification system by enlisting the beneficiaries of the remediation to assist in the production of race. It permitted the dominant white majority to maintain its classification of privilege and allowed it to work around legal limitations by creating conditions within which these classifications so that they may be reproduced and reinforced in the production of race. It also encouraged victims of racism to become accomplices in the production of race. Here we see the promotion of racial pride as a desirable quality in the Black population. Now that race has been severed from its roots and untethered from its original engine, race would be produced voluntarily by its victims. Rather than sing songs of a shared common humanity, songs extolling the virtues of a particular race came into vogue. In this case, the cultural appropriations of the past (Lensmire, 2017, p. 20) were now commodified and the marketplace was now enlisted in the production of race.

Another byproduct of this process is that racists have begun to dilute authentic racist claims with new forms of discrimination and new classifications to discriminate against, attempting to turn the matter into an arbitrage for a panoply of rights marketed in the courts as first and only venue for resolution while still using the issues as electoral wedges to rally votes or demographic data of benefit to commercial interests (Haidar, 2015, p. 21). This was the continuation of redlining without the red lines.

The Production of Race in the Age of Surplus Populations. In the context of rampant automation and job displacement, population dislocations due to climate change and declining prospects for meaningful employment in the future, Black (as well as brown and red) students are deep in the throes of otherization which present itself as a serious obstacle to learning. They are being marginalized at an alarming rate causing withdrawal from participation in academic activities, behavior problems, low accumulation of necessary life skills and poor scholastic performance expressed in low grades and graduation rates. A fate of incarceration or military service is the planned outcome for large sectors of our growing surplus population unprepared to face the precarity of life in the 21st century; for those of us marked for elimination after exclusion and assimilation criteria have been satisfied.

Production of Race in the 21st Century. This process has gotten a spectacular boost from the identity movement and has been aided by the rapid acceptance of intersectional forms of struggle among people who believe they are fighting to change the system. The adoption of identity as a way of defining one's self and social role has provided new impetus for defining arbitrary classifications as well as a boon for demographers and marketers looking for more accurate ways to represent their products, services, events or beliefs. Oppositional forces to establishment policies believe that intersectionality is a valid strategy for building electoral majorities but it may not be a sound approach to educating the whole child. When extended into the classroom by zealous teachers, the promotion of identity necessarily produces otherization, essential for the recruitment of allies, and has become a predatory practice that reinforces concepts of race and perpetuates the very racism being fought. And herein lays the problem. Race no longer needs force for its production; it is asserted with words that confound and complicate the emergence of student voice just as it defines the teacher (Lensmire, 1998).

For instance, many educators and administrators believe that the solution is to celebrate the otherness of their students and design special units about what makes their race special. They believe

the problem is lack of positive self-image so they compensate by trying to inject pride into their difference. This approach sets up the child for socialization into an environment of identity parity and subjects their self-knowledge to a framework of exclusion as subordinate to the dominant “race” and its own attendant belief system imposed as white supremacy. It further reinforces race as a classification and reaffirms the identity of the teacher.

Other educators believe that it is important to have more teachers that look like or are the same color as the students in the classroom. They believe that this identity is required for the child to respond to prompts that do not seem threatening (Pollack, 2017, p. 35). But this is a flawed analysis. What children need are teachers who treat them as human beings with no intermediating issue of race to drive a wedge into a presumed blood connection. Hence the white teacher’s inability to see the Black child as a little brother or sister is misinterpreted as rather the fault of the child’s need to have someone look like them do the teaching, absolving the white teacher of any responsibility in the relationship.

Another problem is the maternal attitude that many well-meaning teachers bring into a classroom, attempting to forge emotional connections with their students. Many times they will refer to the students possessively as their babies, children, kids, or worse, kiddos, a phrase that lacks any emotional commitment to the child. By and large, youngsters resent this condescending presumption of familiarity and insinuation into their family. This also produces race.

So too does the exacerbation of otherness that occurs when teachers seek allies within the classroom for their own causes. For instance, many LGBTQ+ advocates, believing otherness to be a virtue, seek to further the otherness of Black students in order to gain allies and help in producing race. As teachers, this is not appropriate and damages the child, whatever the cause. Teachers need to be the unconditional advocates of their students, whether their students support them or not. It is not a quid pro quo relationship and is not subject to intersectional arbitration or alliance protocols.

Intersectionality may be useful as an electoral tool, but again, it is not an appropriate mechanism by which to advocate for a child's whole being or to help them find their own voices.

Even the unions representing teachers have attempted to develop programs to remediate this problem, advocating for inclusion, equity and racial justice (Education Minnesota). Invariably, these end up becoming separate but equal activities, inadvertently reinforcing the classification vernacular and embedding in teachers the requisite level of self-otherization required by the classification machine to transmit the same to their students. It is a very odd case of Black educators accommodating the racism of their peers by organizing into separate groups to advocate their interest within the organization but powerless outside the dominant group. This process results in neither elimination nor assimilation; it is merely an attempt to preserve the status quo in the name of progress while continuing to produce race.

Many people unfamiliar with these issues oftentimes mistake what is being said here about eliminating the source of otherness as "colorblind theory." This misses the point. It is perfectly appropriate to see color or to say color, but not to see or to say race. We can recognize and celebrate our cultural, ethnic and language differences but should take care not to characterize them as racial. De-otherization merely requires the acknowledgement of our shared and common humanity in the construction of social relations as a necessary starting point. You might say that this paper advocates a colorful raceless society, where every shade and hue is as valued as the next.

The Way Forward. We have seen over the past five eras, adaptations in the production of race have emerged in each that has helped perpetuate racism and strengthen white identity. Even with the best intentions, the continued production of race has demotivated our youngsters and damaged their sense of acceptance even further. The question remains: Can we learn from the process and disrupt it once and for all before we are all marked for elimination?

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