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The Irrationality of Antiracist Empathy

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At the risk of painting with too broad a brush, it is a rare thing in education scholarship to speak directly to the problem of whiteness. As one of the primary conduits for racial stratification in society, the structure of schooling provides heavy doses of racialized harm, but much of this harm is obscured through the race-blind (Leonardo), well-worn discussions of best practices, reform, and achievement. Even more harmful than race-blind, education has largely been resolutely racism-blind, preferring its mantle of “niceness” (Ladson-Billings) and good intentions (Patel) rather than reckon with stark statistical reality. The reality is that racialized harm for many is needed for fewer to enjoy racialized profit, and formal schooling has been implicated in this distribution of resources on this land since European invasion.

In this context, Peter Smagorinsky’s offering of how literacy educators might reframe their engagement with Adventures of Huckleberry Finn through a race and gender-aware lens is a turn away from teacher education’s largely complicit role in refusing to acknowledge the racialized harm done in classrooms. He offers an argument that seeks to redress the racial hazing enacted through daily practices of curriculum, teaching, and assessment and attempts to connect it and inspire empathy through another vector of oppression, patriarchy. My comments are offered in the spirit of texturing concerns I have about this engagement, what it assumes about white benevolence, what it misses about intersections of racism and patriarchy (Combahee River Collective; Crenshaw), and why we need teacher education that explicitly decenters whiteness.

Key in Smagorinsky’s argument is that the defensive noise surrounding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’s position as a canonical text disconnects teachers from the harm it does to Black students. He posits that tapping personal places of suffering might inspire empathy and, therein, leverage a cessation or easing of the infliction of harm on others. The theory of change (Tuck), then, is that through feeling their hearts quiver at their own systemic pain, white female teachers would slow their infliction of pain on Black students through the unshakeable place of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, including its abundant use of nigger, in secondary English curricula.

First Things First: Why and How Does Racism Exist?

I want to situate my discussion of text, context, and suffering in a different starting place altogether. Where does racism itself come from and why does it rage on? As others have noted, racism, and more broadly speaking, the creation and disciplining of categorical constructs to stratify more and less human, exist for the real material purposes of exploiting groups of people for the benefit of another group (Wynter). Terms like race relations, diversity, and cultural competency tiptoe around the historical and contemporary...
architecture of racism because it is so politically fraught to name it. I argue interrupting the material purposes of racism requires more than endless dialogue. Such dialogue is often framed ahistorically and tends more toward individual expressions of emotionality than structural analyses of how well-being and suffering are linked.

From this vantage point that prioritizes material analyses, I view the loud defense of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as indicative of its cultural stature. Culture here does not mean merely a way of being, doing, and acting, but how that way of being, doing, and acting codifies and structures access to societal well-being and profit (Hall). When situated this way, it is no surprise that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is defended vociferously, ironically not for Twain’s antiracist message, but for its literary features. It is defended so because it signifies a shared cultural space and refracts a sense of belonging and authority to those who matriculated through a canon that includes it. It has become a palimpsest for thin discussions of who can say what words and so-called objective literary merit, the discussions themselves acting as proxies for entitlement. These discussions only rarely tap into Twain’s core message and, more harmfully, forestall the foundational analysis that even in its antiracist messaging, the book uses tropes of Black characters rather than full dimensionality. Collapsed Black characters reseat the centrality of white imagination (Morrison) and the text as a cultural artifact of whiteness.

Smagorinsky also cites Morrison’s analysis but then defines the problem with the book in terms of its impact on Black students and the demand for them to interact dispassionately with a text many would find offensive. I view this framing as dangerously partial in its analysis of impact. The negative impact on Black readers is connected to the material gain for white readers, and this is not activated only when Black readers are present.

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Vectors of oppression inflict harm and profit specifically, in distinct, yet connected societal locations. The societal locations of white women are intricately tied up with race and patriarchy. Smagorinsky posits that if white female teachers, the sizeable majority of the teaching force, experienced an onslaught of the use of the word *cunt* as *nigger* is used in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, their emotional responses might build empathy and ultimately reconstitute the terms by which unemotional literary analyses are asked of all readers, regardless of their subject positions. I chose to write these words and set them apart with italics to underscore the ways in which who is speaking and where imbues them with meaning. As an immediate reflection of power dynamics, there is no slur that can be substituted for white men, which Smagorinsky also notes. Be that as it may, the proposal to incite empathy in white women is leveraged through societal positions of suffering. This logic is connected to myriad antiracism workshops and teachings that detail the places of pain and suffering experienced by people of color in the hopes that this will leverage an emotional, empathic response by white people, which in turn might motivate them to “check” their positions of dominance. I am dubious, though, that either putting the pain of people of color on stage or shifting the articulation of suffering will reconstitute the sociality of white women and, more fundamentally, the social order. The creation and consumption of Black suffering is as old as the project of racism, and coloniality has relied heavily on visible suffering and its consumption to deepen the strata between man and human (Wynter).

To recast a common phrase, the personal is not always political, nor is its politicization automatically a move toward equity (Patel). In this case and in consideration of extant history and theorization of subject positions (e.g., Walker), it is more than possible for white women to experience misogyny and alter little or nothing of their subject position relative to people of color. In fact, this is the fundamental irrationality of modernity that
Frantz Fanon detailed in 1968: Black people cannot exist with the frames of modern epistemic racism, but these same epistemic stances exist to provide ample texture for whiteness to rearticulate itself. To illustrate this point that suffering can be a place of both analysis and retrenchment of power, I suggest a turn away from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to another text, the film 12 Years a Slave.

I regard the 2013 film as a text that assumes a white audience and was not surprised when a white antiracist character served to deliver the enslaved Solomun Northrup from his captivity. There was, however, one character that I found unique, not unique in reality, but rarely depicted so accurately in Eurocentric antiracist texts: the character of Mary Epps, the white wife of the white plantation owner. In her portrayal of Mary Epps, actor Sarah Paulson enacts the vicious venom that Epps took out on the enslaved Patsey, who also experienced brutality at the hands of the rapist plantation owner. In interviews, Paulson has said that Epps is not evil but rather lacks the emotional maturity to deal with jealousy and humiliation (Kohn). From a decolonial and oppression-aware stance, though, Epps is more than a flawed individual. She reflects the social location of white women, then and now, who are situated below white men but above people of color, especially women of color. Lacking avenue to gain traction into the concentration of power held by white men, white women have protected their racial privilege through their social location relative to people of color. In Talkin’ Up to the White Woman, Aileen Moreton-Robinson comments on white antiracist women in the academy, and the point applies here as well: “[White women’s] anti-racist practice, as an intellectual engagement, is evidence of their compassion, but racism is not experienced as part of their interiority. Their extrinsic and almost extraneous relationship to ‘race’ is evidence of why the subject position of middle-class white woman, as a site of dominance, needs to be interrogated” (149).

Moreton-Robinson calls for a reckoning with the racialized social location of white women to destabilize those structural locations. Empathy does not require realignment of social relations. This is not to say that it cannot be a component of social transformation, but in our current context that conveniently confuses dialogues about diversity with material transformation (Ahmed), dialogue for empathy can all too easily become parking lots for emotionality and white fragility, recentering whiteness and irrationally requiring people of color to bear witness to these emotions (Matias and Zemblys). A reckoning with social positioning might, though, along with compassion, consider the ways that domination requires acute attenuation of humanity (King). Empathy alone does not demand that analysis.

A final note about Smagorinsky’s article. I was hesitant to respond to it. I didn’t see much in the article that “studied up” to call into critical apprehension positions of domination and control. I questioned dedication of my time and effort in articulating categorical constructs of dominion to a likely largely white audience. Most significantly, though, Smagorinsky’s careful discussion of his subject position and his admission that he “can’t know what it feels like to be a person whose skin invites a wide range of negative assumptions” let me know that this article held little for decolonial imagination and praxis. Those with darker phenotypes do not only understand themselves through subject positions of negativity, suffering, and trauma. The history of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples relative to white domination is marked by resistance, fugitivity, flight, and creativity. And these histories are themselves situated within the larger core vibrancy of Black, Brown, and Indigenous life. Do not misunderstand; I am neither indicting nor dismissing Smagorinsky’s careful discussion of his subject position. In times of infrared identity politics and rapid-fire censuring of anything that may smack of racism, such frank discussions of subject positioning can be useful. I am, however, cautioning that discussions of white social location may not serve projects of sociogeny, wherein the priority is liberation for Black and colonized peoples (Fanon; Wynter). This does not mean that such discussions of social location are not necessary; rather that they cannot be read as politically comprehensive or inherently facilitative of social change.

As educators, as scholars—really, as readers—contested engagement is an important part of our work. We must engage with each other, in part, where we each are, and push each other to reach beyond and differently, to unlearn so that we might learn differently (Kelley). Part of this work must be...
in refusing (Simpson) restrictive frames. I hope that my response, in part, refuses to concede literacy teacher education as a necessarily white-centered project.

Note

1. In recognition of the ongoing projects of white supremacy and anti-black racism, I have chosen to keep white and whiteness as lowercase spellings and capitalize Black. For further information, please see editorial notes from the journal Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education, and Society.

2. A lesser known but important narration of Solomon Northrup’s life directed by Gordon Parks in 1984 positions the white abolitionist differently.

Works Cited

12 Years a Slave. Directed by Steve McQueen. Fox Searchlight Production, 2013.
King, Joyce. “Who Dat Say (We) ‘Too Depraved to Be Saved’?: Re-membering Katrina/Haiti (and Beyond):


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