

Vigilant Uncertainty, Discomfort, and White Complicity: Who Are Your Students?

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In the past number of years, I have learned so much from Cris Mayo; she challenges my certainties. So in the spirit of her call for a pedagogy of uncertainty, I want to pose some questions that her thought-provoking paper raises for me in the hopes that this response, to quote Gayatri Spivak, “produces rather than protects.”¹ In what follows I support Mayo’s argument for the pedagogical tools of “never knowing” and discomfort as vital for white people who are attempting to work against racism. But in doing this, I will also raise some questions regarding Mayo’s counsel about white identity, allies and counterfeit.

Mayo begins by explicating the connection between white privilege and certainty.

One of the kinds of privilege whiteness affords is confidence in knowing the contours of a situation precisely because whites do not actually have to know very much about any situation. Privilege, in other words, gives whites a way to not know that does not even fully recognize the extent to which they do not know that race matters or that their agency is closely connected with their status.

Immediately, it becomes clear that Mayo is not concerned with just any old uncertainty nor is she rejecting all types of certainty outright (as her students acknowledge “if you never know, you do know”). Mayo is unambiguously concerned with “the place of white privilege in defining what is useful to know and what should be known.” Mayo’s call for uncertainty seems to be a pedagogical response to what Marilyn Frye and Maria Lugones refer to as “arrogant perception” and has similarities to Dwight Boyd’s plea for “epistemological humility.”² Whereas Frye, Lugones, and Boyd seem to call for uncertainty regarding how dominant group members understand the marginalized, Mayo is calling for dominant group members (white people, in particular) to develop uncertainty around knowing themselves and their own agency.

Moreover, Mayo criticizes some pedagogical trends emanating from contemporary whiteness studies, correctly I believe, for ignoring the relational aspect of whiteness, for assuming volunteerism and promoting heroism, and for authorizing an escape from responsibility for racism through exceptionalism. Any pedagogy that allows whites to extricate themselves from the role they play in sustaining systemic racism discounts the unintentional ways in which white identity functions as a placeholder that constitutes the marginalized and perpetuates the very same oppressive mechanisms it claims to oppose.³ Even when resisting oppression, privileged group members must be uncertain about their agency, a point that Mayo underscores and I will return to in this response.

Because of the certainty that white privilege grants, Mayo maintains that pedagogy focused on making whites aware of their privilege should not encourage

white students “to know themselves more comfortably as whites or as inhabiting a positive white identity.” Rather, educators should encourage unknowing and uncertainty. Thus, instead of concentrating on white identity, educators should more importantly follow the “ally movement” model and focus on strategies of counterfeit that attempt to destabilizing oppressive norms without directing attention to those doing the work.

My first questions, then, are requests for clarification. Is Mayo’s call for uncertainty primarily directed at white moral agency or about white identity, or both? What does such uncertainty require? Is Mayo implying that white students/people should never focus on their white identity or that there is always a danger in doing so? The students I encounter in my classes are predominantly white and have never had to see themselves “as white” or be exposed to their white privilege. It is not clear to me how white students can come to understand the ways in which the systemic privilege they reap is complicit in maintaining systems of oppression regardless of their intentions without directing their attention to their white identity, without trying to make visible that which they do not have to consider because of their privilege. The pedagogical challenge that I struggle with is how to resist the temptation to allow white students to remain comfortable in the pleasures of knowing, how to avoid letting them remain fixed in “redemptive fantasies.”⁴ Rather, this new knowledge must be continually interrogated because whiteness will always make new avenues available for white people to deny their complicity.

As a model of anti-racist pedagogy, Mayo advocates allies who work against homophobia. Such work does not focus on clarifying what it means to be not gay, but rather is concerned with examining and working against the benefits of those perceived to be heterosexual. As Mayo contends,

The actual identity of the ally is not the point. The focus is instead on the possibility of alliance among people dedicated to ending homophobia. In effect, they are engaged in a project intent on de-universalizing heterosexual privilege by marking out their support for non-heterosexual people.

While it is true that not focusing on the identity of the ally frees up energy to do the work such projects require, don’t such alliances presume that non-gay allies already possess an understanding of heteronormativity and a recognition of their role in sustaining such norms? As the gay and lesbian marriage debate clearly demonstrates, some allies have no intent to de-universalize heteronormativity.⁵ Allies who have not acknowledged their social identities risk not understanding how their own identities unintentionally support social structures even when (and especially when) they fight against a system that constitutes them through privilege. Moreover, non-gay allies must not ignore their social position because good intentions can risk obscuring the need for constant vigilance about one’s complicity. In terms of whiteness, does the uncertainty about white identity and/or white agency that Mayo calls for presume a kind of certainty about whiteness and white identity?

Similarly, Mayo advocates counterfeit as an anti-racist strategy. Counterfeit, however, may not only be unsuccessful, as Cris acknowledges, but it may also be counterproductive. Counterfeit, if suspected, may result in more exclusive and

defensive mechanisms to protect the status quo rather than in destabilizing it, as has occurred with the response of the Bush administration to the threat of terrorism. Suspicions of counterfeit may engender more stringent and institutional ways to detect counterfeit and destroy it, without any change to the system.

Moreover, counterfeiters often see themselves as standing outside of the system in order to manipulate it. Some white proponents of Race Traitors similarly forget that they are white and even think that they can be Black. White people cannot just decide to take themselves out of oppressive systems because their moral agency will still be connected to social structures in ways that keep privilege and oppression in place.

Finally, does focusing on white identity necessarily lead to comfort and confidence? If whiteness is a strategy that maintains white privilege and if white people must never forget that they are white, then white people who are committed to challenging racist systems face an intractable dilemma. On the one hand, inattention to white identity can risk colorblindness and the innocence that authorizes denials of complicity. On the other hand, focusing on white identity risks center-staging and solipsism that recenter whiteness.⁶ Whites need to be continually vigilant and such vigilance, I submit, requires that white people never forget their social location. Rather than moving away from a concern with white identity, I am suggesting that we keep such identity in focus and continually trouble it. Focusing on white identity, therefore, does not have to lead to comfort and certainty but can produce the discomfort and uncertainty that Mayo, I believe correctly, calls for.

Vigilance requires that white people never forget their social positionality, not in the sense of pride, but in the sense of “throwness,” as Iris Marion Young describes.⁷ Rather than move away from white identity, I urge more attention be paid to what vigilance means and what in practice it looks like. Only then, I submit, can whites form alliances with others to challenge the structures that provide meaning for whiteness. Only then can whites work to continually unearth and work against their ways in which they, with the best of intentions, are complicit in perpetuating racist systems.

1. As quoted in Kate McCoy, “Killing the Father/Becoming Uncomfortable with the Mother Tongue: Rethinking the Performative Contradiction,” *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (1997): 497 and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), lxxv.

2. Marilyn Frye, “In and Out of Harm’s Way,” in Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1983) 52-83; Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” in *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 275-90; and Dwight Boyd, “One Man’s Reflection on a Masculine Role in Feminist Ethics: Epistemic vs. Political Privilege,” in *Philosophy of Education Society 1990*, ed. David Ericson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991), 286-99.

3. Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany, Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Anti-Racism,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 7-29.

4. Cynthia Levine-Rasky, “Framing Whiteness: Working Through the Tensions in Introducing Whiteness to Educators,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3, no. 3 (2000): 271-92.

5. I thank my colleague Huei Hsuan Lin for reminding me of this point.

6. Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) and Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

7. Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 39-65.