

## Anti-Racist Work Zones

Audrey Thompson  
*University of Utah*

Many of the stories that white anti-racist scholars tell about racism have the classroom as their setting. As teachers, we recognize racism in the classroom — yet we are seldom prepared to reshape our teaching and our classroom relations to enable new racial possibilities to emerge. Racism in the classroom remains recognizable in part because our classrooms remain unchanged.<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago, I heard a white anti-racist philosopher talk about a whiteness moment in one of her undergraduate classes. When someone in the audience asked her about the black students' response to her intervention, she said, "I don't know exactly what they thought, but I think they appreciated that I said something."

Someone asked how the white students had responded. "I think it kind of went over their heads," she said.

"Did you come back to the issue later in the course?" she was asked.

"No," she said.

"It didn't ever really come up again. It was just that one moment."

"Was there anything in their readings to help the white students make sense of the race dynamics in that moment?" someone asked her.

"No," she said.

"It wasn't a course on racism. It was an ethics course."

What is distinctive about this kind of anti-racist teaching is its passivity. In passive approaches to anti-racist education, the instructor may assume a self-evidence for anti-racism such that her own actions are a sufficient lesson for the students; the charismatic or enlightened teacher models the anti-racist attitudes or insights to which white students are expected to aspire. Alternatively, and more passively yet, the instructor may rely on the students — usually students of color — to take up classroom race dynamics voluntarily and turn them into teachable moments.<sup>2</sup> In such cases, the course is not designed to shape, inform, transform, or problematize the tools with which we make racial meanings; it merely supplies the occasion on which anti-racist lessons may happen to come up.

In proactively anti-racist teaching, by contrast, the syllabus is organized to provide both students of color and white students with tools for analyzing and combating racism. The teacher does not wait for race to come up as a topic but actively prepares to students to grapple productively with the issues to be considered. Even in proactively anti-racist teaching, however, our pedagogical thinking about race, racism, and classroom relationships often betrays an assumption that classroom relationships are generic and untroubled until racism suddenly erupts into the classroom, as if racism had not been present throughout until, suddenly, there it was. We may blame current events or we may blame a student with a bad attitude for contaminating relations in the class. "I've taught this class half a dozen times,"

we say, “and never had this problem before. It was just that one student” or “it’s because of what’s been going on in the news.” Like a murder mystery in which there is no before or after, nothing to help us understand the relationships caught up with the murder, this “story” is an event without a context. There is no suggestion that the classroom is a space that actively organizes racial relationships and patterns of engagement.

In reconsidering the kind of settings that our classrooms might be, I want to ask how our patterns of engagement shape the classroom as an anti-racist space. When we as teachers engage white, brown, and black students in the struggle against racism, how do we take up racism? How do the implicit narratives about race and racism that anti-racist scholarship enlists help us to respond to racialized situations in new ways? How do they undermine the possibility of new forms of engagement?

Among the questions implied in such a project would be whether our teaching is implicitly addressed to white students; whether those of us who are white position ourselves as judges in charge of naming racism (perhaps with back-up from students of color); whether as teachers we approach anti-racist teaching as a tent revival, an exercise in enlightenment, or a white identity workshop.<sup>3</sup> Years ago, a colleague of mine received a student evaluation that commented enthusiastically, “I used to be a cheerleader; now, I’m a classical liberal!” Anti-racist teaching often reflects similarly dichotomous assumptions about who should emerge from the other end of the course — “they’re colorblind now, but soon they’ll be race traitors!”

This essay focuses on how anti-racist possibilities in a classroom are shaped when we as white teachers position ourselves as expert guides for white students making (or failing to make) the journey towards full anti-racist awareness. When white teachers frame white students as “people who do not get race the way *we* get race,” we position those students as characterized mainly by a lack of understanding, information, or critical thinking, rather than as thrown into and caught up in a multitude of complex and confusing but potentially provocative relationships. It is easier to pin white students to the wall with their ignorance or coax them into change with our charisma than to help engage them in new intellectual and pedagogical relationships. Rather than consider the ways in which our classrooms may help to promote and maintain white students’ racial ignorance and obstinance, we shake our heads at their all-too-recognizable racism and try to encourage them to be more like us.

Meanwhile, insofar as we gear anti-racist classrooms to the growth and ignorance of white students, we position students of color as teacher’s helpers, native informants, or sherpas — (unpaid) guides who know the path, know the conditions, and can help us navigate the treacherous paths to the top of the mountain where we will finally be able to see the truth laid out before us.<sup>4</sup> Some teachers actively enlist students of color in these roles. Others merely allow them to fall into those roles — failing to see how the organization of our classes may in fact coerce students of color into taking on those roles.

In such classes, both white students and students of color are positioned statically. Educational change is measured not in terms of the kinds of relationships

in which racism is taken on but in terms of the anti-racist mile markers that have been passed. In the section that follows, I examine a metaphor that I think informs many proactively anti-racist courses. Never explicit but often discernible in the frustrations that it fosters, it is a metaphor of progress along an anti-racist freeway plagued by never-ending road construction — a metaphor that creates unproductive expectations and helps trap us in static roles.

#### RACIAL PROGRESS AND THE ANTI-RACIST INFRASTRUCTURE

From the perspective of many well-meaning white students, learning about anti-racism ought to lead somewhere definite. Presumably, there is a road leading to the anti-racist destination; all they have to do is figure out how to get on it. Ideally, the road will be a freeway with plenty of room for passing. Then they will not feel crowded and they will be able to by-pass all the little hamlets that clutter up backroads driving.

Quite a few anti-racist freeways are advertised. Some of our white students find their way onto the Freirean freeway, others onto the Hybridity highway; a few will prefer the Race Traitor tollway or the Critical Race Theory thoroughfare; several will flood the White Stage Theory turnpike and the Exceptional Whites expressway. Unfortunately, the students come to realize, all the roads — along with all the rest stops — are under construction.

At first, things are not too bad. One has the illusion of speed, of progress, of a travel plan one might chart with the help of an up-to-date road atlas. Some miles into the journey, however, things begin to look ominous. Road signs urge the students to “Use caution” (“Don’t say ‘Caucasian’”) and warn them of the “Work zone speed limit 20 mph” — “Expect delays” (“It takes time to process this material”). A couple of students have put up signs of their own saying, “My mommy works here” (“My mother was on the board of the NAACP!”). Later, there are more road signs: “Uneven lanes,” “Detour” (“No white counter-stories till further notice; take the confessional narrative detour or the conversion narrative detour instead”), “Left lane ends” (“We really don’t know what you should do on Monday”), “Be prepared to stop.” Perhaps referring to Cris Mayo’s unsettling work, some signs warn of “Experimental pavement.”<sup>5</sup> There is a danger here of getting queasy.

Those of us teaching anti-racist classes often lend credence to the anti-racist road metaphor. We offer mile markers, destination signs, scenic overlooks. “Only 26 more miles to the next rest stop!” we say. “Look, you’re already at Helms’s stage four!” The students look at us skeptically. They begin to wonder if the teachers on the road crew are being obstructionist on purpose. Not only are the roads never perfect, but the people who are working on them do not really seem to know what they are doing. Half the time, the drivers have to get out of their cars and work on the roads themselves, in addition to doing repairs on their own cars.

Even before you get to the road repairs, there are hours of slow movement. Sometimes there are miles of orange cones for no apparent reason at all. At last, the road opens up for what looks like a nice, long stretch. Finally, there are three open lanes, not counting the carpool lane. You cannot really count the carpool lane.

Except for the occasional motorcycle, there are no vehicles in the carpool lane; most people are making the journey alone. A lot of us are driving huge moving vans crammed with all the stuff that we plan to take with us to our new anti-racist destination. It is hard to see around the bigger vehicles, but at least there are three lanes. The drivers heave sighs of relief. They get in the far left lane, because they intend to go fast. It turns out to be the slowest lane. Almost everyone is driving in the passing lane, trying to feel more progressive. They are reading Anzaldúa and swerving as they drive.

#### ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION AS A RELATIONAL UNDERTAKING

The most obvious difficulty with the anti-racist freeway metaphor is that it misleads us into thinking of anti-racist awareness and agency in terms of a definite destination. According to the metaphor, some white people are closer to that destination than others, although most whites have yet to leave the comfort of home. People of color, apparently, are waiting with open arms at the other end. There is no suggestion that struggling against racism is an emergent, relational undertaking without a clear-cut, happily-ever-after ending.

Not only does the metaphor seem to suggest a definite direction but it holds out the promise of the security and pleasure that come of knowing where you are going and being able to make reliable judgments about your progress. If most of the maps are wrong, however, and the signposts are unreliable, it should not be surprising if the journey is anything but pleasurable. The fact that the roads are only half built is another source of frustration. The further we seem to get down the road, the less sure we are of our destination and the further we seem to be from it. While white students become preoccupied with the question of how fast they are moving and how long it is likely to take, students of color find themselves foisted into the unasked-for and unwelcome role of local guides, radio traffic announcers, and road crew, their own education forgotten. As white teachers, we too forget our need for education, falling all too readily into the roles of itinerary planner and helicopter passenger with the God's-eye-view.

Road and journey metaphors for anti-racist change set us up for many of these frustrations. They invite us to understand road maintenance and renewal as necessary evils' — unavoidable, but unfortunate and irksome. If we had been lucky enough to have come of driving age when all the road construction was new and stable, we are led to believe, we could have had a smooth trip. The road construction and repairs are necessary to the infrastructure of learning, but they are not *part of* being there and learning. As drivers, we just want to get to the other side so that we can go on "as usual." Implicitly, perfect roads are the norm and travel ought to be fluid, painless, instinctive. We shouldn't have to be thinking about the journey all the time.

Another limitation of the road metaphor is that it reinscribes white solipsism even in challenging it. It is still about us — our growth, our understanding, our exceptionalism, our journey. At some level, most of the personal narratives told by white anti-racists fall into this pattern. Although an occasional narrative is organized relationally, most are organized around individual growth. Accordingly, they focus

on our emerging anti-racist “identity” — how far we have come, what it took to get us to where we are now, the costs and occasionally the pleasures of unlearning white privilege.

When we measure our worlds in terms of personal progress towards a social goal, and particularly when we understand that progress in terms of blamelessness, heroism, or exceptionalism — our status as “good whites” and, in the case of anti-racist white teachers, sometimes “*unusually* good whites” — we lose sight of justice. Not only do we foreground our own thoughts, feelings, and accomplishments against a backdrop of oppression, but we fail to see the ways in which we continue to maintain, reproduce, and rely on racism. We lose sight of the costs of our “goodness” to people of color. White anti-racist teachers’ sense of exceptionalism may foster expectations of approval from students and faculty of color, for example; it may be used to justify continual demands for enlightenment from people of color; it may lend itself to our speaking as authoritative “discoverers” of what people of color know only too well already. We remain at the center of our anti-racist projects.

To recenter justice is not to suggest that social change can be addressed as if it had nothing to do with white people” — as if anti-racism were “other people’s causes.”<sup>6</sup> Rejecting the dichotomous choice between racial justice as “other people’s causes” and anti-racism as a personal path to enlightenment, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman problematize both “the motive of duty,” according to which people of color “become the vehicles of [whites’] redemption,” and the motive of “self-growth or self-expansion.” Instead they argue for “the motive of friendship” as the “only appropriate and understandable motive” for white feminists seeking to bring about anti-racist change.<sup>7</sup> I worry about appealing to friendship as the sole defensible motive for social change. Not only does it conjure up the alarming spectacle of whites seeking out people of color to make friends with, so as to be able to partake in the justice project, it assumes that only ideal motives can underwrite meaningful change. But not every problematic anti-racist motive is a dead-end and no white anti-racist “motive” is entirely unproblematic. We may undertake actions with any number of inadequate and problematic motives that nevertheless lead to something productive. Motives of shame, politeness, curiosity, or teacherly responsibility, for example, may give way to motives of friendship or student-centered concern.

The appeal to a motive of friendship does, however, remind us to think relationally rather than statically or solipsistically. Relationships do not preclude stasis or solipsism, of course. Although cross-race friendship, romance, or love for a sister or son or grandchild may be a powerful motive for anti-racism, such motives are not unproblematic and they do not provide insurance against white exceptionalism. On the contrary, they may lend themselves to the belief that “my intimate relationships situate me in such a way that I really *do* get what other people only think they get.” Just as having a “best friend who happens to be Mexican” may be used to authorize one person’s colorblindness, having an African-American partner, an adopted daughter from Vietnam, or biracial nephews may be used to authorize another’s sense that “I *really* know what (anti-) racism looks like and how it works.”

Thinking of anti-racist change *relationally*, however, may differ from thinking in terms of motives tied to a particular relationship, whether intimate or classroom-based. Thinking relationally means focusing on how our lives are caught up together, how our possibilities are made together, and how we render asymmetrical support or audience to one another — how we may be called upon to listen to and hear one another.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the anti-racist freeway approach to knowledge-making focuses on gathering reliable information and clarifying our direction so as to get back on track to democracy, relational approaches to anti-racist education assume that new knowledge will have to be made through the struggle to develop new relationships. As Maria Mies argues, “In order to understand a thing, one must change it.”<sup>9</sup> All of us, black, brown, and white, are caught up in and by racism — differently, to be sure; but none of us stands apart from racism. Focusing on educational relationships (which may or may not overlap with other social relationships) as a site of struggle and learning means that the work we do in those relationships — both as teachers and as students — and—*the work we fail to do*, institutionally as well as personally, is part of the possibility of coming to anti-racist understandings together. Thinking relationally means addressing anti-racism in terms of our ontological, political, and ethical, as well as personal relationships.

Much of anti-racist theorizing is devoted to explicating whites’ political relationships with people of color. Material whiteness theorists observe that some people live next-door to nuclear waste so that other people do not have to, for example. Such theorizing helps to illuminate how what I as a privileged person have, want, lack, need, suffer, enjoy, can expect, and am privileged to do is caught up in significant ways with others’ situations, possibilities, and expectations. Demonstrating how systemic white privilege is rationalized and codified, institutional whiteness analyses explain how the rules themselves may be organized so that who is assigned credit or merit, who gets the benefit of the doubt, and who has to prove herself redound to the benefit of those already in power. Discursive theories, meanwhile, may address how the perception of a so-called white Protestant work ethic is produced through a relentless demonization of blackness and brownness. To what extent, though, do our classrooms themselves unsettle these political relationships and to what extent do they reinscribe and reinforce pedagogical relationships that tell students who is “for” whom?

Ontologically, we are thrown together, caught up and entangled with one another. Despite our own and many of our students’ received notions about individual agency and responsibility, independence, and intentionality, much of what we regard as our own achievement is produced only with considerable “back-up,” to use Lugones’s phrase.<sup>10</sup> For white students and white teachers, what this may mean is that we fail to see how dependent we are upon one another, how intertwined our situations are, how large a role education plays in producing ideological “back-up,” and how indispensable systematic ignorance is to our sense of ourselves as good people, active agents, and innocent bystanders. Anti-racist classrooms may or may not engage this aspect of relationship at the structural or discursive level (addressing, for example, how white individualism is produced as a naturalized, unmarked category), but to what extent are our classrooms organized to help students give one

another new kinds of challenges and back-up, new kinds of support for learning and changing? What are we doing to trouble the expectation that people of color are “for” white people, such that well-meaning white people can count on people of color to coach us, correct us, listen to our confessions and conversion narratives, and teach us to be acceptably anti-racist?

Almost by definition, thinking ethically might seem to mean thinking relationally, yet in fact much of ethics is conceived in highly individualistic terms, whether as turn-taking, as “putting yourself in another’s shoes,” or as individual accountability to duties or ideals. To be responsive and responsible to one another, to be caught up in one another’s lives in such a way that “we” is as important as “I,” to have one another’s backs, may be specifically at odds with white patterns of counting our anti-racist “virtues,” comparing ourselves to one another, protecting our own integrity, and maintaining our innocence or exceptionalism. To become ethically and relationally responsive to one another, we may need new, emergent and asymmetrical conceptions of listening, learning, humility, generosity, and caring. “The terror of reform,” Emerson wrote, “is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues, or what we have always esteemed such, into the same pit that has consumed our grosser vices.”<sup>11</sup>

At the level of intimacy, finally, a relational orientation means finding joy and value in the relationship itself. Whether conceived in terms of conversation, friendship, love, or desire, intimate relationships allow room for doubt and unfamiliarity within a context of trust. Classrooms are not primarily a space for friendship (although they may also happen to be that), but they are potentially a space for intellectual intimacy, embodied performances of possibility, conversation that goes beyond the level of comfort and takes risks within a context of support and inquiry. Potentially, at least, they may provide room to feel our way together towards something new.

#### CONCLUSION

Addressing anti-racist change relationally involves remembering that our racial understanding and our possibilities for new responsiveness are embedded in relationships. When a white teacher assumes that her job is to teach white students what she knows about race so as to help them get to where she is in her journey, not only does she forget that her students may know things that she does not know, but she implicitly congratulates herself on getting what they do not. When progressive white students tell one another stories about other white students in a class who really do not get it, they use those students to bolster their own sense of racial specialness. When white teachers address a mixed-race class as if the task facing the class were to bring the white students along, they consign students of color to the position of bystanders or inside informants without relational or educational needs of their own.

If, instead of thinking of anti-racist education in terms of progress towards a definite goal, we thought of it in terms of a relational undertaking, we would be able to focus on the work that needs to be done here and now rather than on whether things look any better past the next rise. Under the terms of the freeway metaphor, we are more or less alone on our journeys. Whether we make steady progress, lose our way,

get stuck, or find a shortcut, at least we are moving, and at least we can measure our progress. The struggle for change and for understanding is not only not solitary but is not necessarily measurable as “progress.”

How we measure racism and anti-racism depends in part on how we measure our worlds.<sup>12</sup> Whereas a Chicano scholar of Latina/o Critical Theory might use composite counter-stories to show how racial micro-aggressions create a hostile campus climate, a white judge might recognize institutional racism only when it is statistically measurable.<sup>13</sup> When, as white anti-racist teachers, we measure our own and our white students’ responses to racism in terms of progress along projected lines of anti-racist development, we measure white worlds that recognize only very particular topographies of virtue and vice. They are the worlds that we already know from our maps, and we are not surprised to find them, because we created the maps. Having set up our classrooms in accord with our expectations, we are not surprised to discover familiar, predictable patterns of racism in the classroom. Failing to look past our maps, we fail to see the students of color in the classroom at all, we fail to see the white students beyond their need to be fixed, and we fail to see other possible worlds. Looking for the next mile marker, we fail to see anyone else on the road.<sup>14</sup>

---

1. “We” and “our” are shifting signifiers in this essay. For the most part, they refer to white anti-racist teachers, but sometimes “we” indicates anti-racist teachers in general, whites in general, or white progressives in general. I have tried to make the particular significance of “we,” “us,” and “our” clear in each individual case.

2. My thanks to Cris Mayo for helping clarify my thinking about this example.

3. In borrowing Maria Lugones’s term, “back-up,” I put it to ironic use. Lugones uses the notion of “back-up” to highlight the need that challengers to the dominant system have for support from others who are similarly situated, as well as from allies; although my usage also points to challengers’ need for support from others, it stresses the degree to which white anti-racist allies may turn people of color into back-up for our own heroic stance. I owe the image of anti-racist teaching as “tent revival” to Ed Buendía.

4. I also thank Ed Buendía for the “sherpa” metaphor. I am indebted to my department’s faculty-student colloquia on pedagogy and to Deanna Blackwell and Dolores Delgado Bernal, especially, for important conversations about how whiteness organizes anti-racist pedagogy.

5. Cris Mayo, “Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 78–87.

6. Dana Densmore, “A Year of Living Dangerously: 1968,” in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press/Crown, 1998), 71. Densmore uses the phrase “other people’s causes” to distinguish civil rights, anti-war, and other progressive causes from the (implicitly white) women’s movement.

7. Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for ‘the Woman’s Voice,’” in *Hypatia Reborn: Essays in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Azizah Y. al-Hibri and Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 32.

8. How privileged groups listen to others’ stories is profoundly problematic. For important discussions of some of the issues involved in listening empathetically, opportunistically, and voyeuristically, see Megan Boler, “The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism’s Gaze,” in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael S. Katz (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 208–19; Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif: The Crossing Press, 1984), 66–71; and Sherene H. Razack, “The Gaze from the Other Side: Storytelling for Social Change,” in *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 36–55.

9. Maria Mies, "Women's Research or Feminist Research? The Debate Surrounding Feminist Science and Methodology," trans. Andy Spencer, in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 62. Also see Audrey Thompson and Andrew Gitlin, "Creating Spaces for Reconstructing Knowledge in Feminist Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 125–50, which discusses one emergent approach to anti-oppressive education.

10. Maria Lugones discusses "back-up" in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 288.

12. I owe the phrase "how we measure our worlds" to Bob Blackwell, who used it to distinguish between ways of thinking that measure value in terms of public achievements as opposed to intimate knowledge and responsiveness.

13. In a guest lecture in one of my courses, Octavio Villalpando spoke of a judge who "measured racism" in terms of formally registered complaints and lawsuits, while rejecting evidence in the form of witnessed events. Octavio's language in this description was what reminded me of the earlier conversation with Bob Blackwell on "measuring our worlds."

14. This essay has benefitted greatly from the comments that Frank Margonis, Cris Mayo, and Ivan Van Laningham gave me on an earlier manuscript.