

Contemplative Race Theory
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Preface:

This paper was presented at the ACHME conference in 2013. Since then we have further developed these initial ideas into a facilitated process that brings communities together in conversation about the ways we are raced personally and structurally, and that seeks ways in a group context to answer the question, 'what do we do with this knowledge?' In short, our work has become a practically oriented process.

In light of these practical moorings, Contemplative Race Theory is constantly evolving, changing, and growing as it is continually smelted in the crucible of lived experience. Specifically, the section of this paper that discusses the compassion practice has been considerably lengthened. In our experiences working with communities we realized the need to provide foundational practices that help participants gain facility with nuanced aspects of awareness. Also, we realized the importance of beginning our sessions with practices that simply allow participants to be fully present and to feel heard. We also were met with the need to broaden our understanding of contemplation and the kinds of practices that would be useful to our goal of focusing on issues of race and racism.

Therefore, we hope you find this paper helpful, but also understand that it may raise more questions than it answers. To that end, if you would like to contact us for further information or to inquire about the possibility of engaging this process at your institution please contact either of us.

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How do you teach people, particularly young people, about race and racism? There is a story I would like to share that highlights how difficult this task can be.

Jon Greenburg was a teacher at Seattle's Center School, an alternative arts intensive public high school. For the past ten years he annually taught a class entitled Citizenship and Social Justice. "This class discussed race, gender and class in America, delving into such writings

as “Native Son” by Richard Wright and the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.”¹ Because of the nature of the topics being discussed, Mr. Greenburg informed his students that if at any time they felt uncomfortable they could step out of the classroom in addition to speaking with him personally.

After enrolling in the class, one Euro-American female student began to feel uncomfortable, not with the topics being discussed per se, but she was uncomfortable with how they were being discussed and how these discussions made her feel. The family of this young woman made a complaint to the Seattle Public Schools, and after an investigation they determined that the race unit of class “did create an intimidating environment for a student” and they forced Mr. Greenburg to cancel the rest of the race portion of his class.² However several students disagreed with the decision of the school board and they created a petition that received over 600 signatures. Circumstances around the petition prompted the young woman’s family to file another complaint and as a consequence the Citizenship and Social Justice class is no longer being taught at the high school, and Mr. Greenburg was assigned to another local school.

So, I ask again. How do you teach young people about race and racism? According to the statement released by the Seattle School Board, students and in this case their parents, need to be told that the classroom discussion could cause “a high degree of emotion for students or potential distress” and that as educators “we don’t want to put any child into a situation where he or she feels so intimidated by the manner in which these issues are being taught that the

¹Joel Connely, Seattle Post Intelligencer, June 3, 2013
<http://blog.seattlepi.com/seattlepolitics/2013/06/03/seattle-students-protest-popular-teachers-transfer/>

² Connely

course is no longer effective.”³ On the surface statements by the Seattle School Board sound reasonable. However, when teaching about subjects such as race, gender, class, and globalization having a students level of “discomfort” become the arbiter of what can and cannot be discussed sets a dangerous precedent. Furthermore, this decision highlights the privilege that Mr. Greenburg’s class attempted to deconstruct. A young white woman felt uncomfortable, and thus her uncomfortability was worthy of investigation – we can only wonder how often Native American students feel uncomfortable during discussions about the colonization of the pilgrims, or how Japanese students feel when we discuss their forced displacement during World War 2. Does this require that we no longer teach these subjects in our classrooms?

We believe that the Seattle High School class highlights a pedagogical gap that is present in many classes that deal critically with race. Mr. Greenburg’s class was phenomenal in that it encouraged students to have real conversations about race, to talk about how they felt as racialized beings, in short, it encouraged them to be uncomfortable. However, he fell short in that he did not have an adequately developed process that enabled his students to know what to do when those uncomfortable feelings begin to arise within them. Seth and I believe that recognizing and allowing ourselves to feel whatever it is we feel about race, and tending to those feelings are the crucial steps that can allow creative learning and dialogue to take place in the classroom.

In this paper we will demonstrate that by placing Critical Race Theory and Contemplative Studies in dialogue we can begin to build a method that is intentional about

³ Vanessa Romo, June 12, 2013 <http://www.takepart.com/article/2013/06/12/seattle-teacher-forced-out-teaching-kids-about-racism>

tending to the feelings that are often aroused during racial discourse. We will examine what Critical Race Theory is, why it is important in general, and specifically, why is it useful for educators. In regards to contemplative studies, we will explore how contemplative practices that are designed to foster compassion, mindfulness, and a deep connection to humanity can be used as a tool to help subvert interpersonal and structural racism. My (Chris) real world experience as an African American with a contemplative practice called the compassion practice and our collective reflection on its movements and the contemplative characteristics cultivated within them suggests that it is well suited for creating awareness of how we embody racism. In essence, we believe that with this practice we can learn how to work through the difficult feelings and negative voices that arise within us when our identities feel neglected (minorities) or threatened (privileged).

Both my journey to contemplative practices, and Seth's journey, as a white male, to what can best be described as "racial consciousness," are inherently connected with why we are here today. As such, each of our stories will serve as an introduction of sorts to our respective areas of expertise, Critical Race Theory and compassion based contemplative practices.

Seth's Story

In my early twenties I served in the Americorps National Civilian Community Corps. It was during this time that I became experientially aware of racial inequality, during a project round at an elementary school in inner city Baltimore. We were assigned to help teachers in whatever way they needed, and my primary responsibility was to tutor second grade students in need of extra help.

On this particular day we arrived in the morning as usual, but there was a tension in the air that seemed discomfoting. The principal met us at the entrance and informed us there had been a murder. She did not know where it had taken place but the body was out on the playground. We were told to guard the doors to the school and make sure that no children left the building. I was assigned the door that faced the playground where the murdered woman's body had been deposited. She was lying on the kickball field under a white cloth, her arm exposed. Many children cross the kickball field on their way to school every morning. I wondered how many children had already seen the body. My middle class white upbringing in Nebraska simply did not prepare me for this reality.

My second experiential awakening to race in Baltimore occurred while we were waiting in line to go to recess. One of the students asked, as innocently and honestly as all second graders are, if I was "white." Before I had a chance to answer another student chimed in and said, "nah, nah, he ain't white, he's light skinned." While I found this funny and endearing, it also created an awareness in me that racial categorization begins early. These were 7 and 8 year old students and already they knew that race existed and that some people were insiders and others outsiders. They loved me and saw me as a role model, so in their eyes I could not be white because that would have made me an outsider. I do not know what has happened to the children I tutored in Baltimore, but I thank my friends for the wisdom and education I received during my brief time with them.

In college I sporadically began the process of unpacking white privilege and deepening my understanding and awareness about race academically. In classroom discussions about race I became increasingly frustrated at the nervous silence and quiet tension that always

precipitated the end of dialogue. Similar to the female student in Seattle, I felt uncomfortable and did not want to ask my burning questions for fear of appearing racist. I think this is a common experience for many white students. Though my questions were embedded in a cultural understanding of racism and demonstrated ignorance of the structural construction of race, a more contemplatively oriented classroom would have enabled me to ask misguided questions, and allow others to answer them in ways that also pointed out the misconceptions in the question itself. As the classroom in Seattle points out, however, unresolved tension rules the day. Furthermore, it is usually a tension in service of maintaining white privilege.

In graduate school I became intimately familiar with “white guilt.” While it has become somewhat of a cliché, I think white guilt represents a deep and visceral wound in need of tending. In my experience, it comes from the pain of realizing I am the beneficiary in an oppressive system designed to keep people who generally look like me on top. It is a system larger than myself dominated by our cultural narratives, economic policies, political ideologies, and social indoctrination. More viscerally, it is the realization that this system which has benefited me so well has also caused the suffering of children I worked with in Baltimore.

Too often “white guilt” is seen as an end point and a debilitating outcome of racial discourse, instead of a necessary step in the process of transformation. In our view, the unrest and angst that accompany white guilt are potential motivators for change. Those of us who experience it want to minimize these feelings, quickly and usually in any way possible. Instead of the usual method of suppression, what if we engaged them head on? More broadly, what if the difficult feelings we all experience in the intersectionality of our identities with race became the course material? Chris and I believe addressing the inner dynamics of structural racism is a

crucial step neglected in most racial discourse. Honoring these feelings and tending to their needs is imperative for engaging the internal dynamics of structural racism, and for making it possible to understand the complex external mechanisms. In the classroom every student needs to feel that their voice and their story are important.

Racial Formation

As was evident in Seth's story, many of our assumptions about race can create an internal angst and anxiety if we are unable to clearly express how we feel about this often taboo topic. Critical Race Theory (CRT) gives us a language to speak and tools to use that equip us to understand the ways in which race is at play in our society.

However, before we can delve too deeply into the concepts of Critical Race Theory (CRT) we must first spend a few brief moments examining the cultural and contextual understanding of race within the United States. In their book *Racial Formation in the United States* authors Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe the colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans as the "first – and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest – racial formation project."⁴ Racial formation is defined as the "socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."⁵ Racial formation is a two-pronged process. First, it posits that racial formation is a cultural representation determined by certain physical characteristics of the human body such as skin color and hair texture. Second it posits that racial formation is inherently tied to the social structures of the United States that were used to organize those human bodies depending upon the aforementioned physical characteristics. In this sense, racial formation is

⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 62

⁵ Omi and Winant, 55

best viewed as a historically situated project that changes and adapts in ways that maintain power for the elite.

The project that is racial formation in the United States is therefore tied into the fabric of American society. The American racial project seeks to interpret the link between representation and structure in order to ensure that resources are reorganized and distributed along particular racial lines. “Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experience are racially organized, based upon meaning.”⁶ In other words, to live in America is to be subjected to this ideological project. Everyone learns, consciously and unconsciously, how to interpret his or her existence along the lines of racial classification. Since the Enlightenment, race has become a “common sense” way to understand and determine how we act within the world.

To be clear, I am sure that each of us has an understanding of what race is. But as educators, we believe that we have to move beyond having a mere understanding of race and begin to approach race from a theoretical perspective in order to constructively tend to the stressors of racialization. By beginning to think critically about race, we can begin to connect and heal essential parts of our being. If we are ever going to transcend beyond mere race talk to a “race consciousness” then we need to be able to engage in authentic encounters with ourselves and with others.

Critical Race Theory

In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* authors Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe CRT as a movement “of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming

⁶ Omi and Winant, 56

the relationship among race, racism, and power.”⁷ While CRT addresses many issues that emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement, it also pushes the critique of modern society further. Critical Race Theory questions the “very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.”⁸

Critical Race Theorists do not hold to a standard way of deconstructing race. However, there are five relatively universal tenants that are used to analyze race. The first assumption is that “racism is ordinary, [it is] not aberrational...[it is] the usual way society does business, the common everyday experience of a person of color.”⁹ Racism (and race) is an evolving concept of culturally sanctioned beliefs that, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages of a dominant group over a subordinated group of minorities.¹⁰ In this sense, it should be obvious that “the attitudes, practices, and institutions of the epochs of slavery, or of Jim Crow no longer exist today.”¹¹ As such, colorblind approaches to race can only eliminate the most blatant examples of racist action that stand out and attract attention, such as hiring a white high school graduate over a minority with a graduate degree.

The second assumption is that the US system of white racial hierarchy materially and psychologically benefits white people. In this way, racism has a material determinism for whites in that “racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working class people

⁷Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press: 2001) 3

⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, 3

⁹ Delgado and Stefancic, 7

¹⁰ This definition is taken from David Wellman in “Portraits of White Racism” and Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation in the US*.

¹¹ Omi and Winant, 71

(psychologically),” therefore motivation to eliminate it has lacked historically. Third, racism is socially constructed to meet certain aims, and therefore is able to be manipulated when it suits the needs of the elite. Fourth, because racism can be manipulated, differential racialization, the idea that society racializes different minority groups in different ways in a response to shifting needs such as the labor market, must be accounted for.¹² This is most evident when we examine the labor production of blacks and Latino’s. For hundreds of years blacks were the dominant agricultural workers in the US, but as labor relations changed and it became more profitable to hire immigrants who would work for less pay, the racialization of both groups changed. Lastly, CRT explores the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism, the recognition that no person has a single unitary identity. For instance, a white man from the south may be both homosexual and republican. In this sense, while this man may not be oppressed because of his race, he will encounter discrimination within his political party because of his sexual orientation. Critical Race Theory recognizes that everyone has potentially conflicting identities and interests that intersect within their personhood.

As educators we believe that CRT is an extremely beneficial way to analyze race, racial formation, and racism. As such, its use in classroom discussions about race is profound. When an instructor uses CRT to analyze their own existence they become acutely aware of how racial classification impacts our everyday life. We believe that that this first step, recognizing that you are a racialized being, is critical in order to incorporate a pedagogical approach to race talk.

This process will be especially useful for those of you who are racially categorized as white. One aspect of white privilege is that as a white person you do not have to think about

¹² Delgado and Stefancic, 9

the fact that you are white in most circumstances. Whiteness within a US framework is normal, and therefore normalized. CRT creates a theoretical framework that enables white people to critically examine questions such as: what it means to be white, how did whiteness become established legally, how did certain groups move into and out of the category of white, the notion of “passing” as white, and white privilege. Engaging these questions enables those who are labeled as white to discard their privilege of keeping race talk private, it gives them tools to use and a language to speak about issues with which ethnic minorities are all too familiar. These questions inevitably produce stories, and now it is time that I share mine

Chris’ Contemplative Journey

During the third year of my masters degree program I enrolled in a class entitled “Spiritual Formation for the Contemplative Way.” In all honesty, I took the class for several reasons, none of which involved a desire to actually “learn” about contemplative practices. I liked the teachers, I had friends in the class, and I thought it would be an easy “A.” Prior to graduate school I had no experience with contemplative practices. If someone had asked me to define contemplative I would have responded by saying that it is “thinking about something for an extended period of time.”

In regards to working through issues dealing with race, I was able to use the compassion practice to learn why certain “parts” of my being would be angered during class discussions. For instance, during one practice I noticed a part of me was extremely frustrated about being in the classroom. As I continued to connect with this part, ask it questions and listen for a response, I learned that I resented the fact that I had to work harder to be acknowledged in my other classes. Being one of only a handful of black students in graduate school can be challenging, and

at times I felt as though my voice was not being acknowledged. Moreover I was disappointed that I let these feelings bother me. I dwelled with this part, I held it in compassion, it had every right to be angry, but more than that it needed to be acknowledged as a valid issue. In this last step, acknowledging what that part needed, enabled me to view it without shame or judgment. It no longer controlled my classroom behavior – not that it ever wanted to – and it enabled me to become unmeshed.

As I continued to use this practice, I noticed how my ability to ground myself, behold and acknowledge my feelings (i.e. my parts) without reacting to them if the moment did not call for it, and dwell in compassion toward my feelings, impacted how I handled the micro-aggressive acts of racism that I experience – especially those that I experience in Academe. At a recent conference in Chicago, a group of my colleagues (PhD students and tenured faculty), all of whom were non-white, were confronted with what they believed to be blatant racist and prejudice attitudes from one of our workshop leaders. When we gathered as a collective group to discuss what happened, feelings of anger, frustration, and despair were present in almost everyone. And yet, while I was angry about the experience that they just lived through, I was able to stay focused on the purpose of their workshop. I asked them if they learned what they intended to learn. Given that this was a granting organization I asked if they learned what would need to be done in order to receive grant money from this organization. Unfortunately they didn't. I believe that my colleagues were victimized by their own feelings. By this I mean to say that they did not know how to acknowledge the part of themselves that were rightfully angry with the workshop leader. Giving in to this anger did not benefit them or the offending party. In fact, in some ways it re-inscribes the very racist hierarchy that we are trying to

dismantle in that it effectively kept valuable information regarding acquiring grant money for programs, research, and social justice non-profits out of the hands of the very people who have the ability to put their investment to good use.

Name the Practice

As Chris' own experience demonstrates, the compassion practice cultivates characteristics important for creating awareness of how we embody racism, and can help to transform our woundedness within that context.

We had intended this portion of our presentation to be given by Dr. Andy Dreitcer, but he is unable to be here today. So, if you disagree with or have questions about this section I would be more than happy to give out his private cell phone number after the presentation. Quite fittingly, as any erudite graduate student would do, we are using Dr. Dreitcer's definition of contemplative, which he defines as any practice that moves toward, highlights or centers around the characteristics of receptive open curiosity, a broadly experiential awareness of reality, wisdom or clarity about the nature of reality, an experience of communion or union, empathic care, interior freedom, interior stillness/stability, effortlessness, and compassion cultivation. As will become evident, the version of the compassion practice we are using incorporates all of these characteristics in some way. With this definition in mind I would like to explain the compassion practice in more detail and illustrate we why think it will be helpful for our current project.

The compassion practice was developed at the Center for Engaged Compassion at Claremont School of Theology by Frank Rogers, Andy Dreitcer, and Mark Yaconelli. Its roots are found in the Christian tradition of kataphatic contemplative practices, but in the process of

development it has been adapted for audiences unfamiliar or uncomfortable with Christian traditions. In addition to the contemplative characteristics mentioned above, the compassion practice involves two more crucial components; the use of imagination, and a focus on relationality. The use of imagination allows the practitioner to personify an inner movement. Following from this imaginal leap the practitioner can begin to converse and develop a relationship with the personified movement which in turn allows a healing process to emerge.

Though the compassion practice allows for focusing on a wide variety of inner movements, in the present context we are narrowing the focus to difficult feelings and negative internal narratives surrounding implicit and explicit memories involving race. Furthermore, the practice as presented here is primarily focused on developing self-compassion for healing and transformation of woundedness surrounding embodied issues of race. It should be noted, however, that this practice can be repeated in order to develop compassion toward others. In this case the practitioner would begin the practice from a place of self-compassion and focus on an external person or relationship for its duration.

Now, the practice itself.

Compassion practice

The version of the compassion practice that we are using is a six step process.

Step

1. *Anchoring*: This step fosters a grounded, non-reactive, non-judgmental space that the practitioner can dwell in and return to if needed throughout the practice. Anchoring is used to create this space via focusing on one's breath, the weightiness of one's body, or imagining oneself in a space that elicits feelings of safety, compassion, or sacredness.

2. *Beholding*: From this grounded space practitioners are invited to notice the presence of difficult feelings or negative voices which are then imaginably placed in a separate space where they can be observed and examined. Beholding fosters a sense of open curiosity, and allows interior freedom to emerge.

3. *Connecting*: Deepens one's experience with the feeling or voice being examined through an imaginal process of personifying it, usually as a small misunderstood child. This enables the

practitioner to converse with the feeling or voice and allows a relationship with him or her to emerge. The process of connecting fosters empathic care, compassion, wisdom about what the feeling or voice needs, and the beginnings of interior freedom toward the feeling or voice being examined.

4. *Dwelling*: As the feeling or voice becomes more understood and a sense of compassion begins to grow, practitioners are now encouraged to invite the source of that compassion to engage the child as well as themselves in a healing and restorative way. Dwelling fosters interior freedom, a widening sense of interior stillness, an experience of communion or union, and an encompassing feeling of compassion.

5. *Embracing your Restored Self*: In the penultimate step of the compassion practice participants are asked to notice what grace they are receiving within it and to let it soak into them and claim it as a living part of who they are. This step fosters interior stability, wisdom, and a new experiential awareness of one's reality.

6. *Freely Discerning Compassionate Action*: From this state of compassion and in-dwelling grace practitioners are guided to shift their attention to the original feeling or voice with which they began the practice. Beholding it with empowered compassion they are invited to sense within themselves a way to engage that feeling or voice that embodies the compassion and grace they have experienced during the practice. This final step turns empathy and wisdom into empowered compassionate action or behavior.

Impact for Our Project

The Compassion practice's goal of cultivating compassion toward oneself and others is achieved through steps that cultivate non-reactivity, awareness, empathic care, interior freedom and stability, receptive open curiosity, wisdom, and an experience of communion or union. All of these characteristics are important for understanding, healing, and transforming the internal and external dynamics of racism. When inviting students to begin noticing their inner movements the focus is on racial experiences, perhaps recalling their first experience of being raced. For students who are just beginning to develop a racial consciousness they could be invited to explore the feelings that emerged from having something pointed out as racist that they previously thought was unconnected. White students could be invited to explore

their feelings around white guilt. Nonwhite students could be invited to examine their feelings of anger or depression in order to discern the unmet need at the core of those emotions.

A crucial part of the compassion practice involves creating a safe space where one can acknowledge difficult and suppressed feelings, in this case about race, and begin to explore them in a non-judgmental, non-reactive, compassionate way. In addition, creating a space where compassionate connection with the racialized movement is possible allows it to be seen in a new and transformative way that is healing and gives it a voice. The move to dwelling in this compassionate space is when healing can begin. Inviting a source of compassion to dwell within and around allows one to begin seeing themselves as more than the totality of their thoughts and feelings. In this space race is seen as just one part of who they are.

In our dialogues Chris has pointed out that the space for dwelling, in which feelings of vulnerability are held in a loving and compassionate embrace, can be particularly powerful for minorities. Vulnerability is seen as a weakness and an opportunity for exploitation by the dominant culture. As such these feelings are usually avoided or suppressed by anyone who is perceived to be in a position of weakness in order to maintain some sense of agency and an external image of strength. Finally, the compassion practice allows an embodied knowledge and awareness that race is just one part of who you are, not the defining part or the totality of who you are; a point that is often overlooked by structural and theoretical views of race that are primarily intellectually driven. In this way students could begin to create awareness about and compassion for the ways they internally embody racism. From this grounded place where students have become more aware of their inner movements about race, interpersonal dialogue about race can begin.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we have and continue to develop moves a classroom beyond traditional forms of race talk. As we have shown, Contemplative Race Theory attempts to repair the external and relational damage of racism without giving sufficient attention to the internal anxieties that racialization produces in both white and non-white students. So, how do you teach young people about race and racism? You create a safe space that allows them to compassionately and non-judgmentally engage and explore their feelings about race. You teach them the importance of staying grounded in order to avoid becoming enmeshed in their feelings about race. And lastly, after creating this space of grounded non-reactive compassion, you begin your lecture for the day and you empower your students to speak honestly about whatever arises within them during this discussion.

In closing, let's re-imagine the Seattle High School story. On the first day of his Citizenship and Social Justice class, Mr. Greenburg, just as he did in the past, informs his students that they will be discussing social justice topics that may cause some internal discomfort. But this time, he tells them that at the beginning of each class they are going to spend some time preparing themselves to explore these feelings. In addition, he explains to them that while these feelings may be a part of who they are, they are not the totality of their being. I imagine the young Euro-American woman in his class would have still been uncomfortable with some of the reading and the classroom discussions that took place. But rather than trying to avoid these feelings, she would have been encouraged to explore them and hold them in compassion. And in this way, because of the grounded non-reactive classroom that Mr. Greenburg would have cultivated, we would like to believe that she would have felt

comfortable enough to speak up in the class and express her feelings about the topic at hand.

This type of classroom discourse lays the foundation for changed minds, and in changing minds we hope to change our schools.