

# Reconstructing Race

## A Teacher Introduces His Students to the Slippery Concept of Race

BY NATHANIEL W. SMITH

“I REALLY JUST THINK IT’S SO TERRIBLE that people judge other people for their race. I don’t see how they can be so stupid! I don’t care if you’re black, yellow, or green. I only see people as people.”

When one of my students made this comment, his classmates applauded. Yet he was the same student who, not a day later, noticed that one of our classroom windows had a broken handle. He laughed, saying the school was “so damn ghetto.” And he openly talked about rap music as “complete crap. It’s not even music—even I can get on a microphone and just talk!” I wondered how I would even begin to get at the contradictions in this student’s mind.

Yes, we should “all get along,” as another student once earnestly implored. But before we can, we must first understand the degree to which we don’t get along. This seemed especially difficult considering the population I was working with. I taught in Central Bucks School District in Bucks County, Penn., which is approximately 98 percent white, and 95 percent middle-class or higher. There was not much in the way of racial and socioeconomic diversity among my 10th- and 12th-grade students, who were tracked into honors, standard, and basic classes.

Comments like the ones above were not those of a few idiosyncratic individuals, they were refrains, repeated again and again, often in the exact same wording. I wanted

to develop a curriculum that made race enormous, difficult, and personal, when many students defined it as stupid, simple, and external. As a white teacher in a predominantly white school I wanted to help students see their own whiteness and the ways it has shaped their lives. I wanted to confront my students’ perceptions that “I don’t think it has anything to do with me—I don’t even



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*Isaac and Rosa, two emancipated slaves, whose portrait was part of a set of photos that Frederick Douglass used to educate people about slavery.*

have a race. I'm just normal." I thought I would begin by helping them understand race as a specifically social construct.

## The Breakthrough

"Mr. Smith, why are you teaching us history in our English class?" Students wondered why, in a course on American Literature, I would devote multiple days to discussions of race. I explained to the students the interrelation of literature and the societies in which the authors lived, often pointing out that one couldn't understand modern music without understanding modern times.

As my course contained a unit on slave narratives and another on the Harlem Renaissance, I justified race discussion as requisite to understanding the context of the literature. So by the time our semester together had come and gone, I had taught several lessons that addressed the concepts of race, the historical development of race, and the challenges to race presented by the constant creation of multiracial people. I had found readings and role plays, personal accounts, and documentary films. We acted out and discussed Twain's controversial *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, created graphic novels representing the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and watched samples of the PBS film *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Like many teachers with a passion, I bent the rules of the district curriculum requirements in favor of lessons I thought more pressing. But with all these lessons I ran into the same problem. Constructing race, the daily practice of ascribing roles and identities to physical features, is a matter of active perception. If race affects the way you are treated by others in the world, it necessarily depends upon what race they suppose you to be.

My curricular premise is that individuals can discover and address their own racism more effectively when they understand that all race categories

are political lines drawn in the sands of cultural and genetic diffusion and evolution. I can say it clearly enough, but lectures never bring the result I'm really after. If race is perceptual, it must be challenged on the level of perception. My lessons based on reading and discussion failed to produce activities that revealed to students how they construct race through their own vision and sense of identity. Then in February 2002, I was doing some background research on Frederick Douglass, and I stumbled across Gregory Fried's article "True Pictures." (It's available on the web at <http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-02/fried.>) The pictures he had found were the perfect starting point.

Before we began, I told the students we were going to start working with slave narratives soon, and I thought this would be a good exercise for laying the groundwork. As I handed each student one of two photographs, I explained that these were taken around the time of emancipation (1863, to be precise), and that Frederick Douglass had hoped to use them to educate people against slavery. Then I gave them three minutes to write a description of the photo. "Describe it, explain what's happening and who the characters are. Then explain how you think it might have been used in an antislavery campaign. If this were an antislavery campaign ad, what might be the slogan?" I avoided mentioning the race of the people in the photographs.

The students spent the next few minutes reacting to these pictures. Though I cut off the original captions, I included the names for ease of discussion after. Afterward, I asked them to share what they wrote. Students guessed that the picture of Isaac and Rosa arm in arm is symbolic of an interracial harmony campaign, a Benetton-style depiction of black and white together in youthful innocence. "The white girl and the black boy together arm in arm is a sort of vision for the future—there's hope for us to all live together," wrote one student. Someone else suggested that

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Isaac and Rosa show that “the little white girl is safe playing with the little black boy.”

For the second picture, students had a range of explanations, though often again the idea of safety emerges: “It shows that a black man can know more than a white person—he can teach them to read. And it sort of says, these white kids are safe with this black man.” Alternatively, some students argued, “the white kids are teaching the black man to read, kind of saying that he can learn just as well as white people and should be given a chance.”

In addition to using this activity with my own classes of predominantly white students, I’ve also used it with classes of adults. Every time groups of people have debated these photos, they have described the pictures as photos of black and white people together.

Once students aired their reactions, I revealed to them that every person pictured was an emancipated slave. They had all been socially known as black, made to live as slaves. They were unable to own property, unable to vote, unable to pursue their rights through legal institutions. So, I asked my students: Were they in fact black, or were they white? Though the debate was a stuttering one at this point, students began to engage in some disagreement. Before moving on, I tried to point out one constant in this exercise: When we’re not thinking about race, we guess race and attach significance to it. Though I never asked anyone the race of the people pictured, all respondents (without exception) included it in their descriptions. Their interpretations of the meaning of the photos were all completely dependent on the assumed racial identities of the subjects. This point makes it much harder for students later to claim they don’t see race at all.

### “Is Mr. Smith a White Guy?”

I then changed the topic, volunteering to be a contemporary example. “OK, so the next question is: Is Mr. Smith a white man? Yes or no?” I asked. “Raise your hand if you think Mr. Smith is a white guy.” Across all the groups I’ve worked with, only one person has ever suggested that they thought I might have been mixed—because



Collection of Greg French

*Wilson, Charley, Rebecca, and Rosa, emancipated slaves from New Orleans.*

I have curly hair. “So, without asking, and without knowing my parents or how I might identify, everyone here has quietly agreed that I’m white. So how do you know?”

On the board I made a list of the things that made me white to them. Kids had a lot of fun with this (though it was tough to avoid reacting to the descriptions, as some were quite unflattering); it’s a rare opportunity to pick apart their teacher’s appearance. “You have a thin nose! White skin! Thin lips! Blonde hair! Blue eyes! You talk white! You walk like a white man! You wear khakis and a button-up shirt! European ancestors!” The list of evidence was long, and the students threw out comments faster than I could write them on the board.

Once the list was up, I turned it around. “So, of all these things, which ones are indispensable? Which ones make me absolutely white?” I challenged each one. “If I had fuller lips, would I still be white? Are there white people with brown or black hair? Are there white people with brown eyes? White people who speak ‘ebonics’—are they still white? If a black man wears a button-up shirt, is it harder to tell that he’s black?” We went down

the list until the students were unable to defend my whiteness. Still, they vehemently argued: “You just know.” Again I asked, “But what about Isaac and Rosa? Why didn’t we ‘just know’ with them?”

Following this exercise, the ensuing debate has always been deep and often heated, tightly focused on what qualifies people for their race. No one tried to claim they didn’t “see” the race of the teacher or the people pictured—they had already revealed assumptions about race in their answers. All the students assumed and interpreted race, regardless of whether they considered themselves prejudiced, regardless of whether they were looking at an emancipated slave in an old photograph or a white teacher standing in front of the classroom.

With the rug pulled out from under the categories, we then moved on to discussing how, with all this uncertainty, we ever decide that a person is of a specific race. Using the traits students listed for categorizing my race, I suggested that all the qualities fit under one of three headings: color, culture, or ancestry. I then asked them, which of these provides the key? Is one category more important than the others? Students break down along unpredictable lines and bring forth some very interesting answers. One of the most strongly defended criteria is color. A few questions quickly defeated the color argument. Students said I was white because of my white skin, so I held up a piece of blank paper. “So if I’m not exactly white in color, how white do I have to be to fit?” If students reversed it and claimed that “black people are people with black skin,” I asked them to define the exact range of tones. What about darkly tanned white people? Thanks to tanning salons, there’s often someone who identifies as being white in the room with skin darker than that of Malcolm X, who they all agreed was black. And what of the emancipated slaves in the pictures? Most came to accept that people with darker skin may be white, and people with very light skin may be black. Inevitably, the kids argued about Michael Jackson, and the conversation took on a life of its own.

I offered similar challenges to those who would ground race in culture. My students often

mocked white students who “wish they were black.” I had students explain to me how a person “acts black.” What are the behaviors? “They try to talk Ebonics. They’re always blasting DMX in the parking lot! They wear low baggy pants with their boxers hanging out. I know someone like that who’s always trying to convince people she is black!” If a person has adopted black culture, would we say that person is acting black? Wouldn’t he or she just become black? What if this black-acting person had a black great-grandparent they didn’t even know about? Who would argue that a “black-acting” person with African ancestry is not in fact black? In the face of these ambiguities, students often drew the line at the most “scientific” seeming category—genetics. “You can look like whatever, but you either have African ancestors or you don’t,” is a typical student remark.

I asked about adoptees. Imagine I was adopted and didn’t know my ancestry. Imagine that tomorrow I meet my real parents and one of them is black. Is it possible for a person to be black and not even know it? If this happened, would I be right to come to school tomorrow and say I am black? If not, does that mean black is something other than having African ancestry? If yes, then how could everyone have assumed I was white? I find students often split right down the middle as to whether I would be legitimately black or white in that scenario.

Another response to the ancestry argument revolved around historic black figures. I asked students if Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass were black men, and they said yes. Then I revealed to them that both men had European ancestry. If ancestry is the key to race, why doesn’t that ancestry make them white? Why is it that in the game of race, even the slightest African ancestry trumps European ancestry? And in my case, students say they know I’m white because I have European ancestry—but how does one “see” ancestry? In fact, one sees only physical traits—not the familial lines or genes from which they might be derived. Here students came full circle to the point of admitting that ancestry does not clearly correlate with race—skin tone

and culture matter a lot too. So the argument is circular: A person is black because we decide they are black enough, and there is no single defining quality one must possess.

My purpose wasn't to clarify race, but to blow it apart. To do that I had to bring out the complex challenges that exist on all sides of the race definition. The point was to raise questions and make a mess rather than let students off with neat and easy answers. No more raising your hand just to say, "Racism is bad." But at this point I needed to be aware of a real danger. Students, particularly those white students who feel excluded in race discussions, may try to run with the principle that "race isn't real." As one student said, "This just proves that all this race stuff is a bunch of people worked up about nothing."

Obviously, this was not my intended result. So we got into a conversation about the word "real." I said to the students, "Many people will say that God is not real. As with race, there is no 'scientific' evidence. Let's imagine for a moment those people are right, that there isn't a god. Even if that's true, think of the role the idea of God has played in world history. Think of all the huge religious organizations in almost every country, and the influence those religions have had in the world. Think of how many people refer to God every morning in the Pledge of Allegiance, how God is written on every coin and bill in the United States. Even if God is just something people made up—does that mean it hasn't affected us?" Even the most irreligious of students agreed that the idea of God affected them; in fact I've found the atheist-identified students to be quite upset about how often they are reminded of their status as outsiders. There is a parallel to those who would rather not see race, those who wish it would go away—wishing doesn't make it so. No matter whether race is grounded in science or ideology, it has a long and powerful history, one that has determined the shape of our society in ways no individual can escape.

## Bringing It Home, Literally

Once students had some time to soak in these ideas, I ended with an exercise that literally brought the lesson home. Before doing so, I gave some words of introduction, as this piece could serve to alienate some students if not handled delicately. I explained to students that often we think only of certain populations as not knowing their heritage. It is a widely acknowledged tragedy of slavery that so many family lines were severed and cannot be retraced. This is likewise the case with many populations who may have fled oppressive circumstances in their countries of origin. When one thinks of people not knowing their heritage, one might think of adoptees first. But the truth of the matter is, few if any of us truly know our heritage in the way we imagine it. Think of all the people who describe themselves as "Irish and German" or some other two- or three-part combination. Can this really capture the genetic history of any individual?

For this exercise, I produced a simple blank diagram of the family tree, reaching back five generations. I then ask students to fill in the names of every relative they can. If one looks at the spreading numbers of ancestors—32 great-great-grandparents, 16 great-great-grandparents, eight great-grandparents, four grandparents, and two parents—there are 62 progenitors to name. I have yet to meet a student who could name them all. If one could, it still wouldn't identify the race of those individuals, even if there were pictures of them all.

I tried to minimize the discomfort for students who may have hesitations about revealing this kind of information by emphasizing that we are all on the same ground when it comes to our ancestry. None of us knows "where we come from," even if we know our parents and grandparents. I didn't ask students to share their trees, or even to feel compelled to fill them in there and then. The point was simply to visualize the vast numbers of

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people that came before us, and the inadequacy of the simplified descriptions most of us inherit. I grew up being told I was Scots-Irish and a little bit of Native American, but when I started to examine this tree and ask my family members, I discovered many countries of origin that had not been told to me (Hessian, German, and British), several branches of the tree for which there was no information, and absolutely no confirmation of the “bit of Native American” that I had always been told of.

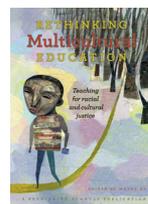
As a group we then discussed the significance of the holes in all our knowledge. If being African American means having African ancestry, how many of us know whether we are African American? How do any of us know we are any specific race at all? Some students will begin insisting on their whiteness, but most quickly realize they have no evidence to stand on. As one student said, “I don’t know—maybe I am black—or African American, or whatever, for all I know.”

Another of my students, the same one who said he didn’t see race, came back to me a week after the lesson. “Mr. Smith, I went home and asked my grandmother how we know we’re white. I asked her if she knew if we had any black ancestors. She got really angry and started yelling that ‘of course we don’t have any n—s in the family!’ I didn’t expect her to care so much about it. I quit asking about it after a while, but she never did say she had any evidence. When I showed her that [ancestry chart], she couldn’t fill it out either. She tore it up.” I worried I might have caused a family rift, or that I might be explaining myself to the principal soon, but at the same time I couldn’t

help but be happy that my student had taken it upon himself to seek answers—and he was sharp enough to recognize that no answer satisfies.

Of course, there are dangers. In my experience, no single lesson is received and applied the same way across all students, or even any two students. Some students will shut down in the face of this mess-making—others will select from the many potential implications the one they most want to hear, “race isn’t real.” It’s a danger, though I would argue all educational practice is fraught with danger. I believe it is promising to bring high school students to this level of thinking about race. If it is not an immutable, biological fact, then race must be a changing social fact. And if it has changed in the past, it can be changed now. Whatever dissatisfies us about the issue does not have to be accepted, looked at with resignation, and considered an inevitable part of our lives. Though it hardly guarantees that all students adopt a conscious, activist, anti-racist stance, it arms them against simple and reductive thinking about race, which is always dangerous regardless of the intent. ■

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