

“The Uses of Anger”: Confronting Racism in the Classroom

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For the first time this quarter, I included a “trigger warning” on a syllabus. This certainly wasn’t the first time I’ve taught topics that might be challenging or controversial for students. Like many instructors, I have encountered a number of students over the last decade who objected to the unfamiliar gender norms or behaviors they were learning about, to different marriage and kinship systems, to various religious beliefs and practices, and occasionally to the entire field of human evolution. I have most often addressed this issue by discussing appropriate and respectful classroom behavior and by reminding students that seeking to understand unfamiliar points of view is central to the anthropological project.

A trigger warning, however, is different. I decided to include one not because of topics that might be new and unfamiliar, but because of topics that many students have very personal experience with. What prompted me to include a formal recognition of and warning about the potentially traumatizing effects of course content was racism.

The course is “Anthropology of the Body.” Over ten weeks, we examine mindful bodies and embodiment, social and sacred bodies, and the reshaping of bodies through

changing medical technologies. One unit of the class, though, and the most difficult one to teach, examines terrorized bodies. The history of lynching in the United States is a central topic in this section. The students, many of whom have a vague understanding of lynching as a few isolated hangings that are part of the ancient history of the nation, are confronted with the torture, mutilation, and dismemberment of primarily, although not exclusively, African American bodies. They read about lynching victims who were burned alive, whose bodies were castrated so that genitals, along with ears, fingers, toes, and other parts that were cut off, could be kept as souvenirs. They learn about and see evidence of the thousands of white citizens who gleefully participated in this public brutalization. In class and through online resources, we examine photographs that were taken to not just document, but to commemorate lynching events. Collected by James Allen in his project, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), many of these images were made into postcards that circulated with handwritten notes. “Well John,” one of them says, “this is a token of a great day we had in Dallas, March 3.” “This is the barbeque we had last night,” another note on a postcard showing the burned body of Jesse

Washington says. “My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son Joe.”

I debated whether to show these images in class. On the one hand, their production as objects of entertainment celebrated ritualized torture, and they worked to normalize violence against African Americans. Reproducing and displaying them can continue to do violence. At the same time, these images have played an important role in anti-lynching efforts. The photographs of Jesse Washington’s burned body and the crowd of thousands that witnessed and participated in his murder were published in the July 1916 edition of *The Crisis*, the main publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and they were central to the organization’s anti-lynching campaign (Du Bois 1916). I decided to show them because, without the images, many of my students maintain only a vague understanding of lynching. It is difficult to imagine what we do not see, and that lack of imagination can make it more difficult to connect this history to current events, and makes it more likely that similar events occur again.

My trigger warning was intended to recognize the potential of these images to reproduce violence and trauma. At the same time, I hoped that it would create a space for students to discuss not just their academic analyses of the subject, but their emotional responses as well (see Johnston 2015 for a sample warning and discussion).

Racial Trauma in the Classroom

Trigger warnings are not without controversy. Over the last few years, as such

warnings have become increasingly common on the internet, especially in feminist spaces, they have been discussed at length in both the popular and academic presses. Trigger warnings at the beginning of articles, blog posts, or other materials, are intended to prevent people who may have strong, damaging emotional responses (like post-traumatic flashbacks) from accidentally encountering material that could harm them. Common topics that receive trigger warnings include graphic descriptions or images of war, sexual violence, or self-harming behavior.

Critiques of trigger warnings, especially in academic course settings, are extensive. One of the most widely cited is Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s cover story of *The Atlantic*, titled “The Coddling of the American Mind” (2015). “A movement is arising,” they say, “to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.” Pointing to a focus on microaggressions, the small actions or word choices that may seem neutral but can be seen as a kind of violence or cause offense, as well as trigger warnings, Lukianoff and Haidt argue that a “new protectiveness” has arisen that “presumes the extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche” and that can ultimately harm student mental health and resilience.

This article has hit a nerve in American society and has prompted a broader critique suggesting that college students are too “thin-skinned,” unprepared for the “real world,” and want protection from having to think.

My intention in discussing this issue is not to argue for mandatory or even regular

use of trigger warnings. Rather, I suggest that the backlash against trigger warnings is indicative of our larger national inability to hear the concerns of marginalized communities and to address violence, structural inequality in its many forms, and especially (though not exclusively) racism.

When we view trigger warnings as “coddling,” when we imagine that they are demanded by students who are overly sensitive or who just don’t want to engage with new ideas, we ignore the students who cannot help but experience and engage with traumatizing events every day.

As Bynum (2015) and others point out, in a social environment where images of dead black bodies appear in our Facebook or Twitter feeds with disturbing regularity—Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, and too many others—what does it mean to show images of early 20th-century lynching victims? My approach to this topic, including my use of a trigger warning, was not focused on students who wish to remain isolated from these issues, but on those who face them every day.

Is Challenging Race Challenging Racism?

In the United States today, while we hear continued calls for a “national conversation about race,” such calls rarely result in honest dialogue. In the last few weeks, we’ve seen students across college and university campuses (Missouri, Yale, Claremont, Princeton, and more every day) organize to confront racism and be met with similar dismissiveness: critics imply that they are immature, petty, complainers who are too easily offended and are themselves

intolerant of free speech (see, for example, *Wall Street Journal* 2015a and 2015b).

What does this mean for our classrooms? As many of us have argued, the field of anthropology is well placed to contribute to discussions about race and ethnicity. In my experience, however, teaching about *race* is a different challenge from teaching about *racism*. I have found that the idea that racial categories are social constructs is, for many so-called “millennial” students, a relatively easy sell. They are the nation’s most racially diverse generation and tend to profess a commitment to colorblindness and a “post-racial” society, though this attitude is not always backed up by a commitment to anti-racist policies (see Demby 2015 and Bouie 2014).

I have encountered these attitudes in my own classes. I have a standard lecture I have used in multiple classes to challenge assumptions that humans can be divided into distinct biological categories. I begin by asking students to brainstorm a list of racial categories they typically use when referring to people and a list of characteristics they use to determine which category someone belongs in. I then ask them to share and discuss their lists with other students in the class. Their lists are almost never the same; they have different numbers of categories, different names for them, and different ways of assigning people to them.

We continue by discussing the many problems with applying the race concept to humans: skin color variation is clinal and exists on a continuum with no clear breaks; the number and names of racial groups have changed over time and from one place to

another (we look at census categories both in the U.S. and internationally); the definitions of the categories are culturally specific (we compare hypodescent, or the “one-drop rule,” in the U.S. with the hundreds of racial categories named in Brazil, for example); the characteristics used to define race vary (skin color is not enough, and hair form and color, eye color and shape, nose shape, and other features have also been significant). We conclude that there is no clear, agreed-upon definition of race. We are left with race as a cultural—not biological—category, although I emphasize that it has significant (and often biological) effects (Gravlee 2009).

Students respond well to this discussion. Invariable, as they make their initial lists, several students only list one race—“the human race.” They assert that race “doesn’t matter” and are happy to learn from my lecture (although it is not my intent) that it isn’t “real.” This approach, of course, is problematic, and can make it more difficult to address issues of racism.

My attempts to discuss racism in class often run up against individualizing narratives. Many of my students see racism as the views and actions of a few unenlightened people, and they are left approaching inequality as the natural effect of cultural difference, values, and personal choices. How do we help students understand the long and continuing effects of institutionalized racism in the U.S.?

“The Uses of Anger”

One of the main difficulties of confronting racism either nationally or on our campuses and in our classrooms is the

emotional resonance and often volatility of the topic. As we see in recent movements on campuses across the country, we cannot discuss racism without confronting anger and pain.

In her 1981 keynote presentation to the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Audre Lourde discussed what she called “The Uses of Anger” (printed in Lorde 1997). “Responding to racism,” she argued, means “responding to anger; Anger of exclusion, or unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation” (278).

But this anger is often feared, and the fear is evident in responses that seek to blame the oppressed (by references to their behavior or culture), deny anger (for example, by referring to students as “coddled”), to divert attention away from pain (by redirecting conversations of racism to discussions about free speech), or to avoid action (because it is deemed impractical or simply insignificant).

Lorde’s primary argument, and what is important to remember, is that anger is useful. “Anger is loaded with information and energy,” she says (Lorde 1997, 280). “Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision of our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (280).

Confronting racism in the classroom means not shying away from anger, but recognizing it as productive. We want students to learn how to listen to anger and respond not with fear, or discomfort, or guilt, but with action.

But how does this work in practice? In our diverse classrooms, how do we address the often conflicting perspectives and concerns of majority and minority students? How do we allow for the expression of anger over the effects of racism and bigotry while ensuring that the classroom is receptive to all students? Is it possible to create a “safe space” in my classroom that actually feels safe for all students?

I do not have a clear answer to these questions or solution to these challenges. I raise these issues today in part to contribute to a conversation and hear your comments.

My current efforts are focused in three main areas: First, like other faculty (Antrosio 2012), I am rethinking my standard race lesson and working to develop ways to more explicitly address students’ lingering impressions that race isn’t “real.” As we all know, the social is very real, but this message can sometimes get lost in critiques of the biology of race. Rather than emphasizing what race is NOT, I increasingly focus on emphasizing what race IS.

Second, I am working to develop assignments that allow students to move away from individualized understandings of racism and inequality and to turn their classroom knowledge into concrete action that can produce a positive change. This Winter, for example, I will be teaching “Disease, Health, and Inequality,” a course on health disparities that, while not limited to addressing issues of race and ethnicity, is heavily focused on them. The problems presented in the course can seem insurmountable, and I run the risk of leaving students both despondent and searching for

easy answers and explanations where they can focus blame. This quarter’s course will require students to work together to identify the structural forces behind an inequality and to develop and implement a specific plan of action to confront it. This may be a local media or public health campaign, the organization of workshops on campus, a lobbying effort to garner support for political legislation, or other actions.

Finally, I strive to find ways to confront honestly the anger and pain that many students bring to class. Trigger warnings are a minimal, and ultimately inadequate, way to do so. While they may encourage us to consider closely how course material may be interpreted differently by different students, and they challenge the idea that intellectual curiosity requires us to set aside emotional reactions, they ultimately do not allow us to make productive use of some students’ anger or to address the alarm with which others may react. Conversations about race are never neutral, and we cannot pretend that our classrooms are exempt from the racism, sexism, or violence of inequality that is so central to American life. While we don’t sit outside of these issues, welcoming anger may be necessary to change them.

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