

“THEY GOT THE PARADIGM AND PAINTED IT WHITE”: MAXIMIZING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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WITH FRANCES A. MAHER**

I. INTRODUCTION

The phrase “maximizing the learning environment”¹ takes me back to my freshman year in college in the late 1950s and the memory of being exhilarated at the promise a liberal education held out to me: to become a whole man. Once my feminist consciousness developed, I could see the humor (especially being told this by Benedictine nuns) as well as the impossibility of this goal. The historical content and pedagogy of American education, although projecting the illusion that it encompassed everyone, ignored the needs, experiences, and perspectives of the majority of people in this country: women of all backgrounds, men of color, and all women and men who perceive their education as not made for them.

Are there similar workings behind the assumption that everyone is male that dominated my undergraduate education, and the assumption in today’s classroom that everyone is white? The purpose of this article is to explore this question by revisiting *The Feminist Classroom*,² and to ask how constructions of gender and race, particularly whiteness, were taken up or suppressed in selected college classrooms. Because there are similarities between the way whiteness is constructed in college classrooms and in legal discourse, I will provide a selected review of images of gender and race in legal discourse. By presenting three classroom examples, I will point out ways in which my co-author and I were oblivious to the workings of whiteness in our original analysis and conclude with examples of how professors and their students are coming to understand and challenge constructions of whiteness that lead to intellectual domination. These examples will suggest how to measure and learn from the moments of insight and ignorance, resistance and implication, and commitment and ambivalence that are present in any setting.

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1. This article is based on remarks given at a conference hosted by the *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* entitled Gender & The Higher Education Classroom: Maximizing the Learning Environment, held at the Duke University School of Law, February 17-18, 1996.

2. FRANCES A. MAHER & MARY KAY THOMPSON TETREault, *THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM: AN INSIDE LOOK AT HOW PROFESSORS AND THEIR STUDENTS ARE TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A DIVERSE SOCIETY* (1994).

The motivation for the research which culminated in the publication of *The Feminist Classroom* arose out of the exhilaration Frances Maher and I experienced and observed in other female professors and students designing an education appropriate for women. The goal was to document the pedagogical approaches and dynamics of classrooms devoted to feminist approaches to learning. However, as the study progressed we became more interested in how knowledge is constructed in classrooms out of the intersection of different perspectives. Drawing upon the recently articulated concept of positionality and the teaching of some of the participants in our study, we came to see that the dynamics of position, more than any other factor, shaped the construction of knowledge in the classrooms we observed.

Positionality refers to the idea that "people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed."³ While always defined by gender, race, class, and other significant dimensions of societal domination and oppression, position is also always evolving, context-dependent, and relational, in the sense that constructs of maleness create and depend on constructs of femaleness, and blackness and the term "of color" are articulated against ideas of whiteness.

Because the aim of our research was to look for previously silenced voices, we focused on the situations and experiences of women as victims of oppression,⁴ not always seeing the persistent powers of the dominant voices to continue to "call the tune." One of the dominant voices we left unexplored was the white students' position of racial dominance.⁵

One memorable example of this neglect of whiteness comes from a classroom discussion about how issues of race and ethnicity are involved in forming an identity and creating "a more inclusive feminist theory."⁶ As we noted in the book, "[t]he students of color . . . attempted to transform the classroom discourse to include themselves. They were struggling to see what would happen if they were able to give a name to their ethnic identities, as the standpoint from which to develop more inclusive feminist theories."⁷ In the course of the discussion, an African American male picked up on a Filipino American female student's cri-

3. See *id.* at 164. Positionality also can be defined as "metaknowledge, locating the self in relation to others within social structures, such as the classroom, that re-create and mediate those relationships." *Id.* at 202.

4. See *id.* at 203.

5. See generally ELIZABETH V. SPELMAN, *INESSENTIAL WOMAN: PROBLEMS OF EXCLUSION IN FEMINIST THOUGHT* (1988) (providing a history of the problem of exclusion in feminism).

6. This class was entitled *Feminism and Historical Perspective/Feminist Theory*, and was offered through the Gender Studies program at Lewis and Clark College, in Spring 1987. See MAHER & TETREULT, *supra* note 2, at 108-09.

7. *Id.* For background on standpoint theories, see SANDRA G. HARDING, *THE SCIENCE QUESTION IN FEMINISM* 136-62 (1986) (discussing feminist standpoint epistemologies); SANDRA HARDING, *WHOSE SCIENCE? WHOSE KNOWLEDGE? THINKING FROM WOMEN'S LIVES* 105-90 (1991) (discussing feminist epistemology and objectivity theory); NANCY C. M. HARTSOCK, *MONEY, SEX, AND POWER: TOWARD A FEMINIST HISTORICAL MATERIALISM* 231-51 (1983); Nancy C.M. Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism*, in *DISCOVERING REALITY: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON EPISTEMOLOGY, METAPHYSICS, METHODOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE* 283 (Sandra Harding & Merrill B. Hintikka eds., 1983).

tique of the feminist movement by saying that theorists co-opted the “methods of liberation movements—they got the paradigm and painted it white.”⁸ In the book, we emphasized the tensions, for students of color, inherent in the interplay between personal voice and the languages of theory and experience, as well as the white students’ resistance toward theorizing the experiences of students of color.⁹ What we ignored was the white students’ resistance to theorizing their own racial experience.

Our understanding of the multiple ways the paradigm is painted white was sparked by reading Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.¹⁰ Morrison presents a historical perspective on the construction of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” and how, until very recently, readers have been positioned as white.¹¹ From her perspective, this leads to intellectual domination, which if it is to be undone, requires looking beyond racism in terms of its effects on the victim to consider “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it.”¹² Scholars also have viewed whiteness not as an essentialized identity but rather the product of history and of power relations.¹³

Armed with this new interpretive framework, our previous research on classrooms could be reexamined for the presence of examples of the workings of white privilege amid the persistence of racial oppression and the growing racial alienation in our society. Among the most powerful frameworks for maintaining the superiority of dominant voices is the failure to understand the workings of whiteness. Assumptions of whiteness shape and even dictate the limits of discourse in the classroom as elsewhere. Much of its ideological power stems from its being hidden as “normal,” “an invisible package of unearned assets that whites can count on cashing in on each day, but about which they were ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”¹⁴

8. MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 109 (quoting a student at Lewis and Clark College).

9. *See id.* at 112.

10. TONI MORRISON, *PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION* (1992).

11. *See id.* at xii.

12. *Id.* at 11.

13. *See* DAVID R. ROEDIGER, *TOWARDS THE ABOLITION OF WHITENESS, ESSAYS ON RACE, POLITICS AND WORKING CLASS HISTORY* 1-7 (1993) (discussing race as a social construction). For a definition of essentialism, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism*, in *THE ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE* 84 (Naomi Schor & Elizabeth Weed eds., 1994) (defining essentialism as a reference to “the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization.”). For a more general description of the problem of essentialism, see generally DIANA FUSS, *ESSENTIALLY SPEAKING: FEMINISM, NATURE & DIFFERENCE* 113-20 (1989) (discussing especially the problems of essentialism in the classroom).

14. Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies*, in *RACE, CLASS AND GENDER: AN ANTHOLOGY* 70, 71 (Margaret L. Andersen & Patricia Hill Collins eds., 1992).

Much has been written about the failure of multicultural education¹⁵ to improve the learning environment for students of color.¹⁶ This is because of a lack of attention to the positioning of people into social relations of dominance and oppression and how that leads to intellectual domination. Reexamining previous classroom data revealed, for example, that maleness as well as whiteness was assumed as the unstated norm when white male students discussed working-class unity and middle-class mobility.¹⁷ From the unacknowledged perspective of the dominant position, the concepts of both race and gender were properties of the "other."¹⁸

Classrooms are important sites for examining the terrains of gender, race, and class that have been mapped onto students' minds. In the classroom, these categories can be explored not as natural states, or as normal or abnormal conditions, but as different positions that can be challenged and changed. It is important to know about the strategies that professors and students use to either challenge or reinforce assumptions of whiteness. An epistemology of positionality holds out the promise of not only unmasking the dominance embedded in this approach but also of dislodging the naiveté of social locations of dominance.¹⁹ An important way to maximize the learning environment for law students and to improve legal practice is to explore people's location within the networks of gender and race in legal discourse and classrooms.

II. IMAGES OF GENDER AND RACE IN LEGAL DISCOURSE

Images of race and gender in legal discourse are related. An epistemology of positionality is central to a pluralistic conception of women. Katharine Bartlett believes that the theory of positionality:

[R]ejects both the objectivism of whole, fixed, impartial truth and the relativism of different-but-equal truths. It posits instead that being "correct" in law is a function of being situated in particular, partial perspectives upon which the individual is obligated to attempt to improve. This stance . . . identifies experience as a foundation for knowledge and shapes an openness to points of view that otherwise would seem natural to exclude Central to the concept of positionality is the assumption that although partial objectivity is possible, it is tran-

15. "The multiculturalists believe that the school, college, and university curriculum marginalizes the experiences of people of color and women They contend that the curriculum should be reformed so that it will more accurately reflect the histories and cultures of ethnic groups and women." James A. Banks, *The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education*, in *MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION, TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE, AND ACTION: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES* 3, 5 (James A. Banks ed., 1996). For another view on multiculturalism, see generally Evelyn Hu-Dehart, *P.C. and the Politics of Multiculturalism in Higher Education*, in *RACE* 243-56 (Steven Gregory & Roger Sanjek eds., 1994).

16. See generally RICHARD DELGADO, *THE RODRIGO CHRONICLES: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AMERICA AND RACE* 2-6 (1995) (discussing the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and the law school hiring market); PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS* (1991) (discussing the impact of racial issues on learning and practicing law).

17. See MAHER & TETREAULT, *supra* note 2, at 7-15.

18. See generally Michael Kimmel, *Integrating Men into the Curriculum*, *DUKE J. GENDER L. & POL'Y* 181 *passim* (1997) (discussing how "gender" is a category that is not applied to men).

19. See HARDING, *supra* note 7, at 119-37 (describing the consequences of standpoint theory).

sitional, and therefore must be continually subject to the effort to reappraise, deconstruct and transform.²⁰

White women have largely resisted the point of view that an over-reliance on experience can obscure important differences among women and the recognition that factors other than gender victimize them.²¹ The obligation to improve embodied in the theory of positionality calls for a better understanding of the images of whiteness in legal and classroom discourse.

The legal literature on whiteness lays out the history of an ongoing national discussion of two key questions: What does it mean to have a race or be a member of a particular race, and who has the authority to decide?²² Assumptions of whiteness have shaped legal reasoning in multiple ways. The constitutional construction of race has ranged from the position that race is dominant by relegating a certain race of people to the status of property, to determining that race cannot be a factor taken into account because the United States Constitution is color-blind.²³ This latter principle has been characterized by Neil Gotanda as self-contradictory and repressive: racial identity must first be recognized, then suppressed, so that race is "noticed but not considered."²⁴ Lani Guinier characterized the principle as coming close to the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for lesbians and gay men in the military.²⁵ The practice of non-recognition limits governmental action and makes the continuance of white racial domination a constitutionally protected norm. An emphasis on race neutrality or transparency fosters white racial domination by avoiding the social and historical context of racial subordination and is inadequate to deal with today's racially stratified, culturally diverse, and economically divided nation.²⁶ The technique of non-recognition construes the interpretive structure in a manner that inevitably favors whites and serves to conceal and legitimate white privilege. Patricia Williams concludes, "Race-neutrality in law has become the presumed antidote for race bias in real life."²⁷

The contract doctrine of objective interpretation also has white racial domination as well as gender domination embedded in its narratives: the understandings and expectations of privileged white men are the standard for contract interpretation.²⁸ If one starts from the position that the standards of objective

20. Katharine T. Bartlett, *Feminist Legal Methods*, 103 HARV. L. REV. 829, 832, 887 (1990).

21. See, e.g., McIntosh, *supra* note 14, at 70-81 (discussing the problems of white privilege and gender).

22. See, e.g., Katherine M. Franke, *What Does a White Woman Look Like? Racing and Erasing in Law*, 74 TEX. L. REV. 1231, 1232 (1996) (discussing a case involving a woman who claimed she was entitled to alimony because she was white, although her husband claimed she was legally negro).

23. See *id.* at 1231-32.

24. See Neil Gotanda, *A Critique of "Our Constitution is Color-Blind,"* 44 STAN. L. REV. 1, 16 (1991).

25. See Amy H. Kastely, *Out of Whiteness: On Raced Codes and White Race Consciousness in Some Tort, Criminal and Contract Law*, 63 U. CIN. L. REV. 269, 269 n.3 (1994).

26. See *id.*

27. WILLIAMS, *supra* note 16, at 48.

28. See Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 401, 402-08 (1987) (discussing race); see also Mary Joe Frug, *Re-Reading Contracts: A Feminist Analysis of a Contracts Casebook*, 34 AM. U. L. REV. 1065 (1985) (discussing gender).

theory are normal and reasonable, then it is common to treat anyone who has a different understanding or expectation as defective. Objective theory “maintains white norms as legal norms,”²⁹ but allows “people to believe the law is not racist or sexist,” thus guaranteeing “legal enforcement of institutional and ideological white supremacy.”³⁰

The legal-historical narrative in the United States is a white-black paradigm that leaves other minorities as add-ons to the legal history of African Americans.³¹ Within this master narrative of bipolar racialization, the question of how immigrants from various Asian countries were racially classified into an Oriental or Asian American category is not addressed. Gotanda, a third generation Japanese American, related how his Asian American law students taught him that notions of race are generational³² and that his work on race would have to be expanded. While teaching a course on Asian Americans and legal ideology, Gotanda saw that his students, while deferential and polite, resisted his characterizations of racialization because he replicated too many of the invisible privileges of whiteness.³³ He was struck by the fluid nature of his students' racial identifications, some identifying as white and others identifying as junior versions of blacks.³⁴ Concluding that the fluid boundaries of race need to be addressed, Gotanda called for a decentering of the stability of social categories that takes into account other things that matter such as citizenship, religion, and accent discrimination.³⁵ Traditional legal racial analysis simply does not allow for a fully-textured examination of Asian Americans.³⁶

III. HOW ASSUMPTIONS OF WHITENESS SHAPE CLASSROOM KNOWLEDGE

I turn now to three class discussions that are taken from *The Feminist Classroom* to explore the strategies that professors and their students employ to maintain or erode white racial domination and to illustrate how the racial composition of a classroom matters. What were moments of insight and ignorance for teachers and students when the concept of positionality resided in a classroom alongside assertions of universality and neutrality? Were there also moments of resistance and acknowledgment as whiteness came into focus as a position, as a dynamic of cultural production and interrelations? Were these three classrooms similar to other sites in our culture, including the law, where much of the ideological power of whiteness is taken for granted?

29. Kastely, *supra* note 25, at 314.

30. *Id.* at 294.

31. *Cf.* Gotanda, *supra* note 24, at 2-3 (discussing white dominance and how the current legal system perpetuates that dominance).

32. *See id.* at 32-35, 37-40 (discussing white dominance and how the current legal system perpetuates that dominance); *see also* Neil Gotanda, *Critical Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory and Asian American Studies*, 21 *AMERASIA J.* 127, 128 (discussing classes called Asian Americans and the Law at the University of California, Berkeley, and other California law schools).

33. *See* Letter from Neil Gotanda to Mary Kay Tetreault, Aug. 1996, at 1 (on file with the author).

34. *See id.*

35. *See id.*

36. *See* Gotanda, *supra* note 32, at 129-30.

A. Constructing Whiteness in Individualized Terms

The first example comes from a freshman writing class of eleven students, all white, at Towson State University.³⁷ This discussion, which took place in 1989, treated issues of social class in concrete terms typical of many white students' attitudes, in which middle-class status is assumed for all white people, leaving the category "poor" as a marker for blacks and avoiding exploration of the wide class differences among white people themselves.³⁸

As an introduction to *The Women of Brewster Place*,³⁹ a novel about working-class black women in an urban setting, the professor wanted the students to look at the structural elements of class, race, and gender oppression, and see their interrelationships.⁴⁰ In response to her question, "Have any of you read any books that talked about social class?"⁴¹ the male students described social class in anecdotal terms, telling stories either of financial upward mobility or its limitations⁴² and comparing "rich people who 'can afford to do what they want' with those who have only a 'moderate' amount of money, who 'cannot just go crazy; they are saving up and investing.'"⁴³ Remarkably, no females spoke.⁴⁴

While agreeing with the students that "income is a major determinant of class,"⁴⁵ the professor pushed them towards more structural issues, asking, "Is there class mobility?"⁴⁶ Most students answered in the affirmative, but several males noted underlying class rigidities. For example, one said:

[A] lot of snobbery exists between old money and new money . . . I could become rich tomorrow, but because I don't come from a rich family I couldn't be in that upper class. Class isn't what I determine myself to be, but what someone else makes it, and that's the problem with it.⁴⁷

In the book, we noted simply that even though these students wanted to talk about their own positions within social class networks, they lacked the ability to do so.⁴⁸ We then explored more generally the difficulties faced by the teacher in trying to expose the race, class, and gender inequalities in our culture. After the above remarks the professor asked, "What about racism?" and a few minutes later, "What about affirmative action? Does that help?"⁴⁹ Based on an equation of blacks with the underclass, so that minorities who get ahead are a priori not qualified, students responded with comments like:

37. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 180-83.

38. See *id.* at 184.

39. GLORIA NAYLOR, *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE: A NOVEL IN SEVEN STORIES* (1982).

40. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 180.

41. *Id.*

42. See *id.*

43. *Id.*

44. See *id.* at 185.

45. *Id.* at 180.

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. See *id.* at 181.

49. *Id.*

It's really like a slap in the face, you've got the jobs just because you're Black or Asian, they're not saying you got the job because you're better or more qualified. We need your minority groups because our supervisor is going to come down on us.⁵⁰

When the teacher sought to turn the discussion back to race, the construction of race finally included the idea of whiteness:

The consciousness level in the United States has been raised, where we're much more highly aware of gender issues. Whereas race, white people don't often think of racial identity in terms of their own identity, what it means to be a white person The minority races are much more conscious of who they are. That's not true for whites in America, that the first thing you identify with as "who are you?" is white.⁵¹

This was originally characterized in the book as demonstrating how the teacher "helped her students confront racial issues,"⁵² but race was associated with African Americans, not whites. Upon reexamination, this remark, indeed this whole discussion, can be seen as a glaring example of the extreme individualism in our culture, in which the participants' persistent assertions of race and class as attributes of individual identity both mask and recognize group and structural issues. These students related a familiar narrative of discrimination, one in which they felt simultaneously victimized as individuals by groups from both above and below. However, only the latter group was racialized, and seen as the "other."

Whiteness was unconsciously constructed and relied upon as the social glue normalizing the students' connection to other, "higher-up" whites, thus stabilizing an inherently unstable situation. In contrasting old and new money, and acknowledging that class is "what someone else makes it,"⁵³ students seemed to be noting structural factors, but they were always experienced in individual terms: "I could not be in that upper class."⁵⁴ Although they understood something of class privilege through their lack of it, the students could not see themselves as privileged within the social relations of race.

The students' lack of understanding of their white privilege was carried over to their dismissal of affirmative action policies as unfair acts of favoritism, a personalized "slap in the face."⁵⁵ Students' belief in a system of individual meritocracy and concern for their economic and social mobility ignored the history of discrimination against blacks as a group. Their focus on the individual could have been dislodged by knowledge of the ways in which white workers have historically constructed their self-definition and their sense of themselves as white as opposed to black slaves and ex-slaves.⁵⁶ Some knowledge of the GI Bill or FHA and VA loans as affirmative action programs which enabled male,

50. *Id.*

51. *Id.* at 183.

52. *Id.* at 180.

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.* at 181.

56. See, e.g., Roger Sanjek, *The Enduring Inequalities of Race*, in RACE, *supra* note 15, at 1, 2.

European-origin GIs to improve their social status (while redlining and other policies kept African American GIs out of the same new suburbs) might have enabled them to understand affirmative action in a broader historical context.⁵⁷ Yet because of the students' construction of affirmative action as a threat to their individual mobility rather than a response to a group history of discrimination,⁵⁸ their responses ranged from mouthing the worst stereotypes about the unqualified getting jobs to comments about black teenage mothers on welfare.⁵⁹ The professor could not get her white students to understand the position of African Americans and Asian Americans because, rather than lacking the ability to do so, the students lacked the theory and the language to understand their own position as whites.⁶⁰

The professor's insightful last remark⁶¹ still cast whiteness in individualized rather than structural terms, as an issue of what it means to be a white person.⁶² As in the law, individual rights turn out to be white rights, because individuals are presumed to be privileged white males. Not unlike the dominant cultural belief that the law is not racist or sexist,⁶³ the male students here continued to believe that the United States' system of individual meritocracy was not racist or sexist.⁶⁴

B. Assumptions of Whiteness and Commonalities Among Women

While the previous discussion focused on class and race, students in an all-female class taught at Wheaton College in 1987 yearned for ways to identify with all other women, even women who were markedly different in experience and background from themselves.⁶⁵ In the process, however, they first identified race and then suppressed it, engaging in a strategy that Gotanda labels as nonrecognition or racial transparency.⁶⁶ By employing this strategy, they concealed the workings of racial privilege and subordination.⁶⁷ One student, in a journal entry, approached Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a narrative of patriarchy, rather than racism.⁶⁸ She searched for commonalities between white and black women by exploring one issue of positionality and knowing: how white and black, lesbian

57. See Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *How Did Jews Become White Folks?*, in RACE, *supra* note 15, at 78, 89-92.

58. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 181.

59. See *id.* at 183-84.

60. See *id.* at 181, 184-85.

61. See text accompanying note 51.

62. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 184.

63. See Gotanda, *supra* note 24 (discussing racial nonrecognition in the current legal system).

64. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 181.

65. See *id.* at 166-70. Everyone was European American except for one African American student. See *id.* at 166.

66. See Gotanda, *supra* note 24, at 16.

67. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 170.

68. See *id.* at 167. *Sula*, a novel set in rural Ohio in the early 1900s, is about two African American women, Sula and Nel, who were close friends since girlhood. The narrator says about Sula and Nel, "Being neither white nor male, they had to figure out something else to be." TONI MORRISON, *SULA* 52 (1974); see also MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 168.

and straight, readers and writers of texts can communicate with each other. The student had written in her journal:

Barbara Smith [a black feminist critic] says, "Writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all [is] something dangerous" Perhaps it would be less presumptuous and less offensive for the white woman critic to try to comprehend the "feminist" or "lesbian" issues within Black women's literature. These ideas and issues may prove to be starting points for Black and white women to understand and interpret each other's literature more intelligently One of the issues that Toni Morrison's *Sula* explores is the value system imposed on women by patriarchy and the conflicts between women that arise when women defy these value systems While white women can never expect to express a total understanding of the Black woman's experience, they can express concern and understanding⁶⁹ in those areas of Black women's lives and literature that parallel their own.

In proposing that lesbianism and feminism can help white readers to understand African American women's literature, the student explicitly positioned the other students with regard to Morrison's two main characters, Sula and Nel, by gender, in effect ignoring Barbara Smith's warning.⁷⁰ At the student's suggestion, the class began discussing lesbianism in the novel.⁷¹ As another student put it, "Sula says that no man could ever be the perfect companion, and maybe there is that—that struggle between being heterosexual and lesbian in the relationship between Nel and Sula."⁷²

It was not until much later, however, that the issue of race was raised for the first time, as part of the discussion of Sula's character. The class turned to debate whether Sula was "acting like a man,"⁷³ and the sole African American student finally broke in to capture a main theme of Morrison's novel: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be."⁷⁴ This African American student grappled with Morrison's idea in her comment:

I think that's a problem because a lot of times we're talking about how they're not men and they're not white, like you know here they are, they're stuck being Black women, you know, this horrible fate, and I think that Sula tried so hard to be a man I don't know, she really has masculine qualities to me, and—it's as if she can't accept herself the way she is. But society's not going to accept her the way she's trying to be.⁷⁵

The student, who had held back during the semester from raising the topic of race, only to do so in this, the last class, was the first person, except for the other student's journal entry, to mention race. The professor took up the African

69. MAHER & TETREAULT, *supra* note 2, at 167.

70. *See id.* at 168.

71. *See id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. MORRISON, *supra* note 68, at 52; *see also id.*

75. MAHER & TETREAULT, *supra* note 2, at 168-69.

American student's views, acknowledging how "tricky, scary, and difficult"⁷⁶ it is for white middle-class feminists "to talk about Black women's writing, especially when they're writing about a community that's not particularly middle class"⁷⁷ She then challenged the students to take the position of African American women for the first time, rather than hiding behind their gender similarities. She elaborated:

But that's not the whole story. And it's important to keep in mind that racism and sexism are not neat little separate packages, and now we're going to attend to sexism and then later we'll attend to racism In ways that may not be expected, a Black woman is going to feel an allegiance to women, and an allegiance to Blacks, that often those two are going to clash, and sometimes she's going to feel an allegiance to both simultaneously And I've sometimes had the sense in reading some Black women's work that there are certain aspects of these works that in a way seem kind of male identified, (maybe because of) an allegiance to blackness Violence is something that in some Black women's writing is more acceptable It makes me really uncomfortable—I don't want violence to be acceptable. But how can white women be sensitive to women of other races if we don't try to at least raise the possibility of different attitudes toward things that we thought it wasn't possible to have different attitudes toward?⁷⁸

This class revealed the workings of racial nonrecognition.⁷⁹ The journal writer initially positioned herself as a white woman, and by extension like everyone else in the room but the African American student. Despite efforts at racial neutrality, there was an underlying assumption of a white norm and the black "other."⁸⁰ Implicit in their discussion of *Sula* and *Nel* was the assumption of commonalities of gender experience among all women that left uncomplicated, and glossed over, differences among white women and between white and black women. This suppression of race continued until the African American student's remark about *Nel* and *Sula* "stuck being Black women."⁸¹ After the students made race explicit, the professor challenged the white students to notice race for the first time rather than suppressing it.

The professor reproduced, however, the dominant culture's practice of focusing on the race of African Americans rather than whites. She spoke of the dominant culture's bifurcation of African American women by contrasting their allegiance to women on the one hand and to blacks on the other.⁸² Her analysis of the interaction of racism and sexism with regard to black women did not include a similar analysis for white women, nor ways in which white women are male-identified. What was left unexplored was white women's relationship to white men in the service of racial privilege. The "different attitudes" of black women rather than those of white women became the problem. This separation

76. *Id.* at 169.

77. *Id.*

78. *Id.*

79. For an explication of this term, see Gotanda, *supra* note 24, at 16-23.

80. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, 169-70.

81. *Id.* at 168.

82. See *id.* at 170.

of the woman from the color most likely reinforced the white students' views of gender, race, and sexual orientation as fixed and separate categories of identity, even though the professor emphasized that they interacted and were not additive quantities.⁸³ In her response, the professor struggled for a way to mark and appreciate that her own attitudes, not Morrison's, might be the "different ones" that ought to be examined.

This discussion illustrates a phase in feminist theory in which women were most often constructed as white.⁸⁴ In part this was because much of feminist theory was grounded in personal experience and obscured the predominance of white women in building the theory.⁸⁵ This focus on white women and gender as the major issue subordinated race, class, and sexual orientation, while ignoring white women's privilege. The white students in this class had the intellectual tools to understand that feminism challenged claims to the universality of gender but did not yet understand that their detachment about race was a mark of their own racial privilege. This class discussion also illustrates the problematic contexts in which many white feminists work. The racial insulation of classrooms, as well as the silencing of many lesbian students, means that gender is often discussed apart from the racial, class, and sexual dynamics that give it more complex meanings. The professor has been preoccupied since our initial classroom research with exploring how a white professor and white students can confront race. She said: "I want them to think of other possibilities in life than what they start with . . . There are some things I think they kind of get, but they don't live their whiteness; I don't live my whiteness. I'm working hard to see how to do that."⁸⁶

C. Resisting Intellectual Domination: A White Author and a Black Audience

The two examples above reveal the effects of unanalyzed whiteness in classrooms where white students were the overwhelming majority. Even a cursory reading of critical legal theory demonstrates how women and men of color are writing against racial privilege and the oppression of people of color, because the "crucial problem" of whiteness is left unnamed and unresolved.⁸⁷ What could be learned by looking in a classroom where the majority of students, and the teacher, were women and men of color, who framed their own views of the world in resistance to and outside those of the dominant white culture around them?⁸⁸

83. See *id.*

84. See generally FUSS, *supra* note 13, 113-20 (discussing essentialism in the classroom); SPELMAN, *supra* note 5 (providing a history of racial exclusion in feminism); Johnetta B. Cole, *Commonalities and Difference*, in RACE, *supra* note 15, at 128-34 (briefly discussing essentialism and gender).

85. Cf. Martha R. Mahoney, *Whiteness and Women, in Practice and Theory: A Reply to Catharine MacKinnon*, 5 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 231-44 (1993) (discussing racial construction and women as differentiated actors).

86. MAHER & TETREAU, *supra* note 2, at 239.

87. See DELGADO, *supra* note 16, at 2-6; WILLIAMS, *supra* note 16 *passim*; Gotanda, *supra* note 24, at 16.

88. The 26 students in the classroom in the next example included 13 African American women, 7 African American men, 4 white women, and 2 white men. See MAHER & TETREAU, *supra*, note 2, at 275 n.10.

The final example focuses on a class at Emory University in which a visiting African American female literature professor was teaching a class called *Images of Women in Literature*.⁸⁹ The following discussion, in Spring 1989, explored the ways in which a white author used an African American figure for his own critique of white society. The teacher made a point of consciously exposing the racial and gender stereotypes embedded in the dominant culture's views of black and white women.⁹⁰ In one class, she gave a summary of the learning process she wanted the students to follow, stressing the importance of revealing what was on their minds so that stereotypical assumptions could be named and confronted:

The problem is that the culture tells you these things again and again and you internalize them, and you make an effort to find the cases that support what you've been programmed to believe. Liberation is liberation of the mind. You liberate your mind. Then you change society. But you can't liberate your mind until you examine honestly what has been put in your mind.⁹¹

A few days later, whiteness was emphatically named as a problem. The discussion centered on the figure of Dilsey, the mammy figure in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*,⁹² and showed the students beginning with an analysis of an African American central character, a victim of racial oppression, and then shifting to a focus on the perpetrators, in this case, Faulkner himself.⁹³ In the course of uncovering the meanings in the book, the students discovered that Faulkner, while critiquing white society, was not writing for or to African Americans but for white people.⁹⁴ They found that in a literary treatment which explores white racism, African American readers were paradoxically shut out.

The way into Faulkner's view of Dilsey had been paved by lengthy observation, directed by the professor, into the many ways that Faulkner emphasized, subverted, and ultimately exposed the toxic effects of racism on a decaying white southern culture.⁹⁵ For example, she had a student read aloud the following passage where the family son, Quentin, goes north to Harvard, and reflects on his changed views of African Americans:

When I first came East I kept thinking You've got to remember to think of them as coloured people, not niggers And if it hadn't happened that I wasn't thrown with many of them, I'd have wasted a lot of time before I learned that the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are, then leave them alone. That was when I realized that a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among.⁹⁶

89. *See id.* at 172-75.

90. *See id.* at 174-76.

91. *Id.* at 175.

92. WILLIAM FAULKNER, *THE SOUND AND THE FURY* (Vintage Books 1954) (1929).

93. *See MAHER & TETREAU, supra* note 2 at 191-94.

94. *See id.* at 195.

95. *See id.* at 194-95.

96. FAULKNER, *supra* note 92, at 106.

The professor initiated the following discussion by soliciting the students' reactions to the stereotype of the mammy figure. She asked them, "What do you want to say to Dilsey?"⁹⁷ Immediately a black female spoke up, speaking as a child whose mother must care for whites: "It doesn't seem she cares about her own children as much as she does about [the white family's son]."⁹⁸ The first three speakers were African American, whose explanations for Dilsey's failure to nurture her own children ranged from fear that whites might take them away to the idea that her job meant she had to ignore them in favor of the white children:

[Female 1]: . . . [M]aybe she doesn't want to get too attached, maybe they'll get rid of her kids. She still has this mind set not very different from slavery

[Male 1]: . . . Even though it was the 1920's, she did have that mind set that . . . goes from generation to generation so the time we are dealing with is something like slavery. Look at what it did to African American lives. You really can't put a time limit on that. But she totally forgot about the nurturing of her children.

[Male 2]: . . . I felt that she didn't love her children. In fact I would go as far as to say that she more or less did not give them a stable beginning whatsoever, she criticized everything they did

[Female 1]: It's not her fault that she has to take care of those other children!

[Male 1]: . . . Regardless of what the social constraints are or whatever, she's a mom, and she could nurture them in some way. It's obvious that she has the capability to nurture. Why couldn't she do it with her own children?

[Male 3]: It seems like it's more of a job, though, isn't it? Wouldn't it be her job to do that? It would be like any other job . . . when the job's over you're not like what you were on the job.

[Male 4]: But that's the thing—it's not like a job!⁹⁹

More discussion of Dilsey's relationship with her white employers ensued, during which the professor pointed out that Faulkner made Dilsey "the moral conscience of the novel, [and] that she is also a stereotype."¹⁰⁰

[Male 1]: I think that Faulkner thinks she's positive, but *she's positive for white people*. And it really upsets me, that I get the impression that Faulkner thinks he's doing us a favor by showing a positive—when she's not really being positive for us! I wish she could be positive for us, not for them, 'cause they have their own family—their mother and their daddy.

[Professor]: She's positive. I mean, be honest The negative images are the images of the white people! I mean give Faulkner credit She's the moral

97. MAHER & TETREAULT, *supra* note 2, at 191.

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.* at 191-92.

100. *Id.* at 192.

conscience of this novel, and we, the readers, are supposed to say this is positive.¹⁰¹

Our first analysis of this class focused on the African American students' identification with Dilsey's children and concluded that the reason Dilsey was so objectionable was "not so much because her portrayal in the novel seemed to them to contradict stereotypic notions of women as nurturing; rather, it was because of the whole history of the merging of femaleness and racial identification in slavery."¹⁰²

Could the black students' anger also have been focused on the unspoken racialized assumptions of the white students, namely their unproblematic location of Dilsey in the servant role, leaving "normal" mothers as white women taking care of their own children? These students were resisting the connection of a certain kind of motherhood with black racial identity, namely that blacks "mother" whites, not their own children. More broadly, the students were displaying the resentment they felt that once again, both in the way Dilsey acted and in the way Faulkner appropriated the figure of a black woman to be the conscience of a white family, blacks were being made to live for whites and not on their own terms. The African American students' discussion of Dilsey revealed their struggle to perceive themselves as normal, as children with all the expectations of American children in middle-class nuclear families in the late twentieth century.

In spite of the attempts by the white students to locate Dilsey unproblematically in her servant role, the students of color were able to uncover "literary whiteness"—to position Faulkner as a writer not for a universal, normative, and unnamed audience, but specifically for white readers. To be able to reconsider these issues in their own lives, it was important for all the students to come to terms with Faulkner's hidden assumptions of whiteness. In a vein similar to the critical legal theorists, the black students were able to bring in the social and historical context of racial subordination as they reminded their peers of the effects of slavery, particularly on African American families. They also challenged the dominant culture's strong belief in merit or ability as they understood that Dilsey could not give her children "a stable beginning."¹⁰³ Finally, they understood that subject position is everything in the analysis of literature just as Patricia Williams and others have seen in the law.¹⁰⁴

IV. CONCLUSION

To leave the seamless web of assumptions of whiteness unexamined in classrooms certainly will lead to the continuing reproduction of white privilege not only in the law but in all other aspects of social positionings. A social commitment to rethinking the nature of racial and gender categories is the first step toward the abolition of the underlying structure of subordination.

101. *Id.* at 192-93 (emphasis added).

102. *Id.* at 194.

103. *Id.* at 192.

104. See DELGADO, *supra* note 16, at 2-6; WILLIAMS, *supra* note 16 *passim*; Bartlett, *supra* note 20, at 832, 887.

What might teachers and students do in their own unique settings to maximize the learning environment? While classrooms often not only reflect but also impose the dominant culture's ideological frameworks, they may also function as sheltered laboratories where those frameworks may be exposed and examined. One hope thus lies in students and professors becoming authorities for each other as they are explicit about themselves as positioned subjects with respect to an issue or a text. Many of the steps toward this kind of awareness, however, are tentative. They are often undertaken, at some risk, by people occupying subordinate positions. Some of the ideas of law professors that I find most compelling¹⁰⁵ urge responsibility rather than blaming techniques to enable students to engage in multilingual and multicultural dialogues. An increase in candor associated with acknowledging the whiteness of formerly transparent white norms would in itself constitute an advance in race relations. As scholar activists committed to antiracist work, we should be conscious of what we know, and should bring our knowledge to bear on continuing to learn about ourselves, to interrogate our own social positions of privilege, and to use that knowledge to inform our research, our teaching, and our professional practice.

105. See, e.g., Kastely, *supra* note 25, at 294, 314; DELGADO, *supra* note 16, at 2-6; WILLIAMS, *supra* note 16 *passim*.