

Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies

How is it possible for many white students and students of color to be present in a university classroom where they read about, see videos documenting, and engage in activities that demonstrate the pervasive and ubiquitous realities and effects of institutional and personal racism, and yet fail to become engaged with racism at a deep emotional and analytical level? What can antiracist teachers do to promote engagement? The answers to these questions, I will argue, have less to do with ensuring opportunities for students from disempowered groups to speak, or for particular viewpoints to be spoken, than with trauma, erasure, mourning, and expression of feeling in classrooms.

The approach to antiracist teaching, and antioppression teaching more generally, that I develop in this essay emerged from an analysis of an encounter between an African American woman who made a guest presentation to a class I, a white woman, was teaching and the prospective and practicing teachers in the class. The presentation, much to the surprise of all of us, turned out to be traumatic for many students and evoked passionate feelings in virtually everyone present. After the students and I had reflected upon our responses to the encounter, our understanding of the power, ubiquity, and harm of racism and of our resistance to acknowledging it had grown exponentially.

What enabled students to begin to witness racism, or to deepen their abilities to witness it, I will argue, was the guest speaker's expression of anger in response to racism, which in turn aroused in students feelings that had previously been unrecognized, unspeakable, and unspoken. Furthermore, I will suggest that if a major purpose of teaching is to unsettle taken for granted views and feelings, then confrontation, with its attendant trauma, and reflection upon the trauma

are necessary. Thus, confrontation and the intense emotional repercussions that are likely to follow may be essential to the process of eroding entrenched cultural acceptance of injustices such as racism. I will argue that “democratic dialogue” does not necessarily promote such shifts. I will, then, frame antioppression teaching as a route navigated between confrontation and reflection. Opportunities to navigate the route cannot be “planned” but may, as in this case, occur unpredictably.

Background: Teaching Before the Encounter

Since 1992 I have been exploring antiracist teaching in the context of teaching the state-mandated Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Course in the Department of Elementary Education at San Francisco State University. I have been teaching at a time when poor children and black and brown children of every social class, by virtually all indicators—grades, test scores, suspensions, and dropout and college attendance rates—continue to fall further behind white middle-class students with each additional year of schooling. The underachievement of African American students in particular is persistent and pervasive (Gay, 2001; Foster, 1996). The most frequent responses to these disparities have been more standardized and centralized testing, national standards, scripted curricula, vouchers, and privatization of schools. Rarely is it suggested that individual and institutional racism must be addressed if what is generally referred to as the achievement gap is to be reduced.¹

Teaching this course for many years, reading the works of researchers such as King (1994) and Delpit (1997), and observing in classrooms have convinced me that racism does indeed contribute significantly to the gap.² However, very few students who arrive in my classroom are aware that racism is a major force in the society at large, much less that it is endemic to and perpetuated by schools.

My primary goal for the diversity course is to encourage students to rethink their assumptions about race, class, gender, culture, language, and sexual orientation that predispose them to reproduce rather than challenge injustice. I want them to recognize forms of injustice, including those that are least visible, and to become aware that as teachers they will have many opportunities to choose between collaborating with or challenging individuals and institutions that encourage indifference to oppression.

In the years that I have been promoting the unlearning of the “isms,” I have looked most closely at racism. In the section of the course devoted to racism my goal is for students, both white and of color, to come to see themselves and others through the eyes of people whose positions in the racial hierarchy are different from their own. This includes seeing from the perspective of people of color who

are attuned to the continuous mistreatment of people because of skin color and characteristics assumed to be associated with it. I also want students to become aware of the privileges white people enjoy just because of their whiteness if they have not already done so. Finally, I want the students to grasp racism deeply enough to be moved to interrupt it.

To promote these goals I ask students to write racial autobiographies investigating their induction into the racial hierarchy. We discuss videos that document institutional and personal racism, including *The Color of Fear*, in which a multiracial group of men express rage, anger, fear, and grief as they examine racism in their lives. We examine our reactions to James Baldwin’s (1988) *A Talk to Teachers*, Gloria Yamato’s (1998) *Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name*, and other essays that convey concretely and personally how the writers experience racism on a daily basis. We engage in class activities designed to raise awareness of white privilege and discuss current racial issues, including whether, as many initially believe, affirmative action gives unfair advantage to people of color. We consider how racism can breed internalized racism, the internalization or acceptance by people who are targets of racism of negative judgments made about them by society at large.³

We explore what a number of students think of as “reverse racism,” a phrase that connotes to them the verbalization of antiwhite attitudes, and exclusion of white people from social events by people of color. I draw the distinction between the former and institutional racism, a term I use to refer to the systematic, naturalized and pervasive mistreatment and marginalization of, or violence against, a group of people on the basis of skin color. For the purposes of this course, I tell the students, the word *racism* will refer only to the latter. I make it clear that, given this definition of racism, “reverse racism” is a misleading and inaccurate term.

Students write responses to each class session, expressing their thoughts and feelings. I encourage candor by telling them I am looking for engagement with the issues rather than the degree to which their views are consonant with mine. I read and comment upon the journal entries and return them the following session.

Several years ago I had reached a point where I thought I had gone about as far as I could in designing a curriculum that would raise students’ awareness of the ubiquity and severity of racism and internalized racism. Then the startling and surprising sequence of events that began with the encounter between the guest presenter, Sekani Moyenda, and my class occurred. The encounter and reflection upon it both revealed the limits of my teaching and deepened my understanding of antiracist pedagogy significantly. The efforts of Sekani and myself to understand what had happened suggested that the arousal and expression of passionate feelings and reflections upon that arousal and expression can provoke students to internalize information and perspectives regarding racism that had formerly fallen on deaf ears.

The Encounter and Its Aftermath

The events that impelled Sekani and me to rethink our understanding of antiracist pedagogy began on the July day when Sekani came to speak to the students in my diversity course.⁴ Three quarters of the students in the course were of European descent. Most of the others were of Asian, Filipino, Latino/Latina, or mixed or biracial heritage. Only one was African American. Most of these students would be teaching in schools as racially and ethnically diverse as any in the world.⁵

Sekani is an African American woman who teaches at an elementary school in San Francisco that serves predominantly poor Chinese and African American families. She had been teaching with an emergency credential for several years and had been a student in the diversity course the previous semester. I invited her to speak because, after completing the course, she told me that, in her opinion, most graduates of teacher education programs were not prepared to deal with the realities they would face as teachers of African American, Latino, Asian immigrant, and poor children. She was convinced that many of those entering the profession were more likely to contribute to the destruction of these children than to their academic and personal growth and power.

The day before the presentation Sekani informed me she was going to engage the class in a simulation she had created to provoke thinking about classroom management in schools where most of the children are African American and poor. She planned to call the presentation “Boot Camp for Teachers.” I had no idea what she had in store for us, though I knew for certain we would not be bored.

Sekani, arriving in African dress, introduced herself as someone who had grown up in the civil rights generation and, strongly influenced by her mother who had been a Black Panther, was a proponent of “I’m Black, I’m proud.” She told the students she thought one of her primary functions as a teacher was to prepare children to become militant adults.

She then shared several autobiographical stories. One was a story of an experience she had when she was in fourth grade. During her first week at a new school where she was the only child of color, a white girl with “swooshing” long blond hair who sat in the desk in front of hers repeatedly annoyed her by swinging her hair on to Sekani’s desk. Sekani expressed her annoyance several times to the girl and to the white teacher. Finally, after the teacher refused to intervene, she punched the girl. The girl arrived in school the next day with her hair pinned up “Heidi-style” and the harassment stopped.

After Sekani related this story, she posed the question, “What do you think I learned from this?” Several students suggested different possibilities, e.g., “You learned not to trust white people.” Sekani responded, “That may have been what you would have learned. But the sense my child mind made of it was that a violent

response can be an effective deterrent to those who insist on exploiting their white privilege.”

The stories Sekani told conveyed that in her view racism profoundly and continuously affects her daily life and the lives of black, Asian, and Latino people, including the children the students in our class would be teaching. She stated explicitly that the most insidious forms of racism, in her opinion, are those that are unwittingly perpetrated by ordinary well-meaning people like themselves.

To provoke students to rethink their assumptions about classroom management in classrooms populated by poor black and Asian children she set up a “worst case scenario” role-play situation, which she called “credential students’ greatest nightmare.” It was a simulation of a fourth-grade classroom that had been taught by a succession of substitutes with emergency credentials. Most students were given scripts that described roles they were to play as children, paraprofessionals, or parents. Jim, a young white man, volunteered to be the teacher. There was immediate chaos as those assigned to be disruptive children fully embraced their disruptive roles. When faced with the simulated chaos, Jim called a “class meeting” to reiterate the class rules that Sekani had taped upon the wall. None of the “children” paid him any heed.

Jim became visibly agitated and red-faced. “Sit down,” he yelled. “WE’RE HAVING A CLASS MEETING.” After a few more minutes of chaos, the classroom a virtual madhouse, Sekani terminated the role-play.

Then, as I stood on the sidelines, Sekani conducted a twenty-minute debriefing of the role-play. Much of the debriefing was taken up by a heated exchange between Jim and Sekani that almost every student referred to that evening in their journals as an “argument.” The argument included the following interchanges, spoken by both Sekani and Jim with increasingly passionate intensity:

JIM: “This situation is totally unrealistic. I’ve been teaching for a year and I’ve never seen it happen.”

SEKANI: “Well I’ve seen it happen many times in the school where I teach. Especially in the classrooms of white teachers. It’s based on my experience. I don’t know where you’ve been teaching.”

SEKANI: “What could you have done to diffuse the situation? Why didn’t you use the ‘para’ to send the children who were out of control to the counselor?”

JIM: “I would never throw a child out of my classroom, no matter what. They’d never trust me if I did that.”

SEKANI: “Perhaps knowing you will teach them what the limits are is just what they need in order to learn to trust you; abused and neglected children can’t always be counted on to listen to reason.”

At one point during the interchange between Jim and Sekani, Jim went over to the list of classroom rules Sekani had posted and below rule number eight he wrote number nine, "HAVE FUN" in bold letters. He told the class "I love being with kids. I'm just a kid, myself."

SEKANI: "These children don't need an adult kid. They need adult role models; they can have fun *after* school. Your job is to teach. If you can't control the classroom, you can't teach. The children are there to learn. You better not sacrifice the learning of my children to what you think might be the needs of an out of control child. If you want to play, become a camp counselor."

Sekani said she could understand that some whites fear black children and adults. She told them she herself fears whites, particularly rednecks.

JIM: "I don't appreciate your comments about rednecks; some of my best friends are rednecks."

SEKANI: "Then you may want to reconsider working in a predominantly Black environment. None of us are too keen on YOUR friends."

Jim's and Sekani's voices had reverberated down the hall.

By the time the class period was over two of the white women in the class had shed tears, and one had fled the room before the class was over. I had remained silent on the periphery watching with amazement and awe as the confrontation unfurled. I recall wondering if an administrator would find out what had happened and question my judgment, or if, as a result of the frank and passionate expressions of feelings, students might report me to the Dean. However, what I remember most vividly was my stunned realization that, though we were nearing the conclusion of the course, we were just beginning to scratch the surface. I also realized that my surprise was an indication of how much I still had to learn.

Initial Responses to the Encounter: Denials and Affirmations of Sekani's Views

The students' journal entries written the night of the encounter indicated a number of them had questioned the validity of Sekani's views and interpretations, including her assumption that racism was a factor in the blond-haired girl story. I cite two examples. Jim wrote, "I don't think she [Sekani] is sensitive to the feelings of everyone. . . . It seems to me she is telling us 'the way it is' from a very one-sided point of view."

Kathy, a white sociology major who had an undergraduate degree from a high-status university, had previously written, in response to James Baldwin's essay, that she recognized the destructiveness of racism and was committed to becoming an antiracist teacher. The night of the encounter she wrote in her journal:

I believe we have built a community based on our shared and differing experiences . . . and are respectful of what we have learned from each other and open to civil discussions of differing opinions. I found S . . . to be hostile, condemning and close minded . . . I found her attitude extremely condescending . . . I felt she completely dismissed any of our experiences . . . She claims she cannot be racist because she does not hold a position of power in society. When she entered our classroom, by taking on the role of teacher, she was in a position of power and she used that power to judge people and make disparaging comments on the basis of the color of their skin. Hmmm. Sounds like RACISM to me.

It was not until I read this journal entry that I realized how superficial Kathy's earlier response to Baldwin's essay had been, and that she had not accepted the distinction I had drawn between racism and "reverse racism."

Prior to Sekani's visit Isaiah, the only African American in the class, had remained silent on issues related to race in the "open forums" of class discussions. Nor had he shared with me any concerns about expressions of racism in our class or elsewhere. The night of the encounter he wrote:

Sekani touched a nerve in our classmates . . . She gave them more in two hours than they will get from any course or class at this university. She stated her agenda, and Jim and others attacked that agenda and forgot about the issue of teaching children of color. Our classmates should be grateful, not ANGRY. She opened or made people take their lenses off and LOOK! LOOK AT YOURSELF. LOOK AT YOUR STUDENTS. LOOK.

There were many more responses, including one by Jennifer, a white woman, who wrote,

Whew!!! What a class!!! . . . The experience is probably the closest I have ever come to feeling like I know what I look like or could look like through the "lenses" of an African American woman. This information is so valuable to me . . . It was one of the most valuable classes I have ever had.

*“Processing” the Encounter**Transformations*

In class the next day we spent an hour reflecting upon our reactions to the encounter. I organized the session by asking students to write answers to eight questions designed to elicit their thoughts and feelings about what had happened. I posed questions such as how they felt about the encounter, what they felt about Sekani’s story of the blond-haired girl, what they thought Sekani wanted us to know about teaching, and whether I should invite her to present to future classes, and if so, what changes (if any) they thought she should make in her presentation.

After they had written responses to a question I asked each student to read his or her response to it aloud. My purpose was to provide the students with a sense of the variation in their classmates’ thoughts and feelings. After the students had given their responses to a question I shared with them my own responses to it.

The following is a sample of journal entries students wrote the evening after the class session devoted to “processing” the encounter. Jim wrote,

Today’s class helped me to internalize the messages that were hard for me to grasp yesterday . . . I feel I’m really starting to GET IT. . . . What I’m starting to realize is that no matter what I feel, others have feelings and images that are just as real and also based on years of experience.

Isaiah wrote,

. . . I really feel some of our classmates were intimidated by Sista Sekani . . . I’m really glad you did the [debriefing] exercise so the many emotions of our classmates could be heard. I know you would like me to speak up more when we have open discussions, but I don’t believe our classmates can even hear ME . . . I feel totally shut out sometimes in our class and that may be ME trippin’. This is how I feel right now. ANGRY. I needed to know how people really see me . . . This class has been an awakening for me. I hope it awakens my fellow classmates. But my lenses have been opened as well.

Kathy wrote,

I feel much better after today’s class. I enjoyed the debriefing exercise. I had such a violent reaction after Tuesday’s class I was unable to focus on any positive aspect of Sekani’s presentation. After I had the experience of hearing other people’s perspectives, I realized I had learned and gained more than I thought. It was good for me to hear her anger and examine the deep feelings it brought up for me.

By the time the encounter and debriefing were completed a profound change had occurred in the tenor of the class. Whereas, before Sekani’s visit, we had discussed racism in tones we might have used to talk about the weather, afterward virtually everyone was emotionally as well as analytically engaged. Sekani’s visit had inadvertently unearthed residual veins of racism and provoked us as a class to confront them. It was an unanticipated happening that surprised us all.

By the end of the course there were indications the encounter and our reflections upon it had disturbed most students’ anchoring worldviews and initiated some significant transformations. For example, after Sekani’s visit Isaiah began to think about his feeling that his classmates could not hear him, and consider whether this feeling was the result of him “trippin’.” We might say he was beginning to see his and the white students’ positions in the racial hierarchy through the eyes of James Baldwin, Sekani and myself. He was beginning to see himself as a black man who, in the words of Baldwin, had been “assured by his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization.” Furthermore, he was beginning to see his white classmates as people who, again in Baldwin’s words, “try to deal with Negroes as though they were missionaries” (1988, pp. 7–9). He came to recognize that many of his classmates did not, in fact, hear him when he spoke. As he put it, “I needed to know how people see me . . . This class has been an awakening for me.”

Jim’s statement that he was “starting to realize . . . that . . . others have feelings and images that are just as real, and also based on years of experience” suggests a dawning awareness that Sekani, like himself, is a human being with “feelings and images.” It also suggests it was occurring to him, perhaps for the first time, that Sekani had images *of him*, and that she might see him in ways that until that moment he had not seen himself. His statement could be taken as an expression of a nascent ability to receive information about how he might be seen and heard by others whose views he had been socialized to discount or not to hear at all.

Making Sense of the Encounter

How can a closer look at the encounter and its aftermath both help us understand the difficulty many students have acknowledging patterns of institutional and personal racism and shed light on how teachers can address this difficulty? My response to these questions draws upon several concepts from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony*.

In *Testimony*, Felman and Laub investigate surviving victims’, perpetrators’, and

bystanders' ways of responding to the unthinkable historical catastrophe of the extermination of nine million human beings by the Nazis. They sum up the views of many members of each of these groups toward the Holocaust as a great conspiracy of silence in which all parties collude, a great cultural secret we are all still keeping from ourselves (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. xix). Felman and Laub ask how it is possible for many of the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders to have been present at the atrocities and yet to have erased the events from consciousness, and consider the processes through which such secrets can be revealed.

I do not use the concepts from *Testimony* because I equate or compare present-day racism in the United States with the Holocaust. I use them because they helped me understand why it is so difficult for many students, both white and of color, to acknowledge the realities of racism, and also because they suggested ways of thinking about how teachers can provoke students' awareness of the shared cultural secret of institutional and personal racism.

Erasure

After reading *Testimony* I began to see racism as a cultural secret, that is, a phenomenon that is rarely felt, acknowledged, or spoken of in the dominant public discourse, in places of worship, the media, schools, and universities. The notion of cultural secret helped me bring into focus the fact that the vast majority of students in my credential classes, both white and of color, had never had a significant conversation about racism before they entered my classroom.

Felman and Laub use the concept *erasure* to refer to individuals' failures to perceive, recall, and respond with appropriate empathy to evidence of inhumane treatment that is, or has been, right before their eyes. They quote a man (speaking in the film *Shoah*) who had lived near a death camp to convey the quality of not-knowing of bystanders and perpetrators at the time: "It was always this peaceful here. Always. They burned two thousand people—Jews—every day . . . No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 259). This quote conveys erasure of mass murder from consciousness that for many, *Shoah* suggests, continues to the present day.

Felman and Laub's portrayals of erasure of the Holocaust by perpetrators and bystanders crystallized my awareness that many white and light-skinned students had remained impervious to evidence of racism they had been privy to both in and outside of class. I saw evidence of erasure in students' failures to suggest the possibility that racism might contribute to the racial achievement gap, even after they had been given many forms of evidence of the ubiquity of racism, including a video that compared experiences of a Black and a white man who apply for the same job, try to rent the same apartment, go shopping at the same stores, and en-

counter the same police. Another indication of erasure was some students' continuing tendencies to label accounts of racism "exaggeration" or "complaints."

Felman and Laub offer the voice of a lone survivor of one of the camps speaking in *Shoah* that clarified for me what it means to say that victims themselves often do not recognize or experience their own victimization. "When I saw all this, it didn't affect me . . . I was only thirteen and all I'd ever seen was dead bodies . . . I thought that was the way things had to be, that it was normal" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 258). Another, speaking of victims' blindness to the meaning of what they saw, describes a moment of perception coupled with incomprehension, an exemplary moment in which the Jews failed to read or decipher the visual sign they saw with their own eyes:

"Then, very slowly, the train turned off the main track and rolled . . . through a wood. When he looked out . . . the window . . . the old man in our compartment saw a boy . . . and he asked the boy in signs, 'Where are we?' And the kid made a funny gesture, this." (He draws his finger across his throat.)

"And one of you questioned him?"

"Not in words, but in signs . . . We didn't really pay much attention to him. We couldn't figure out what he meant." (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 208)

The claim by Isaiah that the encounter opened his eyes suggests that, prior to Sekani's visit, he, like many of his classmates, had also substantially erased racism from consciousness. Felman & Laub summarize, "To understand *Shoah* is to gain new insight into what not knowing means" (1992, p. 253).

Felman and Laub explain how it is possible for conscious beings to dismiss or erase the dehumanization of self and others. They see the failure of so many perpetrators, bystanders, and victims to grasp these events as a function of the fact that the events are "in excess of their frames of reference." That is, the victims, bystanders, and perpetrators do not have the languages, categories, or frameworks by which to name and categorize the events and cannot, therefore, assimilate them into full cognition (Felman, 1992, p. 5). Their preexisting culturally shared frames of reference both delimit and determine what they can know (1992, p. xv).

The substantial degree of erasure of racism by many students prior to and during most of the course can be understood as an effect of the limitations imposed by the frameworks or languages they had been immersed in since birth.⁶ Their induction into the racial hierarchy began in early childhood when those on all sides of the racial divide were told or shown, implicitly and explicitly, that people with lighter skin are "more than"—more beautiful, more trustworthy, more intelligent, more civilized, and that the unequal treatment light and dark skinned people observe and receive is justified.⁷ Though they initially resisted these messages, because children are relatively powerless in relationship to the adult world, for most

institutionally racist interpretations and practices eventually became naturalized (Miller, 1983; Smith, 1961), as invisible as water to a fish. Though most of the students had forgotten the process through which their frameworks were forged, they lived inside them and were unable to register, and respond with appropriate feeling to, information that did not fit comfortably within them.

The frameworks constructed in childhood were reinforced and solidified by the media and schooling, both of which portrayed race relations as a story of continuous progress and treated the long histories of racism and antiracism in U.S. history superficially, if at all (Loewen, 1995). Thus, the media and schooling preserved the cultural secret of racism by minimizing its significance even as, with increasing subtlety, they portrayed race as a marker for inferiority/superiority (Sleeter, 1995). Psychology courses, central to teacher education programs, had focused students' attention almost entirely on individuals' abilities to shape their own destinies, thereby reinforcing worldviews that filtered out the effects of institutional racism. Therefore, most of the students had entered the classroom with lenses that could accommodate only a partial set of stories about the racial hierarchy, and the stories they could accommodate were partial to the powerful.⁸

The curriculum I had offered prior to Sekani's visit may be viewed as the presentation and exploration of evidence documenting some of the realities of racism through the use of video and print. Many students incorporated fragments of this evidence, and fewer students, both white and of color, continued to dismiss Baldwin's "complaints" as outdated, or expressed the thought that the men in *The Color of Fear* were "over-reacting" to racism. Students like Kathy, picking up on a metaphor I used regularly, began to write that they were refocusing their lenses, and beginning to recognize racism and even to speak out against it. However, I doubt anyone had developed a deep and coherent awareness of racism. Breaking through the erasures and becoming witnesses to racism awaited the expression of passionate feelings that characterized the encounter.

Trauma and Witnessing

Two additional concepts offered by Felman and Laub, *trauma* and *witnessing*, helped me understand more about the dynamics behind the transformations. In Felman and Laub's view, one function of the frameworks that filter experience is to protect us from awareness of painful events. Trauma, as I use it here, refers both to massive, painful, isolated events outside the normal range of human experience and to daily insidious and persistent events that continue to re-injure the wounded (see Erickson, this volume). What distinguishes traumatic events from other injurious events is their effects: The traumatic event or pattern of events and/or the

feelings aroused by them (Herman, 1992) are initially partially or wholly erased from consciousness (Britzman, 2000).⁹

Many of the injuries racism inflicts on people of color are more easily identified than those it inflicts on white people. Racism does, however, also injure white people. A primary way it does so is by separating them from their humanity as moral beings. Lillian Smith, a white woman writing in the pre-Civil Rights Era South provides an example of the traumatic injury racism can cause white people when she writes of being repeatedly told as a child that the love and tenderness she received from and felt toward her black nurse was a childish thing she must outgrow, and that, more generally, the human relations she valued most were of little value in the world in which she lived (1961, p. 29). She says, "We learned the dance that cripples the human spirit step by step by step" (1961, p. 96).

Smith shows how repressing significant elements of one's moral being severs connections between cognition and feeling, and "numbs" white people to injustices. Such numbing can be so wide-ranging and persistent that it comes to be taken as an enduring characteristic of one's personality or culture (Herman, 1992, p. 48). This process of becoming numb is then "forgotten." In Smith's words, "The ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind deep down into muscles and glands" (1961, p. 96).

To gain cognitive and emotional awareness of, or have a visceral encounter with, trauma is to become a witness to it (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 114). Because trauma cannot be contained within the schemas through which potential witnesses habitually receive information about their world, witnessing requires the destruction of taken for granted categories or frames of reference and the construction of new ones. This is a complex process that usually requires the help of another as shall be considered in more detail below.

Becoming a witness to traumatic events can be doubly painful. First, the shattering of naturalized worldviews is profoundly disorienting and painful in itself. Second, witnessing experiences that had previously been filtered out is painful because what enters consciousness through the transformed frameworks is itself painful and terrifying. Thus, say Felman and Laub, the witness "becomes radically transformed by the very process of witnessing" (1992, p. 10).

Witnessing can be firsthand, that is, the victims—those who are directly confronted by a traumatic event or daily persistent injuries—come to a deep awareness of the dehumanizing events they have experienced but erased. Because induction into the racial hierarchy has been traumatizing to them, white people as well as people of color are potential firsthand witnesses to trauma caused by racism.

White people can also become secondhand witnesses to racism. Through secondhand witnessing a perpetrator or bystander becomes imaginatively capable of perceiving and feeling the victims' trauma in his or her own body—gaining "the

power of sight (or insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 108).¹⁰ Becoming a secondhand witness to racism—imagining victims' trauma in their own bodies—is painful for secondhand witnesses because, as for the victims themselves, it involves shattering frameworks and integrating painful knowledge.

Trauma, Witnessing, and Mourning in the Classroom

Why did the encounter and debriefing provoke changes in consciousness that my entire curriculum until that point in time had not? What did it take for students to become first- or secondhand witnesses to racism? First, the traumatizing emotional power of the face-to-face encounter set the stage for transformations in both first- and secondhand potential witnesses. Second, both first- and secondhand potential witnesses' responses to the trauma were received and heard empathetically by the teacher and others in the class. Being listened to and heard enabled some to begin or to continue a process of mourning that made it possible to witness and integrate the trauma evoked and/or restimulated by the encounter. I will consider trauma, witnessing, and mourning as they occurred in our classroom in more detail below.

Trauma in the Classroom

When Sekani confronted Jim during the post-role-play "argument," many who had remained silent, as indicated in their journals, felt Jim had been speaking for them. They therefore felt Sekani's passionate challenge to Jim was also aimed directly at them and were, like Jim, initially, unable to integrate what she was saying into their worldviews. Thus, the encounter was a traumatic experience for many students.

Many must have experienced her challenge as particularly assaultive because it came from a black female. The frameworks through which most of them made sense of the world took as given that a black woman's ideas about how to be an effective teacher of black children and children of Asian heritage should not be taken as more authoritative than those of a white man, or indeed, any light skinned person of either gender. Tim, a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong and Daren, a white male, suggest this interpretation. Tim: "The 'white' [students] probably felt more hurt since the comment came from a black female teacher who might unconsciously be considered to be not that intelligent." Daren: "A dynamic (that I absolutely will not bring up in class) is that Jim was not prepared to accept . . . critique from an African American woman, especially one as strong and militant as today's speaker."

What is more, many must have believed I was also challenging their worldviews

because I remained silent and allowed the encounter to continue. One white woman wrote, "As a guest her opinions are validated . . . that alarms me . . . I wondered why you didn't intervene." She was expressing the expectation that I as a white woman would protect students from such challenges.

Many students were traumatized by the encounter simply because Sekani challenged assumptions about racial hierarchy that, as I argue below, were fundamental to their conceptions of self. However, the challenge was especially traumatizing because Sekani delivered it in tones that broke the norm against expressing emotion in classrooms. Her call to the students went beyond the expression of anger. She expressed rage. Her rage conveyed that racism is an assault upon her soul and upon the very nature of her people. It sent the message that racism is a wound that can not be healed unless fundamental and lasting change occurs—unless whites and white-dominated institutions become so fundamentally changed as to be unrecognizable.¹¹ This message was almost certainly in excess of every student's frame of reference.

Sekani's breaking the norm against expressing feeling in classrooms appeared to give permission to students to recognize and express *their* feelings. Indications of this include Jim's red face, the loud intense exchanges between him and Sekani, an explosive retort by Kathy to Sekani, and the tears of two white women, as well many references to fear and anger in their journals. One white woman wrote in her final journal entry:

I feel like my insides have been ripped out and been replaced . . . So far this has been my range of emotions: intimidation, fear, defensive attitude, hopelessness, realization, guilt, confusion, hope, understanding, admiration, respect. And I would say that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Recall Isaiah's words, written the evening following the encounter, "This is how I feel right now. ANGRY." In all my many years of teaching, my students' feelings had never been activated as powerfully as they were by the encounter with Sekani.

Sekani had challenged the students to see themselves as people who had internalized racist messages, erased those messages and their significance from consciousness, and, usually without their awareness, acted upon them. This provocation activated feelings of anger, fear, and shame. Whereas Isaiah's anger was what Megan Boler (1999) refers to as moral anger, anger at socially induced suffering, the anger many of the students expressed during and after the encounter, initially, at least, was of another kind—what Boler calls defensive anger. Defensive anger can be a response to shame induced by the belief one is being blamed for the injustices that provoked the moral anger. Defensive anger can also be a defense against fear.

Prior to Sekani's visit, no student had expressed any fears to me or to the class. After Sekani's visit there were many expressions of fear. One white female student

wrote of the post-role-play interchanges between Jim and Sekani: “The discussion became invasive, violent.” Another wrote, “When she [Sekani] explained that her goal as a teacher was to bring up militant boys and girls . . . off the top of my head I associated it with words like military and war.” Another claimed to have heard “our speaker mention the word ‘militarism.’” A student wrote that her heart rate increased in response to the questions I posed during the processing session. Why had my asking questions caused her heartbeat to quicken? What did she fear?

Sekani’s expression of anger and rage, her references to “militancy,” and her story of the blond-haired girl, likely restimulated fears of black violence that had originally accompanied most students’ induction into the racial hierarchy. Given the frequency of media portrayals of crime and violence perpetrated by black men, the role-play likely evoked terror at the prospect of dealing with what many had learned to see as violence-prone black children and their parents.

Jim’s interchange with Sekani about “rednecks” may have provoked in him and others the fear that if they began to see racism from Sekani’s point of view, they would be setting themselves apart from their families or friends. Fears of not belonging reside in the most vulnerable corners of our psyches. Perhaps at least some of the students, though they were unaware of it, were deeply invested in keeping at bay Sekani’s view that she and other people of color had been unjustly disempowered, because they feared destruction of fundamental beliefs about how rewards and punishments are meted out in a society they had learned to think of as just.

Some of the students’ defensive anger may have also served as a shield against recognizing that their moral compasses were failing them. Some of the white and light-skinned students who responded with defensive anger may have been resisting facing the shameful awareness that they had in fact been bystanders to racism—that they had not noticed, and were not outraged or even moved by, injustices experienced by others. Shame, in contrast to guilt, is a self-judgment not against one’s acts, but upon one’s very being. Their shame regarding their failure to become outraged by racism may have been intimately connected with a profound desire to be recognized as worthy of respect. Maybe Jim’s and other students’ defensive anger was a response to a dawning awareness that their positions in the racial hierarchy, which provided important sources of self-esteem, might be unearned and undeserved.

Mourning: Becoming Witnesses by Being Heard

The encounter initially provoked erasure of Sekani’s message, for example Kathy’s and Jim’s failure to take seriously Sekani’s testimony that racism affected her daily experience, and Isaiah’s continuing difficulty acknowledging racism. (“That may be me trippin’.”) It also evoked strong, and, for most, aversive, feelings without

suggesting any way to adequately respond to them.¹² For many, this aroused anxiety—a generalized feeling of dread.

However, though an unpleasant sensation, anxiety can set the stage for a moment of transformation in those who have the spirit and inclination to recognize and reflect upon their emotional responses and go beyond them. In fact, trauma, defensive and moral anger, and anxiety can be seen as essential precursors to the complex dynamic involved in mourning.¹³ Mourning is a process of naming and confronting one’s own and others’ suffering, of recognizing and coming to terms with loss, whether the loss be of an actual person, a way of making sense of social experience, or an ideal (Britzman, 2000). It can free those who experience it to participate energetically in unraveling the institutional structures that keep injustices in place.

Mourning is set in motion when one begins to reflect upon trauma one has experienced. It is this form of self-reflection that Jim expressed after the processing session when he wrote, “While the role play exercise was in progress . . . I was angered and defensive.” Kathy reflected upon her initial reaction to the encounter by writing, “I had such a violent reaction after Tuesday’s class. I think it was good for me to hear her anger and to examine the deep feelings it brought up for me.”

How is it possible to mourn the various losses incurred by one’s own and others’ racism, in the face of a psychological and cultural dynamic that militates against acknowledging such suffering in oneself and others? Felman & Laub (1992) suggest that it is being heard empathetically that enables individuals to become witnesses to trauma they have experienced and to traumatic experiences of others. In their words, “It takes two to witness the unconscious” (p. 115).

Individuals can not empathize with the pain of others if they have not brought to consciousness and experienced the pain they themselves have been directly subjected to (Miller, 1983). Thus, the trauma white people experienced as they were socialized into the racial order must be heard empathetically if they are to become secondhand witnesses to the trauma people of color experience firsthand.

Being an empathetic listener requires having mourned enough of one’s own traumatic experience to be able to hear and respond empathetically to, rather than erase, what potential witnesses are saying. To “hear” the trauma of another, listeners must have the frameworks and categories that enable them to apprehend the clues the potential witness offers to what he or she grasps only dimly if at all. Hearing is made more difficult because people who have experienced trauma often prefer to remain silent in order to protect themselves from the fear of being heard and thus of hearing themselves (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 58). Responding empathetically involves conveying that failure to feel and know one’s own pain and the pain of others is a consequence of social experience and, therefore, has been, for the most part, beyond conscious control.

Students' Experiences of Being Listened to and Being Heard

After the encounter students had several opportunities for feelings that had been evoked by the trauma of the encounter to be listened to with empathy and heard, by their classmates and by me. During the processing session, as they read aloud and listened to responses to my questions about the traumatic experiences they had shared, they discovered there was at least one other student who shared their views and feelings. Thus, during the processing session, everyone had the opportunity to have his or her feelings heard by an empathetic other. Students had “the right to pass,” but on the day we reflected together upon Sekani’s visit everyone seemed eager to share at least some of their feelings and views. The debriefing session also revealed that refusal to acknowledge the validity of Sekani’s concerns and feelings was not the only response possible. It therefore put students who had continued to erase Sekani’s perspectives in a position to reflect further upon their own feelings and views.

Felman (1992) describes her students’ delayed reactions to testimonies of Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders that resulted in part from intense interactions with one another outside of class. Such interactions were another venue where students’ feelings could be heard empathetically. The journals of my students document a similar process that likely contributed to their changing views.

I also listened with empathy to the students’ responses to the trauma that was provoked or re-evoked by the encounter. I communicated my empathetic understanding both during the processing session and in my written responses to the journals. (In fact, throughout the course I had, in my responses to journal entries, “heard” and encouraged students to acknowledge the pain they had experienced as a result of being subjected to any of the “isms,” including adultism.)

I could listen with empathy because I myself had previously been listened to with empathy as I grappled with my own defensiveness and erasures, and could therefore understand from personal experience and convey to students that their erasures of racism and their defensive anger resulted from their socialization and had been beyond their control. I could also convey that their fear, anxiety, and shame could be seen as initial stages in the process of becoming witnesses to racism.

During the course I made no special effort to provide Isaiah with an opportunity to speak to his classmates, many of whom he correctly suspected would not in any case have heard him. By inviting Sekani what I did provide him was an expression of rage by another who shared his experience of being targeted by racism. Although he did not speak directly to her, Sekani played the role of empathetic listener for Isaiah by affirming his reality and the legitimacy of his latent rage.¹⁴

The work we had done in class before Sekani’s visit, and the work some students

had done before the course began, had prepared some to begin to recognize and mourn the cruelty, fear, and shame incurred by racism, and to consider the gains that confronting racism in ourselves and in society makes possible. For others, the mobilization of fear, shame, anxiety, and resistance that are the prerequisites to mourning began only on the day Sekani entered our classroom.

For some, the opportunity to catch a glimpse of how Sekani saw and felt about them, traumatic though it was, became the most powerful and significant experience they had ever had in a classroom. This was as true for Isaiah as it was for Jennifer. Why would this be so? Perhaps because, by showing them how they looked to her, Sekani was revealing to them aspects of themselves they had been struggling to shut out. The recovery of those denied aspects of themselves may have increased their sense of wholeness and may therefore explain why so many were so enlivened by the encounter and our subsequent reflection upon it.

Lessons from the Encounter: Disturbing and Affirming Silenced Feelings

Megan Boler, in the conclusion to *Feeling Power*, states, “The best antiracist . . . work I have studied and seen in action is not about confrontation but rather a mutual exploration” (1999, p. 199). I would have agreed with this before Sekani and I began to revisit and examine the encounter and its aftermath. However, I now believe that if a major purpose of teaching is the promotion of students’ abilities to receive information that is dissonant, not just congruent, with what they have learned before, then confrontation with its attendant trauma is necessary. I have come to concur with Felman and Laub that crisis is essential in order for cultural secrets to be revealed.

However, though many students in our class were only able to grapple with racism at a deep emotional and cognitive level because the encounter with Sekani had been traumatizing for them, speaking their feelings about the experiences they had shared and having their responses to it heard was also necessary. The artistry of teaching might then be seen as artful navigation between exploration and confrontation.

What happened in class was not the result of a deliberate strategy to provoke a crisis (see Erickson, this volume), but an accident. The process was set in motion when I invited a guest into the classroom who was willing to express with passion insurrectionist views that challenged students’ frameworks for making sense of their social worlds. As Alison Jones argues (this volume), it is not the responsibility of marginalized or colonized students to fulfill this educative role; in fact, teachers are responsible for constructing a curriculum that is as educative for marginalized as for more privileged students.

The encounter was an extraordinary event. What conclusions can we draw from it that can inform our practice on those many “ordinary” teaching days? What I have come to understand from teaching since the encounter is that it is not necessary to initiate a process of exploding cultural secrets by inviting a guest to class. I have become increasingly aware that whenever racism or any other cultural secret is the topic of discussion trauma, in one guise or another, is also present, an ubiquitous, but most frequently unrecognized and uninvited guest. We simply need to recognize the clues to its presence, the courage to acknowledge and explore the disturbing feelings it evokes, and the willingness to support students in mourning the pain that bursting open cultural secrets entails. If we do not recognize the presence of trauma and welcome and reflect upon it, we insure that students will be left in harmful repetitions that reproduce the status quo.

Much of what is taken to be “democratic dialogue” is a repetition that does not disrupt the common wisdom. That my pedagogy had at best been marginally disruptive prior to Sekani’s visit was powerfully revealed on the day she came to class. The failure to recognize and honor troubling feelings in our classrooms sustains cultural secrets. It permits students to remain comfortable by reading stories of oppression and injustice as exaggerations and exceptions, and narratives of justice as the rule.

Notes

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1. See, for example, a story by Viadero (2000) on the front page of the “mainstream” education periodical *Education Week* entitled, “Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations.” Though in this essay I will speak of racism in the singular, I want to acknowledge that there are many forms of racism, and the processes the term refers to change over time. All forms, however, are maintained by institutional power.
2. An interrelated but also independent factor is, of course, institutionalized social class injustice, or inequalities of wealth.
3. See Carter (1995) for an analysis of the dangers of assuming that racism is necessarily internalized by people of color. Some may internalize racism; others develop appropriate anger in response to it. Many respond in both of these ways.
4. This account and analysis of the encounter is adapted from Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda (2001) *Taking It Personally: Racism in Classrooms from Kindergarten to College*.
5. In California 60% of public school students and fewer than 23% of their teachers are persons of color (Keheler et al., 1999, p. 10).

Each of the classes depicted in *Troubling Speech* has a unique racial (and class and gender) composition and geographical and historical location, and these are central to each analysis. In the classes I have taught at San Francisco State no student has ever made the case for the protection of hate speech.

6. White foreign students from Spain and France, like U.S. students, are usually unaware of racism in their countries of origin.

7. In a remarkable study of preschoolers Debra Van Ausdale (2001) shows how early the process of racist conditioning begins. Three of the best explications of this process I know of are Lillian Smith’s, *Killers of the Dream* (1961), Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Skin/Blood/Heart” (1984) and Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good* (1983).
8. See Kumashiro (2001) for an extended exploration of these related meanings of “partial” in relationship to antioppressive education.
9. Forms and degrees of trauma vary and there is no “essential” form. Herman writes of trauma, “Traumatic reactions occur when . . . neither resistance nor escape is possible (and) the human system of self defense becomes overwhelmed . . . The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (1992, p. 34).
10. A number of scholars have examined what Megan Boler (1999) calls the risks of empathy. One major concern is that an empathetic person may reduce the pain another feels to what she herself feels, wiping out the difference in circumstances, thinking, “Her pain is just like mine,” rather than “my pain is like hers in this one way” (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001). Of course, secondhand witnesses can never gain a complete grasp of victims’ traumas, and it is important that they understand the differences between first- and secondhand witnessing.
11. Kohl (2003). Kohl refers to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1986) for his analysis of rage. Felman describes a similar trauma that occurred after she showed her class videos of testimonies by Holocaust survivors. She wrote, “The class felt actively addressed not only by the video, but by the intensity and intimacy of the testimonial encounter throughout the course (p. 48). I see the face-to-face encounter with Sekani as even more intense and intimate than testimony given by video, in our case, the video, *The Color of Fear*.
12. The analysis that follows depends heavily upon Salverson (2000).
13. According to Felman & Laub (1992), “Innocence can only mean lack of awareness . . . guilt is not a state opposed to innocence; it is a process of awakening” (p. 196). Here Felman using the term *guilt* for what I understand as shame.
14. Isaiah did not leave the class with undirected anger. In a final project he wrote, “Finally, my goal for Sam (a student he had interviewed) is to be a “soldier,” NOT a ghetto soldier but a soldier (who will). . . fight the injustices of people who are racist . . . (M) My agenda is to teach a little soldier who will be smart, real tough (physically and mentally) and educated.”

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