WHITE RACIAL LITERACY AND RACIAL DEXTERITY

Kevin J. Harrelson

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Ball State University

ABSTRACT. This essay presents racial literacy and racial dexterity as educational desiderata, especially for white students. Racial literacy is defined as the ability to recognize and interpret racial nuances in real social engagements. Racial dexterity is defined as the ability to engage successfully with diverse racial contexts. After defining racial literacy and racial dexterity, Kevin Harrelson analyzes these skills by contrasting them with racial naivety and racial anxiety. He argues that transitioning from naivety to literacy, and from anxiety to dexterity, requires treating cross-racial interactions as key learning events.

Among the more interesting developments of recent decades is the adoption of standpoint theory as the default epistemology in an array of public discourses. In many circles one may presume the existence of cognitive deficits, on specific issues, in accordance with social identity. This is so much the case that when I introduce Charles Mills's "White Ignorance" to my class, the students often unanimously accept and affirm the basic thesis that white people tend to have a more limited practical understanding of racial phenomena.[1] The conversation turns immediately to the historical details, the justification, the implications, and all the things that one discusses after an entire company has assented to a proposition. This essay considers one implication of the white ignorance thesis for race education. Does it follow that race educators ought to have different expectations for white students and students of color? Answering this question, qualifiedly, in the affirmative, I consider recent notions of racial literacy and dexterity as educational desiderata for certain types of white student. My conclusion will be that taking literacy and dexterity seriously requires an embrace of interracial engagements, with the result that we should eschew some common strategies in race education. I emphasize narrative pedagogies as one method of focusing on interracial engagements in educational contexts.[2]

I borrow the term "racial literacy" from the sociologist and ethnologist France Winddance Twine, whose subjects are white British mothers of mixed Afro-Caribbean children.[3] Racial literacy is a form of applied understanding, which I define as the ability to recognize, describe, and respond to the racial nuances

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1. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State Universities of New York Press, 2007).

2. In this approach, I follow Ivor Goodson and Scherto R. Gill, *Narrative Pedagogy: Life History and Learning* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

3. France Winddance Twine and Amy C. Steinbugler, "The Gap between Whites and Whiteness: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 2 (2006): 341; and France Winddance

of complex social settings. "Racial dexterity" I take from the historian Sheryll Cashin.[4] Cashin's primary example of a racially dexterous individual is Richard Loving, the namesake of the U.S. Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* that ruled state antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional. Racial dexterity is distinct from literacy in that it is more a social than a cognitive skill: to be racially dexterous is to be able to adapt effectively to racially diverse settings. The examples I offer here present optimistic, high-bar ideals of literacy and dexterity. I mean for these examples to be illustrative of the kinds of applied understanding that white students may develop in the long run and in the best cases.

Since literacy and dexterity are less well-known than their contraries, I will attempt a contrastive exposition of each. The contrary of racial literacy is racial naivety. A racially naive person tends not to notice the racial nuances in human relationships or social settings. Some people lacking in racial dexterity, on the other hand, experience racial anxiety; they might become uncomfortable if placed in a context even slightly outside their native one (for instance if a majority of the people in a room with them are nonwhite). It is meant as no great insult to white people, but rather a product of basic demographic circumstances, that prior to focused instructional interventions we tend to be neither racially dexterous nor literate, but rather racially anxious and naive. The question is, what types of activities and educational engagements will help foster the relevant abilities in the longer term? How might naivety and anxiety as particular dispositions serve as a starting point for learning experiences? My suggestion will be that intentional reflection on lived interracial engagements — even anxious or naive experiences — ought to be at the forefront of our thinking about race education.

Nonresistant Students

In an interview with *Inside Higher Ed* to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of her 1997 book *Why Do All the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Tatum described the context for race education at colleges and universities: "Because of persistent K-12 school segregation, colleges and universities are among the few places where people of different racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds can engage with each other in more than just a superficial way."[5] This observation is not merely ancillary to her work, since the basic task of

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Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

4. Sheryll Cashin, *Loving: Interracial Intimacy in America and the Threat to White Supremacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

5. Scott Jaschik, "Updated Classic on Race Relations," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 6, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/06/beverly-daniel-tatum-discusses-new-version-why-are-all-black-kids-sitting-together. See also Beverly Tatum, *Why Do All the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?* (1997; repr. New York: Basic Books, 2017).

KEVIN J. HARRELSON is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Ball State University; e-mail <kjharrelson@bsu.edu>. His primary areas of scholarship are the history of modern philosophy, German idealism, and the philosophy of historiography.

her book had been to explain, in terms of psychological theories, the voluntary segregation of students in ostensibly integrated K-12 settings. Briefly, she offered an explanation of how racial identity develops such that, in or around middle school, racial minorities need and benefit from racially segregated social contexts. Voluntary segregation thus serves as a form of social-psychological defense. By contrast with these groups, white students engage in a very different and much slower process of racial identity formation.

The above quotation also points to a larger social problem, however, since Tatum is not there referring, as she did in her book, to voluntary segregation as it occurs within integrated schools. American towns, neighborhoods, and K-12 schools are today segregated at Jim Crow levels.[6] White students, in particular, are more likely than nonwhite students to attend segregated schools, so that white students are likely to enter college without antecedent "direct contact" with nonwhite individuals. As a result of this, Tatum explains, interactions around race easily become strained, since the white students will have spent many years inundated with cultural stereotypes without the benefit of more genuine forms of cross-racial intercourse. White students, in other words, often arrive on campus unprepared even to interact with nonwhite people, let alone to discuss race and racism with any sophistication.

As a university instructor at a predominately white public university in the Midwest, my experience falls within the contours of Tatum's assertion. Our university is roughly 80 percent white, whereas Black (8 percent) and Hispanic (5 percent) make up the majority of the remainder.[7] Due to the geography and history of our state, the Black and Hispanic students come mainly from three small cities and one large one, whereas many white students come from small towns that have a near absence of racial diversity. Although my classes present a more racially mixed context, with the percentage of white students dropping to between 35 percent and 60 percent, interactions among races remain exceptional rather than normal on campus.

At the beginning of each semester I prompt students to announce what led them to register for Philosophy of Race, since the course is an elective within the core curriculum. The most common answer for white students references a mostly segregated upbringing. These students are curious about race, and they explicitly hope to correct the raceless aspects of their earlier education. I think of them as unwilling victims of racial segregation. I thus encounter very little of the fragile forms of resistance so frequently reported in the human-resource type

6.   Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, and Gary Orfield, "Harming Our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after *Brown*," (Los Angeles, UCLA Civil Rights Project, 2019),   https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/harming-our-common-future-americas-segregated-schools-65-years-after-brown/Brown-65-050919v4-final.pdf.

7.   The statistics on ethnic diversity at Ball State University are published on the website College Factual, accessed February 20, 2021, https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/ball-state-university/student-life/diversity/chart-ethnic-diversity.html.

of race literature. These kids might not be woke, to use their language, but they are most certainly woke-aspiring.

Perhaps due to my emphasis on narrative pedagogies, other information about these students inevitably arises. To give just the most contentious example: in nearly every section I have taught it has surfaced that at least one white woman took the class as a result of being in an interracial relationship, usually with a Black man. To declare this situation requires some bravery, given that the racial ignorance of some white women who date Black men is an easy rhetorical target for racially literate students. Other students oppose interracial dating for quite different reasons. Those who declare themselves to be in interracial relationships will need to consider these responses, which their more racially literate peers will be prepared to raise. Do you date Black men because of a sexual stereotype? Could you suitably raise a mixed-race child? Sexual racism is a core topic of the course (students will study Raja Halwani's "Racial Sexual Desires," or Robin Zheng's "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes"),[8] so I embrace these sometimes fraught exchanges.

There is no need to focus, however, on the singular example of sexual relationships. My point is that even white students from segregated backgrounds will quickly begin to develop some relationships and some interactions that can become material for responsible classroom reflections. Interracial relationships and friendships are subjects for discussion, but so are white consumption of minority-produced cultural items, critical portrayals of race in recent media, and much else. The broad themes that matter (to the white students) are racial segregation, both voluntary and involuntary, and cultural exploration. Students can rather easily be brought to reflect upon, for instance, the social conditions of their segregated upbringing, the differences between their parents' racial attitudes and their own, the difficulties underlying their fledgling cross-racial interactions, and the significance of their adoption of global cultures.[9] These themes present themselves as part of the context as well as the content of my course, as I take it they should in other college-level courses on race.

For all this to be effective, of course, the students of color must establish themselves as authorities in the room. The example above illustrates this well enough, since the white women reflect on their sexual stereotypes only after interrogation by other students. The common objection to this circumstance is that students of color are placed, perhaps unwittingly, into the role of teachers to white students. In my view, however, this is a predictable outcome of the

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8. Raja Halwani, "Racial Sexual Desires," in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 7th ed., ed. Raja Halwani, Alan Soble, Sarah Hoffman, and Jacob M. Held (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 181–200; and Robin Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no. 3 (2016): 400–419.

9. See Myron Jackson, "On the Power of Cultural Adoption through Integral Fakes and Reunification," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4, no. 2 (2020): 114–127, https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc .2020.0020.

reversal of epistemic authority implied by the thesis of white ignorance. My students of color have welcomed the situation in which their authority has been explicitly acknowledged and even confirmed by the course literature. There are power relations to be negotiated among students of color, to be sure, over who among them is to become the authoritative voice(s) in the room. But that some such students, in my experience usually Black women, take the lead is among the basic ingredients of any well-integrated classroom discussions of race.

By turning my attention to the learning objectives for white students, I also do not mean to suggest that these questions have any priority as a social or pedagogical concern. Like many classes in the philosophy of race, mine emphasizes the works of Black authors (for example, Naomi Zack, Kwame Appiah, and Charles Mills) in discussions led most often by Black students, who are often also a numerical majority as well as almost invariably the epistemic authorities in the room. To ask how white students benefit from their peripheral position in such a setup is to pose a necessary, if also ancillary, pedagogical question: How does studying race in this manner impact how the white students navigate their incipient cross-racial interactions? My specific proposal is that race educators should aim at developing racial literacy and dexterity, two forms of applied understanding, in white students. This in turn requires that the students treat their own interactions with intentional, sophisticated, and theoretically informed reflections.

The suggestion that we have different objectives for students by race is not meant to flout the institutional aims of fairness and objectivity. At the most basic level of assessment, of course, all students must be treated equally. This point holds at least for lower-level learning outcomes. All students must complete assignments demonstrating mastery of the material; all students must learn to read and write at advanced collegiate levels; and all students must demonstrate fluency in the terminology and conceptual architecture of contemporary philosophy of race. Nonetheless there are educational objectives of applied understanding that fall under the rubric of "higher-order learning outcomes."[10] These are the subject of what is called "lifelong learning," which may be aided by authentic assessments, engaged storytelling, and other pedagogical tools.[11]

My aim in the following is to describe a few educational practices in terms of these higher-order learning objectives of literacy and dexterity. These objectives differ from the common wisdom in that the focus is on real interracial engagements. I take my chief exemplars of literacy and dexterity from studies of Black-adjacent white individuals, most of whom are working-class and many of whom are women. Part of my motivation is that too much of the common thinking about race in educational contexts is based on more fragile forms of subjectivity,

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10. Kay Sambell, Liz McDowell, and Catherine Montgomery, *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

11. David Boud and Nancy Falchikov, "Aligning Assessment with Long-Term Learning," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (2006): 399–413.

embodied in what Tatum calls "the guilty white liberal."[12] I am not in full disagreement with the strategies that Tatum and others devise for educating guilty and fragile white liberals. However, I do not find these people to be the norm among my white students. "Guilty white liberal" better describes, in my view, my colleagues and other middle-class, middle-aged professionals than it does my students. There are overlooked differences in class and generation, as well as gender, that structure how white people engage with race. I thus follow Twine and others in calling for more class-conscious and more nuanced varieties of white identity.[13]

White Ignorance and Racial Naivety

In what follows I hope to describe the virtues of racial literacy and dexterity by taking an optimistic survey of a few habitats on the racial borderlands. Pedagogical strategies aimed at more fragile white people typically emphasize introspective practices such as privilege-checking or segregated conversations. My concern is rather with nonresistant white college students, those who are willing to learn as relative epistemic subordinates in an integrated environment. The models I employ to describe these learning objectives thus derive from studies of the racial borders of contemporary society, especially the experiences of white people who identify principally with nonwhite subcultures: white mothers of Black children, white jazzers, interracial couples, white scholars of nonwhite literatures, etc. In centering these classes of people, I do not mean to understate the same dangers that are customarily overstated by others, namely, that cross-racial interactions traffic in stereotypes or reenact colonizing gestures. Nor do I wish to valorize white people who lead Black- or Hispanic-adjacent lifestyles. My proposal is only that we learn better to distinguish literacy from naivety, and dexterity from anxiety, in these contexts that are too often dismissed by race educators.

Racial naivety is one form of the inability to observe, appreciate, describe, or respond to racial nuances in social contexts. Since it is not a widely known term, I hope to contextualize it with respect to the broader phenomenon of racial ignorance. The latter is a canonical topic in the philosophy of race due to the work of Mills and others.[14] I emphasize naivety instead of ignorance partly to distinguish it from these broader questions in epistemology. Naivety is a subclass of ignorance. Ignorance can be willful, for instance, but it makes much less sense to speak of willful naivety. Ignorance is compatible with education and intelligence, naivety less so. Hence I employ "racial naivety" for the kind of ignorance that stems from a lack of exposure or opportunity, or that has not yet hardened into willfulness. Racial naivety is a kind of ignorance compatible with being woke-aspiring and engaged with communities of color.

12. Tatum, *Why Do All the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?*, 106.

13. Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain*, 3–4.

14. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997; repr. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); and Mills, "White Ignorance." See also Sullivan and Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

Mills opened "White Ignorance" by suggesting that white people suffer from "mass cognitive distortion" about race. As I indicated in my introduction, some thesis along these lines may function as a starting point for discussion in today's climate. This white cognitive distortion, Mills argues, is the subject of abundant evidence in the folk knowledge of nonwhite Westerners. In "White Ignorance" his ultimate target, however, is the knowledge-structures of academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and political philosophy.[15] The victims of white ignorance, in this larger sense, include everyone who studies in a modern curriculum. The antidotes to these forms of white ignorance include scholarly activities such as revisionary historiography and racial counternarratives. These should be central themes of race education, but "white ignorance" also names some more person-level deficiencies not addressed by revisionist histories. The academic antidote to person-level naiveties should stem rather from what Alison Bailey calls, commenting on Mills, a "race-sensitive cognitive psychology."[16]

It is these latter senses that are of more concern in pedagogical contexts, at least where a degree of pre-professional training is kept in view. More recently, cognitive scientists have emphasized failures of perception by whites in a variety of professional domains, and these are some of the dangers that we need to train our students to overcome — especially in a field like education. To take only the most basic studies as examples: white people, but not always people of color, respond less empathically when watching a pin prick the colored (nonwhite) hand of a subject.[17] This difference holds only when the hand is colored in a way that likely corresponds to the melanin of a nonwhite individual. A hand painted purple, for instance, will be credited with pain whereas more common shades of brown and black will not be. So on this account there is not just outgroup prejudice, but a targeted prejudice at the deep neurological levels of human perception.[18] White ignorance, in these cases, is brain deep.

Mills's own discussion of the cognate points is programmatic and sweeping. While describing white ignorance, he references revisionist historiography and calls for a cognitive science of race. He also allows that his dual theses of white ignorance and the racial contract leave conceptual space for what he terms (in scare-quotes) "white renegades" and "race traitors."[19] It is in the spirit of presenting such concepts, but in a much less dramatic register, that I emphasize racial literacy as an antidote to racial naivety. "Naivety" names those forms of

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15. Mills, "White Ignorance," 69.

16. Alison Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Sullivan and Tuana, 81. See also Mills, *The Racial Contract*.

17. Alessio Avenanti, Angela Sirigu, and Salvatore M. Aglioti, "Racial Bias Reduces Empathic Sensorimotor Resonance with Other-Race Pain," *Current Biology* 20, no. 11 (2010): 1018–1022.

18. Mina Cikara, Emile G. Bruneau, and Rebecca R. Saxe, "Us and Them: Intergroup Failures of Empathy," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (2011): 149–153.

19. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 12.

white ignorance that are most common to college students who have limited exposure to communities of color, whereas "literacy" names its correction. There will be also a sense in which some racially literate white people become seen as traitors, which is to say they break ties and loyalties to certain forms of racial agreements among whites.

As the relatively untutored and unwilling variety of ignorance, white naivety manifests among students in a few easily identifiable ways. The first is a tendency to underestimate the racial nuances in social encounters, a point that is already addressed even by the more common theories of race education. White students might begin by claiming that race has never been an issue in their forming of friendships, or that racial identities in their home communities were of little consequence. The white student who dates interracially, for instance, might defend his or her practice with what Zheng calls the "mere preferences argument."[20] The antidotes to such naivety lie in testimonies as to the importance of race in similar circumstances, comparisons of such practices with other more colonial modes of cross-racial interaction, and so on. Theory is important, since our modern race theories and the language of "appropriation" have provided frameworks for examining such events. But student-to-student interactions serve as a helpful means to apply our theoretical language with sufficient caution.

More enlightening is a second phenomenon, involving white students who demonstrate an aversion to the very naming of racial groups. I have seen white students wishing to refer to Black people, but afraid to say "Black people" given the presence of a critical mass of actual Black people in the room. The desired antidote to this referential timidity is referential confidence, or a self-assured use of appropriate racial vocabulary. But as a teacher interested in understanding this phenomenon, I am led to consider what causes it. What happens in the minds of our youth in this circumstance? There is an awareness that reference itself can be a danger, which already reflects facts about racial history such as slurs and the disputes over the naming of various racial groups. Of course, there was a time when "Black" was an offensive label. More importantly, such timidity suggests that there is an at least faint awareness that more literate audiences are listening, and so referential timidity demonstrates a moment of incipient social self-awareness.

A third form of naivety pertains to cultural specificity. It may be called descriptive, as opposed to referential, timidity. This appears when white students are unable or afraid to describe their experiences or perspectives on racial interactions. This more clearly derives from a kind of incipient awareness, namely that their peers might perceive additional racialized elements in their observations. The company of more racially literate persons as an audience, usually but not necessarily students of color, is thus a critical element in confronting naivety and developing literacy.

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20. Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering," 401–404.

Varieties of literate storytelling, especially by nonwhite students, may serve to counteract these sorts of expressions of naivety. Students of color will typically (and without solicitation) recount difficult experiences or acts of betrayal by white friends through middle school or high school. Depending on circumstances and classroom dynamics, as the instructor I might model more or less naivety by appealing to earlier moments of my own life. I might emphasize, variously, segregated or integrated contexts in my personal history. I can tell stories about early friendships in which I underestimated the racial dynamics, or mistakes I made in the course of such relationships, etc. This allows me to bridge white and nonwhite students by affirming that expressions of naivety are part of a lifelong learning process, and that racial mistakes are inevitable. This also helps, I hope, white students to avoid the pitfalls of fragility and white guilt. The key is to allow for vulnerability among instructor and students alike, and so to avoid a situation in which timidity prevents students from relating or analyzing situations that might be considered, in a more moralistic mood, problematic.

RACIAL LITERACY AND TRANSRACIAL IDENTITY

Racial naivety is a form of ignorance that stems from lack of exposure and opportunity, and so derives from a social situation in which white students have been sheltered in segregated communities. Its initial expressions, in nonresistant students, are timidity and naivety. As a result, they are unable to perceive and analyze the role of race in the world of their growing experience. To draw a stark contrast to this situation we will look at some stories about white people who are fully immersed in nonwhite communities. These are working-class white women who have adopted what were called, before the Rachel Dolezal affair tainted the terminology, transracial identities. A transracial identity involves a transfer of identification and community loyalty from a dominant white community to a relatively marginal racialized community. I wish to keep the Dolezal case in mind, since (as I see it) Rachel's own failure to conceptualize her white identity encouraged her to identify illicitly as Black, and so to become "transracial" in a more controversial sense.

In a qualitative study of the white mothers of Afro-Caribbean children, Twine introduces the notion of racial literacy in order to compensate for the lack of variations of whiteness in the public imagination.[21] We do not, she argues, have a sufficient sense of the roles that racially literate white people play in various nonwhite communities, and so of the specific types of literacy that arise among them. To illustrate a few such roles, she introduces some transracial narratives. These stories detail the transitions that some, mostly working-class, women undergo in transitioning from naive to literate. In the clearest cases these women eventually transfer their loyalties from white communities to Black ones, thus warranting the traditional moniker of "race-traitor." Stories like theirs show that

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21. France Winddance Twine, "A White Side of Black Britain: The Concept of Racial Literacy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 6 (2004): 878–907; Twine and Steinbugler, "The Gap between Whites and Whiteness"; and Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain*.

effective reflections about racial position or identity best arise in the context of intimate relationships and deep community ties.

The polemical context of Twine's study was a debate concerning cross-racial adoption, and her intervention represented a form of optimism in that arena. The objections to cross-racial adoption rest on the fact that establishing intimate relationships with people of color is no guarantee of diminishing racist tendencies. Examples abound in which white mothers racially abuse their nonwhite children. Some white women, however, are indeed fit to parent children of color. The legitimate debates are thus about which white women might adequately parent children of color and what criteria we should use to assess this. It is not fair or helpful to assert that white women as such cannot fill this role, precisely because there is such a thing as racial literacy.

Twine lists six criteria of racial literacy on the basis of which she distinguishes those who meet her bar of racial literacy,[22] but I wish to focus on two of them: "the ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practices" and "a recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of whiteness." A woman named Chelsea explains her perception of racial codes by noting "how her 'vision' had changed" after raising a child of African Caribbean ancestry:

> She now sees the world from the perspective of her daughter, … [and she] exhibits a form of dual consciousness that enables her to move between perceiving her whiteness or her position as a white university-educated woman with certain structural advantages over black mothers in specific institutional settings, and sharing struggles with black mothers.[23]

The structure of this white transracial dual consciousness differs somewhat from the classic accounts in African American literature, of "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[24] It also differs from the double consciousness that Gregory Bynum describes as endemic to white antiracists.[25] The latter are caught in an aspirational bind: they wish to be "antiracist" but discover the hard facts of racism everywhere. The transracialist has a more authentic experience, in my view, the duality of which stems only from the difference between how people identify them and with which communities they identify. Twine's women notice the differences in the way white people interact with them when they are without spouse or children, and so receive a glimpse at two distinct ways they are perceived by other whites. They retain the ability to claim white privileges when without their children, and so they perceive and experience racism from a unique perspective — a sort of secondhand racism structured by their empathy with their children.

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22. Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain*, 92.

23. Ibid., 105.

24. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1994), 2.

25. Gregory Bynum, "'Race Is a Fiction; Racism Is Not'? Understandings of Race in Antiracist Education," in this issue.

A further consequence of these increased perceptions of racism by transracial mothers is that they dissociate from white communities.[26] The women learn to perceive the tacit racial agreements, those real manifestations of what Mills called racial contracts,[27] that we regularly make with other white people. In principle they may either acknowledge or refuse such agreements, but with the best mothers their deep emotional bonds to their children will make such white-on-white interactions too emotionally taxing. Chelsea and Allesandra, for instance, both report an inability to emotionally withstand all-white exchanges. A full break with white solidarity often occurs in some of the most literate individuals.

Ultimately women such as these, since they are good mothers, identify with their children and thereby perceive the exclusionary effects of racialization. In many cases they discover a deeper acceptance in communities of color than they do in white communities, since Black mothers will often extend solidarity to all mothers of Black children. As a result of this last stage, the white women experience increased identification with communities of color. Of course, in these communities they live as outsider-insiders, since their now-sophisticated sense of their own whiteness has become central to the entire experience. Retention of white identity is thus a precondition of their acquisition of racial literacy.

A white person immersed in a Black community, then, is still a white person. Her recognition of her own whiteness is a key structural feature in the development of her unique standpoint of racial literacy. The acquisition of racial literacy, in these cases, results from identifying with a particular community of color and living in it as an outsider–insider. (This will not be easily generalizable or transferable to other communities of color.) A transracial white person does not mistake herself for Black, as Dolezal does and philosophers Rebecca Tuvel and Christine Overall wish to allow.[28] She merely identifies with a particular nonwhite community. There is a big difference between racially literate mothers of Black children and a white woman who postures as Black.

Violations of this principle — that one identifies *with* a specific community but does not identify *as* Black — were not new to Rachel Dolezal or Rebecca Tuvel. Dolezal merely put a fresh, public face on an old phenomenon. David Roediger, for instance, recounts a story secondhand about Bernard Mandel, "the pioneering historian of labor and race and a white writer who later proclaimed that by virtue of his study, politics, and interracial private life he had become black."[29] Many more examples can be found in Baz Dreisinger's *Near Black*, a study of sometimes factual literary narratives about white people who have taken their proximity to Black

26.   Twine, *A White Side of Black Britain*, 99 and 106.

27.   Mills, *The Racial Contract*.

28.   Rebecca Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (2017): 263–278; and Christine Overall, "Transsexualism and 'Transracialism,'" *Social Philosophy Today* 20 (2004): 183–193.

29.   David R. Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (London: Verso, 2019), 85.

communities for their own adoption of Black identity.[30] (There are more legitimate instances of cross-racial identification, including some whites who identified as Black to circumvent antimiscegenation laws. But this is a topic largely unrelated to the question of literacy.)

By 2018 the Rachel Dolezal controversy had exhausted the public's tolerance for stories of transracialism. In that year Netflix released a documentary called *The Rachel Divide* which purported to highlight the deeper controversy over racial identity. It met with dozens of negative reviews, among which was Ijeomo Oluo's penetrating "The Heart of Whiteness."[31] Oluo emphasized the singular origin of Dolezal's flawed racial identity: Dolezal had been raised in rural Montana by extremist Christians. Her abusive parents adopted four African American children, who became her younger siblings. Rachel was their protector, and her efforts to identify as Black stem rather clearly from that circumstance. Her alienation from her parents and affection for her siblings understandably caused in Rachel an identity crisis, and her response was that she could not see herself in popular images of whiteness:

> I worked very hard, but I didn't resonate with white women who were born with a silver spoon. I didn't find a sentence of connection in those stories, or connection with the story of the princess who was looking for a knight in shining armor.[32]

Oluo responds by indicating her contrasting image of whiteness:

> I am beginning to wonder if it isn't blackness that Dolezal doesn't understand, but whiteness. Because growing up poor, on a family farm in Montana, being homeschooled by fundamentalist Christian parents sounds whiter than this "silver spoon" whiteness she claims to be rejecting.[33]

This is exactly the point. Dolezal's failure to conceptualize her identity as a white woman is rooted not mainly in a misunderstanding of Blackness, though no doubt she suffers from that as well. Her principal failure, rather, was to conceptualize whiteness in such a simplistic manner. Dolezal is a white woman who grew up in proximity to the abuse of Black children by her white parents. She adopted one of these siblings as a son, and she ought to have forged a positive white identity based on her proximity to her Black siblings and children. She was a prime candidate for racial literacy. But instead of merely identifying with her children and siblings in a way that might have supported a notion of white womanhood other than one derived from fairy tales, she constructed her struggle in a narrative taken from the victims of chattel slavery.

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30.   Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

31.   Ijeoma Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black," *The Stranger,* April 19, 2017, https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black.

32.   Dolezal, quoted in Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness."

33.   Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness."

White students who undertake the study of race will not, in the normal case, have mixed children through whom to develop such a standpoint of literacy. But they can engage in similar, smaller-scale transfers of identification. The key will be to develop the distinction between those communities with whom they identify and how they identify themselves. This distinction, which Twine calls a form of double consciousness, is forced on our transracial mothers in a way that sometimes causes an intolerance of white communities. Something similar, if less dramatic, can happen to white students as they begin to perceive the racial dynamics even in all-white spaces or encounters.

Racial Anxiety

In an essay on the problem of the conceptual inflation of the term "racism," Lawrence Blum highlighted a phenomenon he calls *racial discomfort*. A simple illustration introduces the notion, as he recounts the story of "a white fourth grade teacher" who, "though she has never admitted this to herself[,] … is not really comfortable with most of the black parents." As a result, this woman, Ms. Verano, "is not confident about her ability to communicate with black adults," so that she "is not able to listen to their concerns and viewpoints about their children" and "is not able to serve these children as well as the other children in her class."[34] The story is familiar enough to everyone. For my part, I have no interest in repeating Blum's attempt to specify the notion of "racism" in order to judge Ms. Verano racist or not. That seems to me too hopeless a task. But his effort to broaden our vocabulary about racism is a laudable one, and it may lead to more precise diagnoses of racial maladies. Everyone in our world suffers from racial maladies, and questions about who is racist only obscure the more legitimate ones about who suffers from which maladies. My plan here is to diagnose racial anxiety as one type of racial malady, in order to frame racial dexterity as its antidote.

Racial discomfort is a near-cousin of racial anxiety, and these are just two related forms of deficiency in racial understanding. Most readers will readily supply their own examples of the Ms. Veranos they have encountered. The important thing is to define these phenomena so that we can see their peculiar symptoms. Blum stipulates that Ms. Verano does not possess self-conscious racist beliefs, and she is generally unaware of her particular discomfort. By hypothesis, she does not think that her students of color or their parents are less intelligent than the white students or parents. But nonetheless she experiences anxiety in their presence, as a result of which she is less able to perform her job as teacher. Racial discomfort is thus an emotional or dispositional disorder that directly or indirectly impacts behavior. But it is compatible with a self-understanding as antiracist, liberal voting tendencies, and perhaps even leftist political commitments.

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34. Lawrence Blum, "Racism: What It Is and What It Isn't," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (May 2002): 212, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015503031960.

A person is racially anxious if the presence of some or many persons of a different race inspires anxious behavior. But what is anxiety? According to Charlie Kurth, anxiety is "a response to uncertainty about a possible threat or challenge that brings thoughts about one's predicament, negatively valenced feelings of concern, and a motivational tendency toward caution regarding the potential threat one faces."[35] The key elements of this definition will be uncertainty, threat, and caution. The racially anxious person will be identified by uneasy behavior, though she might not have a specific idea in mind that is making her uneasy. She differs from the racially fearful person, such as the purse-clutcher who might explicitly believe (without good reason) that the man near her is violent or criminal. The purse-clutcher has a definite belief underlying her fear (whether justified or not), and her fear has a direct object. Anxiety, by contrast, has only causes and contexts. The anxious person is not anxious *of* another person in the way that the fearful person is fearful of a particular stranger.

Anxiety is marked rather by levels of detachment and self-absorption, or as Kurth writes, "thoughts about one's predicament."[36] It is largely motivated by an inveterate concern with one's own identity in relation to others, rather than with any direct threat that others pose to us. The racially anxious person is unable to locate her own identity in the space provided by an interracial contact or outgroup community. Zygmunt Bauman stresses that anxiety arises in the context of a lack of secure identity when confronted with strangers or outsiders.[37] So the racially anxious person is one who is insecure in, and hence absorbed by, her identity around outgroup members. Think, then, not only of Ms. Verano, but of any white person who is less likely to dance, laugh, or joke confidently and playfully in the company of nonwhite people.

Steven Segal has presented an optimistic account of the educational implications of "anxiety of strangers," one that likewise begins from the observation that it involves a mostly implicit threat to one's identity.[38] In white people this malady is especially common, since we often possess an inherent fear of seeing ourselves as white-in-relation. This leads to various forms of withdrawal or dissociation, but Segal believes that herein lies the cure. There may be what he calls a "resolute anxiety," which is an affirmation of the peculiar self-withdrawal involved in anxiety among strangers. The person suffering from outgroup-anxiety is "aware of [her] own presence as mediated by the presence of the stranger."[39] This is all

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35. Charlie Kurth, "Anxiety: A Case Study on the Value of Negative Emotion," *Shadows of the Soul: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Emotions*, ed. Christine Tappolet, Fabrice Teroni, and Anita Konzelmann Ziv (New York: Routledge, 2011).

36. Ibid.

37. Zygmunt Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2–3 (1990): 143–169.

38. Steven Segal, "The Anxiety of Strangers and the Fear of Enemies," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 17, no. 4 (1998): 271–282.

39. Ibid., 274.

a bit too overdramatic for my own taste, but racial anxiety is precisely a kind of overdramatic indulgence. It consists in worrying too much about one's own position in an unfamiliar social context, just when our attention should be on the other people.

The risk, for Segal, is that we exchange anxiety for fear by defining the other. Resolute withdrawal from oneself in the anxious company of strangers (in this case interpreted racially), he claims, nonetheless grants us the opportunity to see ourselves in relation to those strangers. For white people this means that we might be able to learn about our whiteness precisely by coming to see ourselves anxiously in specific relations to outgroups. This is a very different process, for instance, from learning about "white privilege" by drawing up a list of benefits common to all white people. It more closely approximates the white double-consciousness of Twine's transracial mothers, who learn to perceive their whiteness by seeing how people do not treat them when they are without their children. The reason for this is that it also consists in specific contrasts: I can come to see whiteness as specifically manifested in me in relation to these others, who no longer appear so strange. But they should still appear different from me. This process should preclude, as I emphasized in the case of literacy, interpreting myself as a member of a group of which I am not a native member.

University educators have the benefit of disaggregating cases of anxiety in our students from those in our peers. Blum's Ms. Verano, for instance, is in a position of relative power, and she thus contributes to the institutional oppression of non-white students. She and her kin present a more difficult task for the race educator, and I have no proposals on this subject that would not require extensive resocialization (except that she might read books like Jennifer Obidah and Karen Manheim Teel's *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools*).[40] These people reflect a certain failure in our educational system, since we allowed them to reach a professional status without acquiring the requisite levels of social dexterity. Our beginning students, however, are not in a similar situation. Anxious white students may cause some harms, but they do not exacerbate those harms with institutional authority. More likely, in my experience, is that racially literate students will call out any excessive focus on their own identities by the white students (*how I feel*, if I am a white person, is not always relevant in a discussion of Womanism, or Black Male Studies, or environmental racism). They are more likely to, in my experience, encourage hesitant expressions of racial observations and generously nurture the well-intentioned anxious (but not the fragile or defensive) student.

Racial Dexterity

Sheryll Cashin's recent history of American antimiscegenation laws, *Loving*, offers an unusually optimistic account of the role of interracial marriage in

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40. Jennifer E. Obidah and Karen Manheim Teel, *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

America. She attempts to describe the transition from naivety to literacy and from anxiety to dexterity in some white people who marry interracially: "The transition from blindness to seeing, from anxiety to familiarity, that comes from intimate cross-racial contact is a process of acquiring dexterity. And if one chooses to undertake the effort, the process is never-ending."[41] Aware that her optimistic account flies in the face of so much contemporary discourse on race, Cashin cautions defensively,

> I do not make the simplistic and silly claim that interracial intimacy in and of itself will destroy white supremacy or eliminate race. Instead I argue that a growing cohort is acquiring dexterity and race consciousness through intimate interaction contact, especially in dense metropolitan areas.[42]

We need not affirm Cashin's prognosis about the American future in order to share her admiration for the virtues of cultural and racial dexterity. Belief in the ability of some suitably educated white individuals to obtain these traits is compatible with a more neutral or even pessimistic expectation for the course of world history. All that is important here is the style of transition undergone by the people that she designates as racially dexterous, and whether classroom behaviors can contribute to that transition.

Racial dexterity is a species of social or cultural dexterity. What is it to be socially dexterous? It is a virtue too infrequently lauded and described by philosophers, perhaps because we too infrequently develop and practice it. There is some treatment of "cultural dexterity" as a desideratum in medical education,[43] and advocacy for "global dexterity" in a certain genre of business literature.[44] But philosophers and education theorists have not suitably examined the ideal of social dexterity. While my specific goal here is to defend the value of racial dexterity in opposing racial injustices, other sorts of social dexterities would prove to be just as valuable.

One exception to philosophers' neglect of dexterity appears in a study of Socrates by Robert Colter and Joseph Ulatowski. That sage, they argue, was able to tailor his conversation to the background assumptions of his interlocutors. Socrates, in Plato's dialogues at least, exhibits a certain dexterity in that he "exercises a skill that calibrates interactions with others."[45] As a skill of calibrating

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41. Cashin, *Loving*, 3.

42. Ibid.

43. Navin R. Changoor et al., "Surgeons' Perceptions toward Providing Care for Diverse Patients: The Need for Cultural Dexterity Training," *Annals of Surgery* 269, no. 2 (2019): 275–282. 44. Andy Molinsky, *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

44. Andy Molinsky, *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

45. Robert Colter and Joseph Ulatowski, "Social Dexterity in Inquiry and Argumentation: An Apologia of Socrates," *American Association of Philosophy Teachers Studies in Pedagogy* 2 (2016): 7, https://doi .org/10.5840/aaptstudies201713117.

behavior to others, dexterity may be a more or less intellectual capacity. Consider the philosopher who can speak intelligently and intelligibly to an array of audiences, as opposed to the one who communicates only within a subdisciplinary clique. Consider the scholar who gives engaging lectures to the "general public" (already a fatal misdiagnosis, since it invites thinking of nonspecialists as a homogenous mass) as opposed to one who can only speak to specialists.

Dexterity is a skill that we might also find among some teachers as opposed to others. We all know undexterous pedagogues, who can explain a complex point to advanced audiences, but cannot engage an introductory section in similar discussions. Perhaps some of our undexterous pedagogues are more oblivious than they are anxious. They speak over or around their audiences, without so much as noticing that no one understands them. Nonetheless, some are surely anxious, which is to say characterized by an excessive worry about themselves, their appearance, how others might view them, and the like. The dexterous pedagogue is the contrary to these anxious and oblivious pedagogues. She calibrates her lesson fluidly to the audience. She communicates equally effectively to specialists and nonspecialists, to the interested and the disengaged, and so on.

From these ideals of dexterous intellectual communication, we may locate a broader characteristic of social dexterity. Social dexterity is the ability to fluently adapt to diverse contexts of social engagement, say between a formal cocktail party and a working-class beer hall. A socially dexterous person may socialize with people of different backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, genders, sexual orientations, or other social characteristics. She will be marked by a lack of discomfort or anxiety in transitioning from one context to another, and a lack of inhibitive worry (which is not to say lack of awareness) about her own identity in moving among such contexts.

Racial dexterity is a specific instance of social dexterity, which pertains to those vast social groups called races that have been so heavily mythologized in modern culture. It is the native virtue of mixed-race individuals, as well as of some minorities who live in majority-white communities. Some literature on mixed-race emphasizes the peculiar position of the mixed-race individual as outsider in multiple contexts, at home neither in her Black nor her white families.[46] This is of course an important account of the experience of many mixed-race people, especially in childhood, but what is a struggle for the novice may become a skillset for the expert. Many mixed-race adults, including college students, are able to integrate as natives to more than one culture, just as a bilingual child will eventually develop fluency in both of her languages.

How do we recognize a lack of dexterity in white students? The most honest among them, like Blum's fictional Ms. Verano, will offer testimony to the fact. Others will become silent or underestimate their own ability to understand the issues at hand. Yet others engage in the common practice of perceptually inflating

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46. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 141–147.

group size. For example, I have had numerous white students refer to being "one of a few" white people or even "the only" white person in a class, when in fact white students were a slim majority (50 to 60 percent). This is a form of white ignorance, of the person-level and cognitive variety, the most common explanation for which lies in feelings of racial anxiety and perceived threat.[47] The correction of this form of anxious ignorance lies in responsibly tying those race-sensitive sciences to pedagogical practices.

The more difficult question concerning dexterity concerns how pedagogical practices might contribute to its development. Educational theorists have examined the limits of cross-racial dialogue, and some have challenged more classic "multicultural" accounts of integrative practices. My claims, I hope, are much more modest than the targets of these arguments. There is no need to consider cross-racial dialogue as liberatory for all students, but only to examine whether white students who participate in cross-racial dialogue as epistemic subordinates might become more dexterous. Admittedly more research of empirical kinds is needed here. But it is reasonable to hypothesize that classroom experiences might present the white student with an initial opportunity to experience a peripheral position in an inclusive community.

Conclusions and Further Study

During the time in which this essay was written, further instances of police brutality have caused widespread protest against racial injustice. All the world is suddenly curious about race education, and books about race have charged up the bestseller lists. Some have called for increases in the presence of race in curricula, both in K-12 and in higher education. As an instructor of Philosophy of Race, I welcome such calls, although they lead me to rethink some of my practices and aims. My claims and goals in this essay are relatively modest. They target a small segment of our population (nonresistant white college students) and present an even smaller segment (white transracial individuals) as illustrative of a few virtues, namely literacy and dexterity, that the former might acquire in the best cases. What the moment calls for, no doubt, is something much bigger and more comprehensive.

Nonetheless a few principles to which I have appealed should warrant further scrutiny. In the first place, there should be as many varieties of race education as there are varieties of racism and racial identity. There is not an easy, one-size-fits-all model of learning about race and racism. If there is one point that has struck me most vividly in the past months, it is that the common concerns of the HR-theory of race are exceedingly narrow. They speak only, in the best cases, to a certain strain of racism in middle class, professional white people. Race education and even antiracism training, if they are to make progress, must take into

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47. Robert M. Kunovich, "Perceptions of Racial Group Size in a Minority–Majority Area," *Sociological Perspectives* 60, no. 3 (2017): 479–496. Unfortunately, most studies of this phenomenon deal with perceptions in large or middle-sized communities rather than in small-group spaces such as classrooms, restaurants, and the like.

account the vast differences in class, gender, generation, and socioeconomic status that impact racial identity and racial divisions.

A second point that strikes me is the need for positive models in combating racism, which is one reason I have emphasized the two qualities of literacy and dexterity. Twine's models of white racial literacy are especially important, since they are mainly working-class women who live effectively in Black communities and responsibly raise mixed-race children. The transracial individual, the real person who has transferred her loyalties to specific communities of color and as a consequence rejects racial contracts, also presents a useful contrast to the more abstract and aspirational antiracist activist. I hesitate to give further characterizations of the latter, but urge that philosophers and educational theorists turn to studies like Twine's, which is to say to ethnography and history. The heroes or models of our moment should be found in communities where the work of combatting racism is done. They should be real people who display the virtues toward which the rest of us should aim.