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When the Teacher is the Token: Moving from Antiblackness to Antiracism

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Abstract

In this reflective essay I uncover the difficulties Black teacher educators have instructing a predominately white preservice student body *about* antiblackness without becoming complicit *in* antiblackness. So often we focus on students as the token representative of their racial/gender/sexual/linguistic identity; however, we teacher educators are also routinely the "only" in a room of white faces, often as students' first Black professor. We therefore bear the burden of introducing students to whiteness while wondering if our Blackness is being viewed in opposition to, despite, or because of whiteness. How do I convince them of their future students' humanity without sacrificing my own? This is but one of the questions I interrogate as I reveal the tension between creating empathy and understanding, while also disrupting the white gaze. In sharing my curriculum, assignments, and instructional strategies against the backdrop of my own emotions tied to my Black identity, I hope to build unity with other teacher educators whose Blackness becomes transactional in white spaces.

Keywords

Anti-racism, Antiracist Teaching, Pedagogy, Tokenism

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When the Teacher is the Token: Moving from Antiblackness to Antiracism

I arrived at my institution ten years ago as a post-doctoral fellow with a 9-month contract and no intention of staying longer. I had not anticipated moving to the southwest and did not want to build my life so far from family on the east coast. I was also hesitant to join the faculty at a small private liberal arts college, where, upon my arrival, there were only three other Black professors. My department had an Asian staff member but almost no Black, Indigenous, or Students of Color (BISOC). Had I known that across nine Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) cohorts I would only have four Black students (3% enrollment), I would have been further dismayed.

Having attended predominately white institutions (PWIs) throughout my schooling, I was familiar with being the only Black person in the room. I was therefore unsurprised when I was called “girl” by an older white colleague, had my afro described as "pubic hair," or when I was given bronzer as a "thoughtful gift." But having never been the Black person *in front* of the room, I did not anticipate how antiblackness would emerge in the classroom. I did not consider that I would be many students’ first encounter with Blackness, nor that they would expect me to be Mammy and “be more nurturing like women were back in the day." I did not know that I would be a default expert on all things related to race/power/privilege, the contact person for the low-income school district, the assumed mentor for BISOC, nor the automatic supervisor for theses about anything "diversity-related." As a new teacher educator, I did not know that my preservice students expect me to possess secret insight into how best to teach "at-risk" youth. I had no clue how to resist being tokenized by students who have no other point of reference for Black life in Amerikkka (I use this spelling to highlight how white supremacy, most saliently modeled by the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), shapes America).

This is one of the challenges I interrogate in this reflective essay as I reveal the difficulties of creating empathy and understanding while also disrupting the white gaze (Rabelo et al., 2020). Assuming a reflective stance allows me to see the totality of my pedagogy across time, rather than focus on the intermittent snapshots course evaluations facilitate. That is not to say that I do not use students as mirrors of my instructional efficacy, but that my decisions and behaviors are the best reflections of my pedagogical orientation. Reflection provides emotional space that improves clarity and engenders objectivity. I can now look back and ask questions I didn’t know I needed to ask, such as:

Am I complicit in antiblackness by sharing my stories that could be perceived as pain narratives? How do I expose students to Black life without making them cultural voyeurs? How do I create an affective learning experience that moves students past white guilt? I did not always answer these questions

correctly, so in describing my pedagogical missteps on the way to becoming an antiracist educator, I aim to help other Black, Indigenous, Faculty of Color (BIFOC) find compassion and grace for themselves as they too navigate the tension between being an educator and being entertainment.

Years 1-2: Teaching About Diverse Learners

At the end of my first year as a post-doc I was offered a tenure-track position, which I deferred because of ongoing uncertainty about my role in the department. I accepted a one-year renewal and was invited to create *the* diversity course to be tacked to the MAT program's end. Notably, it was a .5-unit course consisting of 10 three-hour class meetings compared to the other 1 unit, 18 meeting courses in the MAT curriculum.

Even so early in my career I was not naive enough to misunderstand what was happening. I was experiencing cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994) in that my Black skin and natural hair were all the credentials I needed to teach about diversity. This additional course was not included in my contracted course load, and though compensated, disrupted my summer research plans with its June scheduling. I accepted because a) I wanted to retain the option of a tenure-track position and knew the importance of being perceived as a "team player," b) the students needed this course, and c) I knew that my Blackness did, in part, make me better qualified to teach the course than my white colleagues.

I was not alone in acquiescing, as Joseph and Hirschfield (2011) report that BIFOC often agree to assume additional duties out of a sense of cultural obligation and moral responsibility. Guillaume and Apodaca (2020) found that heavy BIFOC workloads are indeed motivated by pressures to exceed tenure expectations despite that in doing more than white colleagues, we risk prioritizing quantity over quality. Though I accepted that risk, I was unaware of the possibility that in teaching about antiblackness I might become complicit in it.

Color-evasive Teaching

I was unsure how best to design this class because I had no prior experience as a K-12 teacher or teacher educator. I looked at colleagues' syllabi in my own and other teacher preparation programs (TPPs) and did what they did: focused on instructional methods. Thus, I wrote a course description for my class, *Teaching Diverse Learners*:

> This course is designed to prepare elementary and secondary teacher candidates to work effectively in inclusive classrooms. To a small extent, this class will run as an extended professional development workshop. A primary focus of the course will be on the modification of content

> instruction for a variety of academic and linguistic proficiency levels. This course is not about teaching special education students; it is about meeting the unique needs of students whose life contexts are underrepresented in traditional curricula. By the end of the course, teacher candidates will possess a more inclusive definition of 'diverse learners,' be familiar with policies pertinent to diverse learners, recognize the emotional needs of minority students, and have acquired skills to differentiate instruction effectively.

Because I ultimately wanted my white teacher candidates (TCs) to understand what it is like to teach culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, I curated a curriculum grounded in white teachers' narratives about diverse schools and students (Table 1).

Table 1
Curriculum Years 1-2

Theoretical Texts	**Empirical Articles and Books**	**Narratives**	**Multimedia**
Banks, 1993	Anyon, 1980; Haberman, 1991; Lewis, 2001	Falk & Blumenreich, 2012; Randolph, 2015; Richert, 2012	n/a

I organized the course by student demographic, covering LGBTQIA+, immigrant, homeless, low income, ethnic minority, special education, and "juvenile delinquent students." In treating CLD students as a monolith, there were no readings about how intersectional identities shape learning processes. I grouped CLD students' instructional needs under the umbrella of multicultural education via a single reading on day one.

Though I didn't recognize it at the time, my curricular choices were motivated by imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) that emerged because I was taking responsibility for something I should never have been asked to do. I was deeply invested in proving to my colleagues, students, and myself that I could teach this course despite my lack of qualifications. I was also concerned about how my students, many of whom were older, would perceive me, so I relied on other professionals with what I thought to be appropriate credentials.

I invited guest speakers from local non-profits to talk about their work with queer youth, children experiencing home insecurity, and students who were

victims of the cradle to prison pipeline. I ceded my instructional responsibilities to passionate people with even less teaching experience, and in doing so, endorsed erroneous yet commonly held beliefs that one can be a good teacher if they only care about kids. I attempted to balance this with an emphasis on skill development, though not instructional skills. I included a confusing mix of practical outcomes such as "choosing the curriculum, facilitating discussions on race, and addressing cultural conflict" that reveal my struggle to situate diversity concepts in K-12 classrooms.

I shifted that burden to students by asking them to submit daily video blogs describing how "readings and class discussions will affect your future classroom practices." They were required to write a short auto-ethnography to "deconstruct your cultural identity by reflecting on the origin of your cultural beliefs, how you enact your identity in the classroom, and how students might interpret your cultural practices." Their final project was to create a professional development workshop about "a specific topic related to course material."

Such vague prompts reflect my discomfort with the course material. My focus on teaching *about* diverse learners was deficit-based and reified the notion of the white teacher savior come to rescue "at-risk" students from terrible lives. I centered white teachers' narratives with no counternarratives from minoritized or marginalized students nor their families. And, despite the course title and description, there were only implied suggestions for instructional practices.

My missteps were consistent with most diversity courses in TPPs. Rarely do teacher educators employ social action multicultural teaching that asks students to develop anti-oppressive practices (Banks, 1994). TPPs purport to engage with difference but do so only superficially without the context of social injustice and systemic inequality (Gorski, 2009). The "best-practices" we provide to TCs pair students' identities with specific pedagogical strategies, reducing vibrant children to items on a checklist (King & Butler, 2015).

The overall incoherence of the curriculum and using culture as a proxy for race made me complicit in antiblackness. I positioned race as equal to income, sexuality, citizenship, and ability when in fact, race shapes those identities. My color evasion (Annamma et al., 2017; Frankenberg, 1993) rejected the idea of structural oppression and minimized racism per the neoliberalism that plagues higher education. Students' comments on course evaluations made it clear that I'd reinforced an us versus them ethos that positioned CLD students as foils to white students. Many students mentioned "feeling prepared to give *those kids* the *special instruction* they need that *regular students* don't." Such positive comments ironically signified my failure to help my students begin their antiracist journey.

Year 3: Teaching Diverse Learners

In my third year I accepted the tenure-track offer with the stipulation that the department broaden its focus beyond teacher preparation and integrate "diversity" into all courses. High enrollments in my social justice-leaning courses framed me as the ideal person to design the new major. Like other untenured BIFOC women tasked with additional labor, I felt pressured to accept this assignment for the sake of my BISOC (Rideau, 2019).

I knew that once again my race was a factor in being “asked” to create the major because after two years, my colleagues still viewed me as an accomplished and competent *Black* professor. Many BIFOC experience such hypervisibility as diversity tokens and work harder to create positive visibility (Settles et al., 2019). I, too, agreed to design the major in yet another attempt to get my colleagues to see my value as more than my race.

I reviewed the undergraduate syllabi and was dismayed, though not surprised, that the only classes where students explicitly examined race, power, privilege, and structural inequities were in my courses. This discovery prompted me to acknowledge that while I was doing an excellent job in my undergraduate courses, the same was not true in *Teaching Diverse Learners*, so I revised the class once again.

Trauma-centered Teaching

Despite not changing the course description, I did make substantive changes to course objectives. Whereas the course's first iteration focused on learning about diverse students, the revision was about building relationships with diverse students. I created a curriculum that probed the white savior trope because I wanted students to consider how their pedagogical decisions might implicitly affirm or marginalize students’ identities (Table 2).

Table 2
Curriculum Year 3

Theoretical Texts	**Empirical Articles and Books**	**Narratives**	**Multimedia**
hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McLaren, 2009; Meyer, 2017; Shrewsbury, 1993	Anyon, 1980; Castagno, 2014; Haberman, 1991; Johnson, 2006	n/a	n/a

I structured the course around CLD students’ educational experiences, dedicating the first three days of the class to interrogating the difference between

intention and impact. We then worked through instructional frameworks such as queer theory, feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and radical pedagogy. I used critical race theory to analyze how structural inequalities emerge in schools.

While the readings were more rigorous and encouraged TCs to reflect on the impact of their pedagogical choices, the organization of content was still choppy. In my mind, the unifying thread between beliefs, practices, and social inequality was self-identity. I thought it was apparent that one's identities determine their beliefs, which then shape instructional choices that can ultimately foster or disrupt social reproduction. But because I did not explicitly ask students to grapple with those intersections in the context of their teaching practicum, I allowed them to frame white saviorism as someone else's problem.

The continued absence of Black, Indigenous, and Youth of Color (BIYOC) voice was underscored by readings that positioned CLD students as passive recipients of oppression. In attempting to demonstrate the effects of white supremacy, I inadvertently suggested that CLD students' power is tied to their victimization rather than to their sociocultural wealth. I should have balanced this discourse with readings that celebrate students' social, linguistic, and cultural capital as funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019; Yosso, 2005).

My overemphasis on bad white teachers risked students feeling victimized because they may have thought they were being asked to account for what other white teachers have done. Though coursework and evaluations did not reveal such feelings, many teacher educators note that white preservice teachers feel guilty after learning of their complicity in the continued disenfranchisement of BIYOC (e.g., Crowley, 2019; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Matias, 2016).

I added to their potential guilt with personal anecdotes about being one of a handful of Black students in advanced courses in middle and high school. I translated complex theories to real life as I shared stories about my lack of racial and economic privilege compared to my peers, being excluded from social groups, and the pressure I felt to represent all Black people. My trauma porn of Black suffering is standard among women of color academics whose narratives are compiled in best-selling anthologies (e.g., Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Though our goal is to expose structural oppression and generate a call to action, we risk becoming figures of the white imagination, confirming tropes of the angry Black woman always playing the "race card." In that sense, our narratives might engender contempt and pity instead of a commitment to social justice.

Relating to my students through race had the additional consequence of emotional exhaustion and racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2014). Many BIFOC must continually justify their presence in academe, constantly thinking about how colleagues and students view them, and how their personal and professional identities (mis)align (Hartlep & Ball, 2020; Levin et al., 2013). Hyperawareness is

especially prominent at PWIs where the color of our skin stands out and where being pro-Black can be misconstrued as anti-white.

Such backlash emerges after diversity training when white participants report feeling forced to accept ideas with which they disagree. Their discontent with participating in discussions about race and power can increase hostility toward BIFOC (Anand & Winters, 2008; Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Black faculty must therefore be vigilant not only about potentially incendiary course material, but also about how our Blackness is read as another antiracist text that incites white students' defense mechanisms.

I was perhaps too aware of how my students might respond to a course that framed white teachers as bad, so I overcompensated by not asking them to do any cognitive or emotional labor. In bearing the burden of explaining race-related theories, revealing how my race affected my schooling, and advocating for BIYOC, I centered my Blackness without engaging their whiteness. I made myself the focal point, inadvertently excusing them from doing any self-examination.

Though I'd progressed from a deficit-based framing of diverse students, I was now making CLD students objects of inquiry, and my students became cultural voyeurs. The readings allowed TCs to peer into the window of BIYOC's classrooms but never asked them to enter the school. I bolstered the white gaze by not requiring my students to critically evaluate or contextualize the teacher-student relationships about which they read. Consequently, my students certainly learned what not to do but very little about why they shouldn't do it. My hyper-focus on interpersonal racism cost my students learning about cultural, institutional, and systemic racism. I was not preparing them to understand or combat the unique brand of racism that is antiblackness that permeates K-12 schools via discipline policies, dress codes, and other facets of the hidden curriculum (Anyon, 1980).

Years 4-10: Preparing for Diverse Learners

In preparing for my first annual review, I realized I had difficulty writing about this course because I was unsure how it fit within my teaching portfolio. I once again redesigned the course, this time with an explicit focus on race. While searching for new texts, I stumbled across a sentence with which I truly connected: "Greatness in teaching requires a serious encounter with autobiography because teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves" (Ayers, 2001, p.122)." Inspired, I renamed the course *Teacher and Teaching Identities* and wrote a new course description:

> This course is designed to ensure teacher candidates understand why culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary in U.S. public schools. By

> taking an intersectional approach to identity development, we will examine how many aspects of students' identities combine to create learners with unique needs. Though we will discuss identity development in relation to common demographic markers (e.g., economic, racial, linguistic, etc.), the lens will be on students as well as ourselves. The primary goal of this course is for teacher candidates to recognize their own cultural identity and identify how it affects pedagogical choices and practices, both implicitly and explicitly.

I lobbied my department to take this course more seriously, so we expanded it to 1-unit with 18 instructional days totaling 54 contact hours. I successfully moved the course into the academic year, which signified its importance to students. My new challenge was delivering an educational experience students perceived as good as their methods courses even though diversity is rarely a feel-good topic.

Antiracist Teaching

With almost twice as much instructional time, I wasn't rushed to jump to pedagogical practices without first asking TCs to unmask the who behind instructional choices. I reoriented the course to be personal with new learning objectives, including:

- Understand yourself as a cultural being
- Identify your cultural norms
- Connect your norms to teaching practices
- Locate yourself on an identity development spectrum
- Feel prepared to advocate for all students
- Realize your power to affect and effect change

I developed a spiraled curriculum that helped TCs build their understanding of themselves as cultural beings, of themselves in shared space with future students, and of themselves as a teacher (Table 3).

Table 3
Curriculum Years 4-10

Theoretical Texts	**Empirical Articles and Books**	**Narratives**	**Multimedia**
Applebaum, 2016; Collins, 2009; Delpit, 1988; Hogg & Reid, 2006;	Anyon, 1980; Fasching-Varner, 2014; Picower, 2021	Jenlink, 2014	Glass, 2015, 2017, 2018; Lowman, 2017; Skoll et al., 2018

Ladson-Billings, 1998; Macleod, 1995 McLaren, 2009 Meyer, 2017 Shrewsbury, 1993			

The course begins with critical whiteness studies to provide a theoretical lens through which to examine upcoming content. We then use two books about whiteness in teacher education to facilitate self-inquiry. This unit culminates with a revised cultural auto-ethnography assignment that asks students to explore their cultural and professional identities and practices within a critical whiteness framework.

The second unit reviews schools and systems, pushing TCs to evaluate the relationship between identities and power and educational access and opportunity. They utilize their developing knowledge of social identity theory, the culture of power, critical race theory, and social stratification to analyze trauma-informed teaching, tracking, school choice, and the cradle to prison pipeline. These theories are also illustrated through podcasts, documentaries, and a docuseries that constitutes the text for book club discussions.

The final unit includes the vestiges of prior course iterations, during which we look to critical pedagogy, queer theory, and feminist pedagogy as instructional methods that challenge the status quo. I use the readings to prompt TCs to identify teaching strategies that celebrate students' identities, encourage critical thinking, and operate within the third space (Bhabha, 1994), connecting cultural knowledge to academic content. They are encouraged to emotionally connect to course material as they juxtapose their own schooling experiences with those of the BIYOC in documentaries and podcasts. I want them to develop empathy as they use discussion prompts to converse with classmates whose lives may differ from their own. Finally, I aim to instill hope and positivity as they view real teachers doing the hard work of teaching students whom society has historically neglected.

I ask them to be vulnerable with themselves and their classmates to demonstrate the necessity of connecting abstract content to their own and others' humanity. I've learned that I cannot make my students antiracist, nor can I give them a checklist of antiracist teaching practices. I act as their instructor who contextualizes readings with data, answers questions, reviews critical takeaways, and designs activities that promote perspective-taking and inquiry. I support the development of their professional practice by helping them complete the following prerequisites for antiracist teaching (Wheaton College, n.d.):

- Identify your social position
- Understand the impact of white supremacy in schools
- Learn about how racism shapes lives

- Acknowledge racial trauma
- Probe your expectations of the "ideal" student
- Scrutinize the content in your course
- Understand evidence-based antiracist pedagogy
- Make a concrete and actionable plan for change

Course evaluations and program exit data consistently state that this course is the most "emotionally difficult" course in the program and the "most important" to their future success.

Final Thoughts

Teaching about teaching means teacher educators are role models who should walk the talk. More so than in non-preservice courses, I feel pressured to make sure my pedagogical skills align with my content knowledge. I layer that with the emotional strain of teaching topics about which I care so much and that are vitally important not only for TCs, but also for their future students' life prospects. We teacher educators bear heavy responsibilities.

But in 10 years I've learned that we also have responsibilities to ourselves. Teaching this class forced me to recognize that, like my white students, I carry with me concomitants of my own racial, cultural, and gendered identities, as well as my experiences in predominately white schools. My internalization of deficit-based views of Blackness was infused into the syllabus and bolstered by a performance of antiblackness during which I straightened my hair, dressed in "professional" attire, and introduced myself with my credentials. Being unaware, or perhaps willfully ignorant, of my participation in my subjugation prevented me from being the best educator I could.

It took almost four years to change my perspective of teaching from professional obligation to personal opportunity. The many iterations of this course mirror my evolution into an antiracist person and, by default, an antiracist pedagogue. Teaching this class clarified my intellectual and social positionality and helped refine my teaching philosophy. As I challenged myself to learn more so I could do more, my imposter syndrome disappeared. I now know that I belong in academe and that my value is both connected and unrelated to my Blackness, and that's okay. It took time to accept that I do not owe it to anyone to prioritize their emotional well-being over my own and to learn to give voice to my narrative without centering my pain.

Most importantly though, I learned that I need not waste time justifying my presence when it is more effective to ask students to interrogate theirs. We can do this by cultivating brave classroom spaces where civil controversy, personal responsibility, and respect are commonplace (Arao & Clemens, 2013). We can do this by making it clear that though race is transactional in society, we decide the

exchange rate in our classrooms. We should never explain what it means to be Black without also asking students to understand what it means to be white because everyone should share the work of antiracism.

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