

## Race at Lang Campus Meetings

5/22/2014

*These notes are offered as reflections on two recent meetings that took place as part of the Mellon grant that Lang College received to address issues of race at Lang.*

### **Race at Lang Curriculum Meeting May 16, 5:00-7:00, Lang Cafe**

Follow discussion on twitter: #ral2014

Approximately 40 people in attendance. Lang Dean Stephanie Browner there. Food provided.

Before introductions, people were encourage to write something about what informed their experiences of race on sticky notes and place them on one of the two posters taped to pillars in the cafeteria. This was followed by introductions by Jasmine Rault and Doris Chang, two of the Mellon grant administers and faculty at The New School.

Discussions opened up with reflections about the group meetings held throughout the course of the spring semester, as well as one-on-one faculty meetings with students.

- **Faculty Training**

Concerns were raised about needing better faculty training, as many professors are having trouble, or do not have the skills or knowledge, to facilitate difficult dialogues in their classes.

- **Institutional Investments**

There is a lack of investment on the part of the university in institution building. Questions raised about how to create more institutional support for these discussion, and the challenges raised by these conversations. It was also framed as a challenge of how to organize bottom up, rather than top down, to address issues of race, gender, and social justice across the board.

- **Peer Support & Learning**

Discussed how to create opportunities for peer support and learning around these issues. It was reported that the student-only meetings were very powerful, and had a very good response. It is clear students want more of these. Also raised the ongoing issue of curriculum review and rethinking. Suggestions about doing some sort of curriculum review were also discussed, something that students in the Checkpoint group have raised on several occasions before.

From here various faculty helping with these meetings, and meeting with students one-on-one, discussed main points from their meetings with students. Main points are listed as bullets.

- **Faculty #1 - Met with 4 students as part of this project**

- Importance of social class in these discussions.
- HEOP status seen as a stigma “Scarlet Letter” by students.
- Unaware and defensive white students reinforcing white privilege.
- Tokenization of POC in classes by white students/faculty.
- Lack of course offerings on topics of race and ethnicity.
- Consistent underestimation of the frequency of daily microaggressions.
- Sizeable group of students going to NCORE (National Conference on Race and Ethnicity) this year from New School.

- **Faculty #2 - Met with 5 students as part of this project**

- White students approach race issues intellectually, but not as part of daily lived experience. Disconnect between thinking about and experience racism.
- Need to add white supremacy focus to race and ethnicity discussions.
- Not enough POC in faculty.
- Challenge of too few POC faculty who can be allies.
- White faculty use race as an “add on” to curriculum, instead of a core or consistent focus. “black history week” reading, etc. with no other context.
- Importance of white faculty who start classes by acknowledging their own privileges, racial positionality, etc.
- Importance of “unlearning” and deconstructing certain assumptions and modes of thought held by faculty and students.
- Professors who use POC texts or books and hold them to a higher standard than white authors on race/justice issues.

- **Faculty #3 - met with 3 students as part of this project**

- Faculty are not:
  - ◆ Addressing race at all.
  - ◆ Not able to facilitate helpful or reflective discussions.
- There is a “maldistribution of learning chances” in the university.
- Importance of having an intersectional focus in classes and curriculum.
- Students feeling like “their brains are on fire” from psychological harm in classes.
- Example of student who performs poorly in a class exam that follow directly after deeply troubling or problematic classes before. Psychological stress or harm from class A experiences causing poor performance in class B.
- Necessity of having pedagogical flexibility in “real-time”
- Different life experiences and writing competencies used as punishment against students by faculty. Faculty see “dumb students” who can’t write properly based on their own preconceptions of what “proper” language should be.
- A complete lack of any acknowledgement of privilege in the classroom.

- Outsourcing queer and trans\* classes or learning to other divisions. Students not able to find classes in their own programs.
  - Importance of using a “Start/Stop/Continue” methodology in classes to assess reactions, comfort, understanding during class conversations.
- **Faculty #4 - Met with 2 students as part of this project**
    - Challenge of finding culturally relevant critical pedagogy resources.
    - Lack of any Education Studies major or field a problem.
    - Lack of a radical white male critique, and absence of Critical Whiteness Studies.
    - Last two items above reflect loss of campus activism on whiteness. Used to be a radical white student group called Whites Against Racism (WAR) in 1990s.
    - Lang’s “Social Justice Culture” is trivialized or joked about by other parts of school (faculty and students).
    - Necessity of connecting pedagogy and critical analysis together.
    - Importance of having allies for students to talk to when facing difficulties.
    - Students with negative experiences don’t feel empowered to talk to faculty they have problems with. Some students did respond when faculty allies offered to help draft letter with students. Reinforced the importance of needing strong allies.
    - Privileged students at The New School (majority) don’t understand marginalized and non-hegemonic worldview that don’t fit into mainstream or accepted norms.

Following these reflections the conversation shifted to discussion about solutions and a brainstorm of possible ideas, strategies, etc.

“We can never assume that classrooms are safe spaces” - student

Discussion about how to create safe spaces in class or on campus. Suggestion of having some kind of a “Social Justice 101” class so that all New School students have exposure to basic vocabulary and analysis of an intersectional social justice perspective before they graduate.

Challenge of how you get someone to understand something that they do not have any personal experience with or knowledge of?

Students called attention to the lack of any graduate POC support group. One new international grad student (Black woman) even offered to be a mentor for undergrads looking for support, which was met with much enthusiasm by students. Clearly a desire for more such connections.

Importance of having some mechanism for anonymous conversations to take place, as many people at The New School have concerns or frustrations around race issues, but often no way to express them, or fear of reprimand or retaliation if they do raise them publicly.

Necessity of creating better resources for faculty. Should help provide materials, but also direct people to others with specific skillsets or competencies if faculty want additional materials, training, support, etc.

Challenge of bringing together diverse students groups with common interests. Currently several groups at The New School all working on social justice issues, but not always in communication. It was suggested that having an up-to-date list of all students groups (both OSDA registered and informal groups) with contacts would help.

Question raised about how privilege can often be re-inscribed in conversations about privilege, and how to both try and avoid this and be aware and address it as it happens.

Raised importance of staying connected to “movement spaces” and the dangers that classroom and academic discussions become so theoretical that they are disconnected from reality. Change is happening outside the classroom, not in it, yet elite discourse of trickle down social change still being taught and reproduced at The New School.

Several students raised the issue of language and how language can become a problem when faculty force students to either change or modify their language to fit arbitrary expectations. This applies to both spoken and written uses of language. Student of color expressed they “have to prove themselves” to white faculty; POC forced to perform their language and actions to meet white expectations, esp. faculty. “Where is the space to be ourselves and be comfortable?” Students wanting to say “fuck your comfortability” in these political situations.

False perception on the part of some students and faculty that underprivileged students are “academically inferior” - link back to earlier comment about HEOP stigma felt by students.

Discussed the problem of white students co-opting language from other communities. Recommended people check out June Jordan’s writings on Black English (c.f. *His Own Where*). Brian Lewis, Lang alumni and now Lang faculty, offered to help compile suggested readings for anyone interested. People can contact him via e-mail ([lewisb@newschool.edu](mailto:lewisb@newschool.edu)).

“Why can’t we have an anti-canon?”

Someone else asked where international students fit into all of this as well?

Meeting wrapped up with a brief note about next steps with the Mellon Grant, which includes plans for three workshops in the fall, starting with a Teacher Training workshop, which will be planned over the summer. Anyone interested in being involved with this was encouraged to get in touch with Jasmine and Doris via e-mail ([raultj@newschool.edu](mailto:raultj@newschool.edu) and [changd@newschool.edu](mailto:changd@newschool.edu)).

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**The Labours of Diversity: A Conversation with Sara Ahmed**  
**May 20, 10:30-1:30, Orozco Room**

Approximately 50 people in room. Lang Dean Stephanie Browner and Provost Tim Marshall both in attendance. Started with a long table in the center, encircled by chairs, with the following at the table: Miriam Ticktin, Judy Pryor-Ramirez, Laura Liu, T.L. Cowan, Gail Drakes, Jasmine Rault, Katherine Schmidt, and Sara Ahmed.

A handout was circulated with information about the long table format and principles. Jasmine started with a brief introduction, explained how the long table worked, and a bit about what they had been doing as part of the Lang Mellon grant, and then introduced Sara Ahmed.

Sara began with a short (5ish min) presentation about some of what her latest book (*On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*) dealt with, and especially the challenges of institutional organizing. A few select quotes from her opening remarks are included below:

In the context of diversity work she noted that too often POC and non-conforming groups get pulled into committees to “represent” diversity at the institutional level, or as she put it:

“The more ‘nots’ you are, the more committees you are on.”

In discussing the challenge of diversity work, which has become an institutional “buzzword” that all institutions want to embrace in rhetoric, but not in practice, she noted:

“Diversity is a ‘yes’ word..but this yes does not bring about what it says yes to.”

The motif of walls was central to the entire talk, and also a part of her book. At one point one of the presenters held up a copy of her book and the two pages that have a wall covering them.

Whiteness acts as an institutional wall.

Whiteness is always pushing back when it is the institutional background. When you push on that wall, then stop back and stop pushing, it springs right back into shape. This institutional whiteness is almost like the self-healing walls in the new University Center. You push a tack into the wall, take it out, and there are no traces of the tack left. But unlike those self-healing walls, the wall of institutional whiteness does real harm.

When we hit a wall it hurts. Walls inflict actual physical harm as well as psychological harm.

Someone described it as ‘invisible walls coated with language,’ since at times the walls are not physical but structural, in this case as a part of the institutional language.

This also brought up the fact that POC can be invisible in one context, then suddenly made visible in a different context, depending on what needs they are perceived to serve from the perspective of the white institutional power structure. In this context someone noted:

“The invisible person is seeing the invisible thing.”

Someone else noted that we also need to call people to account, not just abstract walls, since the metaphorical walls are systems of power that people uphold. “It’s not a wall...it’s people!”

Another faculty member mentioned the challenges of being a POC and not wanting to become the tokenized person on a committee, in the dept, etc, and how POC try to negotiate these power relations and personal commitments to working for justice. In this context, the idea of “deliberate invisibility” was raised, where POC choose to remain outside certain spheres of the institution because of the emotional and psychological stress of having to constantly engage with systems of white power and authority.

“Your body is the wall for the institution” Sara Ahmed noted at this point, referring to the resistance that white power structures face when people organize against them from within.

Someone raised the constant danger of “the politics of quantity,” where diversity simply means X number of people from various identity groups, with no regard to the people themselves.

Another person brought up the problem of knowledge being invalidated when it crosses disciplines, so a discussion happening in one division or program suddenly cannot speak to a different program or division, even though they appear to be dealing with the same issues.

Someone raised the importance of changing whiteness versus simply changing the perception of whiteness in an institution. Is diversity about better branding and diverse photos on the website, or a real structural power change? Here the idea of “perception management” came up.

Sara mentioned here the idea of “non-performative will,” or when institutions don’t do what they say they do. (She has written more extensively about that in an essay in *Borderlands* called “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism” available online here [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/ahmed\\_declarations.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm)).

Another faculty from one of the CUNY school brought up the idea of “overstating harm” on the part of privileged groups. They provided an example of a Student for Justice in Palestine group who had difficulty getting a faculty advisor, and the various threats and intimidations from the administration against the group, but how the advisor was in a privileged position with tenure, so the risks to them were actually not that great, but could be seen as suffering a lot of harm.

Someone else raised the importance of distinguishing harm from comfort. When is someone actually suffering harm, and when it is not harm, but rather discomfort from having privileges challenged or called into question?

Another outside faculty from Cooper Union raised the challenges they faced in speaking to an entirely old white male power structure and the different strategies for trying to engage. They used the example of parataxis versus syntaxis to talk about ways to rethink critical ideas. This represents an entirely different way of conveying and organizing information.

One of the part-time adjuncts raised the issue of the many challenges that part-time faculty, adjunct faculty face at The New School, especially when they are trying to be allies for students, or help organize around some of the institutional issues. One faculty described this process as “ritualized humiliation of part-time faculty.”

In the context of how organizing can make you appear as a “buzzkill” or “that person” who always raised “those issues,” Sara reminded everyone that people want to talk about solutions, but not about problems. It’s easy to ignore power dynamics and institutional whiteness when you talk about solutions, but it is impossible to ignore them when you focus on the problems.

She also talked about the importance of engaging strategically when you are at. In other words, you have to work with the pockets of change inside an institution, as they are places where we have more leverage to engage with systemic change.

Someone else brought up the issue of care and community, and how we too often save our compassion for working with difficult people, then take out our frustrations back in our own homes or communities, which is really deadly for building movement longevity and health.

One grad student brought up their frustration with that they described as the “social justice bureaucracy” at The New School, and mentioned negative experiences with both the SJI office and the Social Justice Committee, claiming they were more interested in bureaucracy than making changes.

Someone asked which privileges do we talk about, and which ones do we ignore.

Another person asked what is the goal of education? Or maybe goals?

In talking about the challenges of diversity work in higher education today, and the relationship between universities and on the ground struggles, a huge gap was acknowledged, especially at places like The New School.

In discussing these issues two other common metaphors that came up had to do with health and disease. Sara mentioned that diversity workers often represent the “indigestible differences”

within an institution that it refuses to address even while it claims to want to address them. The metaphor of an apple, shiny skin on the outside, but with a rotten core underneath the surface.

There seemed to be general agreement in the room that universities are no longer relevant for social struggles, as they have become too disconnected and closed off from the rest of our world.

In this context someone asked “what is our relationship to this moment?”

A visitor from Arizona that was in the city noted that “students have power not because they are not student now, they are consumers.” While this is not entirely true, the model of student consumer is certainly apt for The New School and the push under the new president of a model of educational consumption.

It is perhaps apt, then, that Sara concluded by mentioning the challenge of “digestible voices” and who or what can be swallowed by the institution.

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*These notes respectfully compiled by chris crews, Social Justice Committee student co-chair. Any misquotes or errors are solely the authors. [chris@chriscrews.com](mailto:chris@chriscrews.com).*