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In this paper, two teacher educators, a Latino man and an Asian American woman, reflect on their experiences in their graduate teacher-education classes after a controversial book talk and lecture about racism in higher education took place at one of the most diverse institutions of higher learning in the United States. Using critical race and dialogic frameworks, they analyze issues of race, power, and White privilege in academia and probe the reasons why, despite efforts to incorporate multicultural training in teacher education programs, discussing race can be an uncomfortable, threatening, and even cathartic experience to participants.

> *"There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak"*
> Ecclesiastes 3:7

This study is a narrative description and an analysis of discussions about race at George Mason University's (GMU) College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) during the 2005- 2006 academic year. Melanie E.L. Bush was invited to present her book *Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday forms of Whiteness* (Bush, 2004) and to discuss students' beliefs and attitudes about identity, privilege, poverty, race, and racism. With over 30,000 students, GMU has the largest enrollment of any university in Virginia and has the highest proportion of Asian American and Hispanic students in the state of Virginia (George Mason University, 2008). In 2008, a national survey by The Princeton Review resulted in Mason's designation as the fourth most diverse institution of higher learning in the United States.

Dr. Melanie Bush's book-talk, based on her study of race at the City University of New York (Brooklyn College), generated a great deal of interest, individual and collective discussions, and requests from pre-service and in-service teachers to continue the discussions in the following weeks in their

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graduate level courses. Dr. Bush, a White educator and administrator at Brooklyn College from 1990 – 2005, presented a very provocative in-depth analysis of race relations at a university institution that very much paralleled some of the same racial contradictions and controversies present at GMU. Follow-up discussions in our classes elicited some highly charged and unexpected introspection about teaching, learning new ideas, working in culturally and linguistically diverse schools, and evolving perceptions about K-12 students.

In this paper, we analyze and discuss the difficulty of talking meaningfully about race, racism, and oppression as two faculty of color (Gomez, Black & Allen, 2007; Weiss & Fine, 2005). Within the context of institutions of higher education such as GMU, the authors probe what uncomfortable silences and dangerous discourses, such as those experienced as a result of Bush's presentation, can teach university faculty members and students about developing anti-racist pedagogy (Bigler, 1999; Bigler & Collins, 1995). We will argue, using the Gramscian concept of *hegemony*, that some discourses, such as color-blindness, meritocracy, and race in education, have shaped and created meaning systems that have gained the status and currency of 'truth' (Foucault, 1973, 1980). These discourses are hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971, 2000) because for many teachers and educators who have not probed the significance of "Whiteness" these discourses are deeply embedded in how they define themselves and their social worlds. Color-blindness and meritocracy are firmly entrenched in America's dominant, mainstream, cultural ideology (e.g., values, assumptions, meanings, methods) and are promoted through the media. These discourses concerning race permeate and shape the reality for most people including those who work in academia and within primary and secondary education (Curtis & Romney, 2006).

While arguing that a transformative paradigm with its associated philosophical assumptions provides a useful framework for addressing issues of race, racism, and oppression in academia, in this study we will explore and analyze what happens when hegemonic discourses about race are openly challenged with a counter-hegemonic one by a public speaker in an allegedly liberal university setting. Having broken the *uncomfortable silence* about race and racism in academia, Melanie Bush's lecture advanced a highly contested counter-hegemonic discourse and got the audience engaged in some *dangerous discussions*. During the following weeks, these discussions continued in several of our classes.

The audience was polarized along ethnic, ideological, and racial lines. Seated in the auditorium were people with different types of racist and anti-racist attitudes. These included anti-racist student activists who applauded Melanie Bush and welcomed the invitation to talk not about the persistence of racism but what could be done to counter racism. Individuals were also present

who had never seriously examined "Whiteness" and, like the White faculty and students in Bush's study at Brooklyn College, had uncritically accepted the dominant view that racism no longer existed in the United States. Other audience members not only resisted a critique of racism but also saw it as "reverse racism" arguing that Whites today were being unfairly blamed for the past.

Background

Racism, racial prejudice, and intolerance towards minorities continue to be one of the most agonizing social problems of the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). Although many institutions of higher education, both in the public and private sector, continue to work to address and combat racism and intolerance in all its overt and covert forms, racism continues to be a pervasive problem in the United States (Brown, Hinton, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Gándara, Orfield, & Horn, 2006; Knaus, 2006; Orfield, Marín, & Horn, 2005). Although there is no consensus about the best ways to combat racism and bigotry on college campuses, in this paper, we posit that the multilayered nature of racism requires a mutually reinforcing series of policies and initiatives at the various levels at which racism operates in order to produce any lasting change.

Critical race and critical multicultural educators (Mahalingam & McCarthy, 2000; Kubota, 2004), analyze racism as ideology in relationship to political economy and globalization (Macedo & Gounari, 2006). Racism was produced through historical structures and processes of slavery, war, and conquest and colonialism (Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 2003). Discourse plays a prominent role in the construction and reproduction of racism (Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988).

Since racism is institutionalized, hidden and subtle, it is difficult for many in the field of education to identify systematic racist practices and to acknowledge having, consciously or unconsciously, racist attitudes or behavior. Therefore, the struggle to combat and overcome racism or to develop anti-racist educational policies and practices within educational institutions, whether in elementary and secondary school contexts in which our students work or in teacher education programs, can be challenging, countercultural, and difficult. It may be challenging because developing anti-racist curriculum requires uncovering and transforming those structural and embedded inequities that, over the years, have been rendered as "legitimate" and appropriate by particular conventions of policy, law, common sense, and even science (Thompson, 1997). It may be countercultural because questioning the alleged objectivity and apolitical nature of scientific research disrupts the academic canon and

conventional academic practices (Harding, 1998). It is difficult work because changing deeply held attitudes and beliefs is often a painful and troublingly slow process requiring patience. If not handled properly, these efforts can easily be transformed into heated arguments, resentments, and the rupture of relationships.

At her presentation, Bush's talk addressed the findings of her research on Whiteness at Brooklyn College specifically discussing why most White people in the United States believe Americans have achieved racial equality, even though social and economic indicators suggest otherwise. Bush argued that there had been a shift in public opinion from a presumption of collective responsibility for the common good toward a belief in the social survival of the fittest resulting in narratives that align ordinary Whites with global elites. Following her hour-long talk was an almost two-hour question and answer session.

A number of faculty members obtained copies of the videotape of Dr. Bush's presentation to show to their classes. In this article, the authors reflect on conversations that took place in their classes following the book talk and the showing of the video in their classes.

Dangerous Discourses: Facing the Challenges of Anti-Racist Pedagogy

Fighting racism in any institution of higher education requires a deep level of commitment and inclusion from all administrators, faculty, students, and staff. The discussion in open forums and in graduate seminars of stories and experiences of oppressed people that have been traditionally suppressed—the uncomfortable silence factor—may become dangerous counter-hegemonic discourse. No longer silenced or subjugated, the arguments and data presented serve as markers for what had been unknown or kept hidden. In this paper, we posit that one of the best ways to achieve this goal is by facilitating respectful and inclusive presentations and "cultural learning" dialogues (Tierney, 1992). In these dialogues, students, faculty, and staff willingly step out of their own geographical and temporal spheres of identity into the spheres of others, enabling traditionally silenced groups to speak out and ensuring that all have equal protection. Issues of power and dominance are brought to the forefront, where all parties feel safe in addressing their grievances in public and quickly deal with problems rather than dwelling on them and sowing the seeds of resentment. This is an ideal, we found, not easily accomplished.

Since racial beliefs and ideological stereotypes have been developed and molded by education and, to a large extent, by culture, these presentations and dialogues will need to achieve several academic and transformative goals.

They must help students understand racism, how it has historically benefited Whites, and how we must end it. This will often necessitate that the White majority be aroused from slumber and consider how they often quietly benefit from racial injustice. An exploration of whiteness and privilege including class privilege and other dimensions of difference may make students feel uncomfortable as well.

In institutions of higher education, the need for multiple anti-oppressive conceptual frameworks and perspectives (Kumashiro, 2004) and specific anti-racist tools and strategies to develop racial literacies cannot be understated (Bolgatz, 2005). Although some educators and students in academia pretend that racism is a thing of the past, and that no one is mistreated in today's universities because of the color of their skin, racism persists on college campuses just as it is deeply entrenched within the larger American society. Whether manifested in visceral, "in-your-face" racial slurs and hate crimes, or in elusive, subtle, and "normal" educational institutional practices, racism undermines the potential for various racial groups to address systematic institutional inequalities and to create multi-racial alliances for transformation. Whether institutional or interpersonal, subtle or overt, expressed or implied, racism permeates institutions of higher education (Willis, 2003).

On college campuses, one continues to see the phenomena of "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) in which the dominant ideology is meritocracy where knowledge of the upper and upper-middle classes is valued as cultural capital (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991) but the knowledge and epistemological resources of people of color are discounted (Anzaldúa, 1990; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

Echoing Lu's (1999) yesteryear comments on racism within the U.S. academy, we agree that racism remains among the most emotionally convoluted and volatile topics in critical exchanges among people of different (socially labeled and/or self-named) racial identities. As a result, matters of racism are often avoided and treated in strict isolation from what counts as knowledge and scholarship in higher education, generating what several authors refer to as *uncomfortable or disturbing* silences (Bigler, 1999; Bigler & Collins, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Roman & Eyre, 1997). When public discourse of meritocracy does not acknowledge the institutional dimensions of racism, this silence further perpetuates racism and undercuts the potential for the development of grassroots movements for social change.

Methodology

This paper is a narrative description of conversations that took place in teacher education classes following Melanie Bush's lecture at George Mason

8   Dangerous Discourses

University. We consciously used a multifaceted, dialogic, reflective, methodological approach that aimed to foreground the interconnections between dialogue, power, and race. This action research project is part of a broader on-going investigation of our own work in GMU's College of Education. Its purpose is to: (a) Address racial, gendered, and class inequalities in our own teaching; (b) Transform our curriculum to reflect a social justice orientation; and (c) Recruit and mentor more non-traditional students at both the university and college levels.

As in many *ex-post facto* studies and evaluations, our population selection and data collection were conducted after the "presentation and seminar discussions" were underway or completed. The quotes that we select for analysis and discussion in this paper reflect our own critical race, critical literacy, and critical multicultural biases and viewpoints as faculty of color whose perspectives have been informed by Latin American theologies of liberation and the 1960s movements of Third World Students for ethnic studies (Grant, Wong & Osterling, 2007).

As teacher educators and Latino and Asian American community activists, our methodology draws from dialogic approaches to teacher research (Wong, 1994), action research (Burns, 1999), and critical ethnography (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). This particular paper is one response to Foley and Valenzuela's (2005) call for critical qualitative researchers to discuss our collaborative and political practices. As scholars of color who feel a commitment to make our research serve minority communities, we identify with what Valenzuela as an activist sociologist calls, "the long struggle to find one's voice and write in a broadly accessible style" (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 225).

As faculty of color, in contrast to some of our White colleagues, we are aware we are positioned to represent and speak for our communities within the academy and constantly are positioned into essentialist positions. At the same time, in our own commitments as long-time community activists, we find ourselves on our emancipatory, modernist, anti-racist soapboxes, we recognize this may be threatening to White students who hold a subordinate position to us vis-à-vis our power as professors and various dimensions of inequality in our classrooms (including gender, age, sexual orientation and bilingual linguistic repertoires).

Three broad inter-related research questions guided our data analysis:

1. Why are discussions about race and racism so difficult? What can be learned from uncomfortable silences?

2. How can discourses be "dangerous" and for whom?

3. How can schools of education facilitate meaningful discussions about race in teacher education programs and become more aware of the impact of racism in contemporary education?

Discussion

One of the biggest challenges faced by faculty in institutions of higher education who are committed to social justice and to the advancement of society is helping faculty and students discover the core area of racism—the subconscious biases that exist in most people—and to challenge all to take action. Analysis of educational events, such as Melanie Bush's presentation, although difficult, uncomfortable, and emotionally-charged, are a good start for any long-term institutional efforts to raise student awareness about race and racism and to continue dialogues that must be a part of any meaningful transformative process.

Bush's presentation at Mason confirmed that even in one of the most diverse universities in the United States, where many faculty and students may express liberal views, open discussions about race and racism continue to be very difficult. It also illustrated that even the best intentioned might still hold elements of racist attitudes of which they are not aware. Faculty with a social justice orientation may feel that students need a catalyst to help them recognize racism, develop steps to reduce racism, and eventually eliminate it. Some of our students had a very different view of the importance of race in a teacher education program. The *dangerous discourses* and *uncomfortable silences* in the paper's title refer both to the heated discussion that followed a profound silence in GMU's town hall meeting when Bush invited her audience of 150-200 people to talk about the significance of her research on race relations and the discussions that took place among our students in our classes, particularly those who had felt that the debate on race in the book talk was destructive. The question and answer period, intended to clarify Bush's research results, led the participants into very mixed reactions, from resentments and angers to deep analyses and personal introspections, which continued for several weeks in various seminars. These are discussed in the following pages.

"What Can White People Do?"

Bush opened the floor to questions and response after a wide-ranging talk in which she had linked her study at Brooklyn College to a national discussion about the role of race in the media coverage and response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the prospects for social change in America. After a long and uncomfortable period of silence, the first to speak from the audience was a White male. This student asked the question, "*What can White people do?*"

One of the authors of this study, Wong, remembers feeling somewhat irritated or impatient with this inquiry. From her standpoint, the White male's question was an attempt to shift the focus away from discussing the essential problem of racism and what needs to be done about it. For her, a more suitable question would have been, "What does it mean to be an anti-racist ally?" To many people of color in the audience this student had not understood the core elements of Bush's talk—our need to become anti-racist allies—nor was he reflecting on the presence of racism in our contemporary society. He reacted to Bush's talk with a defensive attitude and did not realize that he was ignoring what had been covered in the discussion about racism.

Reflecting on the wording and tone of this White student's first question, people of color may often recall attending events where similar questions were often posed and received non-committal answers, where an analysis of the true causes of racism was avoided. That afternoon, on the contrary, the presenter did not allow the discussion to lose its focus and challenged the audience to become anti-racist allies, foregrounding the experiences of people of color and taking a stand alongside them to oppose racism.

Then a young White woman in the back of the auditorium asserted that the problem was not "racism" but "human nature." Claiming that slavery had existed throughout history, going back to the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, long before the African slave trade to the United States, she argued that even today African Americans have problems with Africans.

This last statement polarized the audience and served as an example of the resistance on the part of Whites who are not aware of racism. What infuriated many in the audience who were people of color was the woman's denial of racism. Her statement which could be paraphrased as, "If African Americans have trouble with Africans, what can I as a White person do?" was perceived as a rhetorical attempt to shift the discussion away from an analysis of institutional White racism by assigning the *blame* of racism to African Americans.

This prompted the reaction of several African Americans in the audience. Challenging the White woman's views, they quickly pointed out the dangers of such overgeneralizations. They argued that, on the contrary, many African Americans are proud of their African heritage and identify with the struggle for freedom of all African American people.

This was followed by the response of a bi-racial Latina who invited the audience to view racism not as a binary issue between Whites and African Americans, but in broader terms including other people of color in the discussion. A middle-aged European American student, who argued that racism in the United States is not the result of "White privilege," supported that point. Having spent her childhood under what she described as a totalitarian regime,

she shared with the audience that today she had a multi-racial family, which included a Latino adopted son, and argued that instead of blaming one another, everyone needed to acknowledge that the United States was the best country in the world.

Heated and contentious responses concerning racism, White privilege, and what constitutes patriotism, mostly coming from students and faculty of color, followed the previous comments. That evening several faculty members, sensing the need to continue with the dialogue, used Mason's web-based course management system, known as Blackboard, to create an electronic discussion site. This avenue provided their students an opportunity to post their views and become engaged in an electronic discussion from any computer with an Internet connection. Other classes had the dialogue continue in following classes. One student wrote:

> By the end, I felt like many people in the room were unable to empathize with others and that there was a contest of which group was persecuted the most. I wish this same group could get together over a glass of wine/cup of coffee and really get to know each other instead of putting others in a box without knowing anything about who each other is.

Racially Polarizing Classroom Discussions

During the following weeks, informal conversations about Bush's talk continued. It was obvious that she had touched a "raw nerve" and succeeded in having faculty and graduate students personally analyze their stands and views on race and racism and that some felt the need to continue the dialogue.

At students' request, several faculty members, including the authors of this paper, devoted entire classroom sessions to this purpose. For many, the energy of these candid, profound, and not always respectful dialogues was surprising. While some students began sharing difficult and painful experiences, others expressed surprise and even shock at what they were hearing.

Several of these sessions began with students questioning the relationship between teacher-education courses (e.g., bilingualism, literacy, and reading) and the content of Bush's book. Some did not understand why faculty had made it a required course reading and had encouraged all students to attend the presentation. In one class, there was a long uncomfortable silence after the instructor opened up with the topic of race and only a few students participated in the discussion. Others would not speak up and indicated that they felt further discussion of race was not appropriate. For example, a White female student wrote:

12   Dangerous Discourses

> I am afraid I see no correlation between Melanie Bush's remarks and the teaching of reading and writing. I found her two chapters in the book to be pure rhetoric. The little substance in her text was destructive and polarizing.

In contrast, many racial minority students emphasized the need to see racism addressed in the curriculum. An African American female teacher commenting on Bush's presentation, reflected:

> I can't help but wonder if this discussion of race, power, and education would be as "respected" or gain as much attention if it came from an ethnic person, as opposed to a White person who inadvertently carries "privilege" and power? Or, would it have been dismissed as the rancorous ravings of a minority?
>
> The curricular implications are that as teachers we need to examine what to teach and how we teach and to encourage critical analysis from our students, in order to challenge the system and the status quo. As teachers, we need to show value to the knowledge that our students bring to class as well as that from the communities they come from and make a conscious effort to incorporate this knowledge as part of the curriculum.

As a result of these classroom dialogues, some students saw the need to examine their own biases and expressed their commitment to contribute to develop curriculum that would include the perspectives of many communities as well as anti-racist pedagogies. As one pre-service teacher commented:

> The Melanie Bush presentation and today's class discussion have been eye opening and invigorating for me. I really enjoyed hearing different points of view and personal experiences. I feel that a major implication for us in our classrooms is to incorporate these same types of discussions and present material on race relations.

While another suggested its transformative impact:

> I think that Bush's work, if allowed, can truly impact schools and communities. Her work is very insightful, but scary in that as a White person, you find it hard to see these injustices but unable to experience them. I hope that someday, social studies, science, language arts, and math are not stereotypical. I hope that all people will begin to understand the struggles every group faces and develop a consciousness for others.

However, a number of students resented discussing race in literacy classes (cf. Blackburn & Clark, 2007). They felt this issue had already been "covered" in the multicultural class and thought it was a waste of time to engage in philosophical discussions instead of practical teaching techniques:

> Now I see the need for understanding theory and social philosophy when teaching in multi-cultural settings, but it is the awareness of this that has put me on this path to begin with. On top of that, there are other classes that I have taken or that I am taking that address these issues.
>
> I guess that my point is that I enrolled in these classes, so that I could learn these skills, and [today] I feel that I still do not see the connection that these types of readings and philosophical / theoretical things are doing to help me further develop concrete skills and acquire meaningful tools.

In one class, a student reflected on the contrast between the media's portrayal of White and African American victims of Hurricane Katrina:

> [Melanie Bush] also touched on perceptions, and how if we don't analyze the way we think and become aware of what is going on in the world around us, then things will never change. Hurricane Katrina is a good example. The words and images presented to us on the television definitely had a strong influence in shaping our perceptions. When poor Black people are portrayed as violent looters, it further cements a negative perception in people's minds. Even as an ESOL teacher, I find myself fighting my own preconceived notions about different types of students and cultures. For example, when a certain student's parents never call me back, or when a student is late all the time, should that be perceived as a part of their culture?

A Latina teacher argued about the proactive role that teachers should play in building inter-ethnic relations:

> Teachers must teach students to treat each other with respect and to value everyone's opinion. They also must give equal participation to all students, pulling in any information that relates to the students and that is connected to the curriculum. Among very young students, having a very different classroom is not an issue. However, when at a very young age, children are taught that not anyone else that is not like them is good enough to be their friend; teachers have an issue at hand that could worsen throughout the school year if no action is taken.

Conclusions and Further Research

Any analysis of race, power, and White privilege in academia is a daunting task. As the dialogues and debates that followed Bush's presentation highlighted, today's racism is so engrained and institutionalized that it is frequently unconscious and often leads some to deny its existence by erroneously arguing that it is a phenomenon of the past. There is a need for institutions of higher education to assist all its members to acknowledge that we live in a society

14   Dangerous Discourses

where racism is still rampant—although subtle and underground—and that we all need to develop a new type of discourse that would help us address and overcome these issues.

Events such as the one analyzed in this non-experimental, *ex-post facto* case study, although essential and necessary in educational institutions, are isolated, unusual, and difficult to facilitate. They should only be considered as the first step in what should become a personal and institutional transformative journey. In addition, the success of this type of event is contingent on the willingness of the audience to participate in respectful, inter-racial dialogues where all the parties are committed to learn more about the phenomenon of unintentional racism and the factors that influence it. They should also be willing to begin working alongside others to improve the conditions of all ethnic and racial groups in the United States.

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16   Dangerous Discourses

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