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The Emotioned Power of Racism: An Ethnographic Portrait of an All-White High School

This article explores the emotioned dimensions of racist discourses at an all-white public high school. I argue that students’ racist assertions do not always or even often originate in students’ racist attitudes or belief. Instead, racist language functions metaphorically, connecting common racist ideas to nonracist feelings, values, beliefs, and associations that are learned in the routine practices and culture of school.

There were times in Angelstown when I did fieldwork with people who seemed difficult and not very likeable. What was I to make of values and beliefs that seemed to run contrary to my own? It seemed to me that as long as I could summon a certain generosity, fieldwork could continue, but there were times when I came very close to stopping the pretense of generosity and walking away. I never took that walk, however, and now, at this writing moment, those same social scenes seem more illuminating than what I imagined back then. But I am left with this predicament: How does one textualize such encounters, such people? How do I render the density and subtlety of life lived if, as the observer, I felt that mostly nastiness and short-sightedness were to be found there?

—Ralph Cintron, Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday
The final drafts of the students’ essays on Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were not sympathetic to her claims about racism. “I’m not saying that her writing this book was a bad thing, or that its full of lies, or that black people are full of lies, but this book seems very questionable,” wrote Tori. “She’s a lesbian,” Sarah stated in her opening paragraph, “and I don’t want to read about her disgusting lifestyle.”

Jacob concluded with: “It was as if she was screaming *look at me cracker, I’ve experienced it all, no one knows my pain, no one knows my strength.*”

Reading the drafts, I pondered Cintron’s question and the passage above: *How does one textualize such encounters, such people?* Cintron answers his question by translating what he sees as a human problem—nastiness, anger—into an ethnographic one. For him, ethnography begins with the assumption that emotions have a public dimension, that “anger and nastiness . . . do not just well up from the interior of a person but are distinctly shaped along systemic lines” (131). One of the purposes of this essay is to locate the complexity of inner life within larger institutional forces. I do this by way of an ethnographic research project conducted at Laurel Canyons High School, a suburban public school, 97 percent white, located outside a midsized midwestern city. This research addressed questions of white racism and the meanings of white attitudes toward race as these are constructed via schooling, in the terms and rhetorical structures of multicultural curricula, and in the cultural practices of literacy. Throughout the academic year I spent at the high school, I observed two English classes taught by a young woman I call Elizabeth, a progressive, passionate teacher committed to her students and to social justice ideals. One class was an advanced writing course for college-bound students; the other was a graduation requirement called Introduction to Humanities. Both classes were themed around issues of identity, difference, and social justice. As part of my research, I observed the students in Elizabeth’s classroom, talked with Elizabeth during her planning period every day, interviewed students and administrators, and collected curricular material and student writing. I present this research here in “mixed genres” (to use Deborah Hicks’s term)—a blend of narrative, essayist reflections on the research, and traditional ethnographic analysis.

I aim in this essay to change the way we think about the causes and origins of racism. I argue against prevailing views of student racism as arising from a need or desire to protect or gain white privilege, or as rooted in ignorance of systemic oppression or lack of exposure to difference. As long as we...
see racism’s origins in these terms, our curricular and pedagogical responses—multicultural exposure to difference, critical interrogations of whiteness and privilege—will be ineffective. Like Cintron, I hope to deflect interpretations that pathologize research subjects as “racist” and instead to emphasize the workings of emotion within institutional practices. This emphasis requires attention to what Danielle Devoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill (2005) call “infrastructure”—the embedded social arrangements, organization, and conventions of practice that govern local practices of literacy. At the same time, it requires attention to the role of individual and collective emotions in the creation of persuasive belief systems, a topic that scholars such as Ellen Quandahl, Sharon Crowley, Laura Micciche, Julie Lindquist, Gwen Gorzelsky, and Megan Boler, among others, have recently addressed. In the analysis that follows, I have deliberately highlighted “nastiness”—the offensive, the problematic, the narrow, the stereotypical and prejudicial in students’ responses to matters of race—in order to trace the origins of racism across the various vectors that constitute the infrastructure of high school English. I move across time and contexts, between the interior and emotional, the institutional and ideological in my analysis.

Elizabeth had made copies of the essays for me, and we pulled two student desks together as we read, flipping through the pages and pointing out particular passages as we went. “Look at Teresa’s,” Elizabeth said, without looking up.

I read:

[Angelou] almost seems to be racist herself, but towards whites . . . As we read this, we realize that she was just being silly and was not used to exposure around whites. Her point of view is very immature.

“Angelou is immature,” Elizabeth said. “That’s a good one.” She underlined it. “I’ll come back to this one. Any thoughts on how I should respond?”

I shook my head. “You’re the teacher.” She laughed.

When we finished reading, I commented on the racism that marked almost every essay. “What’s your sense of how to address this?” I asked. “I mean, how as a teacher do you deal with this kind of racism?”

“It would all come crashing down in a heartbeat if I made too much of this stuff. We’d have parents, students, other teachers, totally freaking out. It would be ugly! But the other thing is, I have to say, I didn’t notice the racism, so much, without you here pointing it out. I’m not sure I would have really noticed it that much.” She paused. “It’s not that I don’t think they’re racist, don’t
get me wrong, or that it doesn’t need to be addressed in these essays, but it’s just, well, I guess what I mostly notice is that the tone and the critiques of Angelou are exactly the same as the critiques of [Lewis] Nordan and Salinger a few weeks ago—you know, just “he’s crazy, why are we reading about this crazy person?” or clichés and easy answers. No real confrontation with the text. So it seems hard to understand how it’s really about race.”

It has taken me a long time to understand fully Elizabeth’s insight that day. In order to share that understanding, I turn to a number of sources and sites. I review research on the emotioned dimensions of schooling and the role of emotion in rhetorical theory, and I suggest that we understand racist discourses as arising from a series of interconnected emotioned beliefs that are not necessarily about race per se. Students become convinced of such beliefs in part through the routines and culture of schooling, and they draw from them when confronted with matters of race, often with deleterious—that is to say, racist, effect. I use the term “emotioned” to suggest that such beliefs become persuasive through mediating and mediated processes of emotional regulation, individually experienced feelings, and dynamics of persuasion and rhetoric. While “emotional” suggests that such discourses related causally to individual feelings—anger, hostility, fear—“emotioned” instead draws our attention to the related dynamics of lived affective experiences, emotional regulation taking place through institutional and cultural practices, and language.

This perspective informs the first part of my argument: racist assertions do not always or even often originate in racist attitudes or belief. Instead, racist language functions metaphorically, connecting common racist ideas to nonracist feelings, values, beliefs, and associations—emotioned positions that are learned in school. I suggest that racist discourses are best understood as psychosocial rhetorical phenomena—forms of persuasion that need to be understood not only for their political meanings and implications but also for their persuasive subjective and affective coherence—and that racist discourses structure feelings sometimes linked to, but surprisingly rarely reducible to, the racial politics such discourses forward. I then extend this argument to the infrastructure of schooling—those tacit, taken-for-granted practices and rituals that scholars have linked to the teaching of social class identities—to show how school scaffolds the emotioned frameworks within which racist discourses become persuasive. I suggest that part of what makes racist discourses cohere and thus what makes them persuasive is school itself—its infrastructure, which exerts a powerful, but largely unacknowledged, pedagogical and persuasive force. Finally, I turn to materials gathered from Laurel Canyons—students’
narratives of their first memories of learning about race, transcripts of class discussions, and interviews with students conducted informally in the classroom and more formally, in the private setting of the library. These materials are used to illustrate the argument above, and as such they suggest provocative new directions for those interested in whiteness studies and anti-racist pedagogies, particularly those that conceptualize white privilege as a property (as Peggy MacIntosh does in her widely used essay “Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege”). Indeed, my argument here raises questions about privilege-as-property metaphors in anti-racist education; these may not be effective tropes with which to explore racism with white students. Consider, for example, Laurel Canyons’ contradictory demographics: at the time of this research, the school was moderately high-achieving, with slightly higher than statewide average scores on state standardized tests. The median home value in the district was above the state average, and fewer than 7 percent of the students qualified as “low income.” The population of adults in the district who had college degrees was nearly 40 percent (above the national and state percentages). Yet most of the students in Elizabeth’s classes had no college plans. Indeed, the overall percentage of the state’s population who had a bachelor’s degree was 16 percent at the time of this research, a fact I had to repeat several times as I talked to colleagues about this research. Many students in Elizabeth’s classes hailed from ambiguous class backgrounds: one student had a parent with a college degree and another who worked as a beautician, for example; another had college-educated parents who themselves doubted the value of a college degree and pushed their child instead toward community college; another lived in a mobile home with her family but took, and excelled in, all the high-track classes in school. In these ways the students problematized the economic metaphors of white privilege. Their lived experiences suggest a view of whiteness as a dynamic, emotioned, rhetorical process rather than a “property”—metaphoric or actual—that gives way to racism as a rational way to hang on to what one owns or as a compensatory “wage” paid to working-class whites. This is not to suggest that privilege and racism were not at work at Laurel Canyons, in the choices available to the students and parents, and in the educational and social power they wielded. This is power that is not accessible, or not accessible to the same degree, to students of color and their families. I do not, that is, want to lose sight of the very real system of whiteness in place in public education and elsewhere. However, I do want to suggest here that the metaphor of whiteness as property and the conception of racism as a response to the need to protect that property do not adequately
capture the complexity of systems of privilege as they are affectively experienced.

My argument here parallels Sharon Crowley’s recent analysis of fundamentalist belief, emotion, and persuasion. Crowley suggests that we pay more attention to the role of emotions and passions in the persuasive process. She imports terms from cognitive psychology—such as the elaboration principle—to help explain how discourses can take on resonance with individuals. The principle of elaboration “posits that ‘the extent of affective influence depends on whether the experience is elaborated or punctuated.’ . . . An elaborated experience is one that is connected to other experiences and memories of such encounters; a punctuated experience is not so connected” (84–85). Many aspects of schooling function as elaborated experiences for students, who bring these experiences to bear on their encounters with race. Crowley points out that rhetors cannot assume that their audience will respond with rational deliberation; instead rhetors need to understand the elaborated affective responses of their audiences. Gwen Gorzelsky also argues that changing ideological belief requires attention to emotional processes, rather than an abstract focus on demystification or developing critical consciousness. Indeed, these analyses suggest that anti-racist educators have misplaced their energy on a “bloodless and cerebral” (Crowley) approach to argument, when they should be focused instead on the centrality of desires and values to the maintenance of beliefs (4), on the emotioned commitments that govern how individuals respond to persuasive encounters within particular institutions.

My research at Laurel Canyons suggested to me that school itself provides some of the elaborated experiences that students draw on when confronted with matters of race. This analysis may suggest the by-now familiar truism that our institutional practices work against critical and anti-racist teaching. But I hope the exploration that follows, of students’ responses to anti-racist ideas and their memories of learning about racism, provokes a more specific consideration of how institutional practices work, and can work against anti-racist pedagogies.

Indeed, throughout my year in Elizabeth’s classroom, I was captivated by the drama of her struggles to enact a critical pedagogy in a public school that served a homogenous community. Daily, I learned from Elizabeth the complexities involved in these struggles, which mirrored my own, as a like-minded college professor, but were different too. The difficulties in both cases often involved resistance by white students to anti-racism or multiculturalism, but I also came to see important differences: while I saw white student resistance as
a theoretical and philosophical problem, in terms of not only the ethical issues of power and politics in writing classrooms, but also the larger ideological forces of privilege and racism that seemed to be at work in white students’ resistance in the classroom. Elizabeth intuitively framed these difficulties in both institutional and affective terms—as a problem at once circumscribed by school boards and required curricula, learning outcomes and relations with parents, and constrained by individual students’ emotional development and feelings. Elizabeth’s intuitive framing has become the backbone of the analysis I offer here and suggests how much composition can learn from research in and projects involving high school classrooms.

High schools are part of composition’s “extracurriculum”; they represent one of many important sites of literacy work outside of the university, though obviously central to it (Gere, quoted in Kates 481). A span of only three months’ time separates some of the students in this study from the freshmen that many CCC readers work with each fall. In my own teaching, I have often felt that I needed a deeper understanding of where my students come from—not in the sense of understanding what has been “covered” in terms of curriculum or what students might be expected to know already, but rather an understanding of the rhetorical communities, institutions, and social networks in which they have grown up and from which, during the fall of their freshman year, they have not fully disentangled themselves. The field of composition has given us ethnographic studies of a wide variety of nonschool language and literacy practices (see Daniells and Lindquist for recent examples). A study of high school literacy practices, conducted with an eye toward understanding particular concerns that have animated composition, can illuminate our field and its questions in new and productive ways. Although I drew heavily on the many studies of high schools written by and for scholars in education and for practicing K–12 teachers, I kept composition squarely in mind throughout my research, with the aim of making this important, closely related site of literacy illuminate questions about whiteness and critical or anti-racist education, and persuasion (see Anderson, Banning, Lindquist, Kennedy et al., Strickland, Prendergast, Crowley) that have animated the field.

The Emotioned Infrastructure of Schooling

My analysis of the material I gathered during my study was shaped by the following questions:

What emotioned rules were taught and how were they taught?
How and when were emotioned rules performed and enacted?

How were they applied and policed across contexts?

How did emotioned learning participate in the development of racial identity, and in the construction of persuasive social beliefs?

As Megan Boler reminds us, education teaches social and moral values, and such teaching is inextricably tied to emotional control. Emotional control occurs through taken-for-granted practices, what Daniel Gross calls “technologies of emotion” (4). As Gross writes, the contours of our emotional world have been shaped by institutions: emotions such as anger presume a public stage, and our most powerful emotional responses are constituted in the social world (2). Recent scholarship on emotion deconstructs many of its popular connotations: for example, that emotion is distinct from reason; that it is a private, individual experience; that it has psychological, but not social or ideological, roots.

Instead, this scholarship asks us to see that emotions are intertwined with rational decision making and are central to the construction of belief. As Laura Micciche notes, “emotion is a central ingredient in the act of persuasion. . . . [It is] connected to our rational and ethical lives (Jacobs and Micciche 3, 5). Emotions are not only privately felt but also socially experienced and constructed. Their construction takes place through language, and thus, as Michalinos Zembylas writes, “emotion is a discursive practice” (937, emphasis in original). Emotion acquires its “meaning and force from its location and performance in the public realm of discourse” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 7). In addition, emotion is taught and learned, both at home and at school. It is an important, deeply embedded site of social control. Boler writes that “the social control of emotions is a central and underexplored aspect of education in relation to hegemony . . . contradictory rules of emotional conduct and expression function to uphold the dominant culture’s hierarchies and values” (xvii, 4). We are taught how to feel as part of our socialization into a particular culture’s dominant norms. It is not hard to see how the study of emotion might thus be central to the study of race and racism. As Donna Strickland and Ilene Crawford have recently noted, those working in whiteness studies need to make visible “the role emotions play in the construction of white subjectivity,” to unveil the “emotional investments and performances that constitute whiteness” (69).

One way of conceptualizing the relationship between such emotions, racism, and schooling is to turn to educational theories about the hidden cur-
Educators have long pointed out that schools function as a site of social class disciplining and have long pointed to the effects of the “hidden curriculum” in providing this disciplining. The hidden curriculum refers to invisible school practices that are expressed in the school environment, in classroom climate, furniture arrangement, pedagogical methods, teacher-student interactions, student-to-student interactions, and many other invisible or taken-for-granted dynamics (Schugurensky 3). DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill call this “infrastructure.” As they write, infrastructures have several features: they are “embedded” or sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies; they are both spatial or temporal, and their effect reaches beyond a single event or one-site practice; they are learned as part of cultural membership, and knowledge of their organizational arrangements and artifacts is “a sine qua non of membership in a community of practice”; they are linked with other conventions of practice; they are built on an installed base and “wrestle with the inertia” of that base, inheriting its strengths and limitations (in this way, multiculturalism and newer pedagogies of whiteness must “wrestle with” the residues of other, sometimes conflicting, practices). Infrastructure reaches beyond its immediate physical or temporal enactment to influence practice beyond a single event or practice; those practices are related—metaphorically, linguistically—to each other. DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill also note that there is more to an infrastructure than what is material or technological: “[Infrastructure] includes standards and classifications—most powerfully what counts as writing, what is permissible in a writing class, and what makes for ’good’ writing. Infrastructure entails decision-making processes and the values and power relationships enacted by those processes, and it is thoroughly penetrated by issues of culture and identity” (112).

Infrastructural analysis illuminates how elements of school culture and practice set up emotioned rules that inadvertently scaffolded racist discourse at Laurel Canyons. For example, teachers, coaches, and administrators emphasized to students the importance of a positive attitude in sports, social life, and academic endeavors. Much of the infrastructure at Laurel Canyons supported, and even necessitated, this emphasis, as I show below. As a result, students often told each other to “look on the bright side” or “keep a good attitude,” and they often interpreted literature so that it too taught the power of positive thinking. When they read a text like Angelou’s, they praised Angelou for her positive attitude and condemned those passages in the book where Angelou critiques racism. In those passages, students felt Angelou was overly negative,
and thus they dismissed her claims about racism as “whiny.” But this dismissal of her claims about racism, problematic though it was from an anti-racist point of view, was rooted in a critique of her perceived negativity rather than in racism per se, and this critique emerged from values and attitudes that were embedded in emotioned rules taught and learned in school. In this way, Laurel Canyons promoted racist discourses through taken-for-granted practices, many of which had nothing explicitly to do with race, and some of which were ironically intended to serve anti-racist goals.

**Constructing Racial Subjects**

Students at Laurel Canyons have had virtually no social interactions with people of color in their communities or school. This surprised me at first. But I also remember my own history, growing up in small all-white towns throughout the Midwest. Like Laurel Canyons students, I grew up without ever having any sustained social contact with people of color. In the recently desegregated southern Texas public school where I attended third grade year, African American children sat on the opposite side of the classroom, which had been divided according to “ability,” which is to say, I sat with the white kids in the “advanced” section of the room where we had free time to choose our own books from the back shelf; my African American classmates sat on the other side of the room where they were required to read aloud from the textbook, their voices a hum of monotones in the background of my classroom life. In the sixth grade, I lived in a small town in central Kansas. I remember that year a boy from Vietnam who transferred into my class for a few months before moving again. I remember that he did not speak English, and that he had a deep scar on his cheek.

These memories constituted more or less my sole exposure to difference until I attended graduate school in California and found myself teaching for the first time, at the age of twenty-five, at a large public university. Among the many strange and unsettling experiences that mark one’s first year of teaching, I remember reading a journal entry from one of my students, an African American woman much older than I was. She wrote that she did not think white people could be effective teachers in multi-racial classrooms. I took her point personally—as perhaps I was meant to—and felt a deep sense of unease and discomfort. Carefully well-intentioned beliefs about myself seemed to crumble around me. Sitting in the office I shared with other part-timers and graduate students, I wrote a lengthy rebuttal in the margins of the loose-leaf pages of my student’s journal. I remember drafting parts of it on a notepad,
trying to get the words right. I even considered quoting some other, more convincing authority to buttress the argument I was making, and I spent several minutes thumbing through the multicultural anthologies scattered around the office. When I finished, I showed the journal and my response to one of my officemates, a seasoned teacher, also white. She read, then handed me a bottle of correction fluid from her drawer. “Let’s start over,” she said. “White this out, and write over what you’ve written, something like ‘It sounds like you’ve had some tough experiences with this. I would like to hear more about it,’ and then leave it at that, okay?”

I remember this as a kind of beginning—a moment when I first saw the edges of a territory I had not known existed, a territory far wider, and perhaps more enlivening, than the world of racial ideas—“we’re all the same inside, skin color doesn’t matter”—that I had inhabited. There are other beginnings of course, going both further back and ahead in time. They are markers; they punctuate the formation of my racial awareness and consciousness. Memories of beginnings, like this one, and notions of chronology were a central part of my research methodology at Laurel Canyons. Chronology and time are tools with which I construct my own racial subjectivity (at which point do I begin my narrative, and how does that shape my construction of the character I present of myself as a white person?) and those of my research subjects. One of my overarching concerns in my research on whiteness has been how we construct white students and how our constructions work against our pedagogical goals. We tend to analyze white students one moment at a time; a colleague of mine calls this the “gotcha” mode of analysis in whiteness studies, where the goal is to expose fragments of racist discourse. In this mode, we fail to place student racism in larger contexts, and thus we fail to understand its emotioned meanings for students, as well as our own role in creating the dynamics that give racism its emotioned power.

To get at this context, to provide a detailed description of students’ everyday classroom interactions, and to capture their meaning-making processes as they responded to matters of race, required an attention to chronology afforded me by my year-long participation in the life of the school, as I watched students’ learning and thinking unfold across the arc of school-structured time: September, midyear grade reports, snow days, holidays, prom, senior projects, graduation. In my research, I use chronology as a frame, with a particular emphasis on origins or beginnings: in students’ early memories of racial learning, what I call “beginning stories,” and in their first responses to multicultural texts and the new ideas about race that they encountered there.
My research methods derive from Foucaultian theories focused on how norms and rules govern public behavior and private perceptions and emotions. I follow Ann Cvetkovich in an effort to “forge methodologies for the documentation and examination of the structures of affect that constitute cultural experience and serve as the foundation for public cultures” (11). I include at the end of each section below students’ “beginning narratives”—stories in which students talked about their first memories of learning about race and racism. These stories are meant to illustrate, but also complicate, my analysis of the emotioned dimensions of racism for students. Texts about one's learning are, as Deborah Britzman writes, stories of “affected psychology and affected education; they may be read as narratives on the passions of learning and not learning but also as points of entry into understanding the work of trying to know the self and the Other” (x). Beginning stories, as we’ll see, are points of entry into an emotioned universe where ideas about race combine and collide in idiosyncratic ways. Eliciting them from students required what Krista Ratcliffe calls “rhetorical listening”—a stance of openness on my part, assumed in relation to students across vectors of commonality (all the students and I were white; we hailed from similar small-town backgrounds and families) and difference (the students and I had to find ways to communicate across what at times seemed to be vast ideological chasms).

Beginning stories also push us to think beyond reductive formulations of racism and anti-racism, and of racial identity. As Amanda Lewis writes, racial identities are not merely “owned” by individuals; they are also assigned and ascribed via processes of schooling. Schools, in this view, are “racializing agents,” settings where people acquire some version of the rules of racial classification and racial identity. In students' beginning stories, we hear them construct ideas about race out of local interactions saturated with contradictory racial meanings. Their stories complicate simplistic faith in the power of anti-racism as rhetorical practice that deconstructs inequality: in one student’s story, anti-racist discourses were deployed as a strategy for positioning the student as different from (and better than) other groups of working-class whites; in other stories, racist discourses were used against individual whites at either end of the socioeconomic spectrum who were perceived to violate the practices of “normal,” middle-class groups. In this way, both racist and anti-racist discourses became meaningful to students as a way to place themselves within the local social hierarchy of their all-white school, rather than to draw or deconstruct lines between white and nonwhite groups.
I have changed the names and identifying features of all participants, institutions, and locations in the study to protect participants’ privacy. I obtained IRB approval for the research before it began, and I have signed consent forms from all participants and their parents, their teacher, the principal, and the superintendent. These official documents and processes do not, of course, answer some of the thornier ethical dilemmas ethnographic research of this kind entails. Because the transcripts highlight “nastiness” they inevitably paint students in a negative light. Indeed, I chose these transcripts because they contained racist discourses; I do not focus on moments where students critiqued racism or asserted a desire for justice, though many students did express such sentiments. There were times when the same student who espoused racism would turn around and offer a critique of it or express a commitment to a more racially just society. Indeed, anyone who has listened long enough to students will realize that the discourses they use, both racist and anti-racist and those in between, do not often add up to a coherent set of beliefs about race. Nonetheless, I have focused on egregious examples of racism because these discourses are widely familiar and recognizable to anti-racist educators and critical teachers, and because they so powerfully capture our attention as teachers. In addition, insofar as language does social work, creating “very real political projects” as James Gee suggests, these discourses warrant our urgent attention. But in highlighting them here, I want to emphasize, following Ellen Brantlinger, that the goal of conducting research on people who appear to promote injustice is not to incriminate them for wrong-doing, but to use their stories to illustrate how flawed systems constrain change.

“They Just Want to Complain”: Denial or Rationalization of Racism

One of the most common student responses to matters of race at Laurel Canyons was an exhortation to focus on the positive, often coupled with an assertion that particular authors or characters complained too much about race. Students often remarked that they hated “whiners,” and they were frustrated by authors whom they thought were whining. As Laura put it, “It’s like, you hear people, all the time, and they’re all like racism has held me back and I’m suppressed, and I think, come on! everybody’s suffered, ok? White people have suffered too. But like, you don’t run around complaining about it, and whining all the time. That gets you no sympathy, in my book.”

Criticizing authors of color for “complaining” allowed students to dis-
miss claims of racism and effectively turned the tables, putting the writers, rather than the perpetrators of racism, on trial: “I don’t like people for having bad attitudes,” one student said. “Who wants to read about that?” But examining the “emotioned rules” in play at Laurel Canyons helps reveal why these exhortations were persuasive to students. Indeed, exhortations to focus on the positive were ubiquitous in the culture of Laurel Canyons. They framed complex and contradictory constellations of meanings and served unpredictable purposes for students, who based the value of positive thinking and avoiding complaint on an underlying sense of agency, and feeling of hopefulness. Assertions such as “Angelou complains too much,” and “Black people whine about racism all the time” were not necessarily meant by students to dilute or neutralize critiques of racism, though this was clearly a result of such claims, but rather, to make possible a place for action and hope that students felt was necessary to their futures. This appears paradoxical at first glance: statements such as “Angelou’s a whiner” are clearly problematic from an anti-racist point of view. But when I asked students to talk about such statements, they focused on the importance of a good attitude to their own future success and wellbeing, and they sometimes even extended this desire for a successful future to the author or character of color. In other words, for some students, pointing out that Angelou was whining felt like a helpful comment, a way to help her, or other people of color, move past racism, feel more hopeful, and find success. This notion of “finding success” was linked to the strong instrumental focus of schooling at Laurel Canyons, a focus that was taught by promoting feelings of control over and hope about the future, as the transcript below suggests.

Jennifer: What if, actually, complaining was a good thing to do in certain cases, because it was a way to get something to change. Like if you don’t complain about racism, how will we ever end racism? Right? Let’s just say, like, complaining is actually a good thing. How would you feel about that?

Michelle: I don’t think you can say, like, it would do any good, to just whine all the time. Like, around here, I know, it would get you nowhere. No one would listen and people would just be all, do the work and it will pay off. Like you can complain about homework, but the truth is, if you do it, by doing it, you are getting somewhere. You’re getting a job or like college or whatever. And complaining, if we just complained and never did all the work, then like I think it’s
like just giving up and saying ok, I don’t care what happens to me. And then, it’s like, just hopeless, I guess. Just complain because nothing does any good.

The idea that complaining was a kind of giving up was taught almost daily in school via emotioned rules about the purpose of schooling that were used by teachers, parents, administrators, and often students themselves to justify academic practices that otherwise appeared pointless and to give an energy and sense of purpose to activities that were characterized by students as a waste of time. Indeed, motivating students appeared to be a full-time job. “Cheer up!” Elizabeth often said at the beginning of a class period, as students slumped in their desks. She did her best to make the room cheery as well: bright yellow beanbags with smiley faces sat along the far wall of the classroom; she kept a bucketful of candy near her desk in the corner of the room. This effort to motivate was also reflected in the school: the hallways were often adorned with encouraging posters made by various student groups; the student aide who read the Pledge of Allegiance over the PA system each morning always ended her recitation with an upbeat “Have a great day!” Students were taught to avoid conflicts with each other and with teachers, and they were reminded that what appeared difficult or boring or frustrating now would pay off in the future. “I know you don’t want to do it,” Julie, the inclusion teacher, would say when a student complained or slacked off. “But think how happy you’ll be when at the end of the day you’ve got that college degree and can make something of your life.”

The principal, in an interview, echoed Julie’s language as he talked about his efforts to make the curriculum less vocational and more focused on college preparation, and to motivate students and parents, particularly those who came from rural and working-class backgrounds, to see education as a means for a better future. One of his goals for the school was to encourage more students to apply to college and to get students to aim higher in their postsecondary aspirations. Being overly passionate, angry, or confrontational was viewed as damaging to these efforts. As one administrator told me during an informal conversation that took place in the hallway in between classes, “Elizabeth’s a great teacher, she’s really passionate, but almost too passionate sometimes.” When I asked what he meant by “too passionate” he elaborated: “You know, it’s great to have enthusiasm for this work, but when it spills over, or when people are getting really worked up, it can have a bad effect on motivation. It’s hard to keep the kids focused, keep them focused on what we’re
doing, getting through the requirements . . . so they can get out there and really make something of themselves.”

Students internalized these emotioned rules and put them to unintended, and sometimes racist, uses. For example, for students, whites were seen as having an appropriately instrumental view of life: they understood the importance of tests, learning how to write, doing well in school, whereas people of color, in students’ estimation, seemed not to understand the connection between hard work and a good attitude, and a hopeful, successful future. The following interview with Ashley illustrates.

**Jennifer:** Why does it bother you that [John Edgar] Wideman’s mother is focused on racism and is angry about it?

**Ashley:** I just think, it’s sad, you know? She was a happy person and she’s letting this bring her down. And it will influence her kids. Like, what if Wideman just sat around complaining about race? He wouldn’t have made something of himself, and written a book and become successful, you know? A lot of people, like a lot of Black people, sometimes, and I’m not trying to be racist, but if you can’t realize that you have to see the good, then they just get stuck complaining about racism and being all hopeless about things, and they let life pass them by.

These beliefs were structured into the emotioned universe of the school. Students were repeatedly told that their destiny was in their hands if only they maintained the right attitude. But such lessons, aimed at teaching students responsibility and even empowerment, had the unintended effect of cutting the legs out from under the critiques that a critical multiculturalism or whiteness pedagogy relied on.

Michelle’s first memory of racism illustrates how beliefs like these—about the importance of college and the future—were taught in ways overlaid with emotion and race.

I had this friend in junior high. I didn’t go here. We lived in Centerpoint where my mom is from then, and I went to junior high there, and we moved because it’s kind of a rough school, you know? Not as good as here. But in seventh grade, me and this girl, Sheila, were best friends, and she was Black. It didn’t mean anything to me. We had like all our classes together, and if it was alphabetical we sat by each other because her name was right after mine. I didn’t have a lot of friends there, because there are so many losers who live in that district, which is why we
moved. But Sheila was cool. And we hung out all the time. She was really funny, and would always crack me up. And we got in trouble in class a lot, we would like goof around, mouth off to teachers, and they were always like calling my parents and stuff. And one day, we got in trouble . . . and the teacher sent us to different rooms so we would stop talking and goofing around, and to me she was like, why do you hang out with her? She’s getting you in trouble. She was all, “Michelle, you’re college material, you’re going somewhere, and she’s not, and she’s bringing you down. I can see it happening.” And I was all, whatever. It still pisses me off. I guess she thought, like because my dad has money, and like went to Penn State, that I was all “college material,” but you know what? I’m totally not. And my parents, they’re fine with it. My sister went, but I’m all, I don’t want to leave my friends, and my grades suck, and I’m just totally not college material. And my dad’s like, that’s fine. I think he doesn’t want me to leave my mom, because then he’d have to deal with her. And my mom thinks college is expensive for what it is, you know? You can get the same thing at [the local community college], or even better, they have really good teachers there, and it costs like half the price for tuition. My mom just wants me to learn something useful so I can get a job, and she’s always all, “Michelle, what are they teaching you at that school?” It’s ridiculous, half the stuff we read in here, it’s not going to help in the workforce, and my mom knows it. I think college is kind of overrated, if you ask me.

**White Victimhood and Reverse Racism**

Claims that whites were victims of racism, that whites suffered as much oppression as people of color, that people of color were racist against whites, and that whites were unfairly blamed or “stereotyped” for racism when it was actually only a small number of “ignorant” or “redneck” whites who were racist were common at Laurel Canyons. The emotional rules underlying these discourses included a desire for community and a fear of racial conflict, and a desire to maintain a positive self-image and group image, which, students believed, was a precursor to racial harmony (i.e., if people of color saw only racism in white people, they would not want to work toward interracial community).

Students often asserted that whites were the true or real victims of racial inequality in the United States. As Mike put it, “It’s hard, when you’re white. You don’t get all the advantages.” Michelle believed that whites had been overlooked: “It’s like, look, my people have suffered too, and just because, like, we didn’t have the Holocaust or slavery or whatever, it’s not like it’s been easy. My mom works really hard and she has suffered so my sister and me could have things. People don’t realize that but it’s true. Whites don’t have it easy.” Laura believed that one of the lessons Angelou learns in her autobiography was to be
“tolerant of white people.” Students also believed that whites were victims of racism and that whites did not get enough credit for enduring racism without complaint. They were quick, for example, to point out unfair generalizations about whites on the part of authors of color. “She [Angelou] totally stereotypes white people. Maybe some are like that, but not all,” was a typical argument. Texts that emphasized the social power whites possess or the oppression of people of color seemed to students to negate the possibility of racial harmony and community. If that’s how they see us, students often told me, then “no wonder they hate us.” Interviews with students, however, revealed that these discourses were rooted not so much in actual belief about race and racism but rather in students’ desire for feelings of community and racial harmony, which were “emotioned positions” reinforced through multicultural lessons in class.

Claims of white victimhood and reverse racism were predicated on students’ sense that making nonwhites understand their own, white, oppression was a strategy for creating common ground: “I just think, if they realized that whites have suffered too, maybe they would understand like, it is possible to just get over the race stuff and not be so mad all the time about it,” Michelle said. Multicultural lessons taught in the school, as well as activities like the “multicultural club,” which billed itself as creating cross-racial communities, structured these feelings by privileging “tolerance,” harmony, and color-blindness as important anti-racist goals.

Separating whites in terms of those who were racist and those who weren’t was also a strategy that promoted students’ sense of the possibility of interracial community. If racism could be located elsewhere, students felt, the path was cleared for “good” whites, as Laura positions herself in the transcript below, to “get along” with others regardless of race:

**LAURA:** I would never want to be part of that group [of “redneck” whites]. You can tell who they are in this school, like it’s no secret who the hard workers and normal kids are, and who the freaks are. Thank god. . . . I would not want to be associated with those people. It’s like, I don’t really know any Black people. But I read a lot of stuff by Blacks, like for school, so I know they think we’re all a bunch of racist pigs. But if you look around here, you can see that’s not true. We’re not all like that. And if you want to know who the true racists are, they aren’t hiding it, and it’s not like you can say we’re all like that. I’m sorry, most white people don’t drive trucks and wear belt
buckles and hick clothes and like have redneck confederate flags in their windows. There are some kids like that here, but most definitely are not.

Jennifer: What if it were true that African Americans thought all whites were racist? Why would that bother you? I’m not saying it shouldn’t bother you, I’m just curious, about how you think about it.

Laura: I don’t know. I guess it would be pretty upsetting, to have everybody think you were a racist. Like if I was Black, and I thought that, like everyone was like the rednecks? All white people? I wouldn’t even try, the whole, let’s just get along thing. I’d be all like, what’s the point, they hate us, and like, I wouldn’t blame them. I’d hate myself! . . . If Black people think that, why would they want to try to get along with us?

For Laura, to acknowledge racism was to give up on the “let’s just get along thing.” Acknowledging racism threatened the possibility of interracial harmony and negated the positive feelings Laura derived from her desire to get along with others. The desire to preserve feelings of interracial community necessitated for Laura a division of whites into “us/them” groups.

Feelings of racial harmony and community were set in linked opposition to one of the primary negative feelings associated with racism, shame, which was in turn linked to the social class divisions and aspirations for class mobility in the school. Students often asserted common ground with people of color as a way of distancing themselves from the racism they associated with what they called the “white trash” or “redneck” population of the school. Indeed, most students in the school agreed that racism was a problem only among a certain group of whites, those coming from working-class and rural backgrounds, some of whom did display Confederate flags in truck windows or even in school projects (one student pasted a picture of a Confederate flag on his identity poster). Middle-class identity, at Laurel Canyons, depended in part on cultivating the appearance of an anti-racist identity. Students like Laura adopted anti-racist rhetoric as a way to acquire middle-class status and distinguish herself from feelings of shame that arose from association with “rednecks” and “white trash.” Locating racism elsewhere served two purposes for students: they could claim that they themselves were innocent of racism and simultaneously that they were victims of unfair stereotyping that painted
all whites with the same brush. Students felt that these dual claims were important components of the goal of racial harmony.

The multiculturalism promoted in school practices such as the multicultural club and lessons about tolerance and diversity supported students’ sense that racism was located elsewhere, in other historically or socio-economically distant groups of whites. The emotioned rules that gave reverse racism and white victimhood their persuasive force stemmed from multicultural lessons about interracial harmony, sameness, community, and, ironically, anti-racism. The ethos of “togetherness” was widely promoted throughout the school, in multicultural lessons that, as one student put it, “show common ground.”

This complex weave of class shame, class “othering,” and racism is illustrated in Laura’s description of her first encounter with racism:

We went to my mom’s family reunion, in Ohio. We had driven four straight hours each way to get there. I remember this so well, the whole day. It really stands out to me. I remember my dad said, it’s summer solstice, the hottest, longest day of the year. And I remember, I played with my cousins all day, in this big park with a pond you could swim in. I had such a good day. I was 11 years old, still young and innocent—ha! That didn’t last long! Because later that day, I heard my uncles and two of my cousins who were, you know, already grown up, and one of my uncles used the “n” word, a lot, he was talking about Black people and how they sponge off people and how much he just, hated them, I guess. I heard everything he said. It was the first time I saw racism. I had never heard anyone talk like that, and I kept hearing the word, the “n” word, you know. I didn’t really know what it meant, but it sounded bad. I think I knew it was bad.

Later, in the car on the way home, my brothers were asleep, I was in the middle, in the backseat. I liked it there because I could talk to my parents. I was the kind of kid who always asked dumb questions, so I asked my parent about it, about my uncle using the “n” word, and they got really upset! My dad said I should never use that word and that my uncle was ignorant and backward. He was my mom’s brother, so then she got really mad, because he was insulting her brother, and she started saying that where my uncle and cousins lived there were a lot of problems with Black people, and you can’t blame him for being angry. My parents got in this big argument about it! My mom was like, maybe her brother never had a chance to make anything of himself and my dad said he had just like, taken the easy way out. And I felt so bad, just sitting there in the backseat wishing I had never brought it up!

But my mom, she is not a racist, and later she told me that she agreed with my dad, the “n” word was wrong and ignorant, and that it was sad that my uncle had never had more opportunities to be educated, but it wasn’t his fault, but I should
never use that word because only trash used it. And I totally agree. I have some
friends who will say it’s ok to use it if you’re referring to people in general, not just
Blacks. And they use it themselves, you know? You see Black people saying it all
the time. I think, if you use it to describe anyone who is lazy or criminal or on
welfare or something, it’s not bad.

Later in the interview, reiterating the importance of creating common
ground, Laura noted again that Black people use the “n” word, and claimed
that they use it in ways that are similar to whites: “I think Black people under-
stand what it means, like, it’s about certain types of people, not one race, and
they would even agree, like about the kind of people my uncle was talking
about. Some would, at least. They would know what he meant.”

“Anybody Can Make It If They Try”

Many students in Elizabeth’s class insisted that the “lesson” in each text,
whether it explicitly addressed race or not, was about the centrality of indi-
vidual will and hard work, and that such individual effort was the key to a
successful life. This response was so pervasive that some students even man-
aged to see *The Color Purple* as a morality tale about individual effort. As
Michelle argued, the book showed the importance of learning proper English
to “make something of yourself in life.”

For students at Laurel Canyons, individualism was a way to enact power-
ful emotioned rules about strength and sameness or equality, rules that emerged
at the school at least partly in response to social class inequality and were seen
as a way to promote social cohesion among different groups of whites. Being
strong and being the same as others were stressed particularly to mask or re-
direct attention from class difference and to diffuse conflict that arose from
difference. The complexity of students’ investment in individualism is illus-
trated by the following exchange.

**Ashley:** This book [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*] is like, oh you
should feel sorry for us, and it’s never going to be ok. But now they
can go to school, and they aren’t denied opportunities all the time.
It’s illegal now to deny them. So what more do they want? And [she’s]
like, it’s never going to be ok, and I don’t agree. It’s illegal. Black
people want us to get down on our knees. That’s what I think. And I
think [they] are trying to say white people are never going to be good
enough, and we’re better than you because of the past. The message I
get from this book is it’s white people’s fault. It’s like, oh I’m going to
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whine about this, and talk about everything that happened to me. It’s race. She wants white people on their knees.

TORI: She like, gets her strength, to put the blame on other people, for like her problems and stuff. But she doesn't realize how, like, that is not really going to work in the long run. It just weakens you, if you like, blame people for your problems. You have to rely on yourself, and be all like, it’s up to you, if you want to succeed.

The immediate provocation for the discourse of individualism (Tori’s comment that “you have to rely on yourself . . . if you want to succeed”) was Ashley’s assertion that Black people “want white people to get down on their knees,” a sentiment that, for Ashley and her peers, violated the emotioned rules about being strong and “feeling equal” or “the same.” In Ashley’s comments, whites were positioned defensively against a stronger, assertive racial “other.” Raised here is the specter of whites as racially inferior, but also, importantly, as weak. Weakness was associated throughout school culture with negative, highly discouraged behavior and attitudes. It was used to motivate students, much in the way it is often invoked in athletics. Students were often reminded that they needed to “be strong” and “buck up.” Behavior such as fighting, not doing homework, having a bad attitude toward school, not participating in school, was often labeled by both students and teachers as “weak.” “You’re never going to make it if you just give up. That’s weak,” was a common refrain. When texts emphasized power struggles between racial groups, students dismissed characters they deemed weak or employed discourses of individualism to imbue the characters with strength.

Reminders of power differences of any kind violated what Ashley called a “feeling of equality” that students valued as integral to social cohesion. “I think, like if you want to be friends, and have all the groups at this school get along, you have to understand that we’re all equal, and just because someone might have more money than you or wear different clothes, it doesn’t mean we’re not equal.” Ashley went on to talk about how her family’s hard work had closed the gap between her economic situation and that of many of her classmates: “Maybe my family doesn’t have as much money as like some of the kids around here. But my dad works really hard, and like my brother and me, we have jobs that pay for like school clothes. So you can’t really say that we’re not equal.” Discourses of individualism restored an important balance of power by masking social class difference. When reminders of power differences came in the
form of an author, like Angelou, who pointed out racism, Ashley and her peers felt that the “feeling of equality” was being compromised.

The emotioned appeals to strength and equality were taught via several tacit aspects of the school’s pedagogy and philosophy regarding middle-class education and identity, and its stance toward the working-class, rural students who attended Laurel Canyons. Part of the principal’s mission was to help the bottom socioeconomic tier achieve middle-class status, and this meant, as he said, raising expectations and changing habits and values, making students and their families see the importance of those aspects of Laurel Canyons’ curriculum that were particularly geared toward postsecondary education. “We want everyone here to feel like they can make it,” the principal said in an interview.

When I ask Ashley to describe how her previous learning about race compared with what she has learned in class, she talked about the social stratification that she saw in and out of school. Her memory is saturated with efforts to appear normal and feel equal to her classmates and illustrates the contradictory meanings racist discourses can have for students.

My first memory? I don’t know. I can tell you one memory I have that will always stick in my mind, when I was going into like in 7th grade or something, about 13, whatever grade that is. And my family, we’re middle class like everyone at my school. We have a house with three bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen. It’s a mobile home. Some people might call that a trailer. But we are not trashy at all. We’re not poor. My dad is the manager of a muffler brake and service, and my mom might get a job in the cafeteria at one of the schools, but I don’t want her too, because kids are ignorant, really ignorant, and I wouldn’t really want my mom to have to deal with that. Anyway, we’re not poor, but one day I was in the yard of our house, and these girls walked by, and I don’t want to talk bad about them, but they were kind of snooty. They go here now, you can see them in the hallways because they are so tan, they spend all their time and money—like how much would that cost—at tanning beds and wear skimpy clothes to show off their skin color. Which if you think about is funny because the story I was going to tell you about these girls is that they called me the n-word! They said “you live like a____!” [Here Ashley mouthed the word “nigger.”] And it’s funny to me now, because look they’re the ones who are obsessed with skin color and like getting really dark. And it’s April and I’m still as white as ever.

**White Superiority**

Two of the most stridently racist discourses that I encountered as I observed Elizabeth’s classes were assertions of white superiority and biological explanations of racial difference. Although they did so cautiously, often in hushed
whispers that suggested an understanding of the taboo nature of what they were saying, students sometimes claimed that whites were superior to other racial groups, and that racial difference could be explained by way of biology and genetics. In the following transcript, Mike, Tom, and James digressed from a discussion of *The Color Purple* (their assigned small-group task) to a broader discussion of contemporary race relations and the differences between whites and Blacks.

**TOM:** It’s a fact that like, they’re better at sports but not at school. Like, they’re not as smart, test-wise or whatever, and that’s a fact, and like no one will admit it, but it’s totally true.

**JAMES:** What do you mean that it’s like a fact? I know the sports thing. Like just look around and it’s obvious that they kick our ass at sports. It’s genetic. But you can’t prove, like, they aren’t as smart.

**MIKE:** Dude, it’s as obvious as the sports thing. Do you see them like striving in society, getting ahead?

**TOM:** You can prove it with statistics about IQ tests and like, SAT scores. I heard it on the radio. Their scores are lower, like regardless of racism, you can’t say oh it’s racism that makes it so I can’t like, score high on a test. So, it’s a fact.

**MIKE** [turning to me] I have no idea what radio station he listens to. What like, the Ku Klux Klan morning show?

**JENNIFER:** So you disagree with him?

**MIKE:** You can’t argue with facts. You heard him, it’s a statistic. It shows, they aren’t as smart as white people.

Discourses that asserted unchanging and invidious cultural, as opposed to biological, differences were also prevalent, particularly among those students who did not want to appear racist. Invoking biological difference was understood as racist; making negative claims about different racial cultures was sometimes framed as open-minded, as the transcript below illustrates.

**LAURA:** Kids will say [racist] stuff, but they don’t mean it, or, they’ve had a bad experience that like, you know, makes them feel that way, or like I don’t know, sometimes, if like something is true, because of a person’s culture, and you might not like that, then you’re not being
racist against a race, just against certain things that some cultures do. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

Alicia: My dad’s like that. He’s had a lot of experience with Black people, like at his work, and he says it’s not because they’re Black but just like, what they value in their culture is not what we value. And my dad’s like, it’s not racist to say that somebody’s values disagree with yours.

Jennifer: Can you give an example, of values that disagree with yours?

Laura: Yeah, like you see it at this school, with the rednecks. Like it’s not race, but I don’t want to be like them, like all not trying and make something of yourself. And a lot of Black people, not all, but a lot, are like, we don’t want to work hard, we just want handouts, and like to me, it’s not racist to disagree with that.

Alicia: It’s just their culture that like, it doesn’t value the value of hard work and trying to better yourself. A lot of them just learn, like from their parents, that it’s ok to be lazy and just, let other people take care of you.

Several days after the exchange above, I asked Laura to revisit her comments about African American cultural values.

Laura: Like it’s not like racist if you can say, look, I disagree with this culture, that just like wants to be lazy. You’re not saying, like Black people are all lazy or something. But certain cultures, even with white people, but a lot with Black cultures, and Indians, or Native Americans or whatever, just want a handout. Even some white people are like that.

Jennifer: What would you say if actually, that wasn’t accurate, but instead, like, the reason you sometimes see people of color needing assistance from the government is that racism has made it impossible for them to thrive, so it’s not that their culture encourages laziness, but rather that American culture, even white culture, has made it impossible for their hard work to pay off. What if that were true, how would you feel?

Laura: Well ok, but like, you can’t blame your problems on other people. That’s what I was always taught, and like, even if it is someone else’s
fault, you have to take responsibility because like, you’re the only one who can take responsibility for your life, you know? . . . You can’t blame problems on other people.

Jennifer: Even if these other people actually caused the problem?

Laura: Ok, if you want, like, it’s ok for everyone to do that? If everybody did that? You’d end up like Holden Caulfield. Totally crazy and like depressed because no one wants to be around someone who just whines all the time and wants other people to solve their problems. And it’s like, I’ve heard it enough times from like parents and teachers and coaches, that you can’t blame other people and if you do, you’re just this pathetic person who is totally like, unable to be functional or get anywhere in life. And then like, if everyone was like that? It’d be chaos, and like, really ugly, because who would ever get anything done? It’d all just be, like, me me me, instead of like, look we all have to like suffer at some point. Everyone has some problems that hold them back.

In her final answer to my questions, Laura avoided the topic of race altogether, even citing a white male character, Holden Caulfield, as an example of the negative traits she associated with people of color. One way to interpret this avoidance is through the lens of contemporary anti-racist pedagogy: Laura avoids because she doesn’t want to confront her own racism or her complicity in systemic causes of inequality and injustice. But to accept this interpretation, we have to ignore several features of Laura’s responses. We have to ignore Laura’s reiteration of a value constantly taught in school—the idea of taking responsibility and being responsible, her reference to a white character (Holden Caulfield) whom Laura judged as harshly, if not more harshly, than she did authors like Angelou. We would need to ignore Laura’s insistence that a different framing—a framing that allowed and encouraged individuals to assign blame where it was due and to critique systems rather than individuals—would lead not to social change that might cause a loss of her own social privilege, but weakness (“you’re just this pathetic person”) and the breakdown of social life (“It’d be chaos”).

The threat of personal weakness that Laura cites was a powerful emotioned rule taught in a variety of contexts through the school. The fear of loss of control, either personal or social, was also part of the school’s emotioned universe. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in another conversation with
Tom, he said that listening to right-wing talk radio helped him feel like the world made sense, and it kept confusion and loss of control at bay: “It, like, kind of simplifies things, but in a good way, so you know what to think and how to understand stuff. Like the whole race thing, they make it easier to understand, and I think that’s good because part of the problem is like, all this disagreement and arguing is just craziness and makes everybody crazy because they don’t know what to think or who to believe.” Much of the institutional life of Laurel Canyons might be said to function similarly: managing what appeared as chaotic or conflicting social relations through simplifying practices like moving between classes only when bells ring, assigning letter grades to students, controlling the length and content of journal entries and assignments, etc. Even Elizabeth acknowledged that without the control such routines introduced, chaos would reign. “Hey everybody, it’s not a free-for-all,” she would say when the noise reached a certain pitch in class. “Let’s sit down, read the instructions, and do the work. If everybody just follows their own rules, we’ll never get through this,” Julie, the inclusion teacher, once remarked that the main purpose of her job was to manage students and “keep the chaos at bay.”

This focus on order and control undergirded many students’ most racist proclamation. Discourses about unchanging differences between groups served to manage what appeared to students to be overwhelming complexity concerning matters of race.

“I was born knowing about racism,” Mike began, joking, when I asked him about his first memories of learning about race. Then, when I asked again, he said:

Ok, no. Seriously. You want me to be serious? Look around, at this place. I mean look around. Do you see any races here? I don’t even know any Black people. How am I going to know about racism when I’ve never even met one? Well, hardly ever met one. I mean you could say I’ve learned about racism from my dad, but he’s not really racist—he hates everybody. He’s racist against the world—Black people, white people who are stupid and fat and lazy—and that’s a lot of white people, let’s face it, Indians—oh, excuse me, I mean Native Americans, and all people who don’t speak English. He even hates French people because they’re faggots, and he hates faggots too, and feminists, and lesbians, and Clinton. He really hated Clinton. I told you, he hates everybody. If you think about it, does that mean you’re racist? Not really.

“What about your mom?” I asked.

My mom? My mom is a white-trash alcoholic. I was glad when she left. But my
stepmom is real nice, and my sister—you know her? She’s all pretty, and so-o popular. She and my stepmom, they aren’t racist because they feel sorry for everybody. Most of the football team is racist, but who are they going to be racist against? It’s all just talk. Basically, there are some rednecks and white-trash kids at this school who are racists, but everybody hates them because they aren’t rich, except for like Chris, guys like him, he’s a hick but still cool. And Chris isn’t racist, either. So you can’t really say. When it comes down to it what matters to everybody in this school is how much money you have. Nobody gives a shit about the whole slavery thing, the whole politically correct thing.

I asked him again, “When do you remember first learning about this stuff, about race?”

“I told you,” he said, giving me a grin. “I was born like this. Everyone [here] is born like this, if they were honest about it, which they’re not. Only the rednecks are honest about it, and everyone hates them too.”

I have argued that rather than conceptualizing racism as originating in racist feelings or ignorance or desire to protect white privilege, we see it instead as the result of complex rhetorical, institutional, and emotioned processes that do not neatly reduce to race. I hope my analysis here serves as a reminder that whatever our students’ original intentions —however unknowable those ultimately are —the racism we observe in their writing or hear in their words takes on its persuasive appeal in public, institutional, and emotioned venues, and it is here that we must turn our attention if we hope to disrupt it.

Cintron writes that the most important human encounters are those that cause anxiety and even anger. “At these moments, we encounter all those limitations that define us. Anxiety and anger may protect our most vulnerable places, but they also encourage us to root ourselves ever deeper inside limiting definitions that rationalize against that wilder stuff that calls to us from just beyond our narrow selves” (131). The limitations that have defined white students in the literature on racism have included the same tendency toward individual analysis that structures many of the “nasty” student responses chronicled here. We imagine our teaching to be rooted entirely in an ideology of self—one teacher, one classroom, one curriculum, one student’s consciousness in need of change. In contrast, Ellen Quandahl suggests that “deliberate emotional education” ought to include “deep thought about how institutions teach and manage emotion, and broad opportunities to learn and reflect on what happens when people feel in certain situations” (20). “Deep thought” on how institutions manage emotions takes us to questions about how the hid-
den and tacit aspects of our pedagogy inadvertently teach dispositions that run contrary to the work we are trying to accomplish. It raises questions about the emotioned rules we teach, intentionally or not, and the political projects those rules, again intentionally or not, support. How can we begin to teach different emotioned rules? Can we make our own performances of emotioned positions—our commitment to justice, for example; our enthusiasm for difference and complexity—more salient so that they might serve as alternative models for students? How can we make space for what Julie Lindquist calls “students’ emotional labor in scenes of literacy learning” (“Class Affects” 189)? We might think of students’ manifestation of racism as the final performance of a persuasive process like that articulated by Kenneth Burke, where persuasion takes place not through “one particular address, but [through] a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to rhetorical skill” (26). This is a persuasive process that acquires its force simultaneously from the institutional and social practices of daily life in school and from the realm of emotions that is both constructed by and responsive to them. It is an understanding of persuasion that is echoed in Lynn Worsham’s evocative definition of emotion as “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual to the social order” (216). We need more attention to persuasion in anti-racist education, and to the ways that schools structure the emotioned logic that makes racism convincing. Researchers have long articulated the ways that schooling teaches social class habits and values. We need to understand how it contributes to racism as well.

Notes

1. All names of people and places are pseudonyms. Identifying descriptive detail has been altered in places to protect research participants’ identities.

2. I defined racist discourse as discourse that promoted negative stereotypes of nonwhite groups, portrayed whites as more “normal” than or superior to other groups, denied claims of racism, blamed the victim for racism, characterized racism as a thing of the past or as something only “extreme” people believed in, avoided or creatively reinterpreted critiques of racism, insisted on color-blindness or otherwise homogenizing discourses, or claimed that whites were the victims of racism. I observed these discourses in action on a regular basis in Elizabeth’s classroom. Of the fifteen students I came to know well over the course of the school year, ten espoused or expressed agreement with these discourses on multiple oc-
casions. All of the focal students used racist discourses on a regular basis, but each also sometimes expressed countervailing views about race.

3. Indeed, I have avoided focusing on Elizabeth in my analysis of Laurel Canyons in order to highlight the systemic, rather than individual, nature of student racism. I want to avoid characterizations of teachers (or students) as the source or the solution to the problem of racism.

4. I am indebted to Michalinos Zembylas’s 2005 essay on poststructuralist views on emotion and identity in teaching for the concept of “emotional rules.”

Works Cited


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