Chapter 7

TOWARDS A ‘TRASH CRIT’

Getting over guilt in using whiteness in the classroom

1. WHY NO TEARS?

In this chapter I argue that a pedagogies involving the interrogation of whiteness with white working class students need to avoid both guilt as an emotional ‘product’ of classroom discourse (following Ringrose, 2002) and to avoid essentialisms and reifications of whiteness (following Bonnett, 2000a) whilst critiquing white supremacy. This is not just an academic insight but one which was fashioned through praxis in terms of teaching a course entitled ‘Multicultural and Global Citizenship’ to undergraduate education students at the University of East London (UEL). The group comprised students from a variety of racial backgrounds including African, African-British, Asian, Asian-West Indian, White-British and students who identified themselves with the term ‘mixed race’. As the texts which we were using in the classroom came from a CRT/critical whiteness studies perspective I expected some hostility on the part of some white students to these texts. Rather than hostility, though, the main reaction of students was the lack of recognition of working class forms of whiteness and of other racial identities in the discourses of whites and people of colour. Being a ‘new’ university in the UK, UEL attracted a number of students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, many of whom considered themselves working class. As pedagogical studies interrogating whiteness in the classroom are mainly based in elitist, American universities students had, in particular, no sense of recognition with white subjects who were guilty about their own whiteness and who denounced their own actions in confessional mode.
Although they recognised white supremacy (and thought politically about what they as ‘so-called white people’ might do about it) they did not feel ‘guilty’ about being white. One of my conclusions was that I was doing something wrong in this class. Perhaps as a white teacher, I was not critiquing white supremacy in anything other than a dispassionate intellectual fashion. Where were the ‘tears of admission’ or the ‘guilt’ which seemed to dominate discussions of whiteness amongst whites in classes in the US? Was this stereotypical British reserve? Are pedagogies which confront whiteness transferable cross-nationally? All of these conclusions are possible, but a troubling thought was that this was more about class than culture. Namely, that white, working class students operate from a different positionality within whiteness than middle class students. This made me question the validity of pedagogies both which focus on white guilt in ‘autobiographical’ modes of expression and on white essentialism. However, this does not mean that post-structuralist (where whiteness is seen as a fluid identity and where oppressions are multiple) or critical multiculturalist pedagogies (where whiteness is critiqued but ultimately re-formed white identities become part of a transformed multiculturalism) should necessarily be adopted. Rather, pedagogies informed by CRT, which examine the possibilities of working to defeat white supremacy, are ultimately the most productive even if whiteness is a contested and fragmented identity.

This work was inspired by the danger not that the interrogation of whiteness will not make it into our classrooms but that it will be utilised in such a fashion that it will actually encourage racism. The danger of a ‘white backlash’ amongst the British white working classes to whiteness studies is twofold.

Firstly, that in essentialising whiteness in anti-racist education there will be a mis-recognition of what critical race theorists refer to as ‘majoritarian’ and ‘counter’ stories. By a ‘white essentialism’ I mean taking an important aspect of CRT (that white supremacy is an actually existing system) into classroom discourse whilst neglecting what is seen as a less important aspect (that race is primary, but is intersected with other objective and subjective characteristics including gender, class, sexuality and disability). The fragmented nature of subjectivity both without and within whiteness is often forgotten in classroom interrogations of the topic. In the first part of this chapter I argue against white essentialism, questioning that there is a single (majoritarian) production of the white voice in the classroom.

Secondly, a focus on ‘white guilt’, without subsequent political activity against white supremacy, will be the primary outcome of these pedagogies. Although critical race theorists rally against white guilt describing it as a useless emotion in fostering real change (Leonardo, 2005; Allen, 2004) many classroom interventions on whiteness do seem to produce ‘guilty