

Teaching Race

*How to Help Students
Unmask and Challenge
Racism*

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and Associates

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Teaching Intersectionality Through “I Am From...”

Mike Klein

Recently a student in my undergraduate Introduction to Justice and Peace Studies course chose to introduce herself by saying, “I am from...my family’s history of war in Liberia and the conflict that continues to impact my family and my community here in the United States, where I grew up.” In this brief and reflective disclosure she raised issues that were already on our syllabus, and she helped the class glimpse the reality of war beyond any academic abstraction by humanizing it through her own story. She complicated the identity categories of black and African American by identifying herself as a first-generation immigrant from an African nation who is fleeing war and dealing with the ongoing impact of violent conflict.

“I am from...” is a tool for analyzing the social construction of intersectional identity that addresses racism and other inequities in the classroom. The earliest reference to it that I’ve located is in a poem by George Ella Lyon, who explains:

“Where I’m From” grew out of my response to a poem from *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet* (Orchard Books, 1989) by my friend, Tennessee writer Jo Carson. All of the People Pieces, as Jo calls them, are based on things

folks actually said, and number 22 begins, “I want to know when you get to be from a place.” In the summer of 1993, I decided to see what would happen if I made my own where-I’m-from lists, which I did, in a black and white speckled composition book. I edited them into a poem – not my usual way of working – but even when that was done I kept on making the lists. The process was too rich and too much fun to give up after only one poem. Realizing this, I decided to try it as an exercise with other writers, and it immediately took off. The list form is simple and familiar, and the question of where you are from reaches deep (Lyon, n.d.).

I learned the current version from a spoken word artist and former student named Ryan Kopperud (n.d.; <http://ryankopperud.com>), who learned of the exercise from Lyon. He uses the exercise to ground himself in his own history and identity, in order to write and rap authentically.

“I am from...” helps students recognize their own constructed identities, enhances their ability to articulate the complexities of their identities, and encourages them to engage in a more critical analysis of power and privilege from the plural standpoints of intersectionality. This is very different from using the simplistic and abstract categories of introduction – *name, major, year in school* – so common in college classroom icebreakers. These categories position students as passive participants with little opportunity to distinguish themselves from each other or to acknowledge lived experiences that might be pertinent to the course. By humanizing and complicating those abstract categories, educators can promote the agency to claim their own identities in students while setting the stage for future critical analysis. In this chapter I explain the “I am from...” activity, describe applications for its use through examples focused on race and racism, and explore its implications for addressing other identity issues related to power and privilege.

The Context for “I am from...”

I often tell my justice and peace studies students that our class will complicate their lives as we examine a complex and interdisciplinary field through a four-step Circle of Praxis pedagogy: insertion into injustice, descriptive analysis, normative analysis, and action planning (Klein, 2013). Our analysis begins with insertion into situations of violence, oppression, or marginalization through direct field experiences or through the indirect experiences of literature, film, news media, or guest speakers. To accomplish this insertion effectively and ethically, we have to know ourselves, cross boundaries of identity and power, and encounter others with respect while avoiding harm. Self-knowledge heightens critical awareness of disciplinary standpoints for descriptive analysis of the insertion experience. Self-knowledge also grounds our normative analysis, helps us understand how other worldviews are different from our own, and spurs us to recognize our blind spots and biases. The exercise thus opens “possibilities for mediating agency” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 4) by helping students understand that how they see themselves shapes how they act in the world.

I also use the “I am from...” activity with master’s- and doctoral-level students studying critical pedagogy. We examine the role of education in perpetuating or challenging racism in formal, nonformal, and informal teaching and learning environments. As practitioner-scholars, self-knowledge is essential in order to problematize and evaluate identity construction, and to understand unexamined biases, prejudices, and racialized assumptions. We recognize that we are on a lifelong journey to unearth racism that is rooted in the formative institutions of family, school, church, and community. We approach this work as critical pedagogues: not to assign blame or wallow in guilt, but to critically assess normative assumptions and to free ourselves from racist social constructions so we can pursue education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 1976; hooks, 1994).

As I write this chapter about intersectionality, I must acknowledge my own identity. While I engage in this analysis because it is urgent and important for education, I am certain to misappropriate aspects of intersectionality because my identity is neither a person of color nor female. In fact, my identities represent most of the dominant and dominating categories in the society I inhabit. I will, however, risk teaching about intersectionality and advocating for racial justice and feminism because – as an educator and activist – I do not see an alternative. So, I qualify this writing as an attempt to reach beyond the limitations of my identities in a continuing journey toward liberation from white supremacy, patriarchy, and other biases.

Teaching about intersectionality moves students beyond simplistic and binary distinctions of *black* and *white*, *male* and *female*, *rich* and *poor*. I explore more complex categories and introduce complex dynamics of power and privilege among these categories. When approaching many topics in the classroom I often prompt students by saying, “We are going to complicate this now.” This is a way of helping them recognize the complexity of social justice phenomena beyond news headlines, political slogans, and Facebook memes. My undergraduate and graduate students tend to view discussions of identity as potentially divisive and may adopt a defensive rhetoric implying clear distinctions between *us* and *them*. Recognizing that the construction of identities is ongoing and complicated allows us to move beyond easy responses such as, “Everybody’s oppressed, so get over it and get on with it,” or, at the other end of the response spectrum, what I’ve heard students refer to as “the oppression Olympics”: a competition over who can claim the greatest level of oppression. Both responses shut down conversations that might provide a more nuanced understanding of oppression and what to do about it.

How It Works

The “I am from...” activity requires 2 or 3 minutes for an introduction, 10 to 12 minutes for written responses, and approximately 15 minutes for students to read their responses aloud, for a

total of 20 to 30 minutes. The length of time allocated for reflection and discussion following the activity depends on the amount of time the educator is willing to invest. The majority of students in my undergraduate college classroom – located in a medium-sized metropolitan area of the midwestern United States – are white, middle class, cisgendered, abled, and young. But there are also students in every class who represent very different identity categories, sometimes outwardly and proudly, and sometimes inwardly and without disclosure. I have found meaningful outcomes in using this activity with both very diverse groups and seemingly homogenous groups.

The activity begins with you, the instructor, passing around worksheets and pencils or pens. You can use a worksheet modeled on the one shown in Table 5.1 or simply use blank sheets of paper and instruct students to write the phrase “I am from...” at the top. Ensure that everyone has a place to write comfortably and with some privacy, preferably tables with chairs or desks. Begin with the directions that follow.

This exercise is about introducing yourself after reflecting individually on many different parts of your identity. It is anonymous except for the parts you are willing to share. Please do not write your name on the worksheet as you will not hand it in to me, and please do not look at others’ worksheets. The phrase “I am from...” sounds like geography and might be completed by naming the place you were born, where you grew up, or where you live now. But in addition to geographic places we are also from families and ideas, histories and ethnicities, hopes and fears. Sometimes we choose where we are from. Sometimes the choice is made for us. Complete the phrase “I am from...” in as many different ways as you can in the time we have. When you are finished, you will not hand it in; no one else will see your answers. You will only read aloud the three (or four) answers you choose to speak, to identify yourself to others in this particular time and place.

Table 5.1 Sample "I am from..." worksheet.

If our identity shapes our agency, how do we give voice to our *being* to inspire our *doing*?

I am from (geography)

I am from (gender)

I am from (class)

I am from (ethnicity/race/nationality)

I am from (sexual orientation)

I am from (ability/disability)

I am from (religion/spirituality)

I am from (politics)

I am from (family)

I am from (education)

I am from (travel)

I am from (heroes/role models)

I am from (nature)

I am from (conflict/loss)

I am from (social movement)

I am from (movies/music/art/literature)

I am from (...)

I am from (...)

Or...*colonialism, hegemony, dominant culture, globalization, left-handedness, outsider status, doubt, transition, liminality, crisis, love...*

You should then introduce yourself with several different "I am from..." responses to model the activity and set expectations for the quality of responses. My responses could be:

I am from...a lower middle-class family who made me feel rich without having material wealth, substantial income, or financial resources.

I am from...an education in a homogenous community with very little difference between us, and I am from appreciation for differences that help me to learn and to grow.

I am from...an extended family that values freedom and equality yet chooses to remain isolated from people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

I am from...the desire to work for social justice and create a more peaceful world, now and for generations to come.

I then model my own critical reflection in this exercise by voicing a normative response to my constructed identity:

I represent nearly every dominant and dominating category in US culture: white, male, middle class, middle aged, heterosexual, cis-gendered, Christian, blonde haired, blue eyed, even right handed... but I continue to learn about the unearned privileges I am afforded by my identities and the responsibilities implied by these privileges to address personal and structural manifestations of racism and oppression.

I find that my reflection at the start of this activity draws students deeper into their own self-reflection; some of them begin writing before I finish my introduction. By addressing the personal and the structural, I also foreshadow the analysis to come in my courses on justice and peace studies or critical pedagogy. I finish the instructions by saying:

The only right answers are the ones that are true to you. Complete the phrase "I am from..." as many times as you can, in the categories you wish to address, until I ask you to finish.

When the allotted time is over (approximately 10 to 12 minutes, or as soon as most participants are finished), ask the students to complete their final phrases and to circle the three (or four) phrases they are willing to share. Ask that students begin each introductory phrase by saying "I am from..." and complete the phrases with their own responses.

The reflective time afforded for students to consider responses to the phrase "I am from..." and the context of an academic class, seem to promote positive self-identifications. I have yet to encounter a student who resisted the activity by responding with a negative or sarcastic response, although some students reply with nondescript or short answers that they perhaps see as safe responses. Contrasting the responses of students can lead to interest in, and tension over, differences. This is the point of the activity: to raise up shared or distinct identities and to welcome them all into the classroom. Some students disclose personal identifications that are deeply felt, such as "I am from...struggles with depression and finding strength in simple, daily victories." Others disclose identifications defiantly, such as "I am from...black and female and lesbian and pride and the activism it takes in this society to stand up for my rights!"

Student responses should be affirmed in the self-identification categories they are claiming and willing to express to the class. I say thank you to each student after he/she/they finishes to affirm what that student chose to share. This also prompts the next person to begin. When all students have spoken, I also acknowledge that this level of personal connection is a gift that contributes to the development of our learning community. I also suggest that this is a glimpse of what democracy looks like: learning how to live together across our differences.

The "I am from..." activity can be a profound experience for students and educators. As Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School said, "You only learn from experiences that you learn from" (Horton, 2003, p. 120). Reflective writing and discussion about the activity can help individual students think again about their own

responses, reflect on the responses of others, and deepen the sense of connection and tension between similar and diverse identities.

Following Up with Discussion

After the writing of the initial part of "I am from..." you can move into a discussion phase, with the intent of shifting students away from voicing their own identities and toward learning about the oppressions associated with those identities and the realities of overlapping and interlocking privileges. The prompts you use set the tone for these personal and perhaps vulnerable reflections of your students. Prompts should shape discussion to meet the learning objectives of your class, such as beginning to frame your learning community and creating a safe yet brave space for students to contribute. Some examples of such prompts are the following:

- What surprised you about your responses to the phrase "I am from..."?
- What surprised you about the responses of others?
- What connections or common themes did you notice? What different or contrasting themes came up?
- How might this deeper consideration of others' identities change the way you interact with them?
- What categories did you choose to share, and why? What categories did you choose not to share? (This second prompt often leads to a discussion of risk and safety.)
- How do these choices reflect the context for these introductions (in our class)? How would you identify yourself differently in other settings?
- How might our diverse identities promote or complicate our work for social justice?
- How might this activity help us view ideas about race or racism differently?

Because this activity can raise identity questions in any of the categories that have been listed, or because students may decide to

add other identity categories, be prepared to have participants uncover unanticipated identity issues that might lead to emotional reactions, both positive and negative. The activity is intended to surface structural issues beyond racism that exist in society at large, such as classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and ageism. So the educator must expect to address unexpected responses and controversial issues.

The discussion risks leading to negative outcomes if identities are not respected by students or educators, or if an expression of intolerance goes unaddressed by the educator. For example, in response to the “I am from...” sexual orientation prompt, a student at my Catholic university said their theology professor had categorically equated homosexuality to bestiality. In that moment, I felt compelled to pause our activity and discuss how such an abstract analysis might affect people – including, perhaps, people in our class – in very real ways. It felt like an important, yet difficult and incomplete, way to address this topic. As educators, it takes some courage to step in rather than avoid or ignore such moments. The act of stepping in provides some structure for such discussions and sets the stage for deeper exploration later in the term.

When racism and other identity topics emerge unplanned in a class discussion, I sometimes opt to delay a conversation until the end of class or move it into the next class period. For example, shortly after the 2016 release of Beyoncé’s “Formation” video, a white female student asked in class, “Why does Beyoncé’s new video slander the police?” Half a dozen hands shot into the air as students, including several students of color, sought to confront this question. In this case, instead of opening an unstructured discussion on a potentially inflammatory question, I used the four-part, nonviolent communication framework (Rosenberg, 2003) that is part of our curriculum:

When I hear you say the word slander, I feel concerned about the judgment implied in that word, and as an educator I need to encourage a classroom in which we think

critically about interpretation, so *I’m going to ask* that we all watch the video as extra homework and discuss it on Thursday.

The class agreed and I moved up our unit on nonviolent communication. Doing so allowed several students to express their interests and concerns prior to exploring the racial and the broader social-justice implications of the video. Students of color could decide in advance how much – if at all – they wanted to be educators to their white peers, and all students had a chance to reflect on the video in light of the plural and intersectionalized identities uncovered in the “I am from...” activity earlier than they ever had in my classroom.

What “I am from...” Accomplishes for Students

The “I am from...” exercise raises identity issues that are often neglected in the classroom. It complicates the role of educator by requiring us to introduce students to new and challenging ideas about the construction of pluralistic identities and the intersections of power, oppression, and privilege connected to those identities. This invariably raises difficult issues, feels risky, and happens imperfectly. But where better to discuss, learn, and grow than in higher education? In fact, “I am from...” accomplishes multiple tasks in its execution:

- It prompts students to begin class as active learners by replacing typical formulaic introductions or generic icebreaker questions.
- It provides a low-stakes (ungraded) writing assignment that promotes student voice and creative expression in the classroom.
- It asks students to reflect on the complex nature of their identities and where various identifiers are rooted.
- It enhances student agency by requiring active participation in the social construction of identity.

- It practices critical thinking about the construction of identity and how different identities sustain, reproduce, and sometimes challenge privilege and oppression.

Replacing Formulaic Introductions and Icebreakers

Typical first-class-meeting formulaic introductions ask students to identify themselves by narrow and abstract parameters. They often reduce students' identities to the names given to them by parents or guardians, even if an allowance is permitted for nicknames or name preferences. They are asked to share the meritocratic identity of year in school or the broadly defining choice of a major field of study. Simplistic introductions can conceal more than they reveal and imply that students should leave most of their identities outside the classroom. Investing time in more thorough and reflective introductions can enhance students' critical thinking, as active participants in the class who teach and learn from each other.

Sara Ahmed (2014) notes, "Histories are bound up with emotions precisely insofar as it is a question of what *sticks* [emphasis in the original], of what connections are lived as the most intense or intimate, as being closer to the skin" (p. 54). "I am from..." surfaces both intellectual and affective responses as students disclose the unexamined histories behind their identities. Students can share emotional responses regarding the relative significance of identity categories and enter into some productively contentious discussion about the degree and meaning of privilege and oppression associated with identity categories.

Promoting Student Creativity

"I am from..." allows for a degree of improvisational creativity that sometimes extends to a powerful form of testimonial. Claiming one's identity is a form of improvisation (Holland et al., 1998; Lederach, 2004) that stands in stark contrast to the rote memorization that typifies highly structured classroom environments. I believe that this kind of improvisation can liberate students from

overly deterministic identity categories and strengthens students' ability to articulate their complex identities.

I've personally experienced creative outcomes from the "I am from..." activity over the years. As an example, this poem was sent to me after I presented the activity to AmeriCorps Fellows at a conference marking the end of their yearlong service:

Met a Man

Where we are from is more than,
 WHERE we are FROM,
 so said the man from justice,
 the man calling us to be
 FROM aware.
 Reveling at revelation,
 I met a man from epiphany,
 shining the bright light of insight,
 the man calling us to be
 FROM introspection.
 Loving through her orphan confusion, fear, insecurity,
 I met a man from child-in-need,
 always running toward another,
 the man calling us to be
 FROM empathy.
 Teaching the ways of the wise inheritors,
 I met a man from the road less traveled,
 blazing new paths through forests of apathy,
 the man calling us to be
 FROM sacrifice.
 Speaking of giving he said: give fully, artfully,
 I met a man from original,
 blending new with tried and true,
 the man calling us to be
 FROM service.
 Inspiring, collaborating, creating,
 I met a man from living,

seeing the need, filling the need,
the man calling us to be
FROM do.

Joseph M. Pandal, AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, 2015

In and through the freedom of creative expression, there is potential for liberation from the constraints of unexamined racism and perhaps some healing from what Wendell Berry (1989) calls the “hidden wound of racism.” The opportunity for students to find and use their voices, and to claim their own identities, can be empowering as a form of testimonial. By claiming their identities, students can engage in testimonial as truth telling, which, according to Sara Ahmed, “makes demands on the others to hear, but which does not always get a just hearing” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 200). Even if some students fail to respond to the “I am from...” identity claims by fellow students, Ahmed argues that “We should not conclude that testimonial forms of politics fail in such failures to hear, or in such refusals of recognition. Testimonies about the injustices of colonisation, slavery and racism are not only calls for recognition; they are also forms of recognition, in and of themselves” (p. 200). When racism is uncritically internalized, voicing identity claims can be an emancipatory act, no matter the response.

Getting Students to Reflect on the Complexity of Identity

“I am from...” asks students to reflect on the complex nature of their identities and the social and political locations of their various identifiers. It addresses racism by encouraging participants to think about the pluralistic nature of their constructed identities, including the social construction of race. This has particular resonance for those placing identity as one color in a spectrum or mosaic comprising a beautifully diverse rainbow. Weak understandings of diversity may define “us” as the dominant or majority group in the act of including, tolerating, or accepting “them” as the other. These monolithic and conformist categories presume inclusion to mean an assimilation of minority identities into a

single dominant identity with a concurrent loss of distinction and an ignorance of the operations of power and privilege. This state might be captured by the phrase “I don’t see color,” which judges racial categories as unimportant or neglects associated privileges and oppression. “I am from...” complicates identities and questions students’ assumptions so they can work across differences without erasing important distinctions.

When students contemplate the roots of their identities in predetermined and socially reproduced categories, this helps to depersonalize the analysis of racism. Identity categories can be seen as social constructs with overlapping oppressions, rather than as given and fixed identities. This is enormously helpful in moving discussions beyond individual guilt to examining the influence of social structures. When students regard their multiple identity categories as contingent, and when they start to view racism as structural, they can begin to address racism in terms of what can be changed. In popular culture, discussions of racial identity are often premised on binary, even black and white (pun intended), categories. Complicating students’ identities by rooting them in social influences helps students understand the social construction of race and the related but differential categories of ethnicity, nationality, and hybridity. It then becomes easier to link these conceptions of race with analyses of power and privilege, and how identities are “oppressed and produced” (Brown, 1997, p. 87) by social relations that construct, maintain, or challenge identity.

A student’s response to the “I am from...” exercise often changes as he/she/they proceed through the term, from class to class, or in co-curricular activities, or in the context of family, religious, and social gatherings. Classrooms of a particular discipline may call very particular identity categories to prominence. For example, in my peace studies classroom, experiences of conflict and violence may cause students to create identities of mediators or troublemakers for themselves. In another discipline, such as sociology, categories based on ethnicity or race will likely rise to the surface. Helping students recognize their changing responses to “I am from...” may

help them to understand how the significance or power attached to identity alters depending on context, which is itself a useful touchstone for further discussions.

“I am from...” invites students to reflect on the rootedness of different identity categories. Distinguishing among identity categories that are chosen, earned, inherent, or inherited can lead to a greater awareness and analysis of common understandings or misunderstandings. This often creates a degree of internal cognitive dissonance that manifests itself in conflict between students who are struggling to come to terms with their underlying values and assumptions about identity. For example, if you have consistently seen yourself as a good white person (Sullivan, 2014), any suspicion that you might be enacting structural racism is going to lead you to vigorously protest your allyship. So educators should anticipate – and when possible cultivate – contentious discussions about the tensions between individual agency and social determination, the diversity in gender or sexual identity, distinctions between earned and unearned privilege, and issues of class consciousness and socioeconomic status.

When these discussions happen, you should be prepared for some highly emotional responses. In the *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed writes, “emotions are not [something] simply ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with other” (2014, p. 10). In other words, our identities and our feelings about them are formed socially, in relation to the identities of others. Unless examined, oppression and privilege function uncritically within this emotional topography. Ahmed describes “emotions as performative: they both generate their objects, and repeat past associations. The loop of the performative works powerfully: in reading the other as being disgusting, for example, the subject is filled up with disgust, as a sign of the truth of the reading” (p. 194). Discussions following the “I am from...” activity can benefit from the teacher preparing students to deal with the emotions

associated with racism and other inequalities. They should affirm the role of affective learning in classrooms that might otherwise deny emotions as inappropriate and create structured settings and protocols to help students sit with strongly emotional expressions of anger and hurt, rather than seeking to move quickly past them.

Involving Students in the Active Construction of Their Identities

Students who see identity as fixed are subject to the socially imposed limitations of those same identities. When students introduce themselves to classroom peers who might be friends, acquaintances, or strangers, and when they introduce themselves to the educator, they have the chance to shape their own – and others’ – conceptions of their identity. For instance, a student recently responded to this activity by stating, “I am from... a Latinx ancestry and white-passing,” which allowed her to assert an identity that might otherwise be overlooked. Another student responded to the activity by declaring, “I am from... mild autism that leads to struggles with traditional educational approaches, but also gives me unique insights through my different ways of thinking.” This student claimed the category of “mild autism” to proactively describe his noticeably different behavior and to name it as a strength before others might make their own deficit-based interpretations.

Making such identity claims was an exercise of student agency. They structured the recognition of identity on their own terms, rather than being subject to predetermined categories or unspoken biases. These “I am from...” responses might be rooted in previous misunderstanding or discrimination that might now be pre-empted before the next harm occurs. Such identity claims are an act of recognition and a naming of biases based on assumptions about identity. As Ahmed states, “The visibility produced by recognition is actually the visibility of the ordinary and normative or the invisibility of what has been concealed under the sign of truth” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 200). “I am from...” promotes visibility of

implicit bias in the face of identity claims made by students who are discovering their agency to shape the social construction of their own identities.

"I am from..." also allows students to decide which identifiers they won't share, so that disclosure is not forced. Too often, when discussing race and racism in classes that are predominantly white, students of color are asked to teach white students about their experience, when their only obligation in class should be learning. For students of color who have reflectively taken on the responsibility to educate their peers, the opportunity to teach and learn can enhance their sense of agency. If, however, students of color are assumed to possess the self-knowledge, interest, and willingness to teach their peers about race and racism, educators are exercising a coercive pedagogical power. When race and racism is explicitly on the syllabus, I invite (in advance) anyone with questions or concerns (whatever the student's identity) to visit me during office hours or to set up an appointment. Only a few students accept this invitation, but it has led to powerful conversations about race and racism in the classroom and on campus.

Promoting Critical Thinking

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, "I am from..." frames the course within the overall project of critical thinking. Students are told that they will be examining the construction of race and identity and the connection of these constructions to the functioning of social structures that sustain, reproduce, or challenge the privilege and oppression associated with different racial identities. This complication of simple identity categories is foundational to moving students from personal and individual conceptions of bias and prejudice to seeing racism as structural and systemic. "I am from..." depersonalizes personal guilt over racial biases by grounding analysis in the structural production of privilege and oppression.

In my own field of peace studies, Johan Galtung (1969) problematizes an individualist analysis of race through the terms *structural violence* and *cultural violence* that are seen as complementing the notion of *direct violence*; all of these are viewed as elements of

organized violence. Structural violence "shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171), while cultural violence includes "those aspects of culture...that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). For example, the violence of racism is evident in the housing policy known as redlining. When the US Federal Housing Authority developed policy on urban housing values, it racialized access to credit so that mortgages would be approved for predominantly white suburban housing and denied for urban housing where most people of color lived. This structural violence of unequal power and unequal life chances reinforced the association between race and poverty that has its roots in institutionalized slavery, segregation, discriminatory laws, and the like.

The cultural violence of racism then assigns individual characteristics and behaviors (being inferior, lazy, stupid, or inherently violent) based on racial identity. White supremacy maintains itself by disregarding the overwhelming history and present practices of prejudice, bias, and bigotry that typify cultural violence. Add these together, and structural and cultural violence are used to justify direct violence, as housing is destroyed in gentrification, calls for justice are repressed as riots, and unarmed people of color are disproportionately killed by police. Asking where identity comes from in the "I am from..." activity helps set the stage for an examination of racism as historical and societal, in terms of structural, cultural, and direct violence. It is a small step in the process that Paulo Freire (2000) refers to as *conscientização*: learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and then taking action against oppressive elements of a society. Acknowledging the difference between what is natural or given and what is constructed is the start of understanding what can be differently constructed.

Theorizing the "I am from..." Activity

Exploring pluralistic identity relies on a number of theoretical analyses. Most foundational is the conceptualization of intersectionality first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) in

her analysis of the ways racial and gender dynamics combine to complicate the understanding of black women's oppression. Intersectionality has since been developed and extended to address multiple overlapping identity categories that also convey overlapping oppressions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1989; hooks, 1984; Sandoval 1991). More recent writing on intersectionality, such as the powerful volume *Intersectionality* by Hill Collins and Bilge (2016), also frames "I am from..."

Wendy Brown's work on the role of different discourses in identity construction is also influential, particularly her assertion that "We are not simply oppressed but *produced* [emphasis in the original] through these discourses, a production that is historically complex, contingent, and occurs through formations that do not honor analytically distinct identity categories" (Brown, 1997, p. 87). In complicating our plural identities and their attendant power dynamics, Brown reminds us that identity categories are constructed and malleable, socially determined yet also shaped by our own agency, and aligned to different degrees with aspects of oppression and privilege.

Writing on identity is a significant opportunity for students to explore intersectionality through a tangible and iterative process. Repetitive completion of the "I am from..." phrase evokes multiple and varied responses to a list of possible identity categories and helps students proactively claim their identities. This is in direct opposition to the standard power relations and practices of higher education, where students are often told what to learn and invited to use their voices only to ask clarifying questions or produce the expected answers to educators' questions. Voice in this context is, "the praxis of self-concept in action; the theory of our own identity in relationship to the way we enact that identity in the world" (Klein, 2016, p. 46). As a simple performance, rather than just a written assignment, the "I am from..." activity can be empowering to students. As ritual theorist Tom Driver (1998) states, "If you can perform, you are aware that you *could* [emphasis in the original] perform differently, and this is the beginning of freedom" (p. 236).

Conclusion

My experiences with "I am from..." have been overwhelmingly positive. The activity allows students to bring more of themselves into the classroom on the first day of class. It helps develop a richer learning community by acknowledging the plural and complex identities of its members. For undergraduate college students, it can promote the developmental task of distinguishing and claiming their identities separate from the influence of peers, parents, and other groups, such as churches and paramilitary groups. I have used this activity to address social justice issues with graduate students, grassroots community leaders, and youth groups. It is powerful as a stand-alone activity and more powerful when integrated into developing and deepening critical reflection and the analysis of racism and other identity constructions. I hope you will adapt the "I am from..." activity to your own needs and context, and that it will contribute toward your lifelong journey of self-discovery and understanding.

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Building Trust and Negotiating Conflict When Teaching Race

Pamela E. Barnett

When emerging white nationalist leader Derek Black enrolled in Florida's New College, he kept his identity and his beliefs to himself for the first year. For one, he quickly realized that most fellow students would not be sympathetic to his argument that immigration was leading to a "white genocide." He was right. When he was outed by a fellow student, the New College student community engaged in an enraged Facebook thread. Some students with whom he had socialized felt betrayed; many called on the community to shun him. But a handful of students saw an opportunity to influence him through engagement. One student posted the question: "Who's clever enough to think of something we can do to change this guy's mind?" (Saslow, 2016). The answer: a Shabbat dinner invitation.

Derek had been collegial with an Orthodox Jewish student in his residence hall, and in the fall of 2011, after months of alienation, he accepted the invitation to join a diverse group of students for the dinner. He became a regular guest, and for a few months no one addressed the elephant in the room. But with time and trust people began to ask him about his beliefs, which he defended, including his belief that it would be better if each race lived