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## **Difficult Stories: Service-Learning, Race, Class, and Whiteness**

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By addressing race and class through the stories we tell about service-learning in the classroom and in our scholarship, I argue that we can more effectively negotiate the divide between the university and the community and work toward social change.

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**A**s service-learning scholarship enters its second generation, the writing on service-learning<sup>1</sup> must begin to reflect our own—and our institutions’—complex relationship to “doing good.” Since service-learning is a widely accepted part of many college curriculums, those who write about service-learning must go beyond the pragmatics of when and how to integrate service into composition courses and begin to theorize who participates in service-learning programs and why they do so. I hope, as Cynthia Rosenberger writes, that service-learning can create a “more just and humane society,” and believe that in order to do this service-learning must “generate a thoughtful and critical consciousness in all stakeholders” (39). We must begin theorizing how service-learning is experienced differently by those from different groups and look closely at the gaps between our theories of service-learning and our theories of subject position(s), of race, class, gender, sexuality, and writing. Recent work

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in composition studies by Ellen Cushman and Linda Flower engages these ideas, and here I want to further these arguments by reflecting on what our stories about service-learning signify about race, class, and writing.<sup>2</sup> In order to do this, I will draw from theories of multicultural education and white privilege to consider how explicit teaching about whiteness and social class can influence the stories we tell about service-learning and push service-learning toward social change work.

Most of the academy is still white and middle class.<sup>3</sup> Whiteness, as Peggy McIntosh theorizes, works because whiteness can remain a largely unmarked and invisible category to white people. In the writing about service-learning, whiteness and middle class privilege are often unspoken categories that define those who perform service and those who write about service-learning.

As a white teacher of service-learning with a complex relationship to social class, I've found this silence around subject position troubling. If service-learning takes place, as it often does, when mostly white students at predominantly white institutions serve mostly poor people of color in urban settings, then teachers of service-learning need to reflect on how whiteness and class privilege function in the service-learning paradigm. By telling

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more explicit stories about race and class, it is possible to open a door for more complex theorizing about the relationship between those who serve and those who are served. If we change some of the ways that we tell stories about service-learning to include reflections about race and social class, we can create a different kind of space for discussions about the social change work that service ideally creates.

Rather than encouraging students to tell the familiar story of how service-learning feels good, teachers of service-learning can work with students to tell difficult stories. Telling the difficult story requires a willingness to break our silences around race, class, and service. For those of us who are white, this means beginning the work of dismantling racism by unpacking white privilege. For those of us who are middle class, this means acknowledging differences of class, caste, and culture and not assuming that those who are working class or poor want middle class culture or aspire to middle class materialism.

Stories become a way to understand race and class differently and with more complexity. I hope that by teaching students to tell stories about race and class, they will learn (and I will learn with them, again and again) that all stories about race and class are both partial and contradictory, and that these partial and contradictory stories are absolutely necessary if service-learning will lead to social change. Including stories in the classroom helps students learn to reflect on their multiple and contradictory positions—all of their voices in all of the stories that they tell.

The stories that follow are based on two courses that I taught to the same group of first-year service-learning students. The fall course was a writing course and the spring course was a literature course. Both courses are required. When students enroll in the first service-learning course, they are strongly encouraged to continue their service-learning experience with the second course in the sequence. Generally, first-year students perform service at the same site for the entire school year. The service-learning program at my institution has existed since the mid-1980s. The Jesuit mission of Saint Joseph's has been an important component of our service-learning curriculum. We have maintained contact with particular community agencies for many years, and all service-learning courses are coordinated through the Faith and Justice Institute. Therefore, our commitment to agencies is long-standing. Students who take first-year service-learning courses often pursue the Faith and Justice Certificate, an interdisciplinary program that asks students to reflect on the economic, material, social, spiritual, and psychological aspects of faith and justice. Service-learning courses require students to spend three hours per week at the service-learning site performing direct service in relationship with others. For first-year students who participate in the yearlong service-learning sequence, this results in sixty to sixty-six hours of engagement in the community in addition to the regular work of two required first-year English classes. While photocopying or cleaning a toilet might be part of a student's service-learning experience at a shelter for homeless men, our service work is designed so that our students spend the majority of their time engaging in conversations with the clients at the shelter. We think of this as service-in-relationship. For first-year students, we have found that yearlong service-learning experiences are more effective in teaching about systemic inequalities.

In addition to discussing how and why difficult stories can be told in the service-learning classroom, I try here to engage in the kind of reflection that I ask students to do, so I tell some difficult stories of my own. I do this for two reasons. One is that as Elizabeth Ellsworth describes it, "Antiracist scholar-

ship is never only antiracist. It is also scholarship—governed by rules that, I want to argue, produce and insure its own particular performances of double binds of whiteness” (“Double” 263). Scholarship that tries to define whiteness and analyze whiteness often overlooks the fact that “whiteness is always more than one thing, and . . . never the same thing twice” (“Double” 261). By telling difficult stories of my own, I try to interrupt the form of scholarly discourse that Ellsworth critiques so that the writing might perform antiracist work. In addition, Michelle Fine (drawing from Patti Lather) characterizes the author of “activist feminist research” as “explicit about the space in which she stands politically and theoretically, even as her stances are multiple, shifting, and mobile” (221). By including my own stories as well as students’ stories, I hope that my political and theoretical stance(s) mirror and complicate the antiracist work that I try to do in my classroom. I’m searching, as I write this, for ways to create a scholarly piece that doesn’t reenact racist and classist ideologies through its very form.

### **Difficult stories**

During my first year at Sarah Lawrence College in 1986, I performed community service at the Prince George Welfare Hotel in New York City. Sometimes, because I couldn’t afford the ten-dollar roundtrip train fare (my ten hour per week work-study job paid \$3.35 per hour), I took a bus from Westchester County to the first subway stop and then took the train downtown through Harlem. The experience of “difference” started for me on the train. I was often the only white person in a car until we had passed through Harlem and arrived in downtown Manhattan.

What I noticed in the lobby of the hotel was the chaos—people coming and going, people waiting, sometimes yelling at one another. Instead of signing in at the front desk as visitors were supposed to do, I often just slipped through. I felt very shy there—very displaced—and very white. Like most white people, I was unaware of my race until I walked into an environment where I was, for the first time, a minority. My awareness of my race and gender began for me on the subway downtown and continued as I walked through the lobby of the Prince George. Because I was self-conscious of my whiteness, I just walked past the main desk and took the elevator up to my service site, an after-school program for the homeless children who lived there. I realize now that part of the reason that I was able to “slip through” was a matter of my race and gender. As an eighteen-year-old white woman, I justified my “slipping through” to myself by arguing that I didn’t pose a threat. At that point in time, I didn’t analyze

that idea any further. I didn't invert my thinking and consciously think about who would—according to my eighteen-year-old, white, racist perception—pose a threat (African American men). I didn't think about how a young white woman *might* be perceived as threatening or out of place to the residents of the Prince George. (She's either coming to “help” or coming to exploit us; why doesn't she mind her own business?)

This is a story that I don't tell to my service-learning students, but that I would like to tell. I don't tell the story for several reasons: as a first-year student from a working class, rural background, I chose to do service because I wanted to give something back. I felt very guilty for being at college at all and

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for leaving people I cared about behind. “Volunteering” as we called it then, wasn't about noblesse oblige for me; it was a way for me to address the feeling of guilt that I had for being in school at all. What I worry about in telling this story to students is that it reveals my class background. I generally do not reveal my working class background to the middle class students that I teach, and when and if I do, I struggle with how to talk about being “working class” without having students dismiss a working class background or subsume it under

the general category of middle class. Our students seem to be anxious about social class or, more specifically, with material goods but seem to have no way of naming class differences. For example, when I teach writing about social class and working class identities in texts by Dorothy Allison, Linda Brodkey, bell hooks, or Joanna Kadi, during class discussions students are prone to refer to the writers as middle class or to collapse distinctions between working class and middle class writers. When I point out that the writer is naming herself working class, they are likely to dismiss this as irrelevant or to explain that they don't know what social class means. In students' social lives, class manifests itself differently. Although students do not ask directly about social class, they evaluate one another's class status through a variety of markers, including the material goods (clothes, CDs, and cars) that other students display. While students do not want to name their social class and have not consciously reflected on what their class status is (and, like most U.S. citizens, would describe themselves as middle class regardless of their family's income or educational level), many middle class students express fear, anger, or guilt about

naming their class and display anxiety about class.<sup>4</sup> Most of the students who attend Saint Joseph's are from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds. The average family income of a student who sends his or her SAT scores to our institution is \$73,000 per year,<sup>5</sup> In addition, most of our students are white (in the semesters when these courses were taught, students of color made up 8% of our traditional undergraduate program). Melissa, an African American student who took service-learning during her first year at Saint Joseph's described this intersection of race and class privilege:

When I came here it didn't really occur to me that I would be surrounded by such a large quantity of white, middle to upper-middle class students, many of whom, from my experience, are concerned heavily with class status. . . . I stick out because I'm a Black female. . . . What I've noticed about this school is that it's just assumed by a number of White students that Black students here have to be athletes, more specifically basketball players or runners, or that they're from Philadelphia or some other city. I've actually overheard White students referring to Black students as having come from the ghetto. There seems to be this fascination by White students about how Black students can afford [this university]. . . . I've been asked what my parents do for a living, what kinds of cars they drive, how big my house is, and one boy even asked me how much a house cost in my town and if you had to be rich to live there.

So for Melissa, the experience of attending a predominantly white institution was fraught with assumptions about both her race and her class background.

So for students of all races the connections and disconnections between race and class must be explored.<sup>6</sup>

There are other reasons I don't tell the story of my experience with service-learning. It reveals an aspect of my personal racism that I still struggle with and that I still work to connect to cultural and systemic racism. It's an extremely painful story to remember. Like many white, middle class people, including my students, I have been trained that any discussion or mention of race and of class is impolite. And I think that, particularly with first-year students, the story will be heard as an "I did service during my first year at college" story, not as a story of racial difference, white privilege, and social class. My mostly middle class, white students tend to erase differences in stories like mine and make them the same as their story—

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a story of a middle class, white person helping. However, I've become convinced that telling stories of this kind is an important pedagogical strategy that can work against racism and classism. "When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions," bell hooks writes, "it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk . . . so as to show how experience can

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illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material" (*Teaching* 21). I agree with hooks, but I also want to acknowledge that the stories that white people tell about race are not nice stories, and that telling these stories involves risk (what is at risk is, of

course, subject to discussion and debate). Using stories "makes what goes on in the classroom personal" (Roskelly, "Tales" 300) and this personal connection, the story, is what can bridge the gap between the experience(s) of difference at the service-learning site, the experience of difference on campus, and the texts and theories that students read in the classroom.

While talking about white privilege is particularly important in service-learning classrooms because of the encounters with the "other" that white students have at their sites, students may strongly resist the difficult stories because of the predominant ideology of American individualism *and* the implicit emphasis on "helping" that brings students to the service-learning classroom. I wonder about how we can tell stories about race and class that complicate students' understanding of service-learning. Middle class, white students may not expect these difficult stories in the classroom. The stories that complicate our notions of race and class may also disrupt the notion that a "classroom should always be a 'safe,' harmonious place" (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* 30). By acknowledging difference in the stories that are told, the classroom may become passionate; there may be anger and confusion. In *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, Alice McIntyre describes how white people may use various strategies to avoid talking about white privilege and to avoid "disrupt[ing] the niceness in which they embed interpersonal relations" (46). Students often seek service-learning classes because they want to "feel good" about "helping others," and because students select service-learning courses to feel good personally, it may be even more difficult to explore with students how cultural and systemic racism and classism create the need for service-learning in the first place.

**Location(s)**

*Subject position really is everything.*  
—Jacqueline Jones Royster

The questions I ask about service-learning are deeply connected to location—to whom and where we're teaching. Those who come from marginalized groups, working class students and students of color, may have very different definitions of service and widely varying experiences of service than our mainstream students. An African American student who comes from a long tradition of service in the Black church will experience service differently than a white student who has been brought up without either a religious tradition or a tradition of service. A student who has experienced poverty or who has been on welfare will have a much different experience than a student who has grown up with white and middle class privilege. As my student Melissa<sup>7</sup> wrote in a reflection, "As a Black woman performing service I felt a personal connection to the homeless Black people that I encountered because they were my people. Their eyes were my eyes, their hair was my hair, and their skin was my skin." Her experience of service was very different than the white man, Alex, who felt useless throughout his time at a treatment center for court-adjudicated boys because the students didn't seem to need or rely on him. Alex's and Melissa's subject positions affect both their experience of service-learning and what they felt they could do at the service site. Finding ways that they can write about their experiences and problematize them is one of the goals for any service-learning class.

For students from underprivileged backgrounds or different racial backgrounds or both, service takes on a different significance. Therefore, in teaching service-learning courses, in addition to addressing white privilege, we must find a way to account for the different subject positions that individual students bring to a course and to help students see that service is not the same for everyone. The service-learning I did as an undergraduate was more complex because of my class background. My experience at the Prince George always made me aware of how it couldn't be me in that particular location in those particular conditions because I was white. It was not just "there but for the grace of God go I," but also, why, as a white person, wouldn't I have this same experience of poverty? This led me to wonder what safety nets my whiteness gave me that others didn't have. The

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Prince George—the crowded spaces, the decrepit building, the noise and chaos, and the race of the people that were there—made me very aware that for white, rural people poverty looked different and service was different, although, at the time, I wasn't able to theorize what those distinctions meant.

Later, when I returned to a rural place and taught with the Head Start program, I saw, again, how rural poverty differed from the urban poverty of the Prince George. While often several generations of women lived together and made up a household, for white rural people poverty could mean living in an old house with lots of space but being cold because there was no money to fill the oil tank before winter. Rural poverty meant struggling with transportation in addition to food, clothing, and shelter. The world of the Prince George and the children I met there were as unfamiliar to me as the Chinua Achebe and Edmund Spenser I read on the train to the Prince George. The experience of “difference” made me consciously aware for the first time that I was white. While I recognized my whiteness, the experience of service did not make me aware of white privilege. For white people, white privilege must be taught.

### **Whiteness visible: race and service-learning**

One of the few stories that my mother has told me about her childhood describes one of her frequent trips as a teenager from Washington, DC, to Virginia Beach, Virginia. My mother grew up in Washington, DC, during the 1940s and 1950s. She would often take the bus to the beach with her friends. Once during this trip, a Black woman asked the bus driver to stop because she was sick. He refused. After some time, my mother realized what was happening and asked him to stop. This time he did. The Black woman got off. My mother got off, too, to force the bus driver to wait. When my mother told this story, she didn't elaborate. My father's side of the family was known for its stories. I grew up on my father's and grandmother's stories of rural Pennsylvania, but my mother told very few. As a white child growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in northeastern Pennsylvania, I didn't have much context for my mother's story. The only buses I knew were school buses. I'd never been to a beach; and while African Americans populated *Sesame Street* and other PBS children's shows, there were no people of color in our 1,000-student, first grade through twelfth grade, public school. As a child I understood the story with my mother as the heroine fighting the “bad” bus driver.

When she told the story, my mother didn't explain or acknowledge the Civil Rights movement or the systemic inequalities of racial discrimination and racism that must have been visible throughout her childhood (and going

on at the time of this incident). Instead the story was cast in personal terms—a good deed against a bad one—and race, the Black woman who asked the bus driver to stop, seemed to disappear from the story. The focus of the story became the white people for whom race is invisible and unarticulated. It wasn't until much later that I realized that my mother grew up in a segregated world, and that it's likely that the Black woman sat on the back of the bus. The story becomes much different when the context is revealed. No longer is the story about individual people, but it is about the racial apartheid that enables the bus driver to discriminate and the white privilege that enables my mother to intervene. But in order to interpret this story and to imagine it, one needs contexts and specifics, what Adrienne Rich calls the “politics of location.” I think a lot about my mother's story when I think about how my white students talk about race and racism. The stories that white students tell about learning about race are ones of denial, and they often express “color blind” ideas about race. It's impolite, they feel, to acknowledge race because “people are people.” As Robert T. Carter describes color blindness, “one first recognizes a person's color and then claims to ignore it” (201). The messages that students describe receiving about race generally come from their parents who tell them “what matters is on the inside.” As a white child in the North, what I learned about race was very similar to what my white students have learned about race—that race should be unacknowledged and avoided.

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Hephzibah Roskelly writes, “[T]he primary way that white students and their teachers ignore what they know about how racism works is by claiming class instead of race as the real discriminator in society and culture.” While I agree with Roskelly, I also think that white privilege and middle class privilege work in similar ways, erasing the specifics of race and class and the ways that race and class intersect, reinforcing the American myths of individual success (“Rising” 198). White people “do not talk about White racism” (Sleeter 5) and “Whites, while socialized in a racially constructed world, are taught not to be aware of themselves in racial terms” (Carter 199). Most of my white students have almost as difficult a time naming themselves as middle class as they do as white, and it's this intersection of white privilege and middle class privilege that becomes particularly difficult to unpack. Teaching white, middle class students about white privilege and white racism “challenges the legitimacy of White peoples' very lives” and also highlights the ways in which oppressions

intersect and collide (Sleeter 7). It can make it possible to discuss and unpack the assumption that “for some to have good lives there must be others whose lives are truncated and brutal” (Allison 35).

It is extremely difficult for white students to talk and write about systemic racial inequalities and white privilege.<sup>8</sup> As Roskelly describes it, “race and racism continue to be matters that white university professors and the students in their literature and writing courses avoid, except in the most abstract, and therefore safe, ways” (“Rising” 198). In my service-learning class we had problems addressing race, whiteness, and white racism other than abstractly, although the service experience provided concrete opportunities to consider systemic racism and how that has affected inner-city environments. This two-semester required English course provided a yearlong service-learning experience for first-year students. In addition to the regular work of a composition course (fall semester) and a writing-about-literature course (spring semester), students tutored children or adults three hours per week. To help

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with the affective goals of our service-learning program, some time is organized for reflection and discussion outside of class. During our final “reflection dinner,” we asked students to articulate the systemic reasons that defined the differences between those at their service sites and themselves. One of the upper-level students who mentored my service-learning students questioned them about the differences they might notice if the learners from their sites were standing together on the other side of the room.

While the most obvious difference was race (we were all white, and the learners were largely African American), the service-learning students sat in silence. They refused to name racism as a possible cause of the difficulties that brought people to their service-learning sites, and they could not name their whiteness as a source of privilege. This was only one of many times when the service-learning students avoided talking about race. At other moments, students seemed unable to reflect on why some of the after-school programs they worked in existed in inner-city neighborhoods of predominantly people of color and not in their own suburban, largely white neighborhoods. As Christine Sleeter writes in “White Racism,” “Our Whiteness seemed to be invisible to us—we could discuss our religious, ethnic, and social class differences, but not our common Whiteness or the privileges we gain from White racism” (6). Despite

students' sincere desire to have a new kind of experience through service-learning, naming the racial dynamics that impacted their service-learning experiences was difficult for them.

### **Stories about white privilege: reading silence**

During this particular service-learning class, I asked students to define a need or a problem at their service-learning site through discussions with their learners and site supervisors. After they had analyzed a problem at their site, they were to write a document for a specific audience that addressed this problem or issue. One of my well-intentioned white students wrote a pamphlet for students at his after-school program who were interested in attending college. Brian's pamphlet was filled with "helpful hints" like the importance of bringing your books home from school to study. However, his helpful hints did not consider that students from Philadelphia public high schools often were required to leave their books in school because there aren't enough of them. Despite my suggestions that he talk with the learners at his site and his site supervisor about the conditions of Philadelphia high schools and his learners' needs, Brian produced a handout much like the ones he might have received in his suburban high school. I'm not sure whether he actually didn't want to acknowledge the differences he experienced or whether he didn't know how to talk about "difference." His pamphlet articulated goals that were very similar to the ones he held (he expresses a desire to be "well-rounded") and explored the same possibilities that brought him to college, rather than recognizing racial, cultural, and class differences. Although we spent time in class discussing race and class differences through the writing we did and the essays and literature we read,

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Brian did not connect these abstractions to his experiences at his service site. While I spoke with Brian at length about how his pamphlet could reflect local conditions specific to the students at his site, Brian did not incorporate reflections on local conditions into his writing. Brian's pamphlet also points up one of the problems with overt teaching about racism and white privilege: logical presentation of "the facts" about racism and white privilege is probably not effective because it assumes that racism can be illuminated through logical, rational debate (see Ellsworth, "Empowering," for more on this). Brian understood, logically, that the students he worked with were different according to race and class, but he couldn't see past the "logic" of the American meritocracy.

For Brian, if these students just worked hard (and brought their books home from school), they could “make it” in America.

Rational debate assumes that each person in the class and at the service site comes from an equal subject position and is capable of articulating and defending a position as logical or rational. It dismisses the pain of people of color as “irrational.” Because racism and white privilege do not work according to “rational” logics, white students move to dismiss racism as a part of the past or, at best, something performed by racists “out there,” not on the university campus.<sup>9</sup> Most white students, as McIntosh describes, don’t see themselves as racists because racism is “only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth,” and they do not recognize whiteness (59).

With this class, one of the ways that I tried to argue logically about race came after complaints about the syllabus being too focused on “them.” Some students spoke privately to the service-learning coordinators and expressed a desire to do some reading on “white people” because they had had enough of “them.” This surprised me because the second half of the yearlong service-learning course had to fall within English department requirements that specified coverage of a variety of traditional periods and genres, including Chaucer, Shakespeare, and a romantic poet. While I had tried to include as many women and people of color in the second semester as possible, the requirements for the course limited its scope. To address students’ perception that the course was dominated by “them,” I asked the class to generate a list of the writers we had studied over the course of the year (including Chaucer and Shakespeare), and we divided the authors according to race and gender. Even with my best intentions to develop a gender and racially balanced course, the list was still mostly white and male. I thought that this activity would illustrate for students how their perception of people of color and women dominating the reading was based on their previous experience of English courses and their own subject positions. Since white men so often dominate syllabi, a syllabus with mostly white men seems “natural.” Instead of responding logically and acknowledging how the syllabus was still dominated by white male authors, most students argued that since our discussions focused on race, class, and gender, it was still “about them.”<sup>10</sup>

During the first semester of this yearlong service-learning course, there were two students of color in a class of fifteen. At the start of the second semester, both students of color had dropped the course. I’m haunted by the way that Joe and Elizabeth’s presence changed the classroom dynamic and how,

when they left, some white students read their absence as being an indication of why students of color shouldn't attend our institution because it was "too hard for them." In other words, the combination of service-learning and a more diverse (for this institution) class did not do anything to problematize the American ideology that any one who wants to can make it in America and in many ways reinforced students' previous racist ideas about people of color.<sup>11</sup>

In the fall, we had several conversations that touched on race. While pedagogically I was concerned because I did not want the two students of color to "represent their race," both students of color shared their experiences of racism with others in the classroom. Elizabeth articulated differences in her experience of service because of her race and connected this to her experience of service. Elizabeth described how white people lock their car doors when she walks down the sidewalk, and how her roommates' parents mistook another woman of color for her, although they had spent about forty-five minutes talking to her a few minutes before. In contrast, because Elizabeth, as Latina, speaks Spanish and shares similar roots with some of the women at her service site, she was received differently there than her service partner who was white. However, Elizabeth's comfort at her service site was perceived by her classmates to be an "unfair" advantage. The white students in the class were largely unable to acknowledge that their comfort level on campus was also related to their race.

When I think about what happened during the first semester, I'm struck by who told stories about race and class. Although I didn't want Joe and Elizabeth to "represent their race," their stories are the ones that I remember. The white students in the class didn't break through the "culture of niceness" that surrounds white privilege in order to tell their stories about race probably because I didn't explicitly model ways of talking about race and whiteness. The more I teach first year service-learning, the more I am aware that I must tell my stories about race and class as well, even though they might be misinterpreted. And when I reflect back to the story that Brian told about race and class in the pamphlet he wrote for learners at his service-learning site, I am struck by the way that it did tell a story about race and class, but the story was about white, suburban middle class privilege. It was Brian's story, and perhaps if I had a found a better way to validate and then problematize the stories that

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white students told about race and class (and made it clearer that these were also stories inflected with subject positions), white middle class students would have been better able to recognize that their whiteness also represents a position, rather than assuming that whiteness is a neutral construct. If students can recognize that whiteness is a position, perhaps then they can recognize how to read and respond to this position in order to move beyond guilt toward change.

### **Race and class: when privileges intersect**

After Joe and Elizabeth decided not to return for the second semester, it wasn't immediately clear to me how the class dynamic had changed. About halfway through the second semester, in the middle of a discussion of race in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we began discussing diversity. The energy in the room shifted when we started talking about race. We began to discuss how whiteness works in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and to relate this idea to contemporary manifestations of whiteness.<sup>12</sup> Many of the students in the class wanted to talk about race because of a recent campus forum on diversity that asked students to think about steps they could take to diversify the campus climate. Students made excellent points about race on campus and our need for a more diverse student body. I kept asking them what they could do to change the situation. I wanted them to recognize that within the university students can organize for change and that white students can work against racism. I was curious to see if they could connect some of the service they were doing off campus with ways to do service on campus in order to promote social justice.

They were beginning to articulate the steps they could take (write letters to the editor of the school newspaper, write a letter to the admissions office offering to help make recruiting visits to public city schools) when Andrea said, "I hate to rain on everybody's diversity parade, but . . . I think we should talk about why Elizabeth and Joe aren't in class anymore." Both Elizabeth and Joe were recruited for the service-learning class from the Act 101 program, a state program for economically disadvantaged students that my institution used to recruit students of color.<sup>13</sup> Andrea went on, "Well, Joe told me, he told me that the only reason he got accepted here was because he was Black. And I just think, that if I was the administration that I would hesitate to bring those kinds of students here, because they just can't cut it. It's got to start a lot sooner than college, and we just can't let them in here."

This comment was more surprising because Andrea's service site was West Philly High, a high school with 98.7% African American population where 86% of the students are from low-income homes. Andrea's final project for the fall semester had been a twenty-page book for future service-learning students at West Philly, describing the conditions of the school and the work she did there. Her research and writing included statistics, personal reflections, and an analysis of the students' language and slang. The only gap that I noticed when reading the final project was the absence of race as a point of discussion. Andrea talked about how uncomfortable she was going to West Philly, but she omitted explorations of how it felt to be a minority. But the fact that Andrea had chosen to write about her service site revealed her interest and compassion for those at the service site. Her book on West Philly was insightful and thoughtful, and she had started to grapple with issues of underfunded public education, so I was surprised that her insights didn't transfer to her classmates' situations. This was again another example of how students have difficulty applying theory about race and class logically to individual experiences. It was as though theories about race, class, and gender (and diversity generally) are fine in the abstract but not in the particular. And, while it might have been fine to talk about "poor" or "underprivileged" students at her service-learning site, Andrea did not want to bring class analysis back to campus and reflect on how social class worked here. As Brian was unable to apply what he knew about his after-school program to his pamphlet *for* his after-school program, Andrea was unable to connect what she had read about race to what she saw both at the service site and in the classroom. I was also surprised by her assertion that the only reason Joe was on campus was because he was Black. During the fall semester it was clear to me that Joe and Elizabeth were among the strongest writers in the class. From my position Joe and Elizabeth were more than prepared for the academic work of the university. What they weren't prepared for, it seemed to me, was the constant battle against systemic racism and individual racist acts that students of color encounter on a predominantly white campus.

Andrea's comments during the class discussion were her first and last public comments on race during the semester. She was quiet during class discussions from that point on. She later wrote that she felt she took a big risk that day and that she hesitated to speak up after that moment. She also wrote about feeling guilty about being white and for having had advantages from her position as middle class. These feelings of guilt, as Andrea described them, were also caught up with feelings of anger. In her journal, Andrea wrote that



her conflicts about race were intensified because she had dated, and loved, a person of color. As Maria Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman write, “The only motive [for antiracist work] that makes sense . . . is the motive of friendship, out of friendship” (576). Rather than Andrea’s personal connection preventing her from acting, Andrea’s connection made her more apt to think about race and racism. Andrea had more at stake in our discussions than many of the other white students.

What’s most surprising, however, is that because white students are most often silent about race, is that Andrea made her point at all. Silence and withdrawal are two of the strategies that white people often use when creating “white talk,” talk that excuses white people from confronting racism (McIntyre, *Making Meaning* 45). Throughout the year of teaching service-learning, what most amazed me were the lengths that white students would go in both their writing and their speech to avoid mentioning race and racial difference. Descriptions of their sites and the learners there would often include references to the poverty of the neighborhood, but almost never would a student mention the race of a learner or a site coordinator or what the neighborhood looked like. So the problem becomes twofold: finding ways for white students to talk about race and then finding ways for white students to analyze race.

Subsequently, one of the ways that I tried to directly address race was by switching some of the informal writing that students did about service. Often in service-learning courses students are asked to do journals about their service-learning experience. What I’ve found to be more effective are “field notes” because I can initially push students to focus not on a personal response to service but, rather, on a descriptive account. Changing the title and structure of the assignment has made students more successful at observing the neighborhoods that they go into for service. By focusing first on observation and then on analysis and by linking some of the observations that students do in their field notes to course readings on race and class, more stories about whiteness are told, and this facilitates discussions of systemic inequalities. Rather than asking students to write for some purpose defined by their service-learning sites, I’ve found that asking students to take their field notes and write ethnographies about their service sites has produced better results and more explicit stories about race and class. As in the teacher-research projects described by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle, I ask students to think about questions that they have about the tutoring that they do and then to perform “systematic intentional inquiry” around those questions (36). The idea then is not always to produce writing to inform some larger public but to pro-

duce writing that informs others in the service-learning classroom. From the field notes, the analysis of the field notes, and the ethnographies themselves, students engage in a kind of reflective practice that then influences their continued service and literacy tutoring.

While others like Nora Bacon have emphasized that service-learning students need to meet the needs of their sites through writing for their sites, I've found that the idea of writing for a service site puts the student in a position of a "knower" that's presumptuous given the fact that, at the most, the student has spent sixty hours at the site over the course of nine months. What I have become more and more aware of is the need to articulate to students, particularly first-year students, that their ethnographies are not research *about* the service site but research in solidarity *with* the service site. This is an explicitly feminist and multicultural model where the researcher is "working *with* others rather than just *for* them," where service "goes beyond meeting individual needs to empowering others to work on their own behalf" (Wade 97).

The tendency among middle class, white students seems to be that it is impolite to acknowledge race *or* class directly. White students that I teach express the fear that mentioning race at all will make them racists; they are trained to not acknowledge race. Middle class and white privilege both work because of this kind of blindness, the ability to ignore race and class because your race and class are the norm. "Interlocking oppressions . . . take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as members of the dominant group one is taught not to see," and the embedded forms are the hardest to unpack and to get students to recognize as oppressions (McIntosh 59). While undoing racism is a long process, one that may take longer than a year or a semester, sometimes, even in the most problematic of classes, there is evidence of change.

During the first part of the second semester, we read *Philadelphia Fire*, John Edgar Wideman's novel that is an account of the 1985 MOVE bombing that destroyed the Osage Avenue neighborhood of Philadelphia. MOVE is a radical group of African Americans who believed in eating raw food and who critiqued capitalism. The police bombed the MOVE house, and the subsequent fire destroyed a city block. Students found this postmodern novel particularly difficult. Because there was such resistance to *Philadelphia Fire*, I was surprised when Dina and Andrea took an unscheduled field trip to Osage Avenue after their regular service so they "could see what it was like." It's moments like these when students take initiative and step outside of their traditional roles

where I hope that lasting change may be possible. Whether it is this kind of impact that has lasting change, I don't know.

### **Last story: recovering racists**

*When telling our stories we assert both our individuality and our connection to others, and we make others aware of our own identity and history. What better way to counter gross stereotyping, demonizing, and dehumanization than by presenting a multiplicity of voices and experiences, each individualized, each unique, and each connected to a common history?*

—Suzanne Pharr

While, as a white woman in a racist culture, I can never be completely free of the racist structures that inscribe what I do, I am also always more than my race. Race is one of the many constantly shifting categories that make up identity. I look for these alternative forms in my teaching as well, and what has

**What I can do is model stories in my service-learning classes in order to show students the way that whiteness works, and to reveal how I, too, am implicated in this history of white privilege. I can encourage students to talk about ways to work against racism and classism, both at their service sites and on campus, in their college experiences and beyond.**

worked, better than overt facts and studies about race and class, are stories. I try to show students the ways that race and class are fluid terms that can be unpacked through stories, narratives about how race has affected and continues to affect, not just my scholarship or my academic writing, but my life. What I can do is model stories in my service-learning classes in order to show students the way that whiteness works, and to reveal how I, too, am implicated in this history of white privilege. I

can encourage students to talk about ways to work against racism and classism, both at their service sites and on campus, in their college experiences and beyond.

The other reason for the focus on stories is that the stories we tell create relationships, friendships, and these friendships may be one of the primary ways we can work to end racism and classism. Because antiracist work is so difficult, as teachers we need to create “opportunities to know the motivations, histories, and stakes of the individuals in the class” and at the service site in order to—ideally—create spaces of trust (Ellsworth, “Empowering” 316). As Thomas Fox writes about collaborative learning and difference, “Students

need time, long stretches, and regular ongoing opportunities to explore and understand difference and begin to find ways of talking and writing that encourage mutuality and reciprocity” (119). Lugones and Spelman describe how difficult the connections are between Anglo and non-Anglo women and argue that “A non-imperialist feminism requires that you make a real space for articulating, interpreting, theorizing and reflecting about the connections . . . a real space must be a non-coerced space . . . you follow us into our world out of friendship” (576). In my own experience, it is through friendships that I learn the most about the ways oppressions intersect. In Mab Segrest’s *Memoir of a Race Traitor*, she writes about how antiracist work must be more than building coalitions. She describes how “movements grounded in relationships . . . [F]riendships that come among people who catalyze changes in each other” were necessary for work against racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia to take place (49). The question becomes how to make these spaces available to students in service-learning class where the relationship can so easily be top down, with the learners positioned as recipients of the knowledge from the “volunteers.”

One way the service-learning coordinators and I have tried to address the inequalities that are present in the service-learning experience for my mostly white, mostly middle- or upper-middle class first-year students is by specifying that service experiences must take place with adults. By working with adults, the first-year students find differences of race and class harder to dismiss. This has made it easier for students to talk with their learners and hear their stories. In addition, in order for the students to recognize the risks their learners take by coming to GED or ESL classes, I’ve required students to share some of their writing with their learners. Some students have read entire essays out loud to the learners as a way of introducing themselves or of getting additional feedback on their writing. Where communication is more difficult because learners don’t speak much English, students have shared a paragraph or a page. By asking students to take this step, to show their writing to an unexpected audience whose motivation for learning might be very different from theirs, I hope that they recognize the power differences inherent in service and start talking with their learners about what those differences are. Once they recognize that the service relationship is one where they have a great deal of power, I hope that students can then begin to imagine ways to make that power mutual and shared. When I ask students to show the learners at their site some of their writing, they’ve been scared. Their fear helps them look at the service

situation differently and with more complexity. I can't undo the power relationships between those who serve and those who are served or require sharing and trust in a way that will lead to friendship, but I can make power

**I can't undo the power relationships between those who serve and those who are served or require sharing and trust in a way that will lead to friendship, but I can make power relationships visible and encourage students to develop relationships with the learners at their site that are more mutual and egalitarian. And in class, I can create spaces for students to explore their different subject positions and relationships to service.**

relationships visible and encourage students to develop relationships with the learners at their site that are more mutual and egalitarian. And in class, I can create spaces for students to explore their different subject positions and relationships to service. By doing this, I acknowledge that (even for my visibly homogenous students) power, race, class, and whiteness are always more than one thing and never the same thing twice (Ellsworth, "Double

Binds"). Friendship is one way that those in positions of either race or class privilege can share an investment in issues that are not "theirs." These friendships can be built through the stories we tell each other and the way we listen to one another's stories.

One final story. There were other reasons I stopped going to community service. At the Prince George, regardless of my class background, I was just another white girl from the college trying to do good. What I mean by this is twofold: My whiteness blinded me to the reality of urban poverty, and my whiteness prevented anyone else at the Prince George from reading me as other than middle class. At the beginning of service when I traveled to the Prince George three times a week, the woman who ran the program agreed that I should be reimbursed for train fare. Since train fare ran around thirty dollars per week, around what I made at my work-study job, the reimbursement was necessary for me. However, when I asked for the money, the man who was to pay me acted as if I was asking for too much and couldn't I, after all, afford the trip down and didn't I "really want to help?" I had no idea how to respond or explain that, no, I didn't have the money, and, yes, I really did want to help, but, no, I couldn't ask my parents for more money because they didn't have it. I didn't tell him that my Dad's job as a janitor at my old high school paid \$12,000 a year, and that full price tuition at Sarah Lawrence was about two thirds of my parents' total annual income. I took the money and never asked for reimbursement again. And I didn't tell anyone any of these things, and I just stopped going.

Alice McIntyre argues that to do antiracist work in the classroom it is necessary to make “social justice noise.” I find necessary not only to teach about whiteness but also to take an explicitly antiracist stance as a way of making “social justice noise” (“Antiracist Pedagogy” 58). Stories have helped create spaces where all of us can listen and hear one another—students, teachers, and learners at the service site. If we can listen for the stories both students and learners tell, we can create space in service-learning classes for imagining a different and more hopeful world. What I hope is that through service-learning courses, students in positions of privilege become committed to an idea of social justice that translates into lifelong work for social change. I hope that through the stories we tell about service-learning and the courses we teach, we can create models of service-learning that produce a lifelong commitment to social justice work in learners at the service site, students, and ourselves.

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### **Notes**

1. At Saint Joseph’s University, we have made an institutional decision to always hyphenate *service-learning* in order to emphasize the equality of the two terms. Therefore, in this article, *service-learning* will always be hyphenated whether it is used as a subject or a modifier.
2. Ellen Cushman’s arguments in both “Sustainable Service-Learning Programs” and “The Public Intellectual” are particularly useful in illustrating how the university can connect with the community across differences of race, class, and gender. Linda Flower’s “Partners in Inquiry” and “Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service” also further our thinking on this topic. However, both Cushman’s and Flower’s arguments come from work at large research institutions. It is important, I think, to have other work on service-learning that originates in comprehensive universities and small college programs.

3. See Thomas Mortenson for an analysis of how poverty and race have influenced admissions in higher education.
4. In fact, one of the most interesting class discussions I've ever had took place when we read Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias." During the class discussion, students kept referring to Brodkey's class background as "typically middle class." When I pointed out that this article was about working class literacies, many students couldn't understand the relevance of the distinction and continued to refer to Brodkey as "middle class." This pointed up for me the ways that students are not prepared to talk about class and have no language for a complex analysis of social class. Class is invisible even if the subject is overt.
5. 2000 Enrollment Planning Document—Executive Summary. Saint Joseph's University.
6. For more on race and the SJU service-learning program, see the Faith-Justice Institute's *Service Learning* newsletter <[www.sju.edu/cas/faith-justice/SLNewsletter.html](http://www.sju.edu/cas/faith-justice/SLNewsletter.html)>.
7. All students' names used are pseudonyms, and all student writing is used with permission.
8. In "White Racism," Christine Sleeter clearly describes whites' inability and unwillingness to "articulate, examine, question, and critique what we know about racism" (5). Other foundational writing on whites and racism and whites' blindness to racism include Marilyn Frye's "On Being White: Thinking toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy"; Alison Bailey's "Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character"; Linda Martin Alcoff's "What Should White People Do?"; Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Linda C. Powell, and L. Mun Wong's *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*; and Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters*. For two additional articles on whiteness, race, and class by compositionists, see Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, "Film Clips and the Master's Tools"; and Hephzibah Roskelly, "Rising and Converging: Race and Class in the South." For other accounts of white privilege and white racism, see Krista Ratcliffe, "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct'"; Adrienne Rich, "The Distance between Language and Violence"; and bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*.
9. I draw here from Elizabeth Ellsworth's discussion of critical pedagogy and "rational debate" from "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?"
10. When I taught this course again, I tried to make my curricular choices more visible in order to clarify the rationale for those choices as well as to involve students more in the decision-making process around the second-semester literary curriculum. These pieces help students better understand the story that we tell through the texts we select.

11. At the time that this class was taught, less than 8% of the university's day student population were students of color. Statistically this would represent one student of color per class of forty students. We are a predominantly white institution surrounded by a multicultural city (40% African American and 5.6% Hispanic).

12. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a productive source of discussion for this class, I would not use this text again. In the guidelines for the course, I was required to use one nineteenth-century text and one American text. If I must use one nineteenth-century text, rather than using *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which reinscribes racialist and racist ideologies because of Stowe's narrative, I'll use either Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative* or Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I have had considerably more success pairing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with *Incidents* in order to problematize race.

13. My institution is no longer using Act 101 for new students. Like many other institutions, Saint Joseph's is emphasizing academic scholarships over need-based financial aid.

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