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Being Triggered as Faculty of Color: Reflections on Teaching Diversity During the Trump Era

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Trigger (v.): (especially of something read, seen, or heard) distress (someone), typically as a result of arousing feelings or memories associated with a particular traumatic experience. (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.)

While this special issue centers on microaggressions, I wanted to also call to attention the notion of “triggers” that faculty of color experience in higher education. Triggers affect one’s emotional state and cause extreme overwhelm or distress, interrupting the present moment and instantaneously shifting to a specific moment or thought in time (Raypole, 2019). While one may not directly associate faculty being triggered in a classroom, it must be recognized that in the current climate of racial and political polarity, specific words and phrases from White students (intentionally or unintentionally) invoke hurt, hostility, and trauma for faculty of color (FOC). It’s quite difficult to put into words the sense that one feels when situations like this arise, but in this essay, I have tried to recount my initial thoughts in hopes that it can serve as a means of healing—not just for myself, but for others who may have similar and/or more frequent accounts of being triggered in educational spaces.

This manuscript stemmed from an email exchange between myself and a student who was enrolled in a graduate-level diversity issues course. Before sharing about the email exchange, I need to disclaim a few things. First, this individualized occurrence has not been the sum of my teaching

experiences at my institution. For the last four years, the majority of my teaching course load has been in sociocultural foundation courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. This is important contextually because, as it stands, I am the only person of color who currently teaches these types of courses in the education program. In thinking about issues of diversity and inclusion, as a faculty member, I feel aptly supported in my department, school, and at the university level, but racially situating the teaching context is a constant source of critical reflection in course evaluations from students and peers. I am reminded of Carter’s (1978) work in examining the Black instructor dynamic in the classroom as an important dimension of the content and curriculum. And while very valuable, FOC still receive more scrutinous ratings in teaching evaluations (Lilienfeld, 2016; Owen, 2019; Smith & Hawkins, 2011). This finding is heightened for female FOC at predominately White institutions ([PWIs]; Bavishi et al., 2010; Samuel & Wane, 2005).

Second, the information shared is from one student—she does not represent the collective perspectives or identities of White women educators from courses I have taught. While a great majority of my preservice teacher demographic has been White women, this is not surprising. National data trends continue to demonstrate that nearly 84% of public-school educators are White, monolingual females (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), and this demographic is often mirrored in teacher education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In this regard, one may think that White students’ perspectives such as these are quite common, but honestly, that has not been my experience. In fact, I have seldomly encountered students who have such conflicting views and ideas about

topics discussed in the course that they invoke a visceral response. For this reason, I wanted to share a glimpse of the interpersonal struggles that FOC may experience when deciding on an appropriate response.

Finally, I needed to write this piece because I could not respond to the student in the way I had initially wanted. I would have been within my right, as the educator of the course and as an academic scholar in the field. However, with an upcoming U.S. presidential election, tensions around personal ideologies were extremely high and seemingly very volatile. In other words, I felt that I would have done more professional harm than good to engage in electronic bantering about deficit ideologies and discourses, although the instructional aims of the course were expected to do just that. Professional decorum is important and, as such, I defused the situation entirely and agreed to channel my energy in a more constructive way. In this way, this manuscript is a form of mental processing during such a turbulent time in our nation and in my life as a Black female faculty member.

Context for Diversity Course

To give context about the diversity course, the purpose was to explore issues (social, cultural, and political) that relate to the teaching and schooling of diverse student populations. Under the framework of critical multicultural education, the course provided graduate students with an opportunity to recognize how their own understandings and interactions impact the classroom, administrative practices, and larger communities and networks. Unique to this section of the course, and the history of teaching the course, of the nearly 20

students enrolled, majority were people of color. To elaborate, African American, Hispanic/Latinx, AfroCaribbean, Puerto Rican, and Native American students represented the ethnic and racial makeup of 14 students. Two students also shared their biracial identities adding to the kaleidoscope of diversity in the course. The remaining five students identified as White. Of the 19 students, 13 identified as female and seven as male; all identified as working professionals, educators, or administrators.

The ethnic student makeup of the class is important to note for a few reasons. In talking about issues of diversity when there is an overwhelming majority of White students, typically voices from people of color are silenced for a variety of reasons. But in this case, the demographic makeup and the fact that the instructor was a person of color seemingly increased comfortability and as a result, students were affirmed by the readings and felt empowered to provide additional narratives about their experiences. During my time as a student at a PWI, I resonate with this sentiment—or the complete opposite act of being called upon to speak as a “representative” for persons of color. Being silenced and/or serving as the token representative for a minoritized group are both frequent yet incredibly harmful occurrences for students of color in classroom spaces (Feagin et al., Harper, 2006; Laufer, 2012; Vera & Imani, 1996;). As such, this class was uniquely positioned to be different in presenting perspectives and lived experiences because the minority was now the majority. As early as the first two weeks of the course, students shared that this too was a “once in a lifetime” experience—having a majority of students of color in graduate class and having an instructor of color. It meant a lot to them, and it meant a lot to me.

Presenters Shared Personal Connections to Social Class and Poverty

The semester was off to an interesting start with the global pandemic (COVID-19) still looming and affecting the health of millions, not to mention the ways in which nations, states, and local entities had to reorganize, reimagine, and reinvent normalized daily routines. In addition to the continuing pandemic, Black Americans were still very “tender” with the onslaught of failed racial justice through police brutality and murders (George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many others), the death of iconic civil rights leaders (John Lewis, Joseph Lowery, and Cordy Tindell “C. T.” Vivian), and the continued legalized deportation doctrines on immigrants and refugees (Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements (Exec. Order No. 13,767, 2017), Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States (Exec. Order No. 13,678, 2017), and Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States (Exec. Order No. 13,769, 2017)).

The week in which the email exchange occurred, the class had examined social class and poverty and its impact on education. In addition to reading about the intersections of race, wealth, and inequality, a small group of students served as facilitators for the session. In their presentation, they provided personal accounts of experiencing poverty and how factors such as urban sprawl, access to healthcare, and neighborhood zoning contributed to education debt. Nearing the end of class, one student mentioned how they felt the “American Dream” was actually a nightmare for many people of color, especially those living in poverty. One student,

Donna (pseudonym) dissented. She replied to the comment by referencing one of her peer’s narratives about moving out of poverty by becoming a police officer. Quickly, the comment became offensive to the presenters and some of the class members who had shared their stories. Two students shared after, attempting to help Donna in adjusting her lens, but to no avail. Soon after, class ended, but nearly half of the class remained to articulate their frustration about the comment Donna made, including Donna. I reminded all students that this was an academic forum that commanded respect, patience, and understanding to be at the center of all discourses, but I also acknowledged the pain and hurt that some had felt by recounting their experiences with the topic at hand. A few more students responded directly to Donna, challenging her to think about how White privilege has affected generational wealth, access, and opportunities for Black people. She decided not to respond, and in a private message, she let me know that she didn’t feel comfortable engaging with students about the topic.

A handful of the students (including Donna) seemed emotional and upset about the session, and the dialogue after class seemed to do more harm. I decided to reach out via email to conference individually to create opportunities for students to voice their opinions, share their perspectives, and quite possibly, bridge understandings to foster community within the class. My initial email to students who remained after class stated the following:

Hi there,
I am setting up independent conversations about discussions we had in class tonight. Are you available to talk privately before next week’s class? This is not a corrective meeting or

anything negative, I just want to have a space for us to talk in case you want to share and provide a place for you to conference with me.

With regards to the five students of color, all responded and were able to conference before the next class session. They found the individual conferencing session to be “therapeutic” and “healing” even though they were not able to shift perspectives of others who did not agree (continually referencing Donna and one other student in the class).

However, two days after the email was sent, I received a response from Donna declining an independent conversation. In her 1,556-word response, she politely declined my invitation to meet but instead, felt it more appropriate to “be very clear about [her] stance” regarding the class. Below, portions of her email were provided through four themed triggers. In each theme, context is also situated for how her words played into the larger political rhetoric and racial slurs/insults. It is argued that, by contextualizing her response with national news stories and/or federal orders, one can see how Donna’s words become immediate triggers.

Donna Felt the Course Promoted White Hatred

I hold [multiple degrees] and took this class for each of those and I also took this class as part of my undergraduate studies as well. The overall concepts are not new to me and I had hoped that over the years the flavor of the class would change to be more inclusive of ALL perspectives. However, I am sad to report to you that the only change I see is that it has become more liberal in

diversity and it has also moved to a very high degree of “white” hatred.

This notion of the class promoting White hatred was a trigger for me, especially when I reflect on the attack on counternarratives as most notably told through the lens of Critical Race Theory. The Executive Office of the President released a memorandum on September 4, 2020 that attacked diversity trainings that centered from a Critical Race theoretical framework. The report detailed that federal agencies were to “cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions” (as cited in Vought, 2020, p. 1). To elaborate, the memo stated:

All agencies are directed to begin to identify all contracts or other agency spending related to any training on “critical race theory,” “white privilege,” or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil. (p. 1)

The final statement of the document read: “The divisive, false, and demeaning propaganda of the critical race theory movement is contrary to all we stand for as Americans and should have no place in the Federal government” (Vought, 2020, p. 2). In the same month, an executive order on combatting race and sex stereotyping that argued that Critical Race Theory is a “destructive ideology ... grounded in misrepresentations of our country’s history and its role on the world” (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020). Citing and twisting the late Dr. Martin Luther King’s words around his vision for a racially unified community, this

sanction regulated federal grant money to be used for such training.

Donna's statement was particularly traumatizing because it reified the horrors of minimalizing voices of persons of color. During this presidential administration, people of color were witnessing horrors through federal acts and mandates in condemning Critical Race Theory. This entire course was built from a critical multicultural perspective—and now it was being threatened. It didn't seem to matter that the promotion of diverse perspectives was a key tenet of the course or that as a person of color who has been historically and contemporarily marginalized in predominately White institutions was facilitating an experience for all students' voices to be and feel heard—all because it seemed “too liberal in diversity” and “promoted [white] hatred.”

Donna Felt She Was the Embodiment of White Privilege

To be honest, Dr. Scott, I am white privilege and I always will be according to their eyes and there is nothing I can do or say to change that. In fact, if you believe the readings that we have and you actually believe what is preached through this course then there is no escape for someone like me to NOT be white privilege.

This statement was particularly jarring because Donna situated herself in a fragile state of whiteness. D'Angelo (2018) is fitting to mention here because the notion of white fragility is deeply connected to personalizing every experience as Whiteness, and to a great extent, recentering the victim/survivor of race-based narratives on the White person. From my understanding, she proclaimed that because

the course focused on addressing notions of White privilege and because she was White, there was no denying that class members and myself would see her as privileged. I would argue that in a class with a majority of people of color *and* an instructor of color, a White person who is in fact defending her Whiteness is demonstrating White privilege and using fragility around “not being able to escape her Whiteness” as a tool. In a later portion of the correspondence, she adds:

I am proud of my ancestry. I am proud of who I am. I am proud to be a Texan and an American. I should NOT have to hide who I am because someone has a long history of being hurt or because they have a different view point. I should not have to put up with bias, racial stereotyping or any of the other issues because someone else has been hurt by another.

In this sentiment, Donna continues to defend her positionality that White is right by implicitly mentioning how historical White supremacy acts have resulted in generational structures of inequality for people of color, and yet it has nothing to do with her. What was most triggering for me was that she was adamant about her stance that she should not have to “hide.” And while she may not have said it directly, it's the same feeling I have when I see *Make America Great Again* slogans displayed as flags on a pick-up truck or as posters plastered in neighborhood yards—it's this terrifying sense that White is right, and anyone else is unwelcomed. Her words haunted me as I thought about my own lineage of being Texan and having graduated from two historically Black state colleges because, in Texas (part of the Jim Crow South), Blacks were not given the same rights to education. I think about how the pride I have for being a Texan is not

stemmed from how much access I have attained, but how much adversity I, and my ancestors, have overcome. Our notions of pride were completely different, and for reasons that still connected to Whiteness.

Donna Believes in the American Dream, and Whomever Doesn't Should Consider Alternatives

I 100% disagree that the American dream does not exist. The American Dream is different for each person and it fundamentally angers me every time some in this class says “America doesn’t exist”, “America isn’t my home” or “the American dream is false”. If America is so terrible I would challenge someone to find another country in the world that can offer the benefits this country does.

As a point of correction, the entire class did not say the things mentioned in her statement. Instead, some students in the class shared their perspectives as a response, and attempted to give insight to the conditions and treatment of people of color. The narratives that students shared well connected with the works of W.E.B. DuBois when he discussed the social conditions in *The Philadelphia Negro* and lived experiences of colored people in *The Souls of Black Folks*, or like Stephen G. Meyer’s book on racial segregation in housing and property taxation called *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door*, or even socially conscious rappers like Tupac when he rapped about urban sprawl and the limited options for youth in underserved communities in songs like *Brenda’s Got a Baby*, *Trapped*, *Keep Ya Head Up*, *Dear Mama*, and *White Manz World*. According to Donna, all of these narratives or academic works based on the condition of Blacks,

which are also deeply varied across time, location, and social status, are not valid—because the American dream exists. It’s quite dehumanizing to reiterate this sentiment despite the many of chronicled counterstories to substantiate the fallacy of the American dream.

And then there’s the part about going to another country. In connection to this statement, the *New York Times* reported that former President Donald J. Trump made similar statements via social media, directing insults and questioning the citizenship status of U.S. House Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts (Rogers & Fandos, 2019). As reported by the *New York Times*:

“So interesting to see ‘Progressive’ Democrat Congresswomen who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world” Mr. Trump wrote on Twitter, “now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run.”

Trump added: “Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done.” (Rogers & Fandos, 2019, para 4–5)

The charge for any non-Whites to “go back” has been a continual theme in White supremacy messaging; President Trump’s tweet and Donna’s statement affirm this notion. Despite the recognition that America is a nation of immigrants, these types of

statements remain unchecked in the scales of justice for all.

Donna Felt Others' Viewpoints Did Not Add Towards the Movement of Social Justice

My viewpoints may not be the absolute best, I am human and I am not perfect. But there isn't anyone in the class that has the viewpoint that makes them the perfect person or the perfect viewpoint, yet within that structure, there is the perspective that "their" viewpoint is superior to mine. That type of thinking does not move the pendulum forward any[more] than burning buildings and destroying property equals justice.

Donna's assertion that others' viewpoints are superior to hers is problematic, but moreover ironic because I felt the comment was placating the fact that she was in the cultural minority in the group. I wondered if the class racial makeup had been majority White and there had been dissenting perspectives if she would also have felt minoritized. I also think her sentiments extend the binary nature of Whiteness in thinking about viewpoints—any perspectives that oppose or counter the mainstream narrative is an immediate threat.

Finally, the comment about "burning buildings" is triggering because of her implicit bias against the recent protests that have spurred from the police killings of unarmed Black people. While I do not condone damaging property, it's fitting to mention Dr. King's recognition that "a riot is the language of the unheard" (Rothman, 2015). While I can empathize with many about the loss of items and properties, I also think about how there was no empathy when property was damaged by hate organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or when Black

families would return to their neighborhoods only to see the burning flames of what used to be their home (Meyer, 2000). It has taken nationwide and international attention to get some form of empathy for the harsh inequities of Black people from police brutality and other violent attacks from White supremacy groups. The death (murder) of George Floyd has been a catalyst for societal change, but not because of the shock value associated with killing an unarmed man. Instead, the recording serves as permanent reminder of how brutal our justice system can be if one sits on the wrong side (color) of the law.

Conclusion

A few recommendations should be considered if we, as pillars of institutions of learning, are to effectuate change in educational spaces. First, administrators must proactively *and reactively* make it safe for these types of experiences from FOC to be told and shared. Understanding the weight of student scoring on teaching evaluations and how these measures further impose self-scrutiny for faculty (especially people of color) is key. How can one truly teach if they are also battling secondary thoughts of being "too authentic" in classroom spaces? This is the plight of teaching content that is directly relational to one's own experiences. I would also agree that having personal connections to the content, as Kumaradivelu (2012) would agree, is a level of personal knowledge that would further credential the faculty member as an expert in the content. However, oftentimes FOC are negatively perceived as "too passionate" about such topics.

Second, we must train faculty on matters of handling classroom incivilities when they occur. Especially when thinking about faculty of color at PWIs, it is

imperative that we understand power dynamics in connection with racial differences in the classroom. Typical professional development and training rarely go beyond handling student hostilities. However, what should be the protocol when a faculty member feels attacked, targeted, or unsafe? This too, should be considered.

In closing, by sharing this story I feel lighter. As an academic, oftentimes writing becomes one's form of therapy and rebuilding in order to persevere—as affirmed by many of my peers who have felt similar issues as a FOC at a PWI. These comments were racial triggers because they set off an array of emotions that have also been contextualized in one of the most racially and politically polarizing times of our lives in this nation. Donna's comments were also microaggressive in that they incited doubt in my mind, even though I am a credentialed academic and a person of color with lived experiences that qualify my pedagogy and professional practices. Racial triggers and microaggressions further expound the notions of White privilege and its continued troubling existence and shed light on the dehumanizing effect of systemic racism. It is my hope that this essay has provided those who have also experienced racial triggers with some reassurance that their feelings are indeed valid. However, it is also hoped that by chronicling these experiences in academic writing, I provide voice, perspective, and insights for dismantling power dynamics in hegemonic spaces.

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