Teaching Race in the Twenty-First Century
Teaching Race in the Twenty-First Century

College Teachers Talk About Their Fears, Risks, and Rewards

Edited by Lisa Guerrero
For all of the teachers who strive for social justice through teaching race and believing in change.

And for all of the students who make us keep striving and believing.
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INTRODUCTION

“Pardon Me, but There Seems to Be Race in My Education”

Lisa Guerrero

“A More Perfect Union”

Days before I sat down to complete my work for this collection on teaching race in America in the twenty-first century, an extraordinary thing occurred that is intimately connected to the issues, themes, and ideas at the center of the individual essays in the book, and that have driven the impulse to put such a collection together in the first place. It was an event that, in my lifetime, had been largely unprecedented. On March 18, 2008, while running for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination, and in response to a controversy surrounding some inflammatory comments made by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Illinois Senator, Barack Obama, gave a speech in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in which he foregrounded the effects of ignoring America’s racial impasse. Despite the numerous and contradictory takes that emerged on the speech and its motivations, ranging from political ploy to political suicide to political gold, one thing is true about the speech: far from invoking race in one-sided, one-dimensional, ahistorical terms as has been typically done by politicians and other civic leaders at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, Senator Obama’s speech made a real attempt to address race in America as something complex, messy, and, perhaps, most importantly, alive and in need of attention. As he stated, “The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really
worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect…Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, ‘The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.’

One of the more audacious things about the speech for me as a professor who teaches race, was the mere effort on the part of any politician, let alone one of such celebrity, to talk about race in a way that tried to resemble reality, and that assumed that people might be invested enough to listen and to think, as he did when he said:

We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the OJ trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright’s sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she’s playing the race card…We can do that. But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we’ll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

In his recognition of the different ways in which Americans “play” with race without ever facing race, Senator Obama plainly identified what is at stake in continuing to ignore our issues with race: nothing will change—for anybody. This one speech marked a significant moment when, as late-night talk show host, Jon Stewart, put it: “a prominent politician spoke to America about race as though they were adults.” In recent decades, conversations like this one have been the volatile terrain ventured into almost exclusively by teachers of race, especially those on America’s college campuses. And it has been a venture that has proven to be as fraught, risky, and unpredictable, as it is rewarding and socially imperative. So it is that the glimmer of promise of a wider and more substantive social dialogue about race in America at which Senator Obama’s speech hints is not only a cause for hope, but also a good time to take a critical account of the experiences and strategies of those of us who have devoted ourselves to confronting the dynamics and dynamism of race in America, and to introducing that confrontation to America’s students, the generations that will be crucial for the United States to “form a more perfect union” in the twenty-first century.
Lighting Out for the Territory of Critical Race Pedagogy

My first teaching experience was as a teaching assistant for an introductory course in American Studies during my second year of graduate school. The course was taught by a veteran professor who was kind, intelligent, and critical. He really liked students, which, as I was to discover, was not a given in our profession, but was something that could, if you let it, truly elevate your life as both a scholar and a teacher. He worked hard to make critical understandings of race, class, gender, and sexuality important to students as both subjects to be learned and sensibilities to be lived. Most times students responded enthusiastically. It was, after all, a “famously liberal” university on the West Coast where students came to be liberal, if not always famously so. But there were also times when students would stare blankly at him as he lectured, or interrupt lecture to challenge him. I would cringe at these moments, praying that I would never find myself in his position, and envisioning myself bursting into flames under the pressure if I ever did. (I’m glad to report that spontaneous combustion is not a consequence of this experience, despite the many times that I wish it were.) He always remained calm, at least outwardly, letting the students come to the ideas in their own ways. Whether kicking and screaming, yawning and blinking, or cheering and dancing, he seemed to have faith that students who were there to learn would do so, but only if you helped them get there with your guidance, not your force. He made the teaching of these issues look effortless, and so I came to believe that they really could be. Let’s just call this, “mistake number one.”

When I first entered the classroom as a solo teacher, I was so concerned with making sure I was “smarter” than my students (or at least could act convincingly as such), and that I “knew all of the answers” about the readings and the course concepts, that I barely had time to register that what I would be “teaching” my class would require far more from me than completing the reading assignments and coming up with questions for class discussion. Thankfully my students quickly reminded me that teaching topics involving race was about more than reading Frederick Douglass and talking about the civil rights movement when an Asian American woman in my class called her classmate, a white man, a, and I quote, “stupid, white, racist” for asking if the “Underground Railroad” was an actual railroad. Now, admittedly, it wasn’t the smartest question I had ever heard, but then, I was listening with my ears, not the ears of an
upper-middle-class white guy whose primary and secondary education probably included two weeks of “black history,” only one of which was devoted to slavery. In that moment, time seemed to stop. Did students really call other students “racists” in class? Did I let this happen? What do I do now? Duck? How did I get here, when all I wanted to do was teach students about African American literature and culture? Can’t we all just get along? Yes, there was a time when I was just this green. We’ll call this, “mistake number two.”

Though it sounds ridiculous, it was at that moment that I realized that I was teaching race, and that that meant something profoundly different than just teaching students Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Specifically, it was the difference between teaching things with race in them (e.g., Beloved), and teaching race (e.g., the racial, class, social, and political ideologies and relationships that created and maintained the institution of slavery, which Beloved is about, and how those same ideologies and relationships work today). Many professors working at colleges and universities today do the former, but think they are doing the latter. You can think of this as “mistake number three,” and it’s a very significant one. It is one that not only allows students to remain uncritical about the way race operates in American society, but it also permits departments, and more largely, institutions, to proclaim commitment to “diversity” without having to disturb the status quo. This mistake is largely a product of the colorblind racism that has become entrenched in the United States, and has made the “transparency” of experience somehow a sufficient way to think about race, instead of having to face the actual complex constructions of race experience in the United States. In other words, if you include a book written by a person of color on a syllabus, or if you put the term “race” in the title of a course, then certainly you must be teaching race without having to do anything more critical and sustained. This vital mistake gets reproduced daily on campuses across the country. More central to this problem is the lack of recognition on the parts of the faculty, department, and institutions that rely on this type of empty race pedagogy that a mistake is even being made at all. The calamitous effects of this mistake are one of the reasons that make the continued effort to teach race in substantive, critical, and sustained ways so important.

The above mistakes, along with myriad others that could be catalogued, are also some of the reasons that I, and the contributors to this book, set out to do this collection. Just as race itself is complicated, so too is any effort to teach it. As simple as this concept is to grasp in the abstract, almost every teacher of race quickly learns
that the distance between the abstract and the actual is so wide as to render the abstract almost useless, making our fellow teachers of race indispensable lifelines as we navigate the capricious landscape of critical race studies in twenty-first-century America.

**THE PROBLEM OF THE COLORBLIND**

During my time as a teacher of race, I have gained an intimate knowledge of the terrain of teaching race in post–civil rights America, one that is likely familiar to all faculty who endeavor to teach race. What I mean to say is, that when it comes to our classes, regardless of the variety of topics that may be covered regarding race, the pedagogical landscape rarely varies, mainly because the larger landscape of American racial politics has rarely varied since Martin Luther King, Jr., “had a dream,” with colorblind racism becoming the national pastime, and political correctness replacing social consciousness and political involvement. With each group of students, you will invariably be responding to similar dynamics, questions, resistances, train wrecks, and moments of epiphanies. In fact, these things are oftentimes not just similar, but exactly the same. I readily admit that all professors, regardless of discipline, will experience the repetition of various occurrences in the classes that they teach with any regularity. However, it is unlikely that many science professors have had the repeated experience of being told that they were “silencing” some of their students with discussions of the double helix; or if many language professors have had to intervene in more than one argument between students because one student felt that the other student’s verb conjugation made them a racist. Professors who teach race are usually faced with these types of issues every time we walk into the classroom.

This phenomenon allows for teachers of race to become adept at not just predicting pedagogical pitfalls, but also preventing them in some cases, and even using them productively in others. Of course, there are also the cases where we are forced to watch them explode, even after having taught through the same situation hundreds of times before. Familiarity breeds a heightened readiness, not an ability to perform miracles.

An example of this phenomenon is the list of the various uncritical disavowals of racism teachers of race will encounter more than once during their teaching lifetime, and probably more than once every term they are in the classroom. During one of my graduate seminars, I discussed with my students, many of whom were teaching assistants
at the time, the almost comforting certainty of these “race rosary beads” being pulled out at some point during any class dealing with race, and recited with a fervor that seeks to make race disappear through an imaginary incantation made up of good intentions, righteousness, fear, and repetition. For those who have been teaching race for a while, these “racial unreasonings” will be familiar friends. For those who are just at the beginning of their careers teaching race, I would like you to meet “The Top 11 Get-Out-of-Race-Free Cards.” I’m sure this will be the beginning of a long and beautiful relationship:

The Top 11 Get-Out-of-Race-Free Cards:

11. “I’m not racist because I don’t see color.” (Variations include: “It doesn’t matter if someone is black, white, brown, or purple. I treat everyone equally.” Or, “We’re all just humans.”)
10. “My grandparents are racist because they’re from a different time. But my parents aren’t racist and they raised me to not be racist.”
9. “I’m not racist. I’ve never used a racist slur.”
8. “I’m not racist. I love hip hop/Chinese food/Dave Chappelle, etc.”
7. “Race is no longer a problem. Look at Oprah/Denzel/Condoleeza Rice/Colin Powell, etc.”
6. “I don’t think Affirmative Action is fair. My girlfriend’s cousin’s best friend had a 4.0 and couldn’t get into college because they let in a less qualified student just because he was black.”
5. “I never owned slaves.”
4. “I’m not racist because I grew up in an all-black/Chicano-Latino/Asian neighborhood.”
3. “Why can’t we have ‘white student unions’?” Or, “why don’t we have a ‘white studies’ department?”
2. “I’m not racist. My best friend is black/Chicano-Latino/Asian.”

And the number one Get-Out-of-Race-Free card is:
1. “Race is only a problem because people talk about it all the time.”

Though I present these oft-repeated rationalizations with a touch of humor, I do take their constancy in my life as a teacher of race very seriously, as do most people who are committed to teaching race. These sentiments serve as markers across the territory of racial discourse and debate through which teachers of race must be prepared to traverse. Taken both singularly and collectively, these moments of rationalization illustrate the various ways in which the majority of students enter our classrooms as either unwilling, unable, or extremely
ill-prepared to consider race critically. These statements, their implications, and the “logics” and behaviors that they engender, substantively inform the different mindset that those of us invested in teaching race find that we must always bring to our courses and our students.

While most faculty in any discipline enter into their classes with common concerns that shape their teaching styles and pedagogical mindsets, regarding things like student interest, student preparation, use of assignments, discussion format, and the like, those faculty whose courses have race as a central topic necessarily enter our classrooms with an additional list of complicated concerns that shape our pedagogical mindsets as qualitatively different from those of other faculty in other disciplines or with other “non-raced” approaches.

Race is personal in a way that poetry and physics can never be because race is *lived*, even as it is ignored, denied, vilified, and/or hidden behind. Race, in the minds of many students, requires a verdict of innocence or guilt, identifies victims and criminals, and makes everyone either good or bad. And students work very hard to make their case so as not to be found “guilty, criminal, or bad.” Arguably, in classes where the subject is race, or is *raced*, students will work harder on their “case” than on any assignment they turn into you. For many students in classes about race or with raced foci, not being seen as a racist becomes almost as important as getting an “A.” These are weighty trials in which calculus, Spanish, and biology don’t typically ask you to engage. Professors who teach race are always already in pedagogical negotiation with these social baggage even before we pass out the syllabus. We have to be. At least, we have to be if we expect to guide our students, as well as ourselves, critically and productively through the labyrinth of issues of race in America.

As if teaching race is not complicated enough just on its own, it becomes further complicated depending on which discipline a professor is attempting to *teach race* in. As a professor in Ethnic Studies it is expected that I will teach race; similarly, students expect that when they enroll in an Ethnic Studies course they will be learning “about race,” though, unless they’re majors, or familiar with the discipline in some other way, they aren’t usually ready for what that means. Of course, by the same logic, it is expected that professors in other non-Ethnic Studies/Area Studies disciplines *won’t* teach race, and neither will courses in these non-Ethnic Studies departments be about race. Many students tend to be resistant to learn about race even when they’re expecting to in an Ethnic Studies course. So it is no surprise that they can be downright outraged when a professor tries to “slip”
in the “irrelevant” topic of race where it “doesn’t belong,” like an English class. Faculty who engage in critical race pedagogy in disciplines that are not transparently “raced” disciplines like Ethnic Studies, African-American Studies, Native American Studies, and other area studies, find themselves in the position of having to lay preliminary groundwork that is assumed in courses in those other departments. In other words, they have to do the initial work of having to convince students that race is important to understanding literature, or film, or Environmental Studies, or Communications, and so on.

For example, students coming into an American Literature course are usually expecting to read the “great works” of Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and the like. Many students will feel “tricked” if 1) the professor wants to talk about the racial resonances and relevances of these works that have long been characterized as without race; or 2) a writer of color is on the list of writers. Because though they may acknowledge the mastery of a Toni Morrison or a Ralph Ellison or a Maxine Hong Kingston, it is always a separate mastery, and they have a hard time thinking about them in the same “universal” terms of representing “American” literature and experience as Twain and his band of canonical buddies.

It is the same for other faculty in any discipline that students see as “outside of race.” This is certainly an added challenge for professors who teach race outside of the “sanctioned” walls of Ethnic Studies in the already challenging endeavor of teaching race. However, it is the larger implications of this specific challenge that speaks to the paradoxical struggle at the heart of teaching race generally in American colleges and universities today.

Thinking about, working on, or teaching race in the academy today is ideologically placed in the narrow box of Ethnic or Area Studies. There are several significant consequences of this ideological restraint that are faced by all faculty who teach race today. One consequence is that the teaching and study of race becomes the exclusive domain of Ethnic Studies in the academic imagination, which then breeds related and equally problematic consequences. First, with race occupying a singular, institutionally sanctioned space, it becomes a much easier task to marginalize the efforts at critical race studies, as well as the scholars that are engaged in critical race studies. It becomes a kind of ironic “ghettoization” of race studies whereby Ethnic Studies faculty and departments are looked at as “just doing race,” implying that it isn’t a real field, like English or Chemistry. The continuum of this
ghettoization can run from lack of departmental resources and recognition by the administration, to the skepticism shown by many students that their professors in Ethnic Studies are not as “knowledgeable” as their professors in other, “legitimate” departments.

Second, this localization of teaching race allows for the majority of faculty in other departments to convince themselves that there is no reason for them to consider race in the teaching of their subjects, which are generally believed to be outside of race anyway. This effect subsequently feeds into the culture of resistance that many students feel a part of when they walk into our “race” classes. Because they aren’t seeing race in any of their other classes in any critical or substantive way, it legitimizes the belief that “race just doesn’t matter,” except to those in the minority (both literally and figuratively), who just can’t let it go. Alternatively, this lack of race education in the majority of their college curriculum serves to isolate those students, largely students of color, who want to think about race in critical terms in their Anthropology, Sociology, Education, or other non-Ethnic Studies courses, only to have their questions or comments on issues of race trivialized, ignored, or deemed irrelevant. This same kind of trivialization is often also experienced by faculty in these departments who work to integrate race into their teaching of literature, art history, film, and the like, when they are seen by their colleagues as engaging in a “fad,” and not actually doing valid disciplinary work. This becomes an especially precarious experience for junior faculty who need the support of their department in order to achieve tenure and promotion. In these last instances, it is easy to see how the desire to teach and learn race critically can have material, lived effects on those who are committed to the realization of critical race pedagogy. It is the constant balancing act between reward and risk that so many teachers of race find themselves in on a day-to-day basis, and usually for a professional lifetime. But how do you begin to strike that balance?

How I Got Over

*Teaching Race in the 21st Century* is a collection of essays to be used as maps, compasses, and mirrors for those of us in the academy that are coming to, or have arrived at teaching race in today’s American colleges and universities. When I first conceived of this collection in 2005, I was reacting to a seemingly constant barrage of hostile events, both local and national, that had been occurring surrounding
faculty of color, students of color, and faculty who taught race and issues of social justice:

- In 2005, Ward Churchill, a professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, came under attack for comments he made regarding 9/11. The media storm surrounding this moment became much more than just commentary on a discrete event when it turned into an indictment of the entire discipline of Ethnic Studies, including both the legitimacy and necessity of scholars who taught race and race issues within the academy. As Churchill fought for his own integrity and professional life, his supporters, comprising largely of students and peers throughout the country, acted not only to defend him, but to also expose the larger war that was being waged against all forms of race, gender, and queer studies in higher education that sought to intellectually interrogate, and thereby challenge, the social, political, and institutional hegemonies of the United States as well as globally. Framed as ideologues, who not so much educated students as indoctrinated them in service to personal agendas, scholars who studied and taught race and other issues regarding social inequity and injustice found themselves, and the very notion of “academic freedom,” under siege by politicians, pundits, and other academics.

- During this same time conservative pundit David Horowitz published his book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. The book purportedly highlights the most “dangerous” professors in the academy today, and includes scholars from varied disciplines, though many are from Ethnic, Women, and Area Studies departments. A close examination of the list revealed some of the most rigorous and critical scholars relevant today, as well as many intellectual pioneers and icons, all of whose “danger” appeared to reside in their social and critical imperatives to deconstruct systems of hegemony and give voice to people who have been relegated to the peripheries of societies.

- In October 2005, Professor Antwi Akom of San Francisco State University, a black man was arrested outside his office and held without charge and with no inquiry by the arresting police officers as to who he was and why he was on campus at night.

- At Washington State University, after an Ethnic Studies lecture on sweatshop labor, a white student approaches the professor to say that he doesn’t understand the big deal about exploiting sweatshop workers with slave wages since “it isn’t like those people really need money for anything.”
Introduction

When an Asian American student in an Anthropology class at Washington State University approaches her professor about offensive comments he made to the class where he referred to Asians as “dogeaters,” he responds by asking her, “Well, have you ever eaten dog?”

At the time I felt like the climate was increasingly hostile and was cultivating a feeling of isolation and threat for teachers who were committed to critical race studies, and who were committed to both the intellectual and bodily well-beings of their students, especially students of color. I thought that it was an important time for us to validate ourselves and what we do in the face of so much explicit invalidation. I also considered that through the act of sharing experience we could not only support those who were already here, but also provide some guidance for those who would follow.

What resulted from these impulses is this collection of what I call, “personal pedagogical memoirs.” Individually, the essays use personal experience as a means through which to critically examine theories of race and pedagogy. Collectively, the book seeks to do two primary things: 1) provide a forum among race scholars to share, most immediately with one another, but also significantly, with larger populations within the academy, and with the U.S. society largely, the challenges they daily see and experience in their efforts to better educate America’s college students on the prevalence and relevance of racial issues in U.S. society, historically and contemporaneously; and 2) bring together various perspectives on pedagogy that attempt to effectively merge commitments to critical scholarship, community building, activism, and social justice from educators who stand on the frontline of race politics in America’s universities, perilously perched between the color line and the colorblind.

Before moving into the pedagogical memoirs, the book begins with Part One, Backgrounds and Contexts, with an essay by Aureliano Maria DeSoto that provides a historical and ideological context of Ethnic Studies and the ways in which Ethnic Studies grew into broader notions of teaching race and ethnicity in the academy. This essay provides a thorough overview of the development of, stakes in, and risks of teaching race in America’s universities through which to situate the various experiences of the rest of the contributors.

In Part Two, “‘If We Would Just Stop Talking about Race, it Would Stop Being a Problem’: Confronting Resistance in the Classroom,” the authors examine the different kinds of resistance that can be experienced in courses dealing with race, including the panoply of
influences shaping those resistances, and how to work both within and through those resistances. Part Three, “‘Race Doesn’t Affect Me. I’m Just White’: Race-ing Whiteness for Students,” deals with one of the more challenging aspects of teaching race: making whiteness and white privilege visible. The authors in this section confront the various ways in which the entrenchment of the “naturalization” of whiteness operates in courses focused on race, mainly as obstacles, but sometimes, surprisingly, as gateways. The authors in Part Four, “‘You’re Teaching This Class on Race?: Negotiating Professors’ Racial Positioning,” discuss their experiences of using their embodied racial identities to get at various complicated issues of race for their students. They trace the successes and pitfalls of having to teach through and beyond themselves as reflections of the transparency of race. Finally, in Part Five, “‘I Don’t See Why Race Is Even Important Anymore’: Creating Dynamic Approaches and Assignments for Addressing Race,” the authors highlight the creative approaches they have taken in the classroom to make race tangible, intelligible, and relatable for their students, without having to condescend, sugarcoat, or oversimplify the complexity, and oftentimes violence, of race in America.

Taken together, the experiences presented in these essays paint a vivid panorama of teaching race in America in the twenty-first century. The collection as a whole can be seen as part primer, part editorial, part diary, and part promise of both the intellectual and social responsibilities accepted by those scholars who believe in the significance of teaching race to, in the words of Senator Obama, “narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of [our] time.”

Notes

2. Ibid.
Part One

Backgrounds and Contexts
The 2005–2007 scandal and subsequent investigation surrounding the work of Ward Churchill has cast Ethnic Studies, both as an academic department and an intellectual practice that is cross-referenced and influences the broader teaching of race and ethnicity in the university, in an uncomfortable limelight. Churchill, a widely known writer and polemicist of American Indian Studies, was the chair of the Ethnic Studies department at the University of Colorado at Boulder, one of the most prestigious public Research One universities in the country. The controversy caused by his remarks regarding the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing successful conservative-inspired campaign to have him removed from his position and his tenure rescinded, revealed a number of different things about the practice of Ethnic Studies and its role in the contemporary American university.

In many parts of the Ethnic Studies professoriate, there was cautious concern over the fate of the Churchill case, not the least of which was the expressly public confirmation of long-held stereotypes within and outside the profession that Ethnic Studies curricula and the faculty associated with Ethnic Studies departments are doctrinaire, anti-intellectual political operatives. Whether or not Churchill was truly guilty of academic malpractice or the subject of a rather baroque character assassination that symbolized the larger “culture wars,” the case highlighted both the legacy of Ethnic Studies programs as grounded, largely, in the resistant and critical racial-ethnic social movements of the 1960s, and the odd, double-edged public relations
value of Ethnic Studies departments for universities and colleges that has failed, for the most part, to actively diversify their faculties, staff, and student demographic.\footnote{1}

Ethnic Studies faculty and more largely those who teach race and ethnicity in various disciplines are caught between two radically different paradigms that they must constantly negotiate. On one hand, the attempt to place critical teaching and scholarship on race and ethnicity within the conservative institutional tradition of the university, which before the social and cultural transformation of the 1960s, had functioned as a tool of formal white supremacist sociocultural inculcation. While on the other, simultaneously hazarding the shoals of institutional cooptation, in which the university attempts to use Ethnic Studies departments, faculty, and courses that focus on race and ethnicity to represent an arguably facile concern with antiracist social and cultural transformation.

The social and political ideological convulsions of the 1960s are still largely unresolved in American society. In this sense, Ethnic Studies departments and the teaching of race and ethnicity in the university are symbolic of the continuing debates over the current state of America as a concept and a promise, and are as discursively fractious as other aspects of this phantasmagorical cultural divide, such as abortion, reproductive rights, feminism, and lesbian and gay rights. The long echo of these tense conversations are found littered throughout the academy, in the rightist critique of leftist bias in the hiring and retention of various academic personnel, in the teaching of racial-ethnic, gender, and sexuality course subjects across various disciplines, and the value of contemporary theoretical applications, such as post-structuralism, in humanities scholarship. What is at stake, for many partisans of these debates, is the very future of the university and its place in American society.\footnote{2}

For the rest of us, modest teachers and scholars of race and ethnicity, how we negotiate the sharp edge of these social and professional conversations is determined by a host of different factors, including local institutional politics and needs, who we are as embodied scholars and teachers, our particular student demographic, and the opprobrium or approbation of our tenured colleagues. As hard as these disparate factors make it to characterize broadly the practice of Ethnic Studies in a profession as widely varied as the contemporary American university, the primary tensions between, on one hand, subjective and objective professional trajectories in the university, and on the other, the institutional use-value of Ethnic Studies departments and