Diversity and its Discontents:

Deepening the Discourse

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Abstract

This article explores the shifting meanings of diversity discourse from the classical demarcations associated with demographic groups to the individualized applicability the concept has assumed in recent years. The trend toward attenuated understandings of diversity comes at the risk of slighting historic hardship that groups of people have long endured. The analysis weaves student testimonies and teaching experience from the classroom together with existing research and critical theory on diversity. In emphasizing the need to honor legacies of oppression among particular groups, while animating the possibilities that shared experiences across expansive human variation provide, the author includes feedback from classes that bring students inside and outside prison together. The author builds on feminist theory and pedagogy to explore the challenges and affective dimensions of diversity discourse in college classrooms, and concludes by affirming the significance of diverse human experience for learning and living together in an egalitarian democratic society.

Diversity and its Discontents: Deepening the Discourse

Warning signs foretell that democracy is in danger, and diversity is front and center amid the challenges before us in a post-truth era. In 2012, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) cautioned that the future of democracy depended on diversity (2012). But what does diversity mean at this historical juncture, and what lasting significance does it hold in store for advancing the goals of liberal education as a blueprint for democratic engagement? In the United States, education has been widely recognized as key ingredient for maintaining an informed and civically engaged public since the time of the founding fathers (Gurin et. al., 2002). How the cognitive and social learning, upon which democratic participation builds, is mediated by diversity remains of central concern. Despite the clichéd symbolism and tired tokenism, 'diversity,' 'multiculturalism' and 'pluralism' summon timeless questions about the human condition and our experiences living together in a world defined by increasing time-space compression – a world diversifying intact with the accelerative thrust of technology and its impact on our sense of time, geographical space and human interconnectivity (Harvey, 1990). Higher education has a formidable responsibility to foster public dialogue across diverse perspectives and tease apart the complex questions that confront society and our global humanity. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) ask with piercing precision in their award winning book *The Political Classroom*: "how do we want to live together?"

College campuses in the United States have been characterized as "a highly visible stage on which the most fundamental questions about difference, equality, and community are … enacted" (Schneider, 1995, p. xxix). Despite the "big sort" (Bishop, 2004) and polarizing trend by which Americans have segregated into communities with others similar to themselves, most

individuals will in theory pledge allegiance to notions of 'liberty and justice for all.' Yet what the normative values should be, upon which 'liberty' and 'justice' are established, teeters with uncertainty and contradiction. More to the point, who comprise the 'citizenry' that determine and ascribe meaning to our collective understandings of freedom, fairness and an equitable society? These questions become all the more significant considering that the democratic values and principles so often invoked as part of the American tradition and political battlefield are rarely explicitly articulated, but are generally presumed and continually evolving (AAC&U, 2011). As a result, our coveted democratic values and principles remain elusive and vulnerable.

This article explores the shifting definitions and meanings of diversity, from the categorical demarcations attached to visible, demographically representative "isms" (e.g., race, gender) to the broader, evasive applicability the concept has assumed in recent years. The goal of the analysis is to illuminate the strengths and limitations of both, underscoring an indispensable commitment to acknowledge and honor legacies of historic oppression among particular groups, while animating the possibilities that shared experiences across expansive human variation provide. Weaving existing scholarship and critical theory on diversity together with student voices and experiences of teaching from across college classrooms, including classrooms that bring students in prison together with students outside prison, the article explores the implications of circumscribed and attenuated understandings of diversity.

The analysis examines the ways in which narrow and broad definitions of diversity inform learning, and argues for the need to build on both positive and negative dimensions of diversity in dialogue. Generative dialogue related to controversy over diversity cannot preclude the affective dimension that painful associations from the historic past or current day invoke for

so many. The author builds on feminist theory and praxis that refuse to disconnect education and learning from emotion and feeling in classical Western patriarchal fashion, and reaffirms the significance of embedding theoretical understandings of oppression and discrimination in grounded experience. An historically informed and intentional anti-oppressive understanding of diversity is emphasized –despite, or precisely because of, its ambiguous and shifting meanings— in efforts to reclaim its significance in redressing persistent inequity. The article concludes by emphasizing the need to deepen the discourse on diversity, and more clearly distinguish individual markers of diversity from the collective affinities of belonging that differentially place groups of people within inequitable social relations of power.

Review of Literature

A great deal of research has accumulated on the value of diversity for enhancing the quality of higher education, encouraging civic engagement, and promoting productivity in the workplace. Despite noted limitations across this research and considerable efforts to disqualify the value of diversity for student learning (Orfield, 2001), much evidence points to the impact of diversity experiences for facilitating critical thinking, problem-solving, innovation, self-reflexivity, civic engagement, in addition to reducing bias and discrimination against marginalized people. Diversity emerged as a concept within higher education in the 1970s, in response to inequitable representation of minority groups across college campuses (Smith, 2009). The *University of California v. Bakke* case of 1978 is often cited as a landmark in controversy over the role of diversity in learning. Despite prohibiting racial quotas, this Supreme Court ruling established race as one of the factors that colleges can consider as part of their admissions policies, upholding affirmative action.

In the 1980s, renewed preoccupation with diversity focused particular attention on the positive benefits of race-based heterogeneity and inclusivity for higher education and society more broadly (Harris et al., 2015). A growing body of literature has also emerged within the field of business management, emphasizing the importance of diversity for productivity and innovation in the professions. This literature review includes representative publications from across a vast body of extant literature, selected for their relevance to the analysis at hand. The review is organized into two sections under the following subheadings: Cognitive and Social Benefits of Diversity, and Diversity, Social Agency and Civic Engagement.

Cognitive and Social Benefits of Diversity

Research on the role of diversity for learning, critical thinking and social relations has yielded complex and conflicting results within the field of cognitive science, education, psychology, and the social sciences more generally. Building on decades of research and publication, a range of terminology has materialized to distinguish different types of diversity experiences and their impact on learning and ability to think critically (Bowman, 2010; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, et al., 1999; Milem, 2003). One basic distinction differentiates between demographic or structural diversity and cognitive diversity (also known as neurodiversity). Structural diversity denotes student diversity in relation to broad demographic groups found across college campuses and society, such as race and gender. Gurin (1999) has argued that although an obvious requirement for student exposure to diversity interactions, structural diversity in itself is not necessarily what contributes to critical thinking and intellectual development among college students. It is the overall presence of diverse peers both inside and outside the classroom –exposing students to diverse perspectives more generally— that enhances

learning outcomes. 'Informal' interactional diversity includes unstructured opportunities for learning and everyday encounters with diverse peers that college students are exposed to outside of class as well (e.g., social activities, campus events).

Many studies that examine informal diversity focus on the foundational role of race and ethnicity in structuring our social institutions and relations, and their consequent relevancy as a lens through which to understand diverging experiences. Other studies, in turn, tend to emphasize widespread manifestations of diversity experience unrelated to race, including worldviews mediated by such factors as political ideology or religious belief (Bowman, 2010). Classroom diversity includes learning about, from, and alongside diverse peers as part of designated college courses (Bowman, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2001; Mayhew et al., 2008). These experiences of diversity are further subdivided according to scope and duration: formal academic courses that explore diversity topics over the course of a semester and require deeper examination, versus limited workshops or trainings designed to confer practical skills and know-how for interacting with people of diverse backgrounds (Bowman, 2010). Some scholars distinguish between knowledge accumulation or "enlightenment" about diversity on the one hand, and intergroup contact with diverse peers on the other (Denson, 2009), and conclude that the experiential learning occasioned by intergroup interaction contributes benefits beyond simply cognitive knowledge acquisition (Bowman, 2010; Denson, 2009).

Cognitive diversity refers to differences in thought processes and synthesis of information, but can also include people's varying beliefs, values, assumptions and prior knowledge (Miller et al., 1998; Schilpzand & Martins, 2010; Liao & Long, 2016). Reynold & Lewis (2017) describe cognitive diversity as differences in information processing styles,

including how individuals manage uncertainty, complexity and unfamiliar situations. This is distinguished from diversity attributed to demographic factors like race and ethnicity, gender, or age. Depending on the variety of cognition present in a group of people working together, teamwork will yield differing results and solutions (Liao & Long, 2016; Schilpzand & Martins, 2010). Groups of people with more diverse cognitions, representing a broader spectrum of decision-making processes, will produce a wider range of solutions and achieve better performance when working to solve problems (Liao & Long, 2016; Talke et al., 2010). In short, introducing a greater number of diverse perspectives into problem-solving generates greater possibilities for understanding and knowledge accumulation (Cheng et al., 2003; Liao & Long, 2016).

Diversity, Social Agency and Civic Engagement

Scholars have also examined the relationship between diversity, social agency and civic engagement. In 2005, Hurtado published research conducted at 10 public universities that revealed the effects of diversity experiences on student democratic skills, engagement and dispositions. Building on foundational theory of cognitive and developmental psychology (Piaget, 1975; Ruble, 1994), the study narrowed in on interpersonal diversity experiences that disrupt students' existing worldviews and enable them to master the uncertainty of cognitive contradictions. Scholars posit that informal social interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds challenge students' familiar cognitive frameworks, which in turn stimulates active thinking (Hurtado, 2005; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin et al., 2004). Hurtado (2005) further notes that interacting with diverse peers provides students with opportunities to practice and hone their democratic skills and capacity to resolve conflicts (p. 603). Results from her study revealed that

students who take diversity courses and are exposed to diversity experiences express increased concern for the public good and commitment to civic engagement (alongside a host of educational outcomes), with far-reaching effects for their participation in a diverse democracy (Hurtado, 2005).

Research conducted by Gurin et. al. (2002) similarly reveals that formal (i.e., classroom) and informal experiences with diversity significantly influences the cultivation of complex cognitive structures and students' sense of efficacy. Building on these findings, Nelson Laird (2005) investigated the implications of diversity experiences for enhancing student intellectual motivation, social agency and civic engagement. The author defines social agency in terms of community engagement, social justice, and working to improve society (Nelson Laird, 2005, p. 367). The concept of social agency is further connected to the notion of 'human integrity' –a significant vector in the social psychology of identity development identified by Chickering and Reisser (1993)— which Nelson Laird defines in relation to "humanizing values and social responsibility" (2005, p. 367). It is worth noting that a great deal of overlap exists between the concepts of social agency and social activism – a term used in earlier research conducted by Astin (1993) that also investigated the impact of diversity experiences on social agency among graduating students.

In 2000, Ehrlich's seminal publication *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* established a broad definition of civic engagement that included both political and non-political efforts to improve the life of a community: "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference" (p. vi). Bowman's (2011) subsequent research on the correlative effects of

diversity and civic oriented constructs suggested that awareness and appreciation of diversity is a central attribute of civically minded individuals. His meta-analysis of college diversity and civic engagement includes studies that focus on both nonbehavioral outcomes (attitudes and knowledge) and student behavior and intentions (i.e. volunteering or community service). The analysis confirmed a relatively consistent positive correlation between diversity experiences and student civic behavior and behavioral intentions (Bowman, 2011; Gurin et al., 2004; Hurtado, 2005; Johnson & Lollar, 2002; Umbach & Kuh, 2006; Zuniga et al., 2005). The author concludes that informal diversity experiences (interpersonal and social interactions) appear to have a greater impact on civic engagement than do formal curricular (classroom) diversity experiences (Bowman, 2011).

Reflecting these and additional findings, Denson and Chang (2009) argue that despite the tenuous *direct* impact of structural diversity (demographic representation) on student civic engagement, a higher percentage of diversity on campus appears to have an indirect positive effect on student civic engagement by expanding informal opportunities for interacting with and learning from diverse peers. This further corroborates research on the role of diversity experiences for influencing student awareness about discrimination and inequality, and related shifts in attitudes toward civic action (Case, 2007; Kernahan & Davis, 2007). Of noteworthy relevance to this analysis, such findings suggest that meaningful informal, face-to-face interactions are integral to the value of diversity experiences, and reinforces evidence on the significance of intergroup dialogue for civic engagement (Gurin et. al., 2004; Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007).

Intergroup dialogue is a structured form of curricular pedagogy that allows students to explore controversial issues from diverse cultural perspectives through guided discussion. Education scholars note that diversity curriculum and pedagogy that facilitates meaningful interpersonal interaction encourage empathy across differences, which in turn is associated with reduced prejudice (Bowman, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008) and enhanced learning (Bowman, 2011; Brandenberger, 1998). The interpersonal connections that take shape through empathy and mutual understanding cannot be compared to diversity exposure that occurs in abstract through theoretical coursework. It is the former, scholars argue, that leads to increased civic engagement and social action (Bowman, 2011). This echoes findings of a meta-analysis by Gurin et. al. (2002), where the authors conclude that informal diversity interaction is instrumental for fostering democracy outcomes and civic engagement.

Despite continued efforts to disqualify the overwhelming evidence that links college diversity experiences to positive student outcomes, Bowman's (2011) meta-analysis of extant studies establishes a clear "relationship between diversity experiences and civic growth … regardless of the type of diversity experience" (p. 49). Resounding additional scholars in the field (Brandenberger et al., 2010; Jayakumar, 2008; Yamamura & Denson, 2005), he concludes that such civic growth has impact "well after graduation" (Bowman, 2011, p. 49). As Gurin et. al. (2002) argue however, engaging across differences cannot be taken for granted; templates for intentionally deliberating diversity interactions in the college environment are needed. This implicates structured learning environments that support experimentation with the instability that diverse perspectives can yield, and that assist students and faculty with managing conflicts that arise. Educators and students alike need structured opportunities to venture beyond the comfort

of cultural conformity, if they are to understand their place and role in a diverse democracy. Civic engagement in a diverse society by definition entails building relationships across different communities of belonging – most notably including marginalized communities— but require pedagogies that accommodate conflict and discomfort.

Teaching and Learning about Diversity

In designing an interdisciplinary course on structured inquiry for a diverse student body at a public university during the summer of 2018, I spent considerable time gathering curricular resources for a unit on meta-analysis of learning. I had recently attended a training in Open Education Resources (OER) and decided to search OER materials for curricula on the role of diversity in learning. Many of the OER resources on diversity I identified were included in introductory textbooks designed to help college students develop essential skills and succeed academically. These 'college success' textbooks typically featured a chapter examining diversity on campus, and most were surprisingly similar, if not identical, in content. These textbook chapters address "how to live with diversity" and open with the impending ubiquity of diversity, proclaiming the sweeping demographic shifts upon us: by 2020, about half of all college students will be non-white [sic] (Mahoney et al., 2017). The chapter then proceeds to define what diversity *really means* : "…the great variety of human characteristics –ways that we are different even as we are all human and share more similarities than differences. These differences are an essential part of what enriches humanity" (Mahoney et al., 2017, p. 324).

The criteria used to describe the definition of diversity above ultimately extend far beyond race and ethnicity or gender and sexuality, and include such markers of identity as:

diversity of geographic, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic background; physical ability; age; religion; political views; even extracurricular interests. Diversity is classified in terms that are sociocultural (beliefs and behaviors that are shared), biological or phenotypic (sex, skin color, age), and personal (religious or political beliefs, extracurricular pursuits), with the acknowledgement that we learn from "people whose ideas, beliefs, attitudes, values, backgrounds, experiences, and behaviors are different from our own" (Mahoney et al., 2017, p. 325). This elastic definition of diversity –as legitimate and commendable as it is from a humanistic perspective— can in principle capture anything that characterizes humans as distinct from one another, both as members of groups to which they belong or as individuals.

There is a significant, despite equivocal, distinction to be made between individual markers of identity and those ascribed to group belonging, however. The distinction speaks to the contradictions and relative equipoise between the individual and collective foundations of our identity; the extent to which aspects of our identity can be attributed to our individuality or the sociocultural environment(s) to which we belong. Celebrating the unique characteristics that make up individual identity is, without a doubt, crucial. Yet a person's individual political views, religious beliefs, and recreational interests, despite contributing to the panoply that is diversity, cannot be compared on par with the composite markers of identity that derive from belonging to groups with particular socio-historical trajectories. A person's cognitive, political, or religious views, despite comprising formative markers of their identity, and contributing diverse perspectives into the social mix, cannot be compared to that of belonging to a group of people who have long been persecuted on political or religious grounds.

The distinction concerns the relative disadvantage or privilege that certain groups of people have suffered or benefitted from historically under particular sociopolitical circumstances. Diangelo (2018) describes the oppression and sweeping disadvantages that groups of people have endured in the United States:

> 246 years of brutal enslavement; the rape of black women for the pleasure of white men and to produce more enslaved workers; the selling off of black children; the attempted genocide of Indigenous people, Indian removal acts, and reservations; indentured servitude, lynching, and mob violence; sharecropping; Chinese exclusion laws; Japanese American internment; Jim Crow laws of mandatory segregation; black codes; bans on black jury service; bans on voting; imprisoning people for unpaid work; medical sterilization and experimentation; employment discrimination; educational discrimination; inferior schools; biased laws and policing practices; redlining and subprime mortgages; mass incarceration; racist media representations; cultural erasures, attacks, and mockery; and untold and perverted historical accounts (p. 59).

Contemporary U.S. society is indeed so fundamentally structured around race, that discussing diversity, equity and inclusion without addressing this central marker of identity, is to distort the truth. Many further argue that the contemporary world as we know it is fashioned from the whole cloth that is race as a social construct and white supremacy as a system of global apartheid (Hage, 2017; Loyd, 2015; Nevins, 2008).

The distinction between idiosyncratic markers of our identity and those ascribed to group belonging is evermore salient during a time when diversity, as referent for particular categories

of people, has been under siege – Black and Brown people (particularly the undocumented), women (particularly their reproductive rights), LBGTQ+ people (particularly transgender people). Treading with caution and hindsight is important in this crossfire, particularly considering the susceptibility of diversity discourse to appropriation due to paradigm shifts in thinking. An article published by *The Atlantic* under the telling title "The Weakening Definition of Diversity" (White, 2015) explores this shift in recent generations. Referencing research findings from a study on the evolving definitions of diversity, the article reports that millennials tend to define diversity with regards to cognitive viewpoints –e.g., in relation to residency patterns or school type attended— rather than demographic features such as race, gender and so forth (Smith & Turner, 2015). This shift in thinking is a stark departure from what earlier generations understood diversity to mean (Smith & Turner, 2015).

Although millennials appear to be far more comfortable with diversity as regards the rote associations that the concept traditionally invokes (i.e., race and gender) and are looking to move past hollowed conversations on the topic, the risk is that definitions become so broadly conceived that they lose the power to identify and address persistent inequities. This includes assaults on fundamental policies that aim to rectify historic oppression (i.e. affirmative action), during a time when formal measures designed to secure equal access to the resources and rewards of society are vulnerable. White's (2015) analysis corroborates the research findings of critical sociologist Ellen Berrey (2011) on 'diversity orthodoxy' and the changing meanings of race on campus. These changing meanings involve rhetorical moves that have widened the precepts of diversity over the past decades, so that students' "social differences, geographic

origins, economic backgrounds and viewpoints" now comprise important forms of diversity (Berrey, 2011, p. 577).

Diversity has become a threadbare referent that evades structural explanations of racial exclusion, and that reaches far beyond marginalized racial minorities (Berrey, 2011). In many respects, the move toward cultural understandings of diversity in terms of "inclusion" has thus signaled a move away from identifying and remedying racial disadvantage: "rather than prioritizing … the needs of racial minority students, diversity discourse and initiatives often incorporate, represent, and even cater to white students" (Berrey, 2011, p. 577). The backdrop of this refashioned diversity discourse and its messaging include controversial legal battles over affirmative action amid the neoliberal project to discipline and corporatize higher education. According to Berrey (2011) the new racial 'orthodoxy of diversity' effectively reframes "race in terms that are compatible with organizational and political demands of the neoliberal, post-civil rights era" (p. 589). The dangers of this version of diversity is that it "downplays the distinctive ways in which race organizes our life chances and opportunities and the distinctive obstacles that racism creates" (Berrey, 2011, p. 590).

Commodified versions of diversity informed by neoliberal logic have similarly reduced its net value to the benefits of enhanced problem-solving and innovation (Bowman, 2010) for global economic competition (Berrey, 2011, p. 580). The commercial vogue of diversity made its way into a *Scientific American* special report in 2014, where Fred Guterl (2014) describes the concept as "shorthand for a vast effort to remake society to include everyone – not just those in privileged positions— in politics, culture and the pursuit of happiness" (39). The coverage

explores how diversity benefits science and innovation, and why it matters for the quality and effectiveness of professional teams: when we work with people who are not like ourselves, we "prepare more thoroughly and work harder to marshal our arguments" (Guterl, 2014, p. 39). The result is improved performance, which in part comes about through heightened awareness of our unconscious biases and ability to transcend them. Yet definitions of diversity in professional fields such as business leadership and organizational management tend toward broad, evasive descriptions that do little to focus the underbelly of persistent discrimination and bias: "the distribution of difference among the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute" (Harrison & Klein, 2007, p. 1200). Such nondescript definitions effectively negate the role of power relations in market-based collaborative diversity that reduce human performance to productivity.

Despite catching the attention of business and the private sector thus, popular market-driven preoccupation with diversity is largely prescribed by the profits that multiplying cognitive potential deliver. Such deliverables need not improve social conditions, but instead has had a steady track-record of generating or exacerbating inequalities. Measured from the perspective of advancing healthy, equitable and sustainable societies, lauding diversity for its standalone cognitive productive value reduces the concept to a misnomer. In other words, intention matters. The less visible or invisible markers of cognitive diversity, associated with broadly conceived, ahistorical definitions that focus on plurality of individualized experience, offer infinite opportunities for identifying across differences, but also perils misuse. The potential for misappropriation that reinforce unequal social structures and relations, in the name of diversity, has proved powerful across sectors of society.

Although most whites will assert that they do not "see any color, just people … the ugly face of discrimination is still with us" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 1). As Bonilla-Silva illustrates in the classic text *Racism Without Racists,* we are not living in a post-racial society: "regardless of whites' 'sincere fictions,' racial considerations shade almost everything in America. Blacks and dark skinned minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life" (2006, p. 1-2). Yet it remains difficult for many to acknowledge that 'hard work,' 'complaining less,' and 'living in the past' has little to do with the material realities that configure Black and Brown lived experience. A gaping disconnect exists between the realities of U.S. color-coded inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and the contradictions of colorblind rationalization. For many students, particularly those who hail from insulated segregated communities, understanding the depth and scope of persistent inequality and discrimination is far from reach. Closing this gap in understanding and assuming responsibility for the persistence of peoples' differential status is an integral component of living in a democratic and just plural society, and is central to substantiating diversity discourse.

Lessons from Inside the Classroom

I routinely encounter defiance among students, explicit or implicit, in efforts to engage dialogue about the intersections of historic and persistent oppression. Beyond detectable pushback, the difficulties of confronting controversial topics in the classroom often materialize with paralyzing silence. Regardless of the scope and scale of a given subject matter – whether race, gender, sexuality or other markers that classify and divide— efforts to generate open and honest conversation about the dynamics that structure power asymmetries now appear compounded by the fears that online callout culture provokes among students in the age of social

media. One approach to tackling these challenges has been to carefully structure the way subjects are covered, interspersing guided discussion with class activities and curricular content grounded in documented knowledge that map relevant historical genealogies. Not only does this place contentious subject matter in deeper, meaningful perspective, depth in understanding can provide the distance needed for students to step back and contemplate emergent self-awareness of complicity. The following excerpt from a student's written reflection in response to Peggy McIntosh's (1989) classic "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" serves to illustrate the learning potential, but also layered complexity, that such instructional opportunities involve:

> Although I may not be comfortable sharing this in class, I think it is important for me to be completely honest in my response to this article. First of all, I have never thought of myself as being privileged solely because of the color of my skin. I do see Peggy's [McIntosh] point on some of the conditions she listed as white privileges and perhaps reading this has opened my eyes to things I may have never even thought of. With that being said, as a white, middle-aged, single mother who works full-time and trying to finish my college degree, I think people are mistaken or even delusional about what it means to be white.

> The color of my skin is "white" and for that reason I feel that I am expected to work hard for my money, not receive public assistance, pay for my health insurance, and pay for my education and my children's education. Nothing is handed to me on a platter. I make too much to receive help from the government but yet I make too little to make ends meet.

I believe there is a huge misconception of what advantages a middle-class white person has. In reflecting on some of the items listed in the article, the first one that stood out to me was "I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me." Again, this is a complete misconception. As a matter of fact, living in a white neighborhood in my town means keeping up with the Joneses. This includes beautiful cars, gorgeous homes and fancy vacations. Just this week, I had to explain to my children why we were one of the only families in our town that was not away on an island or skiing for Winter Break. Some neighbors are not accepting and will go as far as not allowing our children to play together because we come from the "poor" end of town. … I am not saying that there isn't some truth to the things that Peggy McIntosh speaks of but I also think that our society in general is obsessed with racism and movements such as "Black Lives Matter". I agree that racism is terrible and should be addressed. I also agree that Black lives do matter… but don't all lives?

Despite the troubling tenor, this writing response reflects a veritable component of the contemporary political landscape in the United State. The reflections disclose gaps in historical knowledge about the central role of race in structuring social relations and access to opportunities, yet simultaneously reveal perceived gaps in appreciation for the circumstances that predominate in the lives of many middle- and working-class people, regardless of race. The personal testimony moreover reveals the intersecting gender and economic class realities that have long configured our lives in composite ways, alongside the competing priorities that social

stratification creates and that often inhibit our ability to fathom common cause across fractured class structure.

Is it possible to discern parallels between this student's fate as a single female head-of-household –who must hold down the forte alone on the lesser income that a gendered pay gap routinely imposes— and that of other exploited peoples located across variegated sectors of social stratification? Is our curriculum and pedagogy effectively able to distinguish the unpaid household labor single mothers perform –indeed most mothers perform worldwide, single or not— in assuming the responsibilities of reproducing society and raising members of the next generation? What parallels can be illuminated between the conditions of this student's life and that of other exploited people, equivalent in measure and degree or not? Despite the difficulties of identifying similarities between variants of oppression, and the dangers of uniformly equating one version to another, the advantages that inequalities collectively confer to those in more advantaged positions comprise an interlocking matrix we are taught *not* to see (McIntosh 1989).

This matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) requires unveiling and unravelling as part of learning. Racism, sexism and heterosexism are not the same, yet as intersecting systems, their substantive impact overlap in significant ways that can be shared by those at the receiving end.

Responses like the one excerpted above are typically self-censored when summoned in open classroom dialogue. Peer anonymity allows instructors to solicit honest perspectives, but also make plain the lack of an inclusive, comprehensive knowledge base among students at large. Genuine dialogue is essential for cultivating mutual understanding about present-day experiences, yet at once reveals the fundamental socio-historical awareness needed if students are to grasp the cumulative and reinventive dimensions of domination as a system. To express

your misfortune by comparison to the neighbors next door, who can afford a gorgeous home and lucrative island or ski vacation during winter break, is not akin to the historic realities disproportionately affecting Black and Brown people, many who are still far removed from and unlikely to compare themselves to such levels of affluence. This is not to diminish the struggles of single, white women who raise their children with far less than sufficient support. This is to distinguish and draw linkages between various forms of injustice. To declare that "all lives matter" is to state a fact, but in the context of contemporary and historic race relations is also to ignore the disturbing fatality statistics of Black and Brown people, young men in particular, who fall prey to police brutality. Patriarchy and white supremacy here congeal in classic distasteful and fragmenting fashion, to conceal the repressive machinations of social stratification as a complex system. Helping students differentiate between individual and collective experiences of diversity, and acknowledge the struggles that historically marginalized groups of people endure, remains a much needed goal. As eminent sociologist C. Wright Mills (1945) belabored long ago, we must teach students to distinguish the forest from the trees.

Classroom curricula must seek to identify and integrate mutual points of reference that transcend the particulars of diversity across time and place. As Peggy McIntosh (2010) has noted however, the "difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same" (3-4). The intent of such curricula is not to ascribe equal measure to different forms and experiences of domination, but rather to recognize that they share common characteristics that interlock in focal ways, and around which diverse peoples may seek common cause. More specifically, unifying around shared experiences must not neglect the need to

account for historic and systemic oppression against marginalized peoples. An important point of departure includes redressing the historical lacuna in representations of the past that fail to include diverse groups of people. In order to envision alternatives and engage with possibilities that are "otherwise and elsewhere" (Crawley, 2015; Stein, 2018), revisioning the past must incorporate the diversified narratives of history –including histories of resilience, subversion and resistance— that allow humans as a whole to reimagine hope for the future.

Lessons from Prison Combined Classes

Experiences of diversity intersect in unique ways inside 'combined classes' that bring students in prison together with students from college campuses outside prison. Combined classes have emerged as a component of higher education in prison and provide a context in which to encourage cross-cultural exchange of ideas between groups of people ordinarily isolated from each other in the age of mass incarceration. An estimated 40,000 students inside and outside prison have participated in combined classes across the United States, facilitating dialogue among students of highly varied backgrounds and identities (insideoutcenter.org, 2020). As collaborative knowledge production sites with ultimate potential to inform public discourse and policy, combined classes breathe life into student understandings of how social inequities impact different groups of people under punitive governance; how our identities, social relations and statuses are intertwined and embedded within particular and shifting sociopolitical contexts. They often serve to defy assumptions predicated on notions about insurmountable differences and 'culture wars.' Everyday acts of Othering, explicit or not, are contested in unexpected ways, as student participants learn to appreciate those from vastly different backgrounds than themselves.

For students in prison, the combined classroom provides a much needed opportunity to impart experience and knowledge rendered invisible to the public. More often than not, this experience and knowledge builds on a lifetime of hardship and struggle; of disqualification and failures from the vantage point of mainstream convention. These accounts of marginalization become powerful points of departure for understanding the intricacies and magnitude of lived oppression, and the circuitous paths that foreshadow imprisonment. In the excerpt below, an outside student explains the importance of gaining grounded understanding of such lived experience.

> … I was coming into the class with a desire to understand and expose myself to a vastly different reality than my own, with an eagerness to listen and learn, and with an open heart and mind. … Learning about social injustice and inequality stimulated a level of empathy in the classroom. There was a shared desire to challenge the institutional and social injustices many of us have come to accept as the norm. The fact that our classroom discussions were centered around social and institutional injustices and inequalities AND were taking place within an institution fraught with these very issues, pushed each of us to think about how what we were learning affected our fellow classmates.

Student participants who enter prison facilities from outside provide an important lifeline to those locked away and made invisible, in exchange. They come to embody the connection that we all, as humans, aspire to nurture in relation to others, and that enables us to fulfill our need for social belonging. The divides that are bridged cross in either direction; connections are forged despite difference, profound or petty, at the astonishment of inside and outside students alike.

Many express surprise at their collective ability to develop meaningful relations and share a sense of unity around mutual points of commonality, irrespective of the wide range of diversity that typify these classrooms. The following excerpt describes an incarcerated student's experience of connecting with outside students in combined classes, despite the ubiquitous divides that social norms and stratification ascribe.

> … there was an "otherness"; a criterion that divided us into two groups within the combined classes. One group embodied the norm and their identity was valued, which are the outside students and the other was defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination, which were the students inside prison, including myself. We [both groups] were different and could have viewed each other as the "other." Instead we found value amongst ourselves and erased the lines that could have been used to cast the prison population with … vilification. There was no dominant and inferior group. There was just one group, which presented "oneness" as opposed to "otherness," as we worked together and learned from each other. Essentially, the walls were broken down, erasing the blemishes of incarceration and all of the stigma that it brings. There were no borders or walls that came between integrity or academic talent. We were actually teaching each other not only the specific discipline but how to exist with other communities without a bias… .

Participating in combined classes make the processes of dehumanization and social alienation upon which 'othering' relies palpable. Students in prison are humanized when outside students learn to know who they are and pervasive stereotypes recede from the fore. Class participants are pushed to contemplate their biases, and to self-reflect on their implicit role in a system structured

by classification and false hierarchies. For inside students, there is genuine and often deep-seated fear of being looked down upon and debased, of being reduced to their mistakes, of being always and everywhere othered by others. They often express surprise when their assumptions and expectations are invalidated.

> In the beginning of this experience, I … had my own judgments and preconceived notions about the outside students who were taking these classes. In my imagination it was impossible for the outside students to understand or share my feelings. In my thoughts, these students were privileged; they never went any nights hungry, had no clue about the codes of the streets, were far removed from the criminal justice system, which we knew all about where I was from. I had my judgements. I thought of the outside students as well off kids who knew nothing about my life… .

In discussing her experience of participating in combined classes, the above student further identified the significance of being exposed to people from entirely different walks of life than her own. As a Black female of West Indian descent, she had grown up in a segregated community with little opportunity to move outside the racial and cultural contours of her neighborhood. She described the monotony of engaging the same impressions her entire life, and her sense of enlightenment when interacting with people from backgrounds unlike her own – despite the discomfort of moving beyond the familiar. Her descriptions capture the ability of people from vastly different socioeconomic, racial and sociocultural circumstances to share empathy, discover commonality and transcend the divisiveness that common representations of alterity presume:

I wanted to take a combined class to engage with people who were not like me so that they would know me and I them and that we would know more... about each other. This is exactly what happened. I learned that people are able to understand and share my feelings; that fear can be transposed into love. I learned that people can believe in you even at your lowest point and that by letting outsiders in, and vice versa, you open up doors; doors to understanding; doors that shut out judgement and exile and allow us to see the humanity in each other despite the circumstances we may find ourselves in. ...

These insights foreground the central role of diversity experiences in expanding worldviews beyond the grip of convention and convenience. Exposure to different ways of thinking, feeling, and being enables us to understand social phenomena, questions, problems, and reality from different vantage points. It allows us to distinguish and imagine alternative reasoning in our efforts to make sense of the world.

Many decades ago, Langer (1978) characterized the familiar, automatic thinking that people rely on in everyday sense-making as "mindless," capturing the essence of how mundane thought builds on prior learning and established scripts for understanding the world. Langer argued that *mindful* thought, by contrast, takes shape when individuals are exposed to scenarios that challenge customary scripts. Cognitive development is facilitated by ruptures in our ordinary repertoires of sense making. The relationship between diversity experiences and learning has been explained in terms of the dislocations in familiar conceptual frames that interactions with diverse peer occasions (Gurin et al., 2002; Roksa et al., 2017). Building on seminal theories in the field of psychology, including the foundational scholarship of Erikson and Piaget, these

explanations posit that cognitive development is facilitated by disequilibrium (Piaget, 1975) in habitual thinking schemas. For outside students, entering the prison on a regular basis, and learning to know those who are imprisoned, has a destabilizing effect on the ordinary frames with which they perceive the world. Many of the comforts, habits and rights we take for granted are withheld once they pass beyond the prison gates. For students in prison, by corollary, partaking in dialogue with students from outside prison, and entering a space where they can engage critically and openly with ideas and new knowledge, provides another version of disequilibrium that facilitates plasticity of mind amid the droning monotony of total control.

Toward Pedagogy of Discomfort

From a transformative educational perspective, the concept of diversity can indeed be appreciated for its catchall significance, connoting any and all eye-opening 'otherness' that seemingly makes little sense until someone invites you to step into their shoes, and pulls the 'cotton wool' of daily life from over your eyes (Woolf, 1976). Diversity exchanges are at once disorienting and enlightening because they transport us outside our routine existence as individuals and members of familiar sociocultural entities of belonging. They further force us to fathom that although we may shape our future, we do not make history as we please (Marx, 2018); that history is not created "under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 2018). As such, we have a responsibility to understand and brave the weight of tradition that dead generations entrust upon the living like a nightmare (Marx, 2018). Slavery as a system of racial classification and its crimes against humanity is one such colossal nightmare that lives on. In her analysis of history repeated, Michelle Alexander (2010) characterizes the contemporary U.S. criminal justice system

as the 'New Jim Crow,' aptly demonstrating parallels between historic and current-day oppression that manifest in a refashioned system of racial domination. Rife with potential to expand the public imagination, talking points from this thesis have entered mainstream debate and provide an important language with which to communicate about the recursive thrust of a domination paradigm founded in social stratification, dehumanization and exclusionary politics.

The generative dialogue that diversity experiences inspire provides vital opportunities for revisiting the stories we tell, or do not tell, about the past and present, and allow us to uncover buried truths, despite the difficulties of deliberating the ugly particulars. The value of examining contested histories resonate with findings from diversity research conducted by Roksa and colleagues (2017), who distinguish between negative and positive diversity interactions, and who argue for the need to focus more attention on the impact of negative experiences for student learning. The authors note that most research to date has focused on the positive (or neutral) effects of diversity experiences for learning outcomes (Roksa et. al., 2017, p. 314), despite evidence that both positive and negative diversity experiences provide the requisite destabilizing effect that precipitate student cognitive and social development (Bowman & Bradenberger, 2012).

Although scholars acknowledge that negative diversity interactions can have adverse effects on students (Roska et al., 2017), we cannot assume that they therefore contribute nothing to learning. Instead, much like with other learning experiences, the transformative potential that emerges from 'negative' (diversity) experiences are contingent upon the context and pedagogical structures in which learning is embedded. Roksa and colleagues (2017) reference evidence of such benefits from research conducted among students enrolled in service-learning courses

where "the necessary structures and support to work through any negative experiences" are typically available (p. 316). Based on these findings, the authors underscore the need to revise existing frameworks for investigating diversity experiences so that they more explicitly include the role of negative diversity experiences (Roksa et al., 2017).

These findings point toward the significance of intentional pedagogy when teaching difficult subject matter. The many dimensions of diversity ordinarily present in combined classes, for instance, are of central relevance for understanding structural oppression as lived experience. The diverse and often adverse life experiences upon which students in prison build enables broader understanding of how structural oppression and violence are shaped by intersecting identity markers that students inside and outside prison may share. Yet building on diversity, experiences of oppression, and how students are differentially located within a web of structural forces that discriminate, can create a politically and emotionally charged classroom. As Roberts and Smith (2002) explain, students may be concerned about what they can

> contribute to the class, and they may feel apprehensive about sharing their
> identities and political views. Students' awareness of their emotions is
> intensified because of differences in beliefs and values, but also because they
> are talking about who they are; this context has the potential to build barriers to
> student engagement. (p. 292)

In other words, honest intergroup dialogue about student identities, life experiences and political perspectives is likely to invoke emotion. Despite student apprehension to engage in challenging dialogue and the climate of uncertainty that negative associations can incite however, the

charged classroom provides important spaces where sentiments can serve "as a powerful medium for critical inquiry" (Prebel, 2016, p. 2).

Feminist scholars have long identified the role of emotion in pedagogy and learning (e.g., see Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990). As Megan Boler (2015) explains: "feminist pedagogies emphasize how processes of learning, social change and education are intimately bound up with feeling. Integrating theory and praxis, educational practices [can] enable students to understand emotions as a legitimate source of knowledge alongside more favored educational comportments like logic, reason, and rationality" (p. 1491). This has significance for connecting theoretical understandings of oppression and discrimination in lived experience, since "emotions reflect students' identities within social institutions and provide a means through which students might analyze social discourse and power relations" (Prebel, 2016, p. 2). Pedagogy, and epistemology more broadly, should take care to not divorce learning from emotion in classical Western patriarchal fashion. It must instead intentionally seek to render emotion "a source for social change … and … key site of investigation for those … interested in connections between pedagogy and social change" (Prebel, 2016, p. 2).

Elsewhere my colleague and I have addressed the need for a 'pedagogy of discomfort,' following the work of Boler (2015), in efforts to productively engage students in dialogue about oppression and its emotional impact (Ronda & Utheim, 2019). Despite the discomfort of charged classrooms, the cross-fertilizing exchanges that diversity experiences engender can lead to greater understanding and important knowledge accumulation. It is in this rich but unsettling context that a more deliberate pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) can assist students as they navigate complicated terrain. Julie Prebel (2016) describes Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort" as

"a purposeful way of examining uncomfortable emotions we (and our students) might otherwise resist or deflect… [fear, shame, anger, pain etc.], as well as [the] guilt and … discomfort produced when we are forced to question our beliefs and assumptions" (as cited in Prebel, 2016, p. 1). Such a pedagogy understands emotion as an important source of knowledge, not as "innate weakness and pathology" (Boler, 2015, p. 1492) to be circumvented in favor of abstract reason and 'objective' rationality.

In order to encourage the democratizing potential of diversity experiences, faculty and students need "supportive environments in which disequilibrium and experimentation can occur" (Gurin et al., 2002, p. xx), and in which they can contemplate feelings integral to lived experience. Pedagogy of discomfort seeks to accommodate these affective dimensions and remain mindful of shifting classroom experiences. It is a pedagogy that recognizes the emotion of learning as emerging "relationally in encounters between people" (Prebel, 2016, p. 3) and shared learning as constituted between people, not as vestiges contained within individuals. In other words, the dynamic learning "process of engaging and potentially disrupting social norms, discourses, values, and hierarchies" (Prebel, 2016, p. 6) must recognize emotion as integral and generative, but also relational. Because the role of emotion in learning and disrupting hegemonic worldviews is relationally constituted, pedagogy should seek to facilitate authentic, interactive learning opportunities.

The author joins scholars who acknowledge that "as a society we have provided no template for interaction across racial/ethnic groups and [that] such interaction cannot be taken for granted in the college environment" (Gurin et al., 2002). As such, we need curricular scaffolding that assist faculty and students with managing the complexities and conflicts that arise as part of

intergroup dialogue. Understanding the politics of exclusion and hierarchies of human value [sic] upon which social inequalities build, requires confronting unpalatable and painful facets of oppression. Despite the discomfort this can incite, it encourages student awareness about their location within systems of social power (McIntosh, 2010), and represents a point of departure for contesting the 'violence of silence' that superficial, colorblind representations of diversity perpetuate. Because contemporary racism has been "reinforced by years of living in a white supremacist world, [uncovering] a deep whiteness that may not be seen as such even by antiracist whites" will require hard work (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 81; Wise, 2008; Hughey, 2012).

Racism hides in expected and unexpected places. It remains the contentious and uncomfortable undertaking of teachers and students alike to step back and devote time to discern and unlearn its deep grammar; to listen carefully but not wait for, turn to, or assume that Black and Brown people are at their disposal, ready and willing, to elucidate, demonstrate, divulge and deliberate on their behalf. This is particularly noteworthy during a time when authoritarianism and racist fascism is on the rise worldwide, and the stress and retraumatizing effects of excavating white supremacist storylines become as real and raw as the ongoing police brutality, violence and trauma unfolding before our eyes. In order to diminish the risks that secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma can place on people of color in particular, critical theory and analyses of white supremacy should take care to combine intergroup dialogue[1] with cultural competency-sensitivity and trauma-informed pedagogy.

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[1] Intergroup dialogue (IGD) is defined as: "face to face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating and action" (Zúñiga, 2003, p. 9).

Learning from diversity experiences is more than the sum of its theoretical parts and abstract analysis. Classroom diversity must allow students to explore genuine, unscripted learning and exchange perspectives that inevitably juxtapose conflicts of interest. This should not come at the cost of nonwhite students however, who may feel forced "into academic conversations about their nightmares" (Pegoda, 2020, p. 4). As Pedogda (2020) explains, "students who are Asian, Arab, Black, Chinese, Latin American, Pilipino, or a racialized minority in any other way don't necessarily [want or] *need* to talk more about race. It's their everyday life" (p. 4). We must be mindful of "the fatigue that comes with not just living through … events but also feeling compelled to watch, talk about, and process those events all over again" (Anderson, Saleem, & Huguley, 2019, p. 2). Backdoor approaches to 'courageous conversations' (Singleton & Linton, 2006) should encourage students to discuss and share experiences on their own terms, and avoid entrapping students of color with the de facto burden of representing racial minorities.

In reconciling with the past, diversity discourse must reckon with the profound harm inflicted by crimes against humanity. It must allow racialized groups to "reflect upon the accumulated concrete experiences of their own lives, the lives of others who share their situation, and even those who died long ago" (Marable, 2006, p. 36). Such a dialogue will require re-socializing white Americans who are "still taught to believe that 'being white' means never having to say they are sorry" (Marable, 2006, p. 4). It must prepare for and take stock of denial, distrust, fear, shame, culpability, and self-justification on the part of people in privileged positions, as they contemplate their complicity in systems of oppression, willingly and

knowingly or not. As agents of social change, students in particular must be availed the time and support to dialogue, discern, and unlearn assumptions they have never had to question; to make sense of alterity and worldviews different from their own, and to cultivate awareness about their hidden biases. Such contemplation, dialogue and sense-making enable students to examine the broader meanings of democratic belonging and participation, and the means by which power relations configure human diversity.

Conclusion: Mapping the Margins that Divide

This article seeks to disrupt and deepen discourse on diversity. The analysis affirms the central role of diverse human experience for learning and living together in a democratic society. Using student testimonies from the classroom and personal experiences of teaching, the author builds on existing literature to examine the significance of diversity for learning, and argues for the need to more clearly distinguish between individual and collective affinities of belonging in response to shifting representations of diversity. Diversity has come to symbolize different meanings to different people in different settings. At the individual level, attenuated representations denote anything from political opinion and personal taste, to preferences of habit or hobby. It can include markers of identity that are highly visible or invisible, all and any of which deserve recognition as part of the unique make-up of who we are as individuals. Across this swath of variation are infinite possibilities for expanding our views and understanding of the world we live in.

For many however, the concept of diversity still by and large remains code for race and racism, and denotes meaning firmly lodged in an individualizing "prejudice" approach

(Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The deep-rooted and far-reaching foundations of white supremacy require explicit articulation as part of diversity discourse. Allegations of 'reverse racism'[2] in response to policies, actions, and reactions that seek to redress racial domination, for instance, effectively dislodge race relations from their anchoring in power and sociopolitical institutions that structure our lives. Well documented disparities in income and accumulated wealth, living conditions, health indicators, and ability to exercise power and authority (an essential component in definitions of racism) however, make clear that white people remain the dominant group in a position to impose and reinforce racism.

Diversity discourse and education would do well to adopt a specifically anti-racist, anti-oppressive pedagogical approach that dispels myths about 'reverse racism' and makes intelligible racism as a deeply embedded system rooted in white supremacy. As such, we need to put into wider circulation, and further develop, pedagogical paradigms and curricular resources that flesh out and map the entrenched contours of structural racism. As the basis around which diversity discourse and its epistemologies are negotiated, this will require "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) as we search for connectedness across disparate experiences and negotiate representative voices. It will entail generative, collaborative experimentation and cobbling together repertoires of learning --some already in formation, others still in the making-from across such fields of praxis as: Truth and Reconciliation, Transitional or Restorative

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[2] Reverse racism "refers to the idea that dominant racial groups (typically white people) experience discrimination based on their race in the same way that people of color do" (Massie, 2016, p. 8).

Justice, Intergroup Dialogue and Cultural Competency, Trauma-Informed Teaching, and Intergenerational Trauma.

As a central crossroads for envisioning our common future, higher education provides the building ground where collective understanding and public discourse about who we are, and how we want to live together (Hess and McAvoy, 2014), is negotiated. Ultimately, struggles over the meanings of diversity and difference are struggles over inclusivity and belonging: whose voices are heard and whose are not; who belongs and who does not belong. They are struggles over painful and protracted histories only partially, if at all, included in mainstream national narratives, and currently raging across much of the Western hemisphere as the fallout of colonialism comes home to roost and migration from the global south has intensified. Such struggles over belonging and entitlements dig deep into the alcoves of imperialism, nationalism, racism, sexism and other isms. As the communal spaces where members of a democratic society engage diverse peoples and ideas, and expand their worldview, colleges and universities represent indispensable collaborative encounters where humans can reconcile their experiences of the past and present, mediate their vision and hopes for the future, and aspire toward an emboldened public imagination that embraces diversity without divides.

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