

THE CRUCIAL CONVERSATION

Educating Through an Anti-Racist Lens

EDITED BY

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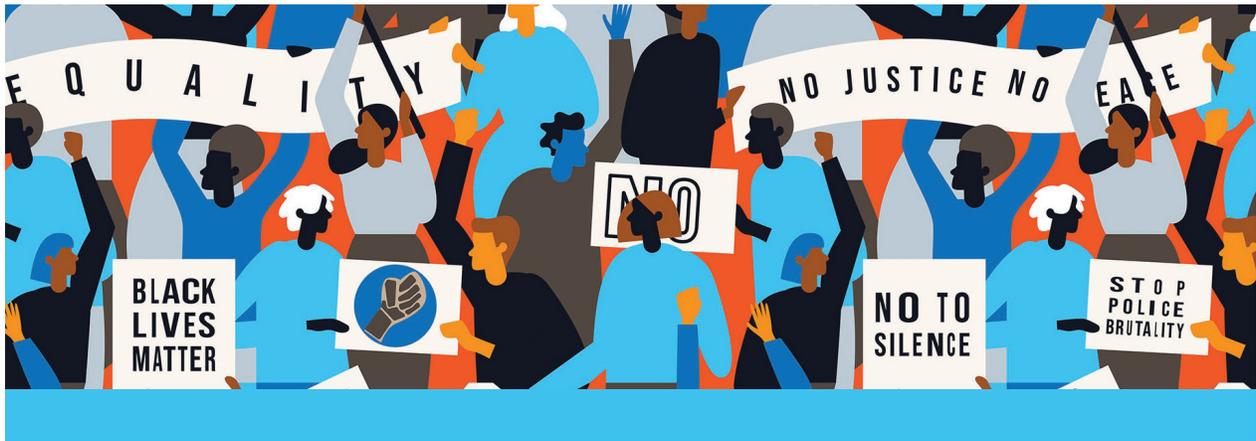
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Dedications

To our children

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.
~bell hooks



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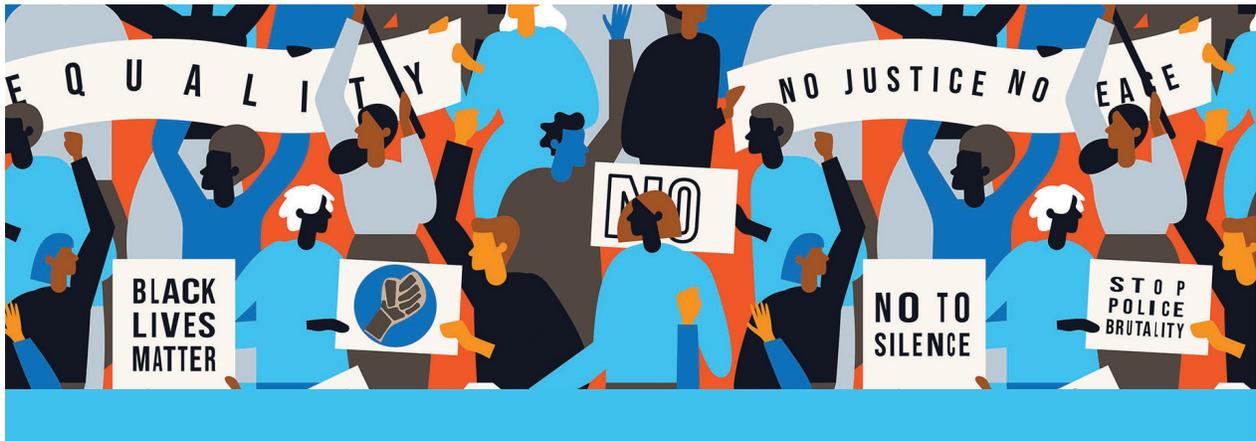
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William T. Hoston

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Introduction

William T. Hoston, Laurette B. Foster, and Farrah G. Cambrice

In the post-George Floyd era, much attention has been given to facilitating discussions on race and racism from the academic classroom to the corporate boardroom. These conversations were largely devoid of the culpability of America's racist traditions. Talking about race, trying to understand it through a racial lens better, and attempting to find solutions to systemic, institutional, and structural racism became the urgency of the moment for populations genuinely working to end legal racism in the United States. For academics, in general, a problem arose when we realized that most college educators, no matter their demographic characteristics, were not prepared to facilitate conversations on race and the multi-faceted social constructs of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the classroom.

Most American colleges and universities do not produce future educators in undergraduate or graduate programs with the pedagogical training to address these constructs. In the aftermath of the 2020 summer Black Lives Matter protests to gain racial justice, teaching about race relations became the pledge for activists in all sectors of professional life. The murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and other Black bodies led educators to enter the classroom either face-to-face, hybrid, or online during a global pandemic and choose whether to answer race-related questions. Some did, and some did not. This revived racial

justice movement opened dialogue among educators on *how* to facilitate these discussions in the academic classroom.

Many of us felt obligated as college professors to conduct lectures that critically analyzed the current events that were happening within the Black community and culture. For 9 minutes and 29 seconds, we witnessed former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin place his knee on Floyd's neck, which resulted in his death and led to thousands of demonstrations in the United States and abroad. Chauvin, a white man, murdering Floyd, a Black man, and broadcast via cellphone footage had re-engaged the Black Lives Matter debate that began after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. After Martin's death at the hands of a neighborhood watch coordinator, the nation observed as former President Barack H. Obama and other activists spoke out against the deaths of unarmed Black men and women in this country. This series of Black murders from 2012 to the present subsequently propelled critical classroom conversations.

From the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown Jr., to Sandra Bland, progressive colleges and universities became laboratories to discuss the totality of how this country tolerated systems of oppression that led to racial hierarchies disadvantaging racial and ethnic minority groups. Unlike other Black deaths in recent years, Floyd's death led to an international uprising. A 17-year-old, Darnella Frazier, filmed his death on her cell phone. We could hear Floyd saying, "I can't breathe," similar to the 2014 death of Eric Garner, and calling for his mother before he became unresponsive. Footage of his death, constant media attention, social media sensationalism, and corporate accountability created both positive and negative debated discourses in every corner of the world.

The activism related to the tragic death of Floyd led educators, who practiced forms of activism in their academic work, to believe we had faith that there may be a window of opportunity where whites would be most receptive to the historical and cultural traumas faced by racial and ethnic minorities. Educators who taught and wrote about the systemic realities of being Black and Brown in white America believed we were on the precipice of teaching about race, institutional and systemic discrimination, and social justice during a time in history when certain factions of whites were finally willing to discuss the historical effects of race and racism openly.

Most general survey courses give little consideration to discussions on race and racism. In predominantly white institutions (PWIs), the exceptions include theme-related courses and upper-level courses; coverage is more pervasive in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs). However, the 2020 summer Black Lives Matter protests called for a

more in-depth exploration in all classroom settings, no matter the racial make-up of the institution. Given most educators' discomfort with teaching about these issues and their own relatively low knowledge base, several questions emerged based on the events of that summer and beyond:

- How were these crucial conversations initiated in the academic setting?
- How in-depth were the conversations?
- Did instructors reflect on their teaching practices and materials for the course?
- Did instructors prepare students with the appropriate readings by scholars who present critical and uncomfortable conversations to promote solution-based dialogue?
- How did the instructors allow time to pause and digest (with the overwhelming amount of racial division in this country during the 2020 summer Black Lives Matter protests, 2020 presidential election, and subsequent 2021 winter insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building)?
- How did white instructors, consciously or unconsciously, negotiate white privilege with white students?
- How did the national outcry over Critical Race Theory affect how instructors approached teaching about race and racism in the classroom?
- How did Black and Brown instructors at PWIs remain well-balanced in their approach to teaching majority-white classrooms?
- How did Black and Brown instructors at HBCUs and MSIs approach these discussions in an academic setting that gives more latitude without the racial backfire experienced at PWIs?
- How did instructors assess whether they facilitated the discussion in a meaningful manner?

These questions are the foundation for assembling this edited volume. The editors of this project, all winners of teaching awards and dedicated to advancing pedagogy in the classroom, identified a constant challenge. Despite having decades of experience facilitating these discussions, none of us are experts on simplifying the ever-evolving nature of race, institutional and systemic discrimination, and social justice. Nor should we have to be. What we think we know is merely one perspective in discussing these multi-faceted social constructs. Other vantage points exist and can equally help assist in our assessment and understanding of how to approach such discussions. In spite of this, discussions on race are complex, nuanced, layered, and take time to initiate, process, and find an appropriate pathway to identifying problem-solving strategies and solutions.

We acknowledge that this moment in time will and has produced similar books that strive to facilitate such crucial conversations on race and racism. Assuring

that we approach these multi-faceted social constructs in an interdisciplinary manner that is attentive to best practices for colleges and universities is what separates this book. With educators entering the classroom while the realities of civil unrest displayed in the news cycle and on everyone's social media apps, it was incumbent upon us to present a project that initiates critical conversations about race relations.

In organizing this edited volume, we asked faculty members from various colleges and universities how they prepared and conducted classes on race relations before, during, and after the 2020 summer Black Lives Matter protests. Did they implement a new pedagogical approach during a pivotal time in our history?

- *In all honesty, I had to start from scratch. I had taught lectures on race, but they were surface level. In class, we talked about white privilege and how it affected BIPOC (i.e., Black, Indigenous, People of Color). My starting point was to re-educate myself by reading about different Black scholars and their analysis of race.*

White Female, Associate Professor at Midwest University, PWI

- *I revised my syllabus, and I took out all of the dated literature on race. I had too many articles from white scholars talking about race from their vantage point. I kept Peggy McIntosh, (Robin) DiAngelo, etc., but needed up-to-date literature even to begin having a formidable discussion.*

White Male, Full Professor at Southwest University, PWI

- *I overhauled everything. The first thing I did was add more relevant literature [to the syllabi]. I found this to be most important. Much of the literature I was using was from graduate courses. I had adopted the readings from my [white] professors.*

Hispanic Female, Assistant Professor at Southeast University, MSI

- *Being at an HBCU helped during this time. I was able to lecture students with no restraint. This was critical because I had a lot of bottled-up emotions about the death of George Floyd and the protests. The class conversations helped both of us.*

Black Female, Associate Professor at Southwest University, HBCU

The feedback from faculty members cements the need for educators to revise their pedagogical approach and create constructive classroom spaces for students.

The Crucial Conversation is a collection of chapters that can act as a source of knowledge for educators seeking to facilitate such conversations in the classroom

and on our campuses. Contributors to this edited volume adopted different interdisciplinary approaches to addressing race to make Black and Brown college students feel visible and valued. Several contributors wrote about building the pedagogical culture in the classroom to teach about race. Others focused on teaching about race and social justice. Select inserts analyzed lived experiences as educational tools, and the remaining chapters from contributors focused on creating safe spaces for student success.

No pedagogical approach is comprehensive. Our desire to introduce this edited volume to improve student engagement, understanding, and foster a positive didactic environment is critical to academia's institutional and cultural welfare. If American college and university classrooms and campuses are to be transformative spaces to have dialogue that exceeds the conventional boundaries of conversations on race, a renewed emphasis on pedagogical growth for instructors is to be welcomed. Our goal is for readers to embrace a pedagogical mindset that appreciates trends, shifts, and changes to create a healthy learning atmosphere for today's students.