Race Ethnicity and Education

Getting slammed: White depictions of race discussions as arenas of violence

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For many educators who lead cross-racial discussions, creating 'safe' spaces in which students can express their views is a familiar goal. Yet what constitutes safety is rarely defined or contextualized. In the absence of this contextualization, the goal of safety is most often driven by White participants who complain that they are (or fear being) 'attacked' in these discussions. This article examines this specific complaint, which we term as the discourse of violence. We draw on data from a facilitated race discussion and identify five key effects of this discourse in cross-racial discussion about race: positions and re-inscribes Whites as racially innocent; positions and re-inscribes people of Color as perpetrators of violence; maintains White solidarity; stabilizes the ideologies of individualism and universalism; re-inscribes the narration of the ideal imagined community. The data reveal that White students draw on violent imagery to position contexts in which race and racism are under discussion as unsafe spaces; as arenas of violence. We argue that the discourse of violence ultimately functions to protect and reproduce White supremacy, specifically in a context in which the goal is to interrupt White supremacy.

Keywords: White supremacy; anti-racism education; safety; discourse analysis

And so, you know – I'm not talking to this because I feel angry from last week and because I don't want to say a bunch of shit and have it all slammed back in my face. (Amanda)

Introduction

Imagine a group of 13 university students sitting in a circle, engaged in the second session of a four-week discussion on race. There are five students of Color and eight White students. An interracial team of two facilitators leads the discussion. In session 1, several of the students of Color challenged the White students' worldviews by pressing them to consider that those worldviews were fundamentally shaped by their race. That session ended with the

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facilitators giving the group their homework for the next session: asking the participants to pay attention to racial dynamics and patterns during the week.

To begin session 2, the facilitators open with a go-around check-in:

Dawn (Facilitator, biracial): What is a racial pattern that you have noticed that was new since our discussion last week, or if you are someone who spends a fair amount of time thinking about race, maybe something that was a pattern or reinforced for you since our meeting last week?

Laura (Asian American): I was at a reading this weekend, and it was a White man reading from his novel that he had written, and it was very striking that, when he described the characters, both before the reading and during, he only racialized the people of Color, and everyone else he talked about just kind of in these really neutral terms. And it just stuck out and really reinforced what I've noticed this week.

Caroline (African American): I think the thing that has been reinforced the past week, and just pretty much every day, is how much I really think about race and how aware I really am of that in every single interaction that I have with every single person that I meet every single day.

Amanda (White): A pattern that I noticed this week is that, every single day this whole week since this past experience, I felt the same degree of anger that I had last week from the experience of being here. And so, you know – I'm not talking to this because I feel angry from last week and because I don't want to say a bunch of shit and have it all slammed back in my face.

While Amanda's anger, along with her depiction of a violent outcome if she expresses herself in the group, may be more explicit than many White students, the sentiment is likely not unfamiliar to those who lead discussions about race. Her allusion to such a graphic image as 'shit' being 'slammed back' in her face is consistent with common White descriptions of race talk as contexts wherein they will be violated. Indeed, when White participants negatively evaluate a course or workshop that examines race and racism, a common complaint is that they were 'beaten up' or 'attacked,' and therefore 'didn't feel safe.'

There are complicated discursive moves operating in tandem in these moments that ensure White supremacy is reinforced and protected, especially in contexts in which the explicit goal is to interrupt that supremacy. We argue that one of these moves is the positioning of cross-racial discussions as 'unsafe' for Whites. In the exchange that begins this article, Amanda is particularly explicit in expressing anger at the violation she feels, but the sentiment is not uncommon for Whites engaged in cross-racial discussions. For this reason, many educators and facilitators respond by attending to the perceived lack of safety in the classroom. Guidelines for ensuring safety in cross-racial discussions are typically introduced during the process

of establishing group norms. These guidelines are often viewed as fundamental to building the community that is assumed necessary in order for constructive cross-racial discussions to occur. Yet, while there are many problematic dynamics in cross-race discussions affecting all students in various ways, guidelines for *safety* are usually driven in anticipation of White responses such as Amanda's.

Examining safety as a prerequisite for race talk

The concept of safety is so central to these discussions that it is presumed that without a safe climate, the goals of the discussion cannot be achieved. For example, according to Adams, Bell, and Griffin's (1997) well-known sourcebook for teaching social justice education, 'Establishing a safe environment in which students can discuss ideas, share feelings and experiences, and challenge themselves and each other to reevaluate opinions and beliefs is one of the primary facilitation responsibilities' (283). Similarly, in Tatum's classic article (1992), 'Talking about race, learning about racism,' she explains, 'Many students are reassured by the climate of safety that is created by these guidelines and find comfort in the nonblaming assumptions I outline for the class' (4). The guidelines that are intended to purportedly establish this safe environment commonly include: speaking for oneself ('use I statements'), and respecting others ('no shame or blame'). While we are not critiquing dialogue guidelines *in general* (for we too use guidelines when teaching), what we *are* critiquing are guidelines intended to ensure *safety*, and *whose* safety drives those guidelines.

As a response to the expectation that safety be a prerequisite for social justice talk, some scholars have problematized the very definition of safety and questioned the premise that these spaces *can* or *should* be safe to begin with (for example see Jones 1999, 2001; Schick 2000; Leonardo and Porter 2010). For this perspective, ensuring a feeling of safety in discussions that ask students to examine their place within relations of inequitable social power is a particularly problematic goal. For example, in the context of cross-racial dialogues that are *explicitly* about race and racism, what feels safe for Whites is presumed to feel safe for people of Color. Yet for many students and instructors of Color the classroom is a hostile space virtually all of the time, and especially so when the topic addressed is race (Boler 2004; Crozier and Davies 2008; Ellsworth 1989; Leonardo and Porter 2010). Many scholars have further argued that 'diversity' defined as non-White students studying in classrooms with Whites, more often than not benefits the *White* students at the expense of students of Color (Winans 2005; Jones 1999, 2001; Mitchell and Donahue 2009). In practice, the expectation that safety can be created in racial discussions through universalized procedural guidelines can block students of Color from naming the racial violence they experience on a daily basis, as well as the racial

violence they may experience in the discussion itself. In other words, the discourse of safety in the context of race talk is always about *White* safety (Leonardo and Porter 2010).

In addition to critiques of concepts of safety in general, specific guidelines, such as speaking for oneself and/or from one's own personal experience, have also been problematized. For example, in our own work examining the dynamics of cross-racial discussions, we have shown how the guideline of 'personal experience' can in fact be co-opted by White students (DiAngelo and Allen 2006). This co-option functions to protect and inoculate White students' claims from further exploration. Our research illustrates that the 'speak from personal experience' guideline rests on two problematic assumptions: first, that only the individual herself has access to her own mind; and second, because she is presumed to have *sole* access, her experiences cannot be challenged. In this way, claims of experience are closed off from interrogation, for how can one question the 'personal' experience of others? Thus, the discourse of personal experience, while commonplace, runs counter to a dialogic and discursive understanding of identity construction and therefore functions to make *experience* itself a kind of 'sacred text.' While the guideline to speak for oneself may be intended to prevent White participants from negating the perspectives of students of Color, in effect, it often protects White perspectives from critical analysis.

Building on the idea of personal experience as sacred text, we have also examined how students privilege 'opinion' over informed knowledge in ways that invalidate informed study of social inequality (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2009). The 'right to my opinion' discourse (e.g. 'I have the right to think and say what I want, and you don't have the right to challenge what I think and say') is another strategy that closes off one's 'personal' experiences and perspectives. Yet not all people have been granted the right to speak, or had their perspectives heard equally in a society that is racially stratified (Applebaum 2008; Boler 2004; Matsuda et al. 1993). Thus, when the request to situate oneself as knower in order to examine positionality in relation to knowledge is re-interpreted as 'the right to my opinion,' positionality and its relation to the production and legitimization of knowledge is denied. In this way, historically marginalized experiences and perspectives are dismissed or trumped via 'just as valid' dominant perspectives, in effect re-centering Whiteness.

Similarly, we and others have examined the dynamics of challenging White students in racial discussions (Applebaum 2008; Picower 2009). DiAngelo (2011) has described one of these dynamics as 'White fragility,' in which even a minimum amount of challenge to White positionality is intolerable and triggers a range of defensive moves and displays of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation (DiAngelo 2011). In

defending the validity of these emotions and resultant behaviors, many Whites use the speech of self-defense (Van Dijk 1992; McIntyre 1997). Focusing on restoring their moral standing, Whites avoid addressing White privilege (Levine-Rasky 2000; Marty 1999; Van Dijk 1992). This speech enables defenders to protect their moral character against what they perceive as accusation and attack while deflecting any culpability or need of accountability. In turn, these responses pressure facilitators to lessen the challenge to White students, often by implementing guidelines intended to make White students feel safer.

Thus, critiques of safety have focused on the meaning of safety from various racial positions, as well as the effects of attempts to establish safety in cross-racial discussions on race. Building on this body of scholarship examining the various dynamics of cross-racial discussions, we are interested in *the discursive effects* of responses such as Amanda's, in which she claims she is being slammed. Her response starkly illustrates both the graphic and subtle allusions to violence embedded in claims that cross-racial discussions are unsafe for Whites. We want to shift the spotlight regarding race talk from *safety* to *violence*. It is important to acknowledge that many rich theoretical discussions of violence exist, among them those examining symbolic violence (Pierre Bourdieu), epistemic violence (Gayatri Spivak), colonial violence (Frantz Fanon), and political power and violence (Hannah Arendt). We draw from these discussions the idea that violence is much more complicated than the imposition of physical force. When we refer to the discourse of violence, we include normative social discourses, as well as assaultive speech (Matsuda et al. 1993), and violent imagery – all of which our participants utilized in the dialogue. In this context, we argue that the discourse of violence manifests through the expectation of safe discussion spaces as defined by Whites. The demand for safety harnesses violent imagery as a means by which White students project racist ideologies onto racialized people, and in so doing, re-inscribe White supremacy.

We want to acknowledge the dilemma in documenting White students' discourses of violence. To be transparent, our goal in offering this analysis is to support other educators in our collective work with Whites who may use these discourses. Thus, it is not lost on us that the violence against people of Color that is reproduced by putting the words in print will be primarily for the benefit of those working with Whites. We have not found a way out of this dilemma other than that of purpose: rather than stabilize it, our goal is to reveal, interrogate, and ultimately interrupt White supremacy.

In what follows, we explicate five powerful ways in which the discourse of violence in race talk re-inscribes White supremacy. In focusing on the effects of the discourse, we want to move beyond the interpretation of the 'mood' of a given space as safe or unsafe for Whites, and instead examine and destabilize White depictions of racial discussions as dangerous and violent exchanges.

Background to the data

The data we draw on is taken from a larger study with university students involving a focused discussion on race and racism. What follows is not a presentation of the study findings. Rather, we have strategically selected excerpts from key moments in the dialogues that demonstrate the effects of the discourse of violence. These discussions were observed by one of the authors (DiAngelo), video- and audio-taped, and transcribed. The study took place at a large research institution in the United States. The study protocols and procedures were reviewed and approved by the researchers' university ethnics review board. Thirteen university students in total (eight White and five of Color) responded to a third-party recruitment email call for participation. An interracial team of two facilitators (not including the authors) with extensive training in facilitation of cross-racial discussions led the group through a series of two-hour sessions meeting once a week for four weeks.

At the start of session 1, the facilitators Dawn (Biracial: Native American and White) and Emily (White) explain the goals of the four sessions:

> Emily: Some of the goals that we came up with, the first one was to provide an opportunity for people to talk in a mixed group about race, which is an opportunity that for a lot of people doesn't come up very often, where you have an environment that is set up for you to talk about race.
> Dawn: Another one was to have an opportunity to deepen our understanding about how different groups have different experiences. So I guess a simpler way of saying that is, how do our different racial identities play into how we have the conversation…does that make sense to most people?
> Emily: We wanted to provide people an opportunity to practice talking about sensitive issues.
> Dawn: And then just to notice some patterns that come up when we talk about these issues.

Following the description of the goals, the facilitators overviewed the following two ground rules: to speak for yourself and to seek dialogue rather than debate.

Drawing on the following exchanges, we examine how the discourse of violence accomplishes these effects: positions Whites as racially innocent; positions people of Color as perpetrators of violence; maintains White solidarity; stabilizes the ideologies of individualism and universalism; and re-inscribes the ideal imagined community. While we map these out as distinct effects, they often work simultaneously and are interlocking.

1.   Positions Whites as racially innocent

One of the central effects of the discourse of violence is its capacity to stabilize historical and current discourses of White racial innocence. For example, White students often position themselves as racially open,

unknowing, and willing to learn. These students embody what Dion (2009) has described as a stance of 'perfect stranger;' that is, when confronted with the history of colonialism and racism and its effects on racialized people, Whites tend to claim racial innocence and take up the role of admirer or moral helper. Dion explains this move in the following way:

> I often begin my work with teachers and teacher candidates asking them to write about and reflect on their relationship with Aboriginal people. Teachers respond with comments that go something like 'Oh I know nothing, I have no friends who are Aboriginal, I didn't grow up near a reserve, I didn't learn anything in school, I know very little or I know nothing at all about Native people.' One way or another, teachers, like many Canadians, claim the position of 'perfect stranger' to Aboriginal people. (330)

The positioning of Whites as racially innocent was prominent in the discussions, as illustrated in the following comments. At the opening to session two, participants were asked to share a new awareness of a pattern related to racism. Two of the White students' responses in particular illustrate the racial innocence discourse:

> Apparently I'm just pretty darned clueless here, because I haven't – I mean, racism; I don't know. I guess I'm just still out of touch. (Mike)

> How could I possibly know? I don't know; right – or know what the world would look like from another perspective. (Amy)

Mike and Amy's comments are examples of Dion's concept of 'perfect stranger.' When Whites 'don't know anything about racism,' how could they be held accountable for their investments in and enactments of it? Yet in reality, rather than 'knowing nothing,' these students have learned a great deal from dominant narratives that position racialized people in a range of problematic ways. In effect, this stance closes off any examination of their own implication and attachment to racism and colonialism (Dion 2009).

Challenging White innocence often ignites anger as illustrated in Amanda's response to Caroline's closing remarks later in that same session, calling for participants to consider how their racial identities inform their responses:

> I'm a little upset. I feel like some people aren't really thinking as deep as they really should and could about some of the comments that they're making and where those comments are coming from when we're talking about social identity. And they're not really thinking about what social identity your comments are coming out of. And so, I'm thinking that maybe that will come out some more as the sessions go on. (Caroline, African American)

> A pattern that I noticed this week is that, every single day this whole week since this past experience, I felt the same degree of anger that I had last week from the experience of being here. (Amanda, White)

hooks (1992) has noted that White people who conceptualize themselves as the least racist often become the most angry when confronted with people of Color viewing them as White. She states:

> Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness,' even as their actions reflect the primacy of Whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think. (167)

Perhaps hooks' analysis can help frame the anger and defensiveness that surfaced when White participants were pressed to racialize their perspectives. In the following statement, Courtney implicitly conveys this anger through her dismissal of the discussion as a 'waste of her time':

> I guess this week I thought about why I didn't really feel like last week was at all useful to me and that if anything it was - a waste of my time, just because I didn't feel like I gained anything from it, and I just was thinking about why. And I realized I've never engaged in conversations about race with a group of people for that purpose. (Courtney, White)

Here, Courtney moves between contempt and innocence, claiming that the discussion was useless to her because it was new to her. Rather than viewing this new experience as an opportunity to learn, she views it as a waste of time. She repeats this sentiment in a subsequent session:

> And - but it's [the discussion's] - you know, usefulness - it doesn't matter if I think it's useful; I mean, that's not the purpose of this study. But it matters to me, because I'm here, and this is my precious time. So, that's where I'm coming from. I came in here thinking this would be a useful experience for me… (Courtney)

Consider the discursive violence of these claims for the participants of Color, who have shared their experiences with racism; experiences that presumably Courtney has never heard before. Their voices and perspectives, and the risks they took in offering them, are summarily dismissed; not only were they useless, but they actually infringed on 'precious time.'

Similarly, in the following exchange, Amanda (White student) moves between anger and innocence. During session 1, Caroline (African American student) presses Amanda to view her comments from the lens of race. However, by session two a week later, Amanda is still upset. Amanda begins session two by claiming that the environment is not safe, and thus she is 'pissed off.' When challenged by the facilitator, she claims she is being silenced. Finally, she moves into a discourse of 'perfect stranger' by offering to 'listen with her whole heart' to the experiences of a person of Color:

Amanda:	It's not fair that – I feel like I have to be on the defense because I feel like, whenever I start speaking, someone cuts me off – mainly the facilitators.... So, I've been pissed off ever since last week. And I feel like I can't be honest in this group. I feel like only with one-on-one do I have some sense of safety, like I'm not going to be cut off or I'm not going to be told that I'm a White girl with no sense of anybody else's experience. And so, I'm not going to sit here and defend my race; I can only defend myself. And I'm sorry; I'm – not sorry for being White; that's not something I'm sorry about. But I'm – I don't want to feel so – so shut up in this group. I feel like I cannot say what I feel.
Caroline:	That's something I've felt my whole life.
Amanda:	I feel completely silenced in here and talking, so –
Emily (White facilitator):	Amanda, did you hear Caroline's comment?
Amanda:	I did hear her comment, and I'm responding to her comment.
Emily:	No. Did you hear the comment that she just made?
Amanda:	Yeah; that she felt – has felt that way her whole life. I did hear that.
Dawn (facilitator of Color):	What does that mean to you?
Amanda:	I'm listening.
Dawn:	Well, I would just like your opinion on her comment. Like, what do you – what do you think about the fact that maybe you're experiencing something for this period and this conversation that she's been feeling her whole life, and how frustrating it feels for you, obviously, and maybe carry that over to what it feels like for her – it's more difficult when she wants to finally talk about something, other people are shutting down and finding reasons not to say anything and aren't meeting her at the table.
Amanda:	Oh, wow. I'd love for you to be able to share from your heart with me for hours and days. And I don't care how long you want to talk; I want to hear. I would love to hear your experience. But in this group I have been feeling tremendously defensive, because I feel like I've been critiqued and not understood. So, I honor your experience, whatever your experience has been. I would love to hear more about it. And I can't take away my race, but I can take away, you know, my defensiveness, potentially. And so, I – I'm sorry that you feel upset. And I'd like to hear more. That's all I have to say.

For Amanda and many of the other White participants, talking about race and racism was an unfamiliar experience. Not only were they pressed to racialize their perspectives, but the facilitators worked to shift the amount of air-time White students took in the discussion space. Even though Amanda's needs and concerns directed much of the agenda and she was the most vocal participant (evidenced by the transcripts), she still felt silenced when her interpretations were contested through counter-narratives.

Whiteness can in part be characterized by a contradictory consciousness in which an insistent innocence is contingent upon involvement in racial oppression (Schick 2000). The concept of innocence that is embedded in the discourse of violence is not benign; it has material consequences as it allows Whites to ignore the impact of racism on people of Color while enjoying its benefits at their expense. For Mike, Amy, Courtney and Amanda, this could be a profound opportunity for self-reflection and there are many questions that could potentially provide them with greater awareness about their racial socialization. Yet their various claims work to protect and maintain their narrative of racial innocence. For participants such as Amanda, the inability to expand their racial knowledge rests on a claim that the context is not safe enough. Thus, their attention must go to continually monitoring and protecting what they perceive as their racial safety.

2.   Positions people of Color as perpetrators of violence

The second and corollary effect of the discourse of violence is that while positioning Whites as innocent, it simultaneously positions people of Color who attempt to insert anti-racist discourses into race discussions as *perpetrators* of violence. For example, Amanda consistently positions the students of Color in the discussions as violating her in a range of ways:

> It seems like this has been a study in my development, and I don't like that. And I feel like everything I've said, especially the past session and a half, has been kind of strategically pulled apart, syllable by syllable. I would love to explore all of this more if you have more questions. I don't know how else to – I feel like everything I say is thrown at me as, 'Well, you're saying that because you're White,' and – Okay. I accept that. And I'm willing to learn and look at it. But in this group it feels like White people are being slammed and blamed and that we have – I as a White person feel like I have to defend myself or just be a punching bag or something. And so, it's totally a repressive environment for me. I don't want to speak more about it, because I already feel upset enough in being here and talking. It's already hard enough. So, I don't want to keep going. (Amanda)

Amanda positions herself as a victim of abuse through the use of provocative terms of physical aggression. When she is challenged by people of Color and the facilitators to consider that her responses are informed by a White frame of reference, she counters, 'I feel like everything I say is

thrown at me as, "Well, you're saying that because you're White."' While she claims to be willing to examine her Whiteness, she depicts the environment in which she is asked to examine it as 'repressive.' This repressive environment makes it impossible – even dangerous – for her to carry out this examination. She claims that if she does not defend herself against these challenges, the only possible outcome is to submit to further abuse via serving as a 'punching bag.' The challenge to consider her White location has become so unbearable that she feels unable to continue in this direction. This language of victimization also enables Amanda to demand that more social resources (such as time and attention) be channeled in her direction to help her cope with this mistreatment (Amanda does not attempt to rise to the challenge and explore the question).

By employing terms that connote physical abuse, Amanda taps into the classic discourse that people of Color are inherently dangerous and violent towards Whites. This discourse distorts reality and perverts the actual direction of danger that has historically existed between Whites and people of Color. Mills (1997) argues that the racial state employs two traditional 'weapons' of coercion: physical violence and ideological conditioning (Mills 1997). Racist images necessary for ideological conditioning and resultant fears can be found at all levels of society, and myriad studies demonstrate that Whites believe that people of Color (and Blacks in particular) are dangerous (Feagin 2000; Myers 2003; Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Dyer 1997). These beliefs are fueled by the mass media via relentless representations of people of Color associated with criminality. Indeed, much of White flight and the resulting segregation in housing and schooling can be attributed to this representation (Johnson and Shapiro 2003). Feagin (2000) addressing anti-Black discourse specifically, states that:

> For Whites, specific antiblack images, prejudices, and stereotypes are part of a broader ideological structure.… The persistence of antiblack attitudes, images and emotions over several centuries is much more than a matter of scattered bigots acting on prejudiced notions and feelings; they are the legacy of the material and ideological frameworks of slavery and segregation…they are present in many situations of inter-group contact and often get translated into alienated racist relations… (105–106).

Thus the history of extensive, brutal, and explicit physical violence perpetrated by Whites against people of Color – slavery, lynching, whipping, genocide, internment, forced sterilization, and medical experimentation to mention a few – as well as its ideological rationalizations, are trivialized through White claims of a lack of safety when in the rare situation of merely *talking* about race with people of Color. By claiming victimization, Whites obscure the power and privilege we wield and have wielded for centuries. The discourse of violence is powerful in part because it rests not only on the current structure of White supremacy, but also on this vast backdrop

of deep historical representations that support that supremacy. This discourse also illustrates how fragile and ill equipped most White people are to confront racial tensions (DiAngelo 2011), and their subsequent projection of this tension onto people of Color.

3.   Maintains White solidarity

The discourse of violence also has the effect of shoring up White solidarity in and beyond cross-racial discussions. White solidarity can be conceptualized as the tacit agreement of Whites to support one another's engagement in the processes that maintain White supremacy. Sleeter (1996) describes this solidarity as White 'racial bonding,' referring to '…interactions in which Whites engage that have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of groups of color, and drawing conspiratorial we–they boundaries' (149). In the discussions, White solidarity manifested through explicit support of other Whites' claims of victimization, as well as the implicit consent conveyed through White silence and the absence of social censure.

In the following statement, Courtney explicitly aligns with a fellow White student in negating the request by participants of Color and facilitators for White participants to racialize their perspectives by asking them questions such as:

> So, can you think about or can you speak to how you feel your social identity as a White person might play into your preference to have a group that's not facilitated by two people or to have a group where you feel like it could kind of go where you want it to go? (Emily, White facilitator)

and:

> What would it mean to you, though, if we could set aside the question of usefulness? What would it mean if everything, regardless of temperament, was about race, and you are still uncomfortable with what this group is doing? (Dawn, facilitator of Color)

When Amanda's racial position has been challenged, Courtney comes to her defense:

> I don't know; I just feel – yeah, the same thing – you're trying to say something, and…it's hard to really explain yourself and really get an understanding between individuals in the group. And I think personally Amanda has really put herself out there. And there were comments made a couple weeks ago about how the White people weren't really saying things and they were holding back. And number one, I think that was a really stupid comment, because how are you going to know who's holding back? (Courtney)

Here, Courtney positions herself as having understood Amanda, invoking White solidarity by supporting the assertion that the problem lies not with

Amanda but with the people of Color and those who align with them (such as Emily). In her explicit support, Courtney positions Amanda as both brave and vulnerable, having 'really put herself out there.' Simultaneously, while Amanda is praised for taking risks, the risks the students of Color take in naming racism and describing its effects in their lives are dismissed. When a student of Color comments on the White withdrawal at various points in the dialogue, Courtney describes this comment as 'stupid.'

Further, the transcripts do not capture the affective dimensions of the dialogue; Courtney's statement is uttered with hostility and sarcasm. The criticism leveled by these White participants towards the facilitators and participants of Color is high, yet these same participants consistently position themselves as being victimized by the facilitators and participants of Color. Courtney's unabashedly critical evaluation and dismissal indicate a deeply internalized sense of racial entitlement to indulge in her immediate reactions without fear of censure or reprisal. White solidarity protects Whites from public penalties resulting from their racial attitudes and behaviors.

White solidarity also emerged in response to the definition of racism that the facilitators introduced and posted in the room:

$$racial\ prejudice + social\ power = racism$$

Dawn explained that this definition is the most widely used by organizations doing anti-racism work and that it is a definition with consensus among academics and community organizers. Following, there is an exchange that lasts approximately 20 minutes, in which every White participant in the group raises at least one question. Despite the facilitators' repeated attempts to move the discussion forward, the White participants continue. In the following excerpt, we have removed the facilitators' detailed responses in order to highlight the range of questions asked by the White participants:

Jack: Does 'prejudice' imply like distaste for, versus just difference from?

Barb: So, how does discrimination fit into that? Does it?

Courtney: I just wondered if what – what was your thinking when you decided to use this definition versus – I mean, what was the purpose of using this definition of racism as opposed to another within the context of this conversation?

Amanda: What does the 'plus' mean in this case? In other words, can racism be just racial prejudice or just social power, or does it have to be the combination? And if so, someone with less social power can't be racist then?

Amy: I'm just wondering how we're – what we're saying about social power, then. Like – because you can be – are we saying all White people have social power?

Jessica: Is it the same as – I had heard the whole 'race plus power equals racism'? Is that the same thing? Because the racial prejudice threw me off. Is that the same thing?

Mike: I was going to ask about the idea of a racial hierarchy. Does that enter into it? Can a person who's – I mean, let's assume that every-body has power over somebody. Is only the bottom free of that tag of racism, or any – and then every step above that could be racist towards them?

Courtney: Okay. I was just curious how I am supposed to interpret this defini-tion, because many people here are in the elementary [teacher edu-cation] program. And when I think about racism in the context of children under the age of 10, no child under the age of 10 has power outside the power of their parents. And because they don't have social power, because they are children, it's – I can look at racism exists in a classroom within a greater social context, but I can't – you know, the active racial prejudice exists among all the kids in my class, and none of them have social power.

Several things stand out about this interrogation. First, it is the only time over the four sessions in which *every* White student voluntarily participates. The exchange is very rapid and there are no pauses, indicating heightened interest. Although the definition is fairly short and simple, every aspect of it is questioned, including the plus sign. A fair amount of time is spent on the definition, in the face of repeated attempts by the facilitators to move on and explore the implications the definition has for the exercise they have just completed. The main issues appear to be: power and the implication that all White people, by virtue of their social position, hold social, histori-cal, and institutional power in relation to all peoples of Color; and whose racial knowledge is legitimate. In their questioning, the White participants hold the discussion at the intellectual level, control the intellectual space, enact their positions as the legitimizers of knowledge, and avoid the self-reflection the facilitators want to guide them in. In striking contrast, not one student of Color questioned the definition.

While there were exchanges of explicit alignment, White solidarity more often manifested *implicitly* through the power of silence. Although less visi-ble in the transcripts, these roles were critical to protecting Whiteness, for White dominance depends, in part, on the silence of other Whites (DiAngelo 2012; Mura 1999). White silence served to embolden the actively resistant participants because it implied agreement. Even if Whites who were silent found the behavior of their cohorts problematic, their silence allowed these vocal participants to dictate the agenda of virtually every discussion. At the minimum, the resistant participants received no social penalty from other Whites, and the silence of their cohorts effectively maintained White solidar-ity.

4.   Stabilizes the ideologies of individualism and universalism

A fourth effect of the discourse of violence is the way it works complicity with other ideologies that uphold White supremacy. Two of these ideologies

are *individualism* and *universalism*. In explaining the ideology of individualism, Flax (1998) notes that there is an irreconcilable tension in society. The legitimacy of so-called Western institutions depends upon the idea that all citizens are equal. At the same time, we each occupy distinct raced (and gendered, and classed) positions that profoundly shape our lives in ways that are not random, nor equal. In order to manage this tension, the ideology of individualism posits that we all act independently from one another, that we all have the same possibility of achievement and those possibilities are unmarked by social positions such as race, class, and gender (Bonilla-Silva 2006; DiAngelo 2010).

Whites depend on the ideology of individualism to inscribe their racial innocence and to position themselves as standing outside of hierarchical social relations (Razack 1998). Amanda demonstrates this in the following claim:

> I feel like, uh, what started out being an interesting introspection and kind of exposition of our feelings and everyone expressing their thoughts has turned into something where I'm feeling judged and misunderstood and, um, angry that everything I say somehow gets twisted around. Um, and maybe that's institutional racism coming up right there, but I just feel like much of what I said has been misunderstood. And I want to – maybe to echo Courtney [White student], who has understood a lot of what I said, because I'm feeling pretty bad right now, just pretty – pretty, um, misunderstood, and I think I just need to go cry about this and think about, you know, my own racism in all this, but, I'm upset. (Amanda)

Amanda begins by restating her expectation that a discussion on race would be an opportunity to share her thoughts. Here she draws on an individualistic rather than an institutional or group framework. Although Amanda makes cursory reference to both her 'own racism' and 'institutional racism,' each time she follows these with a 'but,' in essence negating the previous point and shifting emphasis to what follows. What follows in both cases is a declaration of personal upset and hurt feelings, which serves to keep the conversation on the individual level and pull the focus and the resources of the group towards her and her needs. By insisting that the problem is that she has been misunderstood, Amanda depoliticizes race and places the responsibility for the 'miscommunication' onto those who have misunderstood her – the participants of Color. When Amanda is pressed, Courtney comes to her rescue:

> I think it – I think it depends on the individual experience. And since we're all speaking from personal experience, um, I know that I was – I got a little upset to hear people say that they don't think it's fair that someone would say it's generational, because it's a personal thing if we all know our own families and our own communities and we know what we have perceived in our own families and communities. And so I think it's a valid point – if that's what

you want to say, then that's what you should be able to say. I just want to put that out there. (Courtney)

In Courtney's statement that her feelings '…are not about you,' she presents her feelings as standing alone, or outside, social processes, rather than as the function of social processes. Her feelings are thus independent of the social, political or historical context in which she is embedded.

A parallel ideology upheld by the discourse of violence is the ideology of universalism. Dyer (1997) explains universalism as the power to represent the human norm, which is positioned as belonging to White people. As with the ideology of individualism, universalism places Whites outside of racialization, a subject position only available to them. Within this ideology, people of Color can only represent their own raced perspectives, while Whites can speak for all. Mike demonstrated the ideology of universalism in the following exchange with Dawn:

Mike (White):	There's another level, though, that's below that, below the level of groups too, that's human, I think. And I think that it goes beyond that too. I'm sort of a spiritual person, and I – in looking at that – (pauses briefly) – I don't – I've had the realization before that I wasn't an individual. But I guess I don't identify with being part of a group, you know. So, that's probably something I need to look at. But I also think that there are ways to transcend that – or [I don't know if] it's above or below – but to be more in tune with what's human instead of what's only White.
Dawn (facilitator of Color):	I think that there are a lot of different things that play into how White people encounter and deal with racism. As a person of Color, I don't have the luxury of considering how racism works or my race plays into like a spiritual level, because it's sort of like a survival obstacle course every day. And I don't really have the option to be quiet, you know, and sit back and not speak up or share. And so, I am wondering how you see race playing into the ways that you have just responded to us, in terms of wanting to transcend that and go to a spiritual level and then just thinking about it for the first time. And I'm wondering if you see your race playing into that at all.
Mike:	[No audible response]
Dawn:	And if not, why not?
Mike:	Do I – you're asking do I think the fact that I'm White allows me the luxury of seeing the world in that way?
Emily (White facilitator):	[Nods head]

Mike:	How could I possibly know? I don't know; right – or know what the world would look like from another perspective.
Emily:	What about when she just told you that every day for her is a survival obstacle course.
Mike:	Well, I know that that's what it looks like to her, but how can I know what that would look like?
Dawn:	Would you have to know what that looked like, though?
Mike:	(Pauses) I would have to know more. I would have to know more what you were talking about. I would have to have more information. I – for you to say that without any sort of, I guess, tie to anything that is any more substantial, doesn't give me a whole lot of information.
Caroline (African American):	[Nods head] You were talking about how you were a spiritual person, and like, I guess I definitely want to know, in keeping spiritual how does that…in terms of how you…understand this idea of racism or – I guess it's not clear – so I just wanted to ask you to clarify if you can.
Mike:	No. I think I was more referring to how it affects my status as an individual.
Caroline:	All right. I guess you said it affects your status as an individual person.
Mike:	Because I don't think of myself as separate from everyone else in the world.
Dawn:	How is that helpful in terms of dealing with racism right now?
Mike:	[long pause] It's not.
Dawn:	That's what I was thinking.

Mike's resort to the more abstract discourse of spirituality occurs when pressed to acknowledge his racial status. With this move he invokes the discourse of a universal humanity outside of racialized effects, which he extends to the participants of Color, even in the face of hours of discussion in which they have said that they do not share his experience. Mike's insistence that he does not see the group in raced or powered terms re-inscribes his racial innocence, while simultaneously positioning people of Color as the ones who perpetrate racial divisions.

5. Re-inscribes the ideal imagined community

Standing behind the effects of individualism (wherein we all have *equal opportunity* as citizens devoid of any raced, gendered, or classed group position) and universalism (wherein we all have *equal value* as human

beings devoid of any raced, gendered, or classed group position) is the ideology of an ideal imagined community.

Anderson (1983) argues that nation, nationality, and nationalism are notoriously difficult to define despite the fact that they are concepts that organize so much of the modern world. This difficulty of defining what a nation is and is not (and by extension who does and does not belong) occurs for at least two reasons: first, nations are inherently *limited* in that there are clear boundaries constructed between what constitutes 'us' and what we know to be 'not-us' as there is a border and boundary between ours and a *different* nation; and second, nations are inherently *unlimited* in terms of their constituencies (i.e. nations are not limited to a single 'dynastic' or racial group).

Anderson argues that understanding nations is thus most centrally a project of understanding how they are *imagined* into being. This imagined community manifests in all aspects of that nation's narration of itself. Anderson writes:

> …the nation's biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own.' (210)

In this way, the narratives of the nation and their capacity to help us remember and forget certain violent events and their sanctioned interpretations are important aspects of building a nation's biography. In the United States where this dialogue occurred – a White settler colonialist state – we see this narration in official accounts of national events that paradoxically present and then dilute and absorb the stories of non-White, non-settler others. As Anderson argues, the deaths that are revered and that structure the nation's biography (e.g. Harriet Tubman, Crazy Horse, Martin Luther King Jr.) are of a special kind. The deaths that matter are those that are constructed as creating a biography that erases the very real violence done to millions of anonymous non-White bodies.

In the race discussions, this narration of the ideal imagined community was re-inscribed through the story elements that White participants drew on to describe their communities, neighborhoods, and society: America as the great 'melting pot' wherein differences are subsumed; a past of inequality (genocide, slavery, racism) that is long over and should now unite rather than divide 'us'; and an Enlightenment view of history as an inevitable march towards ever greater progress and freedom. For example, Courtney, Ruth, and Jessica all talked about the 'progress' that had occurred between what was *the past* (and the 'generational' racist ideologies that *may* have existed then), and *the present* (in which we have moved beyond, learned more, and come together to 'become more inclusive'):

Courtney: But I think – from my experiences with you know, older neighbors or people, and there aren't many because I do live in [my city] and I have all my life – and often you don't hear a lot of White people in [my city], openly, you know, speaking in a way that sounds racist or that's openly talking about stereotypes. I've been in situations like that, you know, that are usually older, and it's generational, if – it's a matter of not being around anyone who isn't White. White people in [my city] don't hear other White people saying racist things.

Ruth: I see it personally in my family as being a generational thing, but I think it is also exposure to a multicultural atmosphere that changes the generations. So although I see it changing in my family as my family is exposed to more multiculturalism around the community, um, it's also – it's generational for each family in a different format. But I think it is – there is generational change, but it's also about community and exposure to those things.

Jessica: I do. I think it's generational. I think every generation isn't as educated, but if they can have this open dialogue that we can have right now – I think this is a foreign discussion to them. I think there is hope, and I think you just have to help educate them little by little. I mean, you don't want to attack them. I think they'll probably see it as confrontational and not want to listen to you. But I think that they would be curious. I think that they feel kind of left out when it comes to pop culture and current issues that are going on with becoming more, you know, inclusive.

In fact, whenever the facilitators attempted to move the discussion away from discourses that align with the national story, and press participants to conceptualize group relations from a framework of unequal structural power, the White participants argued that the facilitators were dividing this imagined community. Thus the counter-narratives of facilitators and the participants of Color were challenging not only the group's work, but also critical elements in the fabric of 'America's' story.

Jessica's worry that the older [racist White] generation be educated 'little by little' and her caution not to 'attack them' are also noteworthy. In her narrative, she imbues this older and allegedly more racist generation with a child-like innocence. Their presumed lack of awareness of progressive new racial ideas results in a corresponding need to go slowly when speaking with them about race. Granting their receptivity the benefit of the doubt, she assumes that they will be curious – provided that they are treated kindly and not confronted. In these ways, White racial innocence, the potential dangers of race discussions, and the nation's narrative of ever-forward marching racial progress are simultaneously re-inscribed.

In the following exchange, when Mike is pressed to consider the effect of his spirituality narrative, we can see how Mike organizes this imagined community in line with mainstream national narratives about America as racially united:

Dawn (facilitator of Color):	Emily and I, in reflecting on the group last week and what we talked about, something we noticed was that there was a lot of energy that was kind of expended when we introduced the idea or definition of racism. And so, we wanted to bring this back to the group and ask people if they had noticed anything about which group it was that seemed to be spending all of its energy around the definition of racism. So, when we put the definition up there last week, people were like – oh, whoa, what's going on. And it seemed to be – the people that responded were…
Barb (White):	Were White.
Dawn:	Exactly. And so, we were wondering if you guys had picked up on that. And what does the group make of that, or what do people think about that? And why do you think maybe people of Color weren't responding? Or people of Color can speak for themselves.
Mike (White):	I think I responded to it because I found it – I found the idea of it to be divisive to us as a group, and I – I preferred…
Dawn:	'Divisive' meaning like…
Mike:	That it was dividing us. That it would divide us into those with power and those without. And I would prefer not to go – you know, I would prefer to remain as a whole group.
Dawn:	What would it mean, though, that, if that definition is true and if it did do that? What would that mean to you?
Mike:	Well, if it comes down – well, if it comes down – it would mean that half the group were racist, and half were not, by definition. Well, the people with power would be racist, and the people without power would not. I didn't want that line to be drawn, I guess.
Laura (Asian American):	So, what – I'm just not – I'm not understanding how we could have a conversation about racism that wouldn't be – I…
Mike:	That wouldn't be divisive?
Laura:	Yeah. I mean, because – I guess I'm not quite clear on… [trails off]
Dawn:	Well, one question I would have is: Do you think that that line was there before the definition went up, or the definition created that line?
Mike:	There were – the definition created that line in the discussion.
Dawn:	For you it did?
Mike:	Yeah.

Emily (White facilitator):	Are there other people that want to respond to that, that already you are seen as someone who has power?
Mike:	But – okay; I can accept that. But I guess my expectation of the group is that it sort of operated as a – as a whole, not as two parts; that it was sort of working towards a similar end, instead of at cross purposes. I don't *not* accept it. And I have heard it before. But I don't know; I guess I was less – I don't want to say 'comfortable,' but less happy hearing – having that be the discussion.
Dawn:	Why?
Mike:	I guess because of – because of, like I say, because it's a divisive nature; it creates an 'us' and a 'them.'

The problem for Mike is not the existence of power itself, but its recognition. His main concern is that naming power breaks a unity that he assumes is shared – even though this assumption is contrary to the repeated claims of participants of Color. He thus erases (and denies) alternate racial experiences and locations. These alternative perspectives put them at 'cross-purposes'; presumably his purpose is to maintain an imagined unity while theirs is to divide it. Although Dawn tells him that she sees the power difference and that, in fact, for her and the people of Color present, it is *not* naming power that divides the group, Mike continues to maintain his claim.

A final way that the story of nation circulated was in narratives about a 'shared purpose.' At multiple points in the discussion, the facilitators were explicit about the purpose of the discussion, and had also articulated it at the start of the study. However, a number of White participants continually raised questions about purpose. In response, at the start of session three the facilitators rearticulated the goals by reading directly from the consent form, which stated 'This research will provide valuable information about how White student teachers engage in racial dialogue. This information is intended to help design multicultural education courses that are more effective in preparing White teachers to teach students from racial groups different from their own. You may benefit from taking part in this study by gaining increased understanding of a range of viewpoints on race'

Yet during session three some White participants were still raising questions about the discussion's purpose with claims that it ought to 'bring people together' and 'work towards a similar end':

Matthew:	But – okay; I can accept that. But I guess my expectation of the group is that it sort of operated as a – as a whole, not as two parts; that it was sort of working towards a similar end, instead of at cross purposes.
Amanda:	What is the purpose of the racial dialogue? You know, ultimately, what are we trying to reveal or prove or pursue? And what is my

> role as a White person in this world? I would like for anyone to give me some clarity about how to proceed – people of Color – how White people – I want to know what the purpose of this group is, because I feel like it's really evolved from what I understood to be the purpose, of how to teach and bring people together and understanding more about race issues or whatever. But it feels like it's becoming a strange debate that isn't productive, instead, it's a divisive forum; it's not unifying. So, I want to know what as a collective is our purpose here?

While several White students expressed confusion over the purpose of the discussion, to participants of Color the purpose was clear. Later in the same session, Marie attempted to connect White concerns about the group's purpose to group level racial location. She did so by positioning herself specifically as a person of Color in her response:

> …clearly somebody gets to choose who gets to be on what scale on the hierarchy. And it's those who get to choose that are teaching our kids. Those that get to choose are going to teach *my* kids. There really are very, very few teachers that are minorities. They're not teaching our kids. And I think that's what the whole purpose of this is, is White people teach our kids, and what are they teaching them? What do they recognize about themselves before they go into the classroom and try and teach these kids that they don't know anything about. They've never lived in their shoes; they have no idea what they think about every day, you know. That's the point of this. (Marie, Native American)

Laura also addresses the question of purpose, from her position as a person of Color. She refers to White assertions that the group isn't talking about anything 'real' or 'useful,' and that the dialogue is not a positive experience for them:

> I'm kind of just struck by a couple things. One is the whole idea of like what – for some of the White people, what would be a positive experience that would come out of this or what – since I've heard the phrases like 'what's real and tangible'; 'what's really useful.' Because I feel like this is real and tangible. I mean, the dynamics are real and tangible, and this is a microcosm of everything that goes on out there. So, it's not like we're looking at it in a vacuum. It's everything about this conversation. I'm curious about something that Courtney said about a negative versus a positive experience. And I'm curious to know for a White person what would be a positive experience of talking about racism, what would that look like? I do think we're getting diverted into talking about all this stuff when – when the conversation itself is what's real. (Laura, Asian American)

When Laura asks the White participants how they might define a 'positive experience' in a dialogue about different racial perspectives, the White participants are not able to articulate a response to her question. The more

nuanced and complex analysis offered by participants of Color was characterized by Whites at various times in the discussion as both 'academic' and 'hypersensitive.' This analysis placed the White participants in the rare situation of being on unfamiliar racial ground. This ground is 'dangerous' as it violates the imagined story of an America in which 'we are all united.' Further, White students' claims of division are somewhat ironic, given that they all acknowledged that they have grown up, gone to school, and currently live in contexts of racial separation. It appears that it is the *naming* of racial separation that is problematic, not the actual *lived* separation itself. Thus the ideal imagined community can (and does) exclude people of Color, as long as that exclusion remains unnamed.

Notably, the participants of Color never questioned the group's purpose. They saw value in the difficult process and articulated a deep investment in the task, despite inevitable discomfort. In fact, the participants of Color stated that they view racial comfort, particularly White racial comfort, as problematic, for it indicates maintenance of the status quo. Because they are expecting discomfort, and perhaps even hoping for it as a sign of movement, they do not express dissonance between their previous expectations and what is happening in the sessions.

Conclusion

…anger, hostility, frustration, and pain are characteristics that are not to be avoided under the banner of safety.… They are attributes that are to be recognized on the part of both Whites and people of color in order to engage in a process that is creative enough to establish new forms of social existence, where both parties are transformed. (Leonardo and Porter 2010, 149)

The White participants in this study have positioned themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, having their words 'strategically pulled apart' and their 'precious time wasted,' misunderstood, silenced, repressed, and under threat for use as a 'punching bag.' They are responding to the mere articulation of counter narratives; nothing physically out of the ordinary occurs in the sessions. These self-defense claims work to position the speakers as both vulnerable and superior, while obscuring the true power of their racial locations. The discourse of violence simultaneously obscures micro and macro levels of racism and positions members of social groups who name racism as irrational, scary, and dangerous.

While the comments shared here express anger, hostility, frustration, and pain, these are not the forms of expression that Leonardo and Porter describe as transformative in race discussions. Rather, the expressions documented here functioned to *prevent* the transformative forms of hostility, frustration, or pain that might have unsettled the White supremacy circulating in these discussions. The exchanges reproduced in this paper indicate that it is personal and ideological *comfort* that is at stake, not safety.

If it is the case that safety and guidelines for establishing safe classroom space for discussions about race and racism are false (or at least ineffective) strategies, then what might more productive contexts for these discussions look like? The analysis we offer in this article lends support to the questions raised by some scholars about whether anti-racism education that does not perpetuate discursive violence towards students of Color can occur in cross-racial settings (c.f. Chinnery 2008; Crozier and Davies 2008; Jones 1999, 2001; Leonardo and Porter 2010). Their argument is that such spaces ultimately foreground the needs of White students and position students of Color as 'native informants and unpaid sherpas' (Thompson 2004), guiding White students into a racial awakening. Leonardo and Porter go further and argue that the conditions of 'safety' are meant to maintain White comfort and thus are a symbolic form of violence experienced by people of Color. That is, it is students *of Color* who are metaphorically 'slammed' in these conversations, intensifying the real violence, physical, as well as structural and discursive, that they already bear in society at large.

Ironically, Amanda's description of this temporary and exceptional experience for her in this discussion fairly well describes *daily* dimensions of this violence for students of Color (Crozier and Davies 2008). We return to an earlier quote from Amanda and replace the term *White* with *person of Color* to capture very familiar dynamics often described by students of Color:

> I feel like everything I've said, has been strategically pulled apart, syllable by syllable. I feel like everything I say is thrown at me as, 'Well, you're saying that because you're [a person of Color]'…in this group it feels like [people of Color] are being slammed and blamed and that…I have to defend myself or just be a punching bag or something…it's totally a repressive environment for me. I already feel upset enough in being here and talking. It's already hard enough. So, I don't want to keep going.

The historical and socio-political context these participants are situated in, both inside and outside the discussion, is not neutral; it consistently does violence to people of Color, discursively, physically, and structurally. For participants of Color, this is likely one of the few environments in which they can feel somewhat protected, given their numbers and the support of the facilitators. Still, in surfacing White umbrage and defensiveness, cross-racial discussions actually increase the degree of discursive violence meted out to them. In her work, anti-racist educator Darlene Flynn regularly encounters the demand that discussions on race be made safe for Whites. She exposes this discourse as a manifestation of White privilege when she replies, 'You mean you usually feel safe racially? That must be a great feeling. It's not something people of Color can take for granted or expect, much less demand.'

While the *feelings* may be real for White people struggling with a sense of safety, it may be useful to consider what safety means from a position of

social, cultural, historical and institutional power. If one does not fear actual *physical* harm, then some reflection on what one *does* fear can be a rich avenue of self-knowledge and social insight.

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