

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

Reflections on 'Birthing Racial Difference' in the Classroom

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Gail Lewis' (2009) 'Birthing Racial Difference: Conversations with my mother and others' appeared in the first edition of *Studies in the Maternal*, the year I worked as a MAMSIE intern. Here, I consider what this piece has taught me about doing sociological work that centers the autobiographical and what pedagogic possibilities this kind of work can create. Reflecting on conversations with students about *Birthing Racial Difference*, I consider how the piece opened up ways of thinking and talking about race and racism, whilst challenging any retreat into 'virtuous whiteness'. In our sociology classroom *Birthing Racial Difference* provoked and facilitated teaching and learning that centers student experience without avoiding or depoliticising the discussion of race and racism. Through collaborative learning with sociology students, *Birthing Racial Difference* formed part of my ongoing process of developing a critical pedagogy.

Gail Lewis' (2009) 'Birthing Racial Difference: Conversations with my mother and others', appeared in the first edition of *Studies in the Maternal*, the same year I interned for MAMSIE. Lewis offers an autobiographical account of the complex negotiations, pleasures, pains and intimacies of maternal relationships. The maternal relationship in 'Birthing Racial Difference' is one marked by differences in skin; of a white mother and black daughter trying to negotiate and survive the many ways structures of race and racism are felt and become known in intimate lives, played out, reproduced and resisted through the maternal. I first read 'Birthing Racial Difference' 10 years ago and have re-read it many times since. It is a piece of writing that taught me about the possibilities of doing sociological work that begins with, stays with, and makes central the autobiographical as a way of understanding and exploring the complex entanglements of the personal and the social. It is also part of a body of work that has pushed me to interrogate the privilege my own whiteness affords, to recognise how whiteness functions as a marker of belonging, a form of protection and an instrument of power in the institutions in which we work, and beyond.

My first encounter with 'Birthing Racial Difference' coincided with the time I started teaching. As an inexperienced and precariously employed PhD student, the power and effect of the academy often meant that my teaching was shaped by conventions that reinforce power and hierarchy. More recently, 'Birthing Racial Difference' has found a place in my sociology classroom and I focus here on what this paper makes possible in this pedagogic space. It opens up ways of thinking about the power of family myths and secrets and how whiteness operates in the family and also challenges any retreat, by me or white students in the classroom, into virtuous whiteness (Smith and Lander, 2012).¹ Sociological autobiographies can push use, students

¹ Smith and Lander (2012) explain that the concept of virtuous whiteness, which depends on the unvirtuous other, allows white students and teachers to maintain a faith in themselves as helpful, good people who do not hold prejudice. Depoliticising the discussion of race and racism in the classroom reinforces virtuous whiteness: 'the White teacher is virtuous in her desire to teach this challenging material, and the students are virtuous for continuing to participate.' (Smith and Lander, 2012: 340). It reinforces the 'good/bad' white person binary, which allows racism to be located elsewhere and avoid interrogation (Diangelo, 2018). It also facilitates collusion with a perception of racism as something 'out there', shifting attention away from its reproduction within the institution (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 148).

and teachers, to create 'brave spaces' (Arao and Clemens, 2013) and transformative learning communities (hooks, 1994), contributing to the project of building the anti-racist university (Tate and Bagguley, 2017).

The teaching context

I teach sociology at a post-92 University with a majority student of colour demographic and, on the sociology programme, majority women of colour. The institutional staff body is not reflective of the student population, a pattern seen across the sector. I am one of many white academics that occupy a position of power in the classroom, marked by racial difference. As Ahmet (in press) argues, the colonial histories of many UK universities embed whiteness into the institution. Universities mark staff and students of colour as 'out of place' in various ways, creating a distinct sense of unbelonging (Ahmet, in press; Tolia Kelly, 2017; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Rollock, 2019). The investment in whiteness that sits at the heart of the university is felt by students of colour in their day-to-day navigation of university spaces (Ahmet, in press). Recognising, interrogating and challenging the power that my whiteness affords and the benefits I gain from being white in this sector, is a part of my pedagogic responsibility and care as a white lecturer (Back, 2004; Hobson and Whigham, 2018).

I read 'Birthing Racial Difference' with my first-year sociology group during a session on sociological autobiographies. As a group, we think about the different social forces that shape an individual's life path, opportunities, intimate and personal relationships, thoughts and feelings. Through life stories, we come to understand and engage with the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Lewis offers us a guide through this kind of work, as we follow the threads of a personal, political and theoretical navigation of race and racism, through an account of the maternal. Lewis creates possibilities for conversations that push us as a group to do the difficult work of exploring the structures of race and racism in individual lives and to stay with the emotional complexities and discomforts of these discussions (Martinez-Cola et al, 2018). These discomforts are experienced differently by students of colour and white students (Housee, 2008; Kobayashi, 1999; Smith and Lander, 2012). 'Birthing Racial Difference' both is and can generate a kind of counter-storytelling (Delgado,

1989) – a key component of critical race theory – as students reflect on the role, function and experience of race in their own and others' lives.

Birthing Racial Difference in the Classroom

We read 'Birthing Racial Difference' alongside Georgina Lawton's 2017 account, published in *The Guardian*, of growing up as a mixed-race child in a white Anglo-Irish family. Lawton reflects on the collective silence maintained around her blackness; her dark skin and 'soft and stubborn curls' were explained by her white parents as a 'genetic throwback'. When Lawton experienced racism, her mother comforted her with assurances that she was 'white, like her'. There was shared acknowledgement between Lawton and her white father, shortly before his death, that they probably did not share the same DNA. A DNA test following his death prompted her mother's admission that Lawton's biological father was a black Irish man and not the white British father she had grown up with.

The article headline – 'My mum always told me I was white, like her. Now I know the truth' – is accompanied by a photograph of Lawton. This juxtaposition of the statement of Lawton's whiteness and the image of a dark-skinned young woman, often prompts incredulous laughter from the class, with exclamations such as 'how can she think she's white?!'. To the students, Lawton's race is self-evident and her mother's denial of it unbelievable and fruitless in the face of what is clearly communicated by her daughter's skin. The students' responses reveal an understanding of racial difference as an unmovable truth. However, reading this alongside 'Birthing Racial Difference' we can, as a group, come to understand the power of family myths and the function of whiteness in Lawton's story as productive of sameness and difference.

Lewis (2009: 6) writes that her relationship with her white mother 'was choreographed through the social and familial and psychic meaning accorded to the differences in our skin'. She considers the things that skin can communicate – the threat it carries for exposing women's 'transgressive erotic desires' and the 'ruptures that skin can cause between mother and daughter' (Lewis, 2009: 8). Lewis offers our group a framework for understanding the power of the myth of Lawton's whiteness and her mother's fierce

investment in it. Lawton's skin spoke her mother's secret, but the 'protective bubble of whiteness' (Lawton, 2017), created by familial silence, was fiercely defended, offering imagined protection from the pains of racism and exposure of secrets.

When reading Lawton's story through Lewis's paper, we see how whiteness is a myth the maternal relationship depends upon; an idea that shapes the family. The questions Lawton had about the differences in skin did keep resurfacing, in often demanding ways, but the investment in familial sameness and in her origin myth were powerful enough for the illusion of whiteness to prevail. Discussing both texts side by side, we consider as a group how family secrets and origin myths can hold far greater power than what the students often initially see as the self-evident 'truth' spoken by Lawton's skin. Through Lewis, we can consider how racial difference is an ongoing negotiation, a process of identification, and something shaped by social structures and investment in the maintenance of intimate relationships. We also come to understand how whiteness is marked and made visible through maternal relationships. As Harman (2010: 13–14) has argued, white mothers of mixed-race children are historically subject to increased scrutiny and judgement, and this 'has implications for whiteness in terms of an increased visibility and salience attached to white mothers of mixed-parentage children'.

Reading 'Birthing Racial Difference' alongside Lawton's account of her family's silence surrounding her race, allows us to trace the production of racial difference through familial, particularly maternal, secrets. It is through the maternal figure that 'Birthing Racial Difference' facilitates another discussion in the classroom – one that challenges any retreat into virtuous whiteness (Smith and Lander, 2012) during often uncomfortable discussions of race and racism, and one that is prompted by one particular moment in the text. Lewis describes meeting her mother from work as an 11-year-old child. Her mother is with colleagues and walks past her daughter without any acknowledgement. Addressing her mother directly, Lewis writes: 'Your work colleagues didn't know you 'had black kids' and you denied me there and then' (2009: 18). This moment stands out for students; it is always commented upon in our reading. Sometimes there is judgement; how could a mother ignore her child like that? Often empathetic understanding, reflection on the time and place and

the suggestion that Lewis' mother wanted to protect her from the racism of her colleagues.

Both Lewis's and Lawton's mothers use denial of their daughter's blackness, and of the differences in their skin, as a means of hiding 'transgressive erotic desires' from view (Lewis, 2009: 7). What the incident leads us to in the classroom is the uncomfortable truth that racism is not something located in a few 'bad' white people (Diangelo, 2018). Lewis' account of a white mother's denial of her black child reveals the 'proximity of love and racism, the simultaneous closeness and distance' (Lewis, 2009: 14) that we also see in Lawton's story. Lewis shares a maternal relationship that is profoundly loving, but also profoundly painful. It is recognition of this proximity of love and pain that means white lecturers or students cannot avoid the painful and shameful truth of racism. In its weaving of the personal and social, 'Birthing Racial Difference' demands recognition by white readers of being part of or 'affected by the forces of racism as a member of a society in which racism is the bed-rock' (Diangelo, 2018). Lewis confronts the painful truth that racism occurs within the most intimate relationships that are also characterised by love, care and tenderness, and reflects on the careful relational work that takes place to repair and survive this.

hooks (1994: 43) argues for the need to bring compassion into the classroom in recognition of the pain that comes with 'giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches'. 'I respect that pain', she writes. The recognition and respect of pain does not aim to make racism more comfortable, or to minimise its harms, but to recognise its proximity. This is facilitated in our class by Lewis' account of this encounter with her mother, the pain of which is not minimised, but it is understood in the context of how structures of race and racism operate in intimate relationships. For white students and teachers, this makes the denial of or distancing from racism, or rendering of whiteness as invisible, more difficult. For students of colour, discussion of the piece offers a potential point of recognition and space for reflection on their own racialised histories, identities and relationships.

'Brave spaces' of belonging

'Birthing Racial Difference' has made it possible to have conversations about racism in class that refuse the distancing of the white self from racism. In the classroom, Lewis' account is often recognisable to students of colour – some of whom choose to share their own experiences of racism from white friends and family with the class – and requires white students, and myself, to acknowledge and address the pains of racism, without resorting to distancing or defensiveness. There are many examples of where 'Birthing Racial Difference' has prompted counter-storytelling from students on the complexities of racialised identities and identifications through their own autobiographies. For example, one student considered how her close relationship with her white mother led her to see herself primarily as white, despite her mixed-race parentage. This prompted discussion of how racial difference is entangled with the complexities of identification, rather than being a self-evident truth, allowing for an unpicking of the initial response to Lawton's article headline and photograph. These kinds of discussions make space for the generation of sociological knowledge and theorising through student experience, rather than the foregrounding of my voice in the classroom.

These conversations can be difficult, and discomfort is propelled, manifest and experienced differently by students of colour and white students (Martinez-Cola et al, 2018). The race of the lecturer and racial diversity of the student body also has an impact (Bhopal, 2002; Housee, 2008; Smith and Lander, 2012). These spaces must also be under constant negotiation and reflection, with recognition of the power that circulates in the room, if they are to be part of the process of building the anti-racist university (Tate and Bagguley, 2017). In making space for the sharing of lived experience, there is a risk that students of colour feel an expectation to speak to their own experience, or are positioned as 'native informers' (hooks, 1994). Experiences of racism must not be transformed into teachable moments for white students and lecturers (Kobayashi, 1999).

Kobayashi (1999) observes that the discomfort that emerges in discussions of race and racism is often manifest in silence. In my experience, 'Birthing Racial

Difference' does not provoke silence. There is something about this piece that enlivens discussion without depoliticising it. It is, I think, its auto-biographical nature that facilitates these kinds of conversations. hooks (1994: 41) suggests that one way of building a learning community that has a climate of openness, 'is to recognise the value of each individual voice'. 'Birthing Racial Difference' demonstrates the value of the autobiographical as a way of understanding how race and racism are produced, sustained and experienced. Reading the text as a collective creates a space where lived experience is valued as having something to say about the sociology of race and racism. As a text it makes space for the emotional; the pain and proximity of racism is not minimised, as can happen in 'safe spaces', which have been criticised for being beneficial to white students, rather than students of colour (Martinez-Cola et al, 2018). Instead, the piece helps create 'brave spaces' in the classroom, where critical conversations can take place and offer possibilities for a more honest engagement with the emotional dimension of learning (Martinez-Cola et al, 2018).

Reflecting on responses to reading 'Birthing Racial Difference' in the classroom helps me, as a white lecturer, consider the circulation of power in the room. In contrast to my early teaching style, we read this piece sitting in a circle, as a group. This is part of a critical pedagogy that considers the significance of the physical, emotional and institutional space to the ways in which whiteness can be embedded in the academy (Ahmet, in press; Burke, 2018; hooks, 1994; Martinez-Cola et al, 2018). Whilst never assuming that unequal power dynamics are eradicated by such approaches, working with 'Birthing Racial Difference' in the classroom has helped me to develop a critical pedagogy that seeks to destabilise the hierarchical power of the academy and to create a sense of belonging through a critical learning community (hooks, 1994).

Editor's Note

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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