

Linking Anthropology with Ethnic Literature:
How I Learned to Talk about Race and Racism

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From the age of five until eighteen, I attended school in the same kindergarten through high school building, located in rural Wisconsin between three cornfields and my school district's oak-laden forest. Growing up in a school district where the graduating class was approximately twenty-five students each year didn't allow me much exposure to diversity, especially in regard to race. In 2011-2012, my senior year of high school, out of the ninety-three high-school students one-hundred percent identified their race and/or ethnicity as white. My parents tried to expose me to different cultures through hosting foreign-exchange students from Japan, China, Kazakhstan, and Denmark through my childhood. Although I began noticing a difference in skin color between a student my family was hosting from Japan and myself at the age of six, my parents tried to shy me away from discussions of skin color and race growing up, which unintentionally caused me to internalize the belief that it is rude to talk about these subjects. Until my sophomore year of college, I thought it was okay to be "colorblind" to race, believing that it was better to not talk about race than incorrectly talk about it. Although introduced to the topic in a couple of my general education courses, I still didn't completely understand the idea of racial colorblindness. I believed it to be a way to help focus on the equalities amongst humans, instead of seeing differences. In the first couple weeks of my junior year of college my viewpoint on racial colorblindness completely changed due to two classes that seemed, at first, unrelated: General Anthropology, a social science course, and Ethnic Literature, an English course. By integrating a scientific approach of studying the genetic variations of phenotypic traits, such as skin color, in General Anthropology with a cultural approach of understanding race and racism as social constructs in Ethnic Literature, I am now able to recognize the danger of not talking about race and racism.

While studying anthropology, our class used a four-field holistic approach, looking at the subject, not solely from a biological standpoint, but also cultural, linguistic, and archeological perspectives. However, much of the time spent in General Anthropology focused on a lot of the biological aspects of anthropology, including genetics and genetic variation. In the beginning of the semester, my class studied how many anthropologists prefer the term ethnicity over race. While race is a cultural constructs based on the observations of different phenotypic traits, such as bone structure, skin color, and teeth, and cultural traits, such as language, art, and music, it has been used with negative connotation harming specific races, as people created and enforced a racial hierarchy. Not only did this help me realize that it's okay to talk about race and ethnicity, but it taught me how to talk about race by evaluating scientific characteristics of human, such as skin color, without placing races into a hierarchy. I started being able to analyze features of human beings, such as the phenotypic traits that people classify into a race and apply them as a foundation for understanding race and racism as social constructs.

While studying Ethnic Literature, we looked at race through the voices of the human beings that I was studying in anthropology. Because I was able to empathize with the human being studied in the science, I felt like I could genuinely understand the problems that has caused racism, and still currently causes racism, in America. Covering material over a span of two-hundred years, we analyzed a variety of people including those that identify racial or ethnically as Senecan, Mexican-American, black-American, African-American, and Chinese-American. We studied social ethnic and racial issues, including slavery, legalized segregation, racially-discriminating immigration laws, racist attitudes, political correctness, white-privilege, white-normativity, and the use of rhetorical violence as a weapon that's been manifested into physical abuse against humans in America.

Until this past semester, I felt afraid to bring up race because I didn't understand how to talk about race without being offensive and seeming offensive. I didn't realize that by having a racially colorblind attitude I was perpetuating a racial hierarchy. After studying ethnic literature and anthropology together, I have realized that most of our language today is embedded with a white-normativity; meaning that we usually assume, unless a specific race or ethnicity is mentioned, that when a person is mentioned they have white skin. Before taking these classes, I believed seeing and talking about race as dangerous because it would seem racist, but now I am able to see that I was by not talking about race and ethnicity I was perpetuating a racist narrative. I now look around and see how my own race and ethnicity has given me privileges in my daily life: being able to buy Band-Aids with the same color as my skin, being able to be in the company of others with a similar skin tone as myself, and being able to not be victimized based on the color of my skin. By acknowledging the advantages I receive based on my skin color, I am now able to see many of the disadvantages non-white skinned people face and the dangers of these disadvantages. Being able to see how humans view race as a construct made me learn how to talk about the history of race from a scientific viewpoint, race as a cultural construct, race and ethnicity as an identity, and the dangers of racist attitudes, even if they are unintentional.

Instead of feeling afraid to use language, I am now able to responsibly use language to discuss race and racism in my classes, with my family, and with my friends to help understand the dangers of racism and figure out how to fight racism in America and around the world. Focusing on the humanity of the individuals around me through the words of ethnic writers and their characters based in the past, I can acquire a breadth of perspectives and experiences that I will never have the chance to experience (although some of these events, such as slavery, legalized segregation, and racial profiling, I would never want to have to be forced into). If I

would have solely read pieces written by ethnic writers, instead of having a knowledge of the science of phenotypic traits and the construction of the term race, I would have been exposed to the experiences and emotions of their ethnic characters and the characters' personal experiences caused by racism and ethnic exclusion; however, taking an course in anthropology allowed me to be able to talk about the specific science behind phenotypic traits that are associated with constructed races and understand that noticing differences in skin color and bone structure is part of my curiosity as a human being. By revealing this connection between the sciences and humanities, I now understand both topics with greater comprehension because of weaving the two manners of learning into one mindset. Finding this synergy between the sciences and the humanities has allowed me to widen my vocabulary, mind, and understanding of today's social issues, helping me understand my responsibility to use language to make a positive difference.