



Sample Syllabus

Social Justice Curriculum

The following is a topical guide for reading and discussion. The summaries and questions are meant to be introductory, not exhaustive. We encourage readers and groups to adapt these materials to their users based on previous experience with these subjects.

Week 1 – Seeing White

Readings

- Seeing White (Halley), Chapter 1

Discussion Questions

1. Does reading Chapter 1 arouse any emotions? If you had a strong emotional response to a certain aspect of the chapter, (1) identify the part of the chapter, (2) describe the emotion that was aroused, (3) and evaluate this experience. If you did not have any emotional responses to the chapter, explore that.
2. Describe several issues considered to be “truths” in feudal times and in the 1970s that are now understood to be false. Explore possible “truths” today that you predict will be demonstrated to be false in the future.
3. What are *social* and *economic power*? Who held power in feudal Europe, and how did they hold onto that power? Who holds power in the US today, and how do those in power hold onto that power? What is meant by the terms norm and normative? What has been a common relationship between whiteness and these terms? How might this relate to power?
4. What does it mean to claim that whiteness tends to be invisible to whites? When have you been aware of whiteness? What might that reveal about whiteness?
5. Describe *cultural materialism*. How does it relate to race, particularly whiteness? Evaluate Tim Wise's argument (quoted within the chapter) that inequality and privilege are essential aspects of whiteness.
6. What are *ingroups* and *outgroups*? What is the relationship of these terms to inclusion and exclusion? Who is part of the white ingroup? Who is excluded from this group?
7. Have you ever had an experience when you were keenly aware of yourself as privileged? If so, how did this awareness affect you? How did the privilege affect how others treated you? If you have never been aware of privilege, reflect on why that may be?

8. Chapter 1 describes *racism* as ranging from unintentional individual behavior by whites to policies at an institutional level. It also argues that racism is “prejudice plus power,” such that racism only tends toward white supremacy. How would you have defined racism before reading this chapter? What are your reactions to the definition of racism in this chapter?
9. What do you think has been the effect of having a president of the US who is African American? Has this changed understandings of racism in the US? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. What is *ideology*? How does it shape understanding of important issues such as race? Do individuals tend to be conscious of the influence of ideology?

Week 2 – Race: The Power of an Illusion

Documentary and Readings

- *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, Parts 2 & 3
- “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism” (Tatum)

Discussion Questions

Documentary, Part 2:

1. For the US Government, what was the advantage of saying that Native Americans are close to white people and are capable of being “civilized” (e.g. Thomas Jefferson; the movement West)?
2. What is an ideology, and how does race act as an ideology. (Feel free to research.) How can or how does the “power of the ideology of race” change people’s minds or influence their agenda (scientific or political agenda)?
3. How did scientists use their craft to promote racist ideologies? Can you think of more contemporary examples of people using science to promote a racist agenda?
4. Why do you think white women in this film (and in general) are removed from history’s conversation about white people’s oppression of black people and people of color?
5. At any point, did this segment (or other readings) make you feel shame? If so, why?

Documentary, Part 3:

1. What connections do you draw between the “ghettos” (i.e. racially segregated, high-crime or poor neighborhoods) of today and the past practices of the Federal Housing Authority? What legacies remain from these practices?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the experiences of immigrant groups such as Italians and Eastern European Jews in the early 20th century, and African and Mexican Americans?
3. How do modern color-blind beliefs—“I don’t see race,” “Race doesn’t matter anymore, so we shouldn’t talk about it”—miss the target if race is an illusion with no biological reality? Why do social justice efforts like ours focus so much on race if it’s an illusion?
4. In what ways does this film series contradict or change—or agree with—how you’ve understood race and its legitimacy before now? What information in these films was surprising to you? What other feelings did you have while watching these films?

“Talking about Race, Learning about Racism”

1. According to Prof. Tatum’s definitions, how does she distinguish between racism and prejudice? Do you agree with her claim that US-Americans have been generally misinformed about these definitions? Why is it important to have clear definitions for these particular words?
2. How do US-Americans (and people elsewhere) learn that the topics of race and racism are taboo? Were these topics off limits in your family and social settings while you were growing up? If so, how did you learn that they were?
3. What is a meritocracy? Describe the mythology surrounding this notion in US-American society generally, and in the scientific community specifically. What are the realities about meritocracy?

Week 3 – Whiteness

This week's readings should solidify the idea of whiteness and give background for later discussions. Our attempts last week to define Black and African-American could have benefited from these readings because understanding social constructs like race is often more easily accomplished by defining what things are not (rather than what they are). Defining whiteness is crucial because whiteness is the standard against which all other groups are compared.

Video and Readings

- “On Being White...and Other Lies” (Baldwin)
- “What is Whiteness?” (Painter)
- Video: “Whiteness and the Historical Trick of Privilege” (Wise)
- Bonus: Seeing White, Chapter 3 (Halley)

Discussion Questions

“On Being White...and Other Lies”

1. Baldwin describes various communities of European people, such as the Irish, Polish and Germans. Practically speaking, what did the people in these communities have to do in order to become (US) white? Baldwin describes this transformation as a price. Describe why it was a price to pay, and what they had to give up to become “Americans,” to become white. Can all or some Latin@ people pay this same price and undergo this same transformation? Can all or some Black people do so? Can all or some “Asian” people do so?
2. “Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history.” Do you agree that (white, US) America does not confront their true history? If so, give examples of ways in which the “ravage” of this country’s history is hidden from view. If you disagree, in what ways does this country regularly recognize, and atone for, the wrongs visited upon “non-white” people in the past?
3. “[I]t is the black condition, and only that, which informs us concerning white people.” In what way(s) does the social condition of black people define what it means to be white?
4. What do you think Baldwin meant by the following passage, and do you agree? (Why or why not?)

"And how did they get that way? By deciding they were white....By persuading themselves that a Black child's life meant nothing compared with a white child's life....By informing their children that Black women, Black men and Black children had no human integrity that those who call themselves white were bound to respect" (pp. 179-180).

“What is Whiteness?”

1. Painter says, “We don’t know the history of whiteness, and therefore are ignorant of the many ways it has changed over the years.” Think back to the video: In what ways has whiteness changed over time? What misconceptions do people today have about whiteness?
2. Do you agree with the statement that a “monolithic definition of whiteness is antithetical to social justice”? Why or why not?
3. “The useful part of white identity’s vagueness is that whites don’t have to shoulder the burden of race in America, which, at the least, is utterly exhausting.” Given your experience in talking (or not) about race with white people, do you agree with this conclusion? Why or why not?

General Questions

1. What do you think about how your own “race” is defined (by society) after having read Painter's and Baldwin's articles and listening to Wise?
2. Baldwin focuses on whiteness with respect to blackness. Do you feel that his arguments can be applied to, say, whiteness versus “brownness”? Based on your personal experience, how are the experiences of Black Americans and Latino Americans similar and dissimilar?

Week 4 – Mass Incarceration

Week 4 examines the latest chapter of the enslavement of people of color: mass incarceration, having begun with chattel slavery. Explore how the privilege of whites (and the exclusion of blacks) to participate in post-World War II home ownership laid the groundwork for racially segregated and impoverished “ghettos.” Our readings will also show that over-policing of areas like these (in the name of reducing crime through campaigns like the War On Drugs) has led to a system of mass incarceration and economic isolation exacerbated by the creation of private prisons endorsed by the Democratic Party among others.

Readings

- The New Jim Crow (Alexander), Introduction - Chapter 1
- What is Capitalism? (Imara and Roth)
- Bonus: The New Jim Crow (Alexander), Chapter 2

Group Discussion

There are 2 million Americans under the direct authority of the US penal system. Why are 90 percent of those affected black and brown citizens? Michelle Alexander describes the New Jim Crow—mass incarceration—as “the most damaging manifestation of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.”

This may seem surprising description, given the widespread absence of such alternative narratives in US media and among prominent civil rights/social justice organizations. Dismantling institutionalized racism requires reckoning with this “racial caste system,” the New Jim Crow.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Alexander’s main argument in *The New Jim Crow*?
2. What does Alexander mean by “racial caste system”?
3. How does Alexander define “mass incarceration” or “the New Jim Crow”? What is the role of the criminal justice system in American society?
4. How was the Constitution designed to protect slavery?
5. What was Jim Crow? What, ultimately, explains its downfall?
6. What is the pattern to the births and deaths of racial caste systems in America?
7. What was the purpose of “law and order” and “tough on crime” rhetoric used following the Civil Rights Movement?
8. Why was the War on Drugs launched? How did the government (across political parties) and media build support for the war?

General Questions

1. Even if you (as a person of color) don't personally know someone who is/was incarcerated, does mass incarceration affect you? Is mass incarceration a black issue or an American issue?
2. What does it mean to assert your full citizenship in America?
3. Would you welcome someone who was formerly incarcerated into your family or close circle of friends?

Week 5 – Immigration

Much confusion exists with regard to immigration policy and practices in the United States. Media consistently offer their platforms to hysterical xenophobia, only inflamed by economic stagnation and record inequality. Over time, US policy on immigration and citizenship has grown to be some of the most restrictive in the world, and Chomsky's work will show how its dramatic evolution has been tailored to target—especially racially— the least powerful and most exploitable.

Readings

- Undocumented (Chomsky), Introduction

Discussion Questions

1. Why do undocumented citizens break the law? Why don't they come here legally? Why don't they just become US citizens?
2. Discuss the causes leading to deportation and the consequences of being deported.
3. What are the similarities between mass incarceration and immigration law as forms of racial control and the maintenance of the racial caste system in the US?

4. What is your reaction to the following phrases: “they broke the law,” “this country belongs to Americans,” and “this country was built by immigrants”? What is your reaction to “we all came here as immigrants”?
5. Discuss the role of globalization (particularly free trade policies) in the existence of a class of undocumented peoples in the US.
6. How do your ideas of fairness (as related to citizenship and all its privileges) contradict or fall short of the principles and standards of human rights?

Week 6 – Sexism

Discrimination based on sex is perhaps the most universal and well-established form of prejudice. Although comparing kinds of discrimination is usually an unhelpful distraction, doing so here serves to point out the ubiquity and insidiousness of sexism. Sexism is widely accepted in the form of *gender roles* among all peoples, and because of this, women continue to be excluded from positions of influence by law and by custom. Intersections of race and sexual identity (among others) have major influences on the experience of sexism.

This week, examine sexism (especially its impact on women of color) from historical and contemporary perspectives. In particular, view sexism through the lens of "feminism." Explore gender as a social construct, as well as the role of masculinity in maintaining sexism. It might be helpful to begin with the short piece by bell hooks to get a working definition of *feminism*.

Video and Readings

- “Ain't I Woman Enough” (Hooks)
- “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression” (Hooks)
- “Women: New Voice of La Raza” (Vidal)
- Video & Article: “Why Stereotypes are Dangerous to Latinas” (Lazo)
- "Why Immigration is a Feminist Issue" (Valoy)

Discussion Questions

1. As a young person of color (whatever your gender identification), what do you see as the MOST pressing issues faced by contemporary women of color in the USA (e.g. wage inequality, reproductive rights, educational opportunity, media representation, violence)? In other words, what do you consider to be some of the biggest problem(s) women must face today?
2. Why do you think so few women who are known or recognized for work in the Civil Rights movement? What other situations/institutions/events have related phenomena of “missing women”?
3. For the women of color: have you ever felt excluded or marginalized in your school or classroom? Have you ever felt excluded from a feminist or anti-racist movement before? If so, why?
4. For the men of color: what practices have you witnessed (or participated in) during your life that might have excluded women?

5. What are some commonalities in the struggles faced by Latina and Black women and girls? What are some of the common stereotypes of Latina and Black women?
6. Recalling how whiteness is critical to our understanding of race and racism, how is the idea of masculinity/machismo necessary to understand gender and sexism?

Week 7 – Capitalism

So far, you have read about and discussed racism, sexism, and xenophobia (bigotry and injustice against immigrants). How are these oppressions linked in a capitalist society? What is *capitalism*? How can it exist without racism, sexism, and xenophobia?

Readings

- “How Capitalism and Racism Support Each Other” (Wolff)
- “The New Global Capitalism and the War on Immigrants” (Robinson)
- “Keep Harriet Tubman – and all women – off the \$20 bill” (Jones)
- “A Q&A with Angela Davis on Black Power, Feminism, and the Prison-Industrial Complex” (Barat)
- “What is Capitalism?” (Imara and Roth)

Discussion Questions

1. Think on the following terms. How would you define them: (1) capitalism; (2) class; (3) globalization; (4) colonialism; (5) neoliberalism; (6) prison-industrial complex.
2. What are your opinions on Harriet Tubman’s image appearing on the twenty-dollar bill? Why or why not? Can you think of other instances in which an outspoken critic of American society has been co-opted or popularized?
3. What are some of the ways in which anti-immigration policy and sentiment are profitable in the US?
4. In her interview, Angela Davis was asked, “what does the prison-industrial complex say about society?” How would you answer this question?

Week 8 – Globalization

By now, you've discussed racism, sexism, inequality, capitalism, and social justice. How has your thinking changed (or remained) since? Did reading *Eyes of the Heart* connect any dots? What thoughts, questions, and sources of inspiration will you take with you? In this discussion, get inspired and talk about solutions and strategies for social justice in our communities!

Readings

- *Eyes of the Heart* (Aristide)

Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of *Eyes of the Heart*? Consider the topics we’ve discussed this summer. What connections did this book reveal?
2. What questions came to mind while reading?
3. Why is Haiti so impoverished?

4. What was your favorite story by Aristide? Why?
5. What does Aristide mean by a “third way”? What is your “third way”? What social justice dream do you want to work to make a reality?
6. How has this book (and other readings) informed your views of happiness and success? Is the American trajectory a logical path to global prosperity (by any definition)? Why or why not?