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Anti-racism and *Active Voices*: segregationist, assimilationist, and anti-racist

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement garnered support from millions of Americans in ways not seen before. Just as importantly, much of corporate America, including major sporting franchises and leagues, for the first time openly supported BLM and the BLM goals: to acknowledge systemic racism and root it out.

The belief that racism is woven into the fabric of our society's practices and beliefs, reflecting a long history of privileging Whiteness and White values, is gaining a broader acceptance. The inherent biases of our systems play out in ways both subtle and openly visible. Subtle effects, those not openly visible but no less harmful, include such things as more stringent bank loan requirements for Black-owned businesses and fewer medical referrals for African American people than Whites for pain-relieving medications they may need. More visible effects include everything from excessive surveillance and detention by college campus security of Black male students to excessive police force more frequently used against Black people.

While BLM foregrounds Black experiences, people of other races, ethnicities, and genders suffer the effects of systemic racism and bias as well. When the COVID-19 coronavirus first spread throughout the United States, commentators calling it "the China virus" or "the Wuhan virus" led directly to attacks on Americans of Asian descent. The #MeToo movement has made clear that women in the workplace face frequent sexual harassment even as they continue to fight against sexist stereotypes and behaviors. And Native American and Indigenous peoples continue their fight to have legally bindings treaties and agreements even acknowledged in court, often with little success.

So what to do?

Anti-racism is the term used to describe the efforts to dismantle all instances of the systemic racism that is woven into the practices and institutions that form our society in order to alleviate the consequences of 400 years of racist practices.

That's a lot.

And even more, it allows for only two positions: working with and in the system, which ultimately supports and perpetuates it, or working against the system to rebuild it more fairly.

At its root, then, anti-racist practices and beliefs do not allow for any so-called non-racist or "neutral" or "color-blind" position. Any such position would require a place *outside* the system of meaning-making that defines our culture, a belief that rests upon the false hope that human beings and their thinking can exist outside of a racialized world.

To put it even more bluntly, each of us is *within* a system of belief that has historically supported racist practices, but some of us are actively working *against* that system of belief by challenging the system in an attempt to create a new system, all while we are aware of our own beliefs and how they shape what we know. Ultimately, there is no neutral ground.

Active Voices and Resisting the Systems of the Academy

Part of the goal of *Active Voices* is to help you understand the rules of the game that define the academic world so that you can navigate it more successfully.

But another of *Active Voices's* goals is to give you the opportunity to critique and resist those systems of belief.

To that end, each chapter is written not to be definitive but to be descriptive. That is, saying, "This is what is" does not equate to saying, "This is what should be." The goal of each chapter of *Active Voices* is to start a conversation, not to persuade you to think something. "What the academy is" may be the title of the first chapter but by confronting "what the academy is," you may be able to question, resist, and perhaps influence the shape of the academy of the future by standing more firmly within your own cultural and historical context.

To better understand how that might work, let's look at a few terms that may help us understand how racist beliefs manifest and how *Active Voices* might form an anti-racist view.

Segregationist and Assimilationist Belief Systems

In order to understand the term "anti-racist," it's important to understand the term it is defined against: racist. We all have a popular understanding of the word "racist" and few, if any, of us would so define ourselves by this term. The blatant racist comments we no doubt have heard we probably want to distance ourselves from. And the White Supremacists who echo Nazi beliefs of "superior races" that we sometimes see in news reports we likely find repellent.

But racism as practiced in America for hundreds of years is woven into attitudes about race and racial groups that are sometimes harder to see.

Even before the Civil War, many people defined themselves as "segregationists." **Segregationists** argue that *racial differences are fundamental to who a people are and therefore the different races should be kept separate*. At its most extreme, segregationists argued for the idea of polygenesis, the false belief that people of different races evolved from separate origins. Later, segregationists abandoned polygenesis but clung to the belief of inviolable differences. Segregationist views most prominently came to be seen in the "separate but equal" policies that were supported after the Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896 and which led to segregated schools and businesses. *Plessy v. Ferguson* stood for fifty-eight years until it was struck down in the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954.

But other forms of segregationist thinking have been woven throughout American culture. Until the 1967 Supreme Court ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*, sixteen states continued to have anti-miscegenation laws forbidding Whites from marrying Blacks and sometimes Asians. Housing and land use were apportioned by race via city and county zoning laws enacted in the early twentieth century and which to this day have not been completely dismantled. And America's long history of immigration laws is rife with racist distinctions—for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first immigration law to bar people of a particular race or ethnic group; it was not repealed until 1943, when China was an ally in World War II.

In sum, a segregationist idea is one that promotes the belief that racial differences are fundamental to a people and, therefore, practices and policies should enforce separation of people by race. (Note that there are and have been similar and parallel arguments about the need to separate people and their roles in society according to sex, gender, sexuality, religion, and class.)

An **assimilationist** belief is one that *promotes the integration of minority cultures into what is sometimes called "the mainstream" or "the majority" culture*. The argument is that, in spite of past racist practices, inherent to the American system is a fairness that is available to all, so long as everyone abides by the same principles. While on the surface this sounds fair, in practice these principles inevitably describe White, heterosexual, masculinist, native-English speaking cultural practices—a fairly narrow slice of the American pie.

We can easily question the application of these principles. For example, must we all speak the same language? Must we even speak English? If so, then what kind of English? The English of working Black Americans? Historically, the answer to that question has been a definitive "no." Or how about the English of poor Whites of Appalachia? Again, historically, no.

And beyond language, must we all exhibit the same kinds of sexuality? If not, what variations are acceptable and which are not? And why not? Remember that prior to 2015, gay and lesbian couples were not allowed to marry (and in some states, still face hurdles), and until 2003, homosexuality was still a crime in many states. Many similar cultural and personal differences are considered deficient or deviant even if not criminalized. Just ask the members of the trans-gendered community.

Ultimately, it's the sense of *deficiency* that is inherent in assimilationist thinking that makes it difficult if not impossible to accept.

Yet, assimilationists argue that the best way for those historically excluded from power, especially racial, ethnic, and gender minorities, is to learn and adopt the language and practices of the majority in power. They argue that while it is regrettable that the system is skewed in the favor of the majority (power-majority if not numerical majority), it is the reality and we may as well just put past injustices behind us and accept and learn the ways of the powerful.

But why? Why should the historically disempowered change?

To do that, some Black students, for example, would have to learn to "code switch," or learn to use Standardized Edited American English (SEAE) in public settings and keep their language of home, often called Black Vernacular English, away from school and work. Native American and Indigenous peoples would have to forego their claims to land stolen from them and even their right to determine the use of the lands they live on so that they may "fit in" to the mainstream economic views that posits the land and waters as "assets" or "commodities." But why must indigenous people adopt White capitalist values?

The argument against segregationist beliefs should be obvious: differences among people are not immutable nor should they be considered a threat requiring separation. The ideas supporting the "celebrate diversity" movement, mainly from the end of the last century, counters the segregationist view by promoting a pluralism among different groups of equal people.

The argument against assimilationist beliefs holds that the bulk of the burden of repairing the damage of historic racism lies unfairly upon the victims of that system. In other words, the victims of a racist system should not now have to take painful and difficult actions to accommodate to that system while those in power do nothing. Worse, it leaves intact the belief that mainstream society as defined by Whites is normative and that it's up to everyone else to comply, to fit in—implying that they are "less than" and need to change.

The Anti-Racist Belief System and Color-Blindness

In contrast to both segregationist and assimilationist beliefs, **anti-racist** beliefs *promote the dismantling of systems that articulate and defend any single standard as acceptable or "right."* Every culture's values should be acknowledged as equal, not less than. These beliefs also support feminist and LGBTQ+ work as well as work in support of those with disabilities.

While we may have come a long way in repealing racist laws and policies, in practice, some things remain more intractable, such as racial profiling based on the inherent belief in the criminality of certain people. Black and Latino/a people recount with distressing regularity experiences of being watched when entering stores, of being followed by security guards, and of being stopped by police. Meanwhile, Asian Americans are asked how long they have been in "this country" or experience other kinds of race-based aggressions. Anti-racist work seeks to dismantle the belief systems that underlie these and similar practices.

More fundamentally, anti-racist work seeks to decenter any sense of a single standard of what is good or correct. This means that different ways of knowing and understanding the world—through narrative as opposed to scientific reasoning, for example, or through spiritual experience rather than capitalist valuation—must be acknowledged as having value equal to the culture in which it exists.

This also means that different ways of speaking and knowing must have an equal place. This is not to say that Standardized Edited American English (SEAE) should be shunned, only that it should be knocked off its pedestal as the one "correct" version of English. This also means that the scientific method of knowing the world should not be overly emphasized to the detriment of lived experience, of narrative, of elder and cultural wisdom. This is not to say that science is to be distrusted but rather that scientism, the excessive belief in the power of scientific thought, should be rejected and the dismissal of cultural knowledge should be stopped.

But "What about race neutral?" you might ask. Can't we all just ignore race and treat everyone the same? What about "*color-blindness*"?

It would be nice if we could simply not see race. But as the saying goes, race can't be erased. It is perhaps the first thing we notice, along with gender, when meeting or seeing a person. Immediately, and even before we are conscious of what

we know, we have identified the race and gender of the person we've just seen or met. And once seen in these ways, the person is immediately part of a category of thought, a system of belief: The concept of "Asian American woman" or "African American man" are part of a complex fabric of intersecting beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices.

The conceptual language we use establishes a value system with which we view the world. Certain things are good and others are not so. Embedded in that belief system are values of right behavior, right speech, right dress, right hair styles, etc. And these values woven together provide a view of people that implicates the values and meanings of different races, classes, and genders. We adopt these values in the language we learn to speak as children.

What this means is that we can't "set aside" values that underlie racist beliefs because those values are woven into our language and thus our very way of thinking and being in the world. To be "race neutral" would require us to have no language as a basis of thought. We would have to be unconscious—and how could we act and interact then?

The Language of the Academy and Racialized Discourse

Active Voices seeks to demystify the academic system and "academic discourse," which is the language and epistemic (knowledge-making) systems that form the academy. And like all human language, academic discourse is racialized: it is largely White and male. It is not neutral and it is not innocent.

Historically, the arguments grounding segregationists and assimilationists have taken place as much on college campuses as in the popular press, with academic arguments made by prominent scholars often playing a vital role. The hope that the principles of the Enlightenment, including the scientific method, rational thought, and the primacy of the individual, might be neutral tools has been undermined by the recognition that dispassionate reason alienates and disempowers other ways of knowing and being in the world. What this means is that the belief that reason is the pinnacle of human thought dismisses other ways of knowing the world, such as lived experience, intuition, and empathy.

This understanding that academic discourse and scientific reasoning are racialized does not discount the powers of such reasoning to do everything from develop vaccines to send spacecraft to Mars. What it does discount is the belief that reasoning can be applied to all the world's problems and, in fact, argues that such a mistaken belief actually causes many of the world's problems.

Ultimately, it's not all that difficult to develop a sophisticated thought system to support a prejudice. Just look at Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which an undisputed genius (Jefferson) carefully articulates the non-humanness of the people he was enslaving, creating a "hierarchy" of the human races, as he understood them, with White Europeans at the top and the people of African descent whom he was enslaving at the bottom. These claims were supported by supposedly scientific studies of differences in the cranial sizes of people of different races that were said to indicate different capacities for intelligence. (These spurious studies were all later wholly discredited as attempts to "rank" races.)

Anti-racist work, then, rests upon the belief that human language and belief systems, including academic discourse, are inherently racialized and to pretend otherwise—to argue that there is anything like a "neutral" language or thought system, or that we can be "color-blind"—is to be complicit in a historically racist system. Anti-racism calls for a plurality of views and ways of being in the world and claims that segregationist and assimilationist views are based on a false and harmful view that posits "different" as "less than."

Active Voices and Anti-Racist Work

So how can you, as a student, use *Active Voices* in an anti-racist way?

First, see the chapters not as definitive but conversational. The readings should be a point of departure, not a destination. For example, the chapter on "What thinking like an academic means" describes the thinking that academics, as academics, do.

But consider "thinking as an academic" in light of other kinds of thinking that are not mentioned and how those other kinds of thinking may be racialized or gendered. This can be a powerful way to resist the belief that there is a standardized

type of thinking that is "better" than others. For example, hip-hop artists of the 1990s could know and present to the world predominantly Black and Latino/a city life in ways no sociologist ever could.

Second, as you read and discuss, ask yourself what your world views are and what languages and knowledge you bring that are not discussed in the text. How might these other ways of knowing and being broaden the narrow academic world to make it more inclusive? We can ask ourselves, "How does identifying a standard tend to lead us to value that standard? What is being diminished and why?"

Finally, many of the chapters and sections offer ideas and views that can challenge racist and other marginalizing systems.

The first eight chapters of *Active Voices* describe the academy and the types of knowing and being the academy promotes. But you can ask yourself: What is left out? How can we understand the traditional academic standards and even, perhaps, appreciate and function with them without necessarily limiting ourselves to them? Chapter 10, "What Language to Write In," presents the statement on the Students' Right to Their Own Language. This was and remains a highly controversial statement. Ask yourself: Who might resist this statement and why? How do you feel about it and why?

The "Active Voices" features recognize students challenging the status quo. "Different Methods of Learning" presents a student with Asperger's who challenged the standard of what is called "neuro-normal" learning. Other sections that support an anti-racist perspective include "Heritage, Identity, and Scholarship" (60), "Monuments as text" (94), "Freedom of Speech on Campus" (122), "HU Stands" on sexual harassment (130), "Activism Across Generations" (174), "I'm Lovin' Diversity" on the lack of Asian-American images (223), and "Campus Pride" (303). These might help you see the kind of work that's going on around your own community.

In Sum

Racist views that have grounded social and educational systems can be loosely grouped as **segregationist**, which seeks to enforce racial separation, and more commonly today, **assimilationist**, which argues that the best way to overcome the legacy of racism is for traditionally marginalized people to learn and adopt the language values of those in power. **Anti-racist** beliefs, however, challenge the notion of any single neutral or "natural" standard. Instead, it seeks to promote a plurality of equal cultural norms.

Extending the Conversation

Activity 1

Talk back. Look at the key terms of this chapter and do a bit of research on your own. Learn a bit more about segregationist, assimilationist, anti-racist principles. Learn what equity, diversity, and pluralism might mean. What did this essay get right? What did it get wrong? What do you understand about the intersection of these different concepts in describing the world you live in, have lived in, or want to live in? What consequences do your views hold in terms of rights and responsibilities?

Activity 2

https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist

Check out the "Talking about Race: Being Antiracist" site presented by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, one of the Smithsonian Institutions located in Washington, DC. Read about the different forms of racism (individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural) and then watch the short video with Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to be an Antiracist* (2019) as well as the National Book Award-winning *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016). Summarize what you've come to understand and then decide what you want to do with all these ideas.