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# Teaching Note - Race and the Walking Tour

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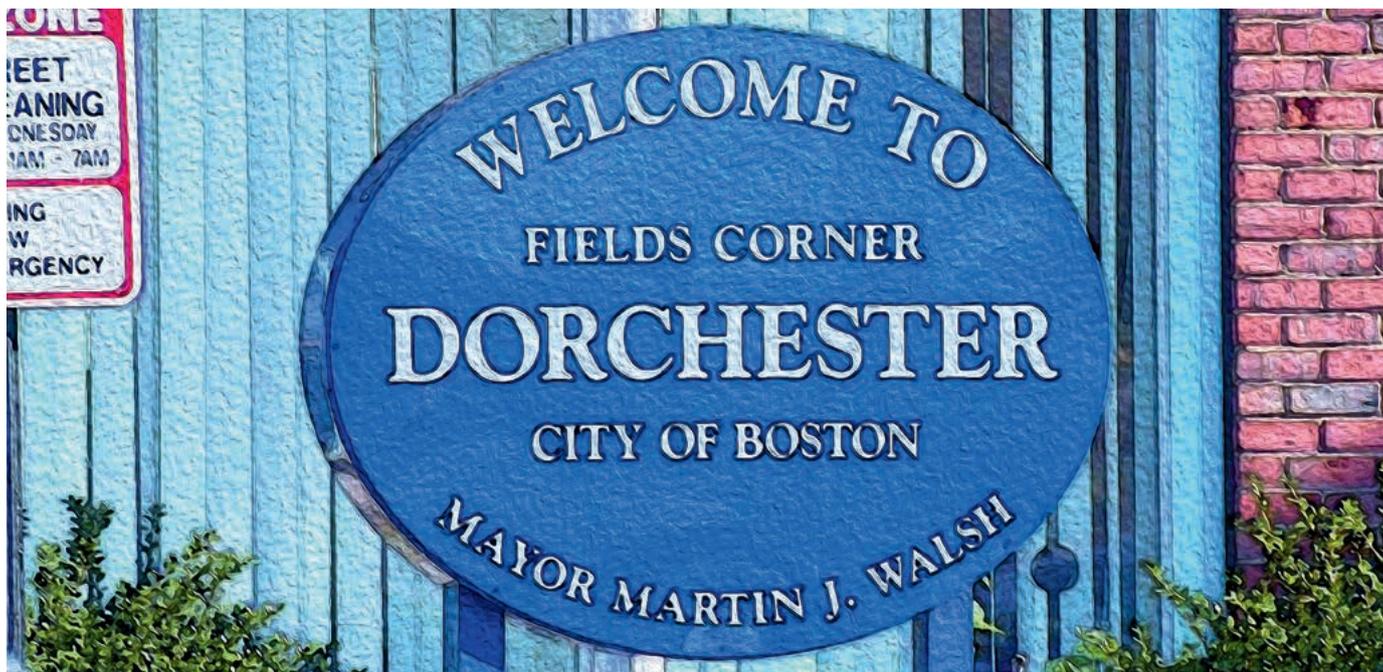
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## TEACHING NOTE

### Race and the Walking Tour

*Robin Tierney*

One afternoon after I had lived in Bridgewater for a couple of years, I had my eyebrows waxed at the nail shop on the town square. After chatting for a bit, the woman waxing my brows told me about how her children had refused to speak to her in Cambodian when they were growing up; they would only respond to her in English. “And now,” she said, as she leaned over me to apply hot wax to my eyebrows, “they are learning Khmer from some white guy at Massasoit Community College.” I didn’t share with her that I was a white ‘gal’ who teaches Asian language and literature at Bridgewater State University to a steady trickle of Asian-American students, but it certainly registered with me. The particular silence that I felt in the nail salon that morning became the catalyst for a chain of reactions that ran, in unpredictable ways, through my teaching, my student’s experience inside and outside the classroom, and my own self-understanding.

The beauty technician’s comments helped me begin to identify some needs of students of Vietnamese and Cambodian descent who regularly found their way into my East Asian Literature class, and left, I imagined, feeling relatively empty-handed. The course focuses on China, Japan and Korea, not the South East Asian cultures of Cambodia or Vietnam, whose diasporic communities have shorter histories and significantly lower economic positions than established Chinese-American or Japanese-American communities. With a realization of the gaps in my course content, I developed a mini-unit on Cambodian-American and Vietnamese-American literature that included a self-guided walking tour of the Vietnamese-American community in Dorchester.

The assignment was composed of a ten-stop walking itinerary and two writing prompts that would hopefully serve as an impetus for cultural observations that students would write about in their required writing journals. The explicit goal of the walking tour was for students to experience the cultural hybridity of Asian-American communities and to observe the ways in which immigrant cultures reconstitute

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and adapt their cultural institutions. But what engaged students most of all was something that I would never have predicted: feedback from the very first student to do the walking tour who said it had been so dangerous that she had been too scared to be able to learn anything from the experience. The student did the tour on a Saturday afternoon with her mother and her aunt, both of whom had grown up in Dorchester when it was primarily an Irish-American area. They had felt uncomfortable in front of the men hanging out on the steps of the Field's Corner T station. They were afraid to turn off the main avenue and go to the Buddhist temple and the Vietnamese-American community center.

When I received this email on a Saturday evening, I immediately cancelled my Sunday morning plans and drove to Dorchester to do the tour again. It was a crisp blue morning. I saw African-American men sitting outside the Field's Corner T station, I saw Vietnamese monks at the temple. I saw boarded-up store fronts and small supermarkets where the produce was sold out of overflowing cardboard boxes and there was sawdust on the floor. In the restaurant where I ate, the customers were African-American and Asian-American. I saw signs of stress – “no children please” posted on several store doors – and the many mailboxes on some individual porches indicated cramped living conditions.

I had seen urban poverty, but I hadn't felt fear when I spent that morning in Dorchester. I was reassured that I had not endangered my students. But why didn't I feel fear when my student and her family had? Were other students also going to feel fearful? When I brought up the topic in class on the following Monday, the students very quickly broke down into three different perspectives: students who felt unsafe in poor urban areas; students who thought those students were sheltered and,

however inadvertently, racist; and students who lived in Dorchester and felt that students' concerns for their safety were justified. I had not anticipated the amount of common ground shared between the “sheltered” students, all of whom were white, and the students living in Dorchester, all of whom were African-American. The students left out of this shared understanding were those who used their critical-thinking skills to perform an analysis of race and class, and the projection of fear.

Here is Michael (not his real name – all student names are pseudonyms), a Dorchester resident: “Oh, yeah I'd be

assaults and convenience store hold-ups that occurred – without exception – between the hours of 10:00 pm and 4:00 am.

In this particular class, the conversation spanned three class periods. Two students from Dorchester, Robert and Michael, contributed most to the conversation. I noticed that when they talked everyone in the class was attentive. It was a concentrated listening that is not at all the norm in my classroom where, at any given moment, there could be students talking to one another, or checking their phones, or heading out to the restroom.

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## Again and again, I learn the lesson that it is not possible to observe the Vietnamese-American community without engaging with the broader histories and dynamics of race in the United States.

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scared walking that part of the Avenue if I didn't know what was up. My sister's house got broken into last year, but I wasn't staying there when it happened. I mean, I know people, so it's no problem for me to feel safe. Don't go there at night time and you'll be alright.”

Another student, not from Dorchester, shared that there were lots of drive-by shootings in Dorchester. I pushed back a little on this and asked for specific examples. “You hear about it all the time,” was all he had to offer.

That night, I looked up the police logs in Dorchester. There were no drive-by shootings, but there was more violence than I had expected; sexual

It's strange, really, when you think how simple but powerful this is; people talking to one another about their lives and hearing the perceptions of the people sitting next to them about their own. But I bet I am not alone in having the experience of mostly talking about race and class with people whose demographic background closely resembles my own.

Robert has been talking about his experience since he was a high-school student. He had a politically conscious English teacher who taught his students about writers who wrote social critiques about their respective worlds.

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“He knew what was up,” Robert said of his teacher. “I mean, he knew we weren’t normal kids.”

“What do you mean by ‘normal’?” I asked.

“He knew we didn’t always have homes to go home to, or if we did that there wouldn’t be dinner, or anybody asking us how our day was. He took our class on a field trip to a town where some famous writer used to live. We were all like, ‘This is how people live on television.’ All the big houses had their front doors wide open.”

It turns out that it was Thoreau’s cabin near Walden Pond where Robert had gone to on his class trip. The reproduc-

tion of Thoreau’s spartan one-room cabin had not left much of an impression on Robert, but the concentrated wealth of the Boston suburbs certainly had. It was another example of students learning about race and class when the intended outcome was likely something else.

they were talking about their lived experience; not by the white student who brought up the concern about danger and men hanging around the steps of the T-station, and not by the African-American students who lived in Dorchester and readily acknowledged its potential dangers. I imagined we were talking about race but race was only mentioned by the cohort of students who performed an academic analysis of race and class; it was only mentioned in the abstract.

I have now assigned the walking tour many times. I appreciate the refrains from students that they have driven by this neighborhood on I-93 their whole lives and never knew it was there; that

hesitate before going on to make generalizations about neighborhoods they have never been to when sitting next to students who live in those neighborhoods. Students speak of their anxieties in regard to being in new places and being in urban environments. Students recounted feeling glared at, and one student, who went with his parents, said that someone yelled at him in a language he didn’t understand. Each student who used the word ‘anxiety’ was white. Several students of color mentioned feeling welcomed, and one student spoke of being nodded to by other African-American men because of how he was dressed and the pick that he carried in his back pocket. Throughout all of these conversations that was the only instance in which a student voluntarily introduced race as a construct through which to understand what we were talking about.

I began to wonder what was being lost when race was not explicitly articulated as a shaping factor in the students’ experience of the walking tour. Even if, in some way, we all ‘got it,’ not directly talking about it meant that we didn’t actually explore how significantly race shapes the contours of our lives. I saw how the inability to articulate race too often ceded the space of ‘authenticity’ to rumors; students seemed more willing to talk about their ‘feeling’ of being frightened by men at the T station, for example, if they did not include the fact that the men were African-American. I resolved to make the role that race plays in these student experiences more explicit. I had learned that our study of Vietnamese-American literature and culture would intersect with American racial identity in general; I was better prepared.

This past spring a clear opportunity to insert race into the conversation presented itself. A student, a petite blonde woman, shared how she had been noticing so many examples of cultural hybridity inside a Vietnamese bakery that as soon as she exited she took out a

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tion of Thoreau’s spartan one-room cabin had not left much of an impression on Robert, but the concentrated wealth of the Boston suburbs certainly had. It was another example of students learning about race and class when the intended outcome was likely something else.

When these conversations first started taking place in my classroom, I thought students of different backgrounds were talking to each other about race and class in an unusually open manner. In writing about this, however, I realize that race was not explicitly named as a factor by any of the students when

one doesn’t have to go overseas to witness diverse cultures; and that what they saw when they opened various doors – in particular, of the Buddhist temple – was completely different than what they had imagined. Again and again, I learn the lesson that it is not possible to observe the Vietnamese-American community without engaging with the broader histories and dynamics of race in the United States. Sometimes Dorchester residents aren’t as understanding of white student discomfort as Michael and Robert were. One student said, “That’s where I do my banking every Saturday – you’ll be fine.” And I have seen white students



pad to write them down. Immediately, the manager came out to ask her if she was the health inspector. Upon saying 'No,' the student was invited back inside and treated to pastries. Another student, an Afro-Caribbean woman, then shared that she was browsing through Vietnamese CDs and had been wondering if the store clerks were going to think that she was stealing. The clerks had looked up when she entered, but then went right back to

their phones. The student took this to be a positive sign of acceptance.

Neither student mentioned the color of her skin when they shared their experience. One student was approached as though she held institutional power and was given free pastries, and another student had appreciated that she was not believed to be engaging in criminal behavior. This was an ideal opportunity to introduce the question of race. To my surprise, however, I found myself

growing concerned that my saying that a white student and a black student had just had very different experiences because of their color, was in itself going to be racist. That I was going to identify students in my classroom as having 'racial identities' when they had not initiated such identification felt, momentarily, like an aggressive act. In that instant I couldn't say whether race was the elephant in the room, or if I was simply alone in not being a millennial. So I did precisely what I had



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been planning and hoping to change, I spoke about race without identifying it as such. I said something like, "Clearly there are social and historical reasons for why some people are going to be assumed to be enforcers of public

policy and others have to reckon with being seen as criminals from the start." I hoped the class knew what I was saying, or not saying, and I can't imagine that they didn't. Then why didn't I just clearly say what I meant?

It is not lost on me that this project was largely catalyzed by a comment about whiteness, a comment that was more relevant to me than I cared to own at the time. When I look at the force field that keeps me from talking about race in settings where I believe it would be productive to do so, I see the fear of being wrong in regard to race as a significant factor. I understand that particular fear, and my ability to protect myself from it coming to pass in public, to be part of my white privilege, or perhaps just my whiteness in general. A charged silencing of myself at the nail salon led to the contradictory results of opening my eyes to connections I had not seen before, but also to a repetition of my own silence about race in the debriefing session in the classroom. I experienced change and repetition happening at the same time. I also encountered some limits of the academic skills of social critique; intellectual skills of critique alone did not provide me with the ability to address race in a social setting of people of different races and differing understandings of the role race plays. These dialectics of change and stasis, and of thought and lived experience, moved in unpredictable ways across the terrains of my own Bridgewater neighborhood, a college classroom, a neighborhood in Dorchester, and back again to the classroom. There will be no final resting point, I realize, in my own evolution of thinking about race. In this particular case, crossing those terrains has been a key factor in keeping that evolution in motion.



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