# Anthropology students in Michigan, migrant workers in Israel, and the inadequacy of the “social construction of race”

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In the winter of 2014, as a graduate student in the University of Michigan’s Department of Anthropology, I was both taking classes and teaching them. I was teaching Anthropology 101 – an introductory class for undergraduates – and taking Traditions in Ethnology 2, a required course for PhD students. In the latter class, our professor Alaina Lemon assigned an article by bell hooks, “Culture to culture: Ethnography and cultural studies as critical intervention.” The whole article was fascinating, but one paragraph hit me like a punch to the belly. With your permission, I will quote from it extensively:

*These days when I enter classrooms to teach about people of color and the students present are nearly all white, I recognize this to be a risky situation. I may be serving as a collaborator with a racist structure that is gradually making it much more difficult for students of color, particularly black students … to participate in undergraduate or graduate study. Their absence can be easily ignored when the subjects studied focus on non-whites, just as their absence in the professorial role can be ignored when white professors are addressing issues of difference. In such circumstances I must interrogate my role as educator. Am I teaching white students to become contemporary “interpreters” of black experience? Am I educating the colonizer/oppressor class so that they can better exert control?* (hooks 2014, 132)

I think the most profound sentence in this paragraph, and the one that shocked me the most, is this counter-intuitive one: *The absence of black students can be easily ignored when the subjects studied* ***focus on non-whites****, just as their absence in the professorial role can be ignored when white professors are addressing issues of difference.* This means that something has changed. If in the past racism was perpetuated in the academia by either ignoring the existence of people of color or through explicitly racist discourses, today this is no longer viable. Today, the function of “educating the colonizer/oppressor class so that they can better exert control” apparently requires that race be talked about, and not in explicitly racist ways. Why is this?

One kind of answer was suggested to me by something that happened later that same year: the downfall of Donald Sterling, owner of the LA Clippers basketball team. As you may remember, Sterling was ostracized, stripped of ownership of his club and banned from the NBA for *saying racist things*. Namely, he said – to a friend, in a private conversation which he did not know was being taped – that “It bothers me a lot that you want to broadcast that you're associating with black people,” and, “You can sleep with [black people]. … you can do whatever you want,” but “the little I ask you is ... not to bring them to my games.”

Now, it bears mentioning that Sterling was also a landlord and that in 2003 and 2006 he paid good chunks of money to settle cases of alleged housing discrimination. His blatantly racist *actions* may have had financial consequences, but these weren’t disastrous given his great wealth. It was racist *talk*, and again let me point out that this was talk in private, that brought him public disgrace and humiliation. The implications of this for America’s white elite are clear: you can get away with perpetuating all sorts of horrid racist phenomena, so long as you *don’t talk racist* under any circumstances, even in private. But this is a pretty tricky ability to acquire; it takes training. When bell hooks raised the possibility that those of us who teach about racial difference may be complicit in “educating the colonizer/oppressor class so that they can better exert control,” could she have had this in mind?

The winter of 2014 was also the winter when the movement known as BBUM, for “Being Black at the University of Michigan,” was coming to the fore. One of the movement’s main demands was the reinstatement of affirmative action in university admissions. Affirmative action at Michigan is a long story of struggle, and in recent years a story of defeat for anti-racist action. Let me try to sketch the contours quickly. The State of Michigan is 14% black. Most of its black population is concentrated in the Detroit metro area, which is 23% black. The main campus of the University is located in Ann Arbor, on the margin of this metropolitan area. Even with affirmative action in enrollment, in 2008 only 6.8% of new students were black. And then came Proposal 2, a state law that made affirmative action illegal. The University opposed it, but it was held up by the US Supreme Court and is in effect to this day. Since 2009 black admissions have hovered at between 4 and 5 percent – making for a student population that is overwhelmingly white and Asian.

As you know, in the United States higher education plays a major role in reproducing all kinds of inequality. Your life chances are greatly impacted by whether or not you went to college, and what college you went to if you did. The University of Michigan is an elite institution – that means that having a degree from UM could be a major boost in life to people from underprivileged backgrounds. It is also a public institution – one that ostensibly has an obligation towards the people of the state in which it is located. But it is not fulfilling this obligation, at least as far as the black citizens of that state are concerned.

What did all this have to do with me as a teacher and with what I was teaching? Well, the course that I was a teaching assistant for, Anthropology 101, was and still is a gigantic course. We were six TAs, each teaching three sections with about twenty-five students in each; there were two versions of the course being taught every semester, so a rough estimate says 1,800 students were taking the class every year; that is, about 1 in 4 students at the University takes it. And why do they? Well, some may be interested in anthropology; but most take it because it fulfills what is called the “race and ethnicity requirement.” Let me read you part of the explanation about this requirement from the University’s [website](https://www.lsa.umich.edu/facstaff/undergraduateeducation/curriculumcommittee/courseapprovalrequestsforms/raceethnicityrequirement_ci):

*These courses address issues that arise from racial or ethnic* ***intolerance****:*

*Required content. All courses satisfying the requirement must provide discussion concerning:*

* 1. *the meaning of race, ethnicity, and racism;*
  2. *racial and ethnic intolerance and* ***resulting*** *inequality as it occurs in the United States or elsewhere;*
  3. *comparisons of* ***discrimination*** *based on race, ethnicity, religion, social class, or gender.* (my emphasis)

One immediately apparent thing here is that the word “intolerance” appears twice, while “inequality” and “discrimination” each appear only once, and other words, for example “violence,” don’t appear at all. Inequality is further specified as *resulting* from intolerance. So the definition of the requirement is definitely tilted towards a view of “intolerance” – that is, a mental state or a state of belief – as the root of the problem. The social problem of inequality is an *outcome* of this mental state, and “discrimination” – something that is situated uncomfortably between the individual and the social levels, between a personal attitude and an institutional policy, has no specified cause at all.

Let me return to Anthropology 101. Race is a central issue in anthropology, so it is natural that the class should fill the requirement. But *how* does Anthro 101 deal with race? What does it say about it? In my experience, the bottom line is quite simple, though it is hammered home to the students in a number of ways, and it is this: *race is a social construction*. In accordance with the conventional wisdom in the discipline, which is even enshrined in an [official statement](http://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583) by the American Anthropological Association, the course uses biological anthropology to argue against the biological reality of racial categories, and it uses cultural and linguistic anthropology to show that these categories are constructed, that they are created by people – though collectively and not individually.

Now this is a simple statement but its implications are not necessarily easy to grasp. For example, one day I mentioned in passing in class that black people are usually poorer than white people; after class a very well-meaning white student approached me to ask whether that was not a racist thing to say. I could understand his logic: if racial categories are a harmful, oppressive thing that is made up by people, does it not perniciously perpetuate this oppression to say something like “black people are disproportionately poor”?

Now, from the point of view of people of color this is a ridiculous mistake. The fact that race is a “social construction” didn’t help Aura Rosser, who was shot dead by Ann Arbor police in that same year of 2014, basically killed for being black, like so many thousands of others. Oppressed people know that these so-called “social constructions” have a brutal reality to them, that just because they are not biologically determined does not mean that they are in any way an illusion. But for white people this way of thinking is tempting.

The cautionary tale about Donald Sterling reinforces the temptation. Sterling was not denounced by luminaries up to and including the president of the United States for discriminating against his black tenants, but only for his “intolerant” talk. Of course, when racism works blindly, through institutions like the prison system that sucks young black people in and the higher education system which repels them, we can all agree that this is in some sense an outcome of the so-called “social construction” of race, but just repeating that statement doesn’t get us very far in understanding such phenomena. In fact, as the text of the requirement suggests, the easiest go-to is that they are a simple result of “intolerance,” that is, of racist beliefs and racist talk. So if we get rid of these, we should be clear of any racial injustice. One possible corollary is that if white people stopped being “intolerant” then any remaining inequality would not be the result of racism at all, but the fault of the underprivileged themselves.

To be absolutely clear, I don’t think that this reactionary position is the position of the people who teach Anthro 101, either the professors or the TAs. We are all good liberals or leftists, and we’re opposed to structural racism and we try to talk about it in class. But it’s not the main thrust of the course; the main thrust is that simple statement, “race is a social construction,” and again, I want to suggest that what most white students take away from the class is the injunction: “don’t be racist,” which primarily means “don’t talk racist,” or, if you want to be completely safe, just “don’t talk about race at all.” If any of you were perplexed by the white reaction to Beyoncé’s recent video “Formation,” with the bizarre suggestion that Beyoncé is herself racist – well, now you might have an inkling of where this sort of thinking comes from.

Now I want to take a leap away from Michigan to my own research, which is on Thai migrant farmworkers in Israel. I think one valuable thing we can do with this vexing and incredibly important problem of race is to look more closely at how it works in other parts of the world. Academic ideas about race are very much based on the North American paradigm, and the most important comparative work has been done with Latin America and the Caribbean. Recently, with the big waves of migration, lots of work is also being done in Europe. So we academics know quite a bit about race in North America and a fair amount about race in the rest of the Americas; for people in the social sciences and humanities working on most of the rest of the world, including Israel, race hasn’t been a central issue. This may or may not be because racial thinking and racial institutions just didn’t exist in those societies until recently; in any case, they certainly exist now. If race is a social construction, we shouldn’t be surprised that it can spring up rather quickly. In fact, places where it pops up seemingly out of nowhere are interesting laboratories for asking what makes race happen, in other words, of what causes and perpetuates *racialization* processes. And I want to talk about the case of Thais in Israel in this vein, to complicate the notion of “social construction” just a little bit.

Thirty years ago there were no Thais in Israel. The population was made up almost entirely of Jews and Palestinian Arabs, who are distinguished along lines that can be considered racial, but who are actually quite hard to physically tell apart a lot of the time. I remember riding a bus at age five or so and seeing my first black person; it was a memorable occasion. But in the 1990’s the State of Israel made a strategic decision to wean itself off the cheap labor of Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, who were becoming too rebellious, and to open its borders to hundreds of thousands of migrants from all over the global South. This was a very controlled labor stream, limited to particular industries, and each industry was assigned one or two primary countries of origin. For eldercare, for example, it was the Philippines. For agriculture, Thailand.

Today this policy decision has produced a form of racialization that is very strongly coupled to occupational roles. *Filipinit* means “Filipina,” that is, a woman from the Philippines, but it also means “eldercare worker.” Women from other countries who work in the same profession are also called by that name. *Tailandi*, in the masculine, means “farmworker.” In the farming community where I am doing my fieldwork, *tailandim* – the plural form – is used to refer to all workers who are neither Jewish nor Arab, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, and sometimes even Ethiopians. WiFi networks usually begin with the name of the homeowner, who is also the employer, and those networks that are intended for the use of workers are suffixed with the word “Thai” (in English).

Obviously, the difference in physical appearance helps to make Thais stand out, and it’s not particularly surprising that other Southeast Asians are thought to be Thai. But Israelis don’t identify Thais only on the basis of their physical appearance – in fact, even the notion of “physical appearance” is a little misleading, because we think of it as pertaining only to the natural, biological body; but people don’t usually walk around naked, so “physical appearance” obviously includes clothing. While they’re doing farmwork, Thais and other farmworkers tend to dress very differently from Israelis. Israelis like to get tanned and we dress very skimpily when outside in the sun – no doubt contributing to the very high incidence of skin cancer in the country. Thais, like the indigenous Bedouin Palestinians, are very careful to cover up their bodies when at work. In addition to pants, long-sleeved shirts and hats, they also often cover their faces with a cloth. This keeps the skin light, which is culturally prestigious, and it’s also probably a good way of preventing cancer and dehydration. So “Thais” working outdoors look very different from Israelis, but not because of their biologically determined physical features.

This can be taken further. In the community where I am doing fieldwork, about half of the population consists of migrant workers. It’s a small place, but remarkably enough, when you ask local Israelis what it’s like to have such a massive presence of foreigners in their community, they usually say that they don’t notice it. This is only possible because of several micro-level processes that make it easy to ignore the non-Israelis. The latter live in segregated quarters, normally in the inner yards of farmhouses, and they ride to work on tractor-drawn carts hours before most Israelis are up and about. They shop in separate shops and keep away from public facilities like the pool and the café.

All this is classic racial segregation. It has appeared before in many places, including the American South during the Jim Crow era and apartheid South Africa. It’s also different from these other cases in all sorts of ways. But my point is that this is not just an *outcome* of racialization, it’s also one of its *sustaining causes*: Israelis can “tell” Thais apart from themselves not only because their faces are a different shape and their skins are a different color; not only because they dress differently; but also because they move around at different times, on different vehicles, using different routes, with different purposes. One last and particularly surprising example before I move on: one day I was working in the packinghouse when an Israeli customer walked in. I was a little surprised when she addressed me in English, and after answering in Hebrew I asked her why she had done so. Did she think I was Thai? She confessed, rather ashamed, that she had. Now, as you can see I do not have Thai facial features. I wasn’t even dressed like a Thai; it was enough that I was engaged in a job that she expected a Thai to be doing for her to mistake me for one.

What I am getting at is that race is definitely a social construction, but that doesn’t mean that it is entirely in people’s heads. Buildings and roads and tractors and greenhouses and hats and shirts – these are all social constructions too, in the sense that they are made by people that are interacting with one another. They have a material aspect, and they are not illusions; they are as real as any natural phenomenon. The same goes for race. People make buildings and roads and tractors and greenhouses and hats and shirts, and those material objects make a racial category, the *tailandi*, together with what goes on in people’s heads.

So what would happen if we could magically scoop out all the “intolerance,” all the racist thoughts and beliefs from people’s heads? There is no real way of knowing, but note again that thirty years ago there were no Thais in Israel. There was never any concerted attempt by anybody to foment beliefs of any kind about them – in fact, unlike the Palestinians, they have been pretty much ignored in Israeli public discourse. Sure, there are racist beliefs about them now, but these seem to be an *outcome* of the inequality and legalized, planned, structural discrimination against them, not a cause of it. This gives the lie to the idea that disciplining the beliefs of the oppressor group, as expressed in the way they talk, can be a pathway of primary importance to the ending of racial injustice.

This emphatically doesn’t mean that there shouldn’t be a race and ethnicity requirement, or that anthropology has no part to play in fighting racism through education. But the time has passed when it was a progressive move simply to point out that racial differences have no biological basis. At this point, we need to be clear with our students that race is not an illusion that can be banished by not talking about it. Rather the opposite: we need to understand how the social construction of race takes on a painful material reality, if we are ever to have any hope of eradicating racial injustice.

***Works Cited***

hooks, bell. 2014. “Culture to Culture: Ethnography and Cultural Studies as Critical Intervention.” In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 123–34. New York; London: Routledge.