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# Race and Racism

## Institutional Racism

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Institutional racism in the United States is a debilitating force in many people's lives. Critical thinking about its features is crucial if educators are going to counteract its effects in the form of discrimination or structural inequality. As such, the structural features of society are a main target of a social analysis of racism, rather than a more psychologized analysis of individual racist actions. Individual pieces of the racial puzzle do not produce a coherent understanding. Rather than being concerned with details, critical thinking brings to focus the total picture of a racialized society. A critical theory of institutional racism turns on two important premises. One, institutional racism is part of the basic fabric of society and saturates its processes. Two, institutional racism is durable, which means that it has historical roots and an objective presence. These starting points help educators understand that institutional racism is about social patterns, not random acts of hatred.

In a speech, former Black Panthers leader, Elaine Brown, noted that it took black people one hundred years to drink out of the same water fountains as whites. She is referring to the period between the

official end of slavery and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which brought about social changes in the institutional and legal landscape of the United States. In addition to sharing water fountains, blacks can now ride in the front of the bus and enjoy access to most schools across the nation. Yet, racial integration is still a future projection and not an accomplishment of the present. Rather than emphasizing details about institutional racism, like interpersonal dynamics, critical thinking comes to grips with its structural features in society at large. Although it may be tempting to suggest that it is a thing of the past, institutional racism has taken on different forms, mutating from overt policies, like slavery and forced segregation, to euphemized social policies, like school tracking practices or de facto segregation. In all, while the United States has abolished slavery and other coercive forms of racism, we live with its structural form, or racism in our social institutions.

Critical thinking begins with the assertion that interpersonal relations do not explain the institutional basis of racism. The critical thinker problematizes the popular belief that racism is a problem be-

tween individuals. Rather, she helps students gain a proper understanding of history and the way that institutions—like schools, the workplace, or the law—are structured by racism. For example, when whites speak demeaningly about minorities, there are institutional consequences for such statements over and beyond their hurtful consequences. These statements have institutions that support them, which give them their force. In this manner, we can say that they are not only hurtful, but institutionally oppressive. When Asian Americans are called “Chinamen” or “Japs,” we are reminded of the exploitation of young Chinese railroad workers and Japanese internment camps. When schools use Indian mascots and appropriate Indian culture, this is not interpreted as an innocent gesture of openness toward indigenous people. These actions are supported by hundreds of years of white cooptation of their culture, of the government’s ability to subvert their self-determination, and the cultural conversion policies of the United States. Critical thinking confronts the ties between the present and the historical past.

Although they may be hurtful or stereotypic, and hence should never be encouraged, bigoted statements about whites rarely carry institutional weight. Critical thinking must make this basic distinction to avoid characterizing all racially motivated statements as having equal institutional consequences. When minorities call whites “honkeys,” there is little history to suggest that it has been used to oppress whites, or that it has institutional consequences for them. In some cases, it may have damaging effects on an individual’s psyche, but it lacks structural effects. Critical thinkers understand that there are important differences between misconceptions about a race and institutional ar-

rangements among the races. Misconceptions about whites can be addressed through mediation, whereas a statement like “Mexicans are beaners” is symptomatic of institutionalized immigration policies impacting Mexicans who are perceived as illegal aliens and whose rights should be curtailed.

A critical educator can teach about California as a case study. Here, Mexicans were the largest target of Proposition 187, an initiative limiting social services, like education and health care, to undocumented immigrants. Although undocumented immigrants may sound like a catch-all phrase to include many groups, its popular image in California is a brown face. White faces, like Canadians, are rarely accused of illegal immigrant status. Moreover, the recent passing of Proposition 227, which challenged the legitimacy of bilingual education, should be linked to 187 as a package that is racially motivated against Latino interests. Although they certainly represent error, misconceptions about whites can be mediated by the astute teacher. The institutionalized form of misconceptions is more durable, has material consequences, and thus requires a different analysis from the critical thinker.

Critical thinking recognizes that institutional racism ultimately reflects relations of power between groups. When whites segregated blacks into ghettos at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was made possible by white institutional power (Massey & Denton, 1993). Otherwise, it would not stick. It was supported by the courts, local and federal government, and politics in general. The historical record makes it clear that whites controlled these public spheres. In addition, critical educators remind students that housing segregation reinforces school and job discrimination, again bringing to focus a

complete, rather than fragmented, picture of institutional racism. For racism to become a pervasive force in society, it must saturate every sector, soak every institution. Critical thinking engages the big picture of racism; otherwise, it is not a structural feature, but rather a background annoyance. Today, on almost every social indicator from wealth to health, minorities register less gains and more pains compared with whites. With the nation’s two hundred fifty years of slavery, one hundred years of Jim Crow, and forty years of ambivalent action, a critical teacher is warranted to say that the United States was founded on the principles of institutional racism.

At the turn of the second millennium, we witness the backlash of affirmative action. How do educators make sense of affirmative action? As a policy designed to ameliorate present racial disparities and as historical compensation for the legacy of black and Indian oppression, affirmative action provided a sense of mobility for minorities. However, with concerns about falling academic rigor and perceived white disadvantage, the discourse of reverse discrimination has surfaced. The argument is premised on the belief that affirmative action discriminates against whites. Although white institutional disadvantage under affirmative action utterly lacks empirical support, it behooves the critical thinker to analyze the assumptions of such a charge from an ideological vantage point. Often, ideological statements do not rely on evidence, yet are still effective as claims about reality. Hence, critical thinkers must not dismiss them simply as examples of irrational thinking.

Critical thinking may proceed in the following manner concerning affirmative action. First, we recognize that the charge betrays a lack of understanding for the in-

stitutional basis of discrimination. Discrimination may be defined as the process whereby a group creates policies to maintain its power by oppressing other groups. Such has been the case with white ghettoization of blacks or men’s disenfranchisement of women from the vote. Thus, a critical educator understands that affirmative action does not equate with discrimination in reverse because it is not a policy that minorities use to maintain their power over whites, a power that they do not possess in the first place and, therefore, cannot enforce.

Second, to name affirmative action as reverse discrimination individualizes what is otherwise an institutional arrangement. As already suggested, the charge lacks empirical support so that it becomes fairly obvious that people making it consider themselves personally victimized, which is the first mistake in our understanding of racism. Institutional racism is not explainable through the psychological or subjective dimensions of our lives. It is not a feeling absent of structural origins. Institutional racism is anchored in real things, material resources that then affect one’s subjectivity or self-perception. Racism is objective of our desires and wishes in the sense that it is autonomous of them, existing independently of them, as an institutional force.

Third, critical thinking reminds us that, despite the lack of empirical support for “reverse discrimination,” the ideology is enough to trigger policies. In California, Proposition 209 struck a blow to affirmative action based on the premise that it helps no group. It does not help whites because of the perceptions already stated and it cripples the legitimacy of minorities, particularly in university settings. Soon, minority students start to believe that they do not belong there either. The reaction has been to dismantle the policy rather

than address the institutional climate of the universities, one which is inhospitable to minority students. In exchange for institutional intervention, the belief in rugged individualism is reasserted. Minorities should gain entrance into institutions based on their merit, thus deracinating the concept of meritocracy and leaving it un-problematicized.

Critical thinking makes a fourth distinction. If segregation represents institutional attempts to maintain power relations, then attempts by racial minorities to address their own community issues through self-separation cannot be called "self-segregation" or "reverse segregation." For instance, when blacks establish Afrocentric schools, they do not promote the same segregation we saw earlier when whites segregated blacks into their ghettoized neighborhoods and prevented them from integrating into the nation's schools. If segregation is an "action perpetrated by a group on another," then it is difficult to claim that blacks are segregating whites through Afrocentric schools. In the same light, critical thinkers understand that Native American nations, Latino-based organizations, or Asian American ethnic enclaves do not represent attempts by these communities to segregate whites into their own sectors, let alone ghettoizing them. In fact, one could argue that these examples are reactions to segregation policies.

Widespread minority separatism would not be necessary in a fully integrated nation, where every child felt reflected in society at large. Afrocentric schools represent the black community's ability to organize schools addressing their particular needs, which mainstream schools have failed to incorporate into the official curriculum. Native American nations have opted for self-determination in a country where institutional genocide of

their people threatens their very existence. Finally, Asian American enclaves, like Chinatown, remind us of the difference in power between Western and Eastern cultures in mainstream society.

A popular, but problematic response to the status of race is that it is natural. Critical thinking about race understands that is a socially constructed concept; thus, any reference to naturalized racial characteristics must be questioned. For example, the eugenics movement was an attempt to determine the relationship between intelligence and race. If we understand racism to be a sociopolitical relation, then eugenics institutionalizes the relation through an apparently objective detour, like science. Although it would be tempting to discredit eugenics based on its bogus status as a pseudoscience, it was common sense in that era, not to mention its reappearance in the recent literature on intelligence. One of the lessons we learned from eugenics is, "What aspects of our society naturalize race today?" An educator can invoke the following examples.

It is now common sense to refer to Asian American students as the "model minority." Dubbed as "whiz kids," Asian Americans are touted as naturally proficient at math and science. It is assumed that, as a race, they have natural dispositions toward these disciplines. Another explanation goes through the cultural route and suggests that Asian Americans are culturally predisposed to education. These comments must be taken in relation with Latinos and blacks, who provide the backdrop as the "bad minorities." Both explanations mystify the racialized and institutional basis for Asian American choices.

It has been argued that Asian Americans suffer from institutional racism as immigrant, English language learners. Recognizing that other roads to success, such

as entertainment and politics, are relatively blocked, Asian Americans choose the educational path for mobility (Sue & Okazaki, 1994). This is an institutional response as opposed to a racial or cultural characteristic of Asians. Also, experiencing discrimination as English language learners, Asian Americans opt for academic fields, such as math and science, and careers that do not depend solely on the ability to speak and write in the English language. Again, this is a rational response to the opportunity structure in light of their specific racial experience. One might wonder why Latinos, who also face linguistic racism, lag behind Asian Americans in education. Critical thinking must intervene here. An educator notes that, as a group, Asian Americans immigrate to the United States with a higher class status than most Latinos, with the exception of Cubans. Our racial comparisons are confounded by economic class considerations. In light of what we know about the positive correlation between class status and educational attainment, this fact weakens the naturalized racial explanation for Asian American educational ascendancy. Moreover, it points to the nation's selective policies for immigration, another racialized institution.

As educators discuss with their students the institutional policies that affect minority immigrants, it is important to note the comparisons students may use to frame the issue. For instance, the critical teacher may confront the justification that many immigrant groups have suffered discrimination, such as the Irish, Jews, or Eastern Europeans. Picking up speed, a student may even suggest that, whereas these groups have transcended their historical condition, blacks and Latinos have not. Thus, the problems that blacks and Latinos face are internal to their group

rather than inherent features of U.S. institutions. Critical race thinking problematizes the response by noting that the immigrant experience of minority groups is subjected to the standards of white ethnic assimilation. However, the two processes are not the same. European immigrants eventually became part of the white race, whereas Latinos, blacks, and Asians remain non-white. In addition, the response rationalizes the oppression white ethnics suffered as immigrants and portrays the experience as a process that other groups must also bear. A bit like hazing. When Irish native language practically disappeared in exchange for English, the gains could not compensate for the loss, nor could the ends justify the means. Critical thinking does not justify bad treatment of a group because of another group's suffering.

When teaching about institutional racism, educators use critical thinking to relate their different forms. First, the prison industrial complex and criminal justice system have been a concern of race activists, such as Angela Davis. The rate of incarceration for blacks in the United States is disproportionate in light of their population at large. The nation builds jails at a faster rate than it erects new schools. And when former President Clinton signed the "three strikes" law, he put minorities even more at risk. Second, the practical demise of the welfare system under President Clinton has racial consequences in light of the disproportionate number of blacks, especially women, who rely on such services. Critical thinking reminds us that both the prison and welfare systems are institutions perpetuated by longstanding racist beliefs about minorities. Although it should not end there, critical thinking can begin in our schools. For example, students benefit from a broader understanding

of racial images and the institutions that support them. By studying our society's ideological representations in the media, deficit thinking about minorities, and presumptions about racially neutral policies, like the law, critical race educators fight against the daily evasions of race so common in our schools.

Critical thinking incorporates explanations about the maintenance of institutional racism. In particular, it is helpful to examine the ways that classroom discussions evade critical thinking about institutional racism. When discussing modern racism, a popular refrain suggests that groups have always oppressed each other, with Japan's imperialist history posing as a non-white example. A critical educator uses this opportunity to question the normalization of white racism, that is, its apparent banal nature. She can contextualize white global power as unmatched by Japanese imperialism, which is more regional to Asia. White racial power is different both in terms of scope and scale from other forms of group power.

Here is another scenario. When discussing black slavery and its legacy, students may respond that slavery has existed throughout history, with every conceivable group enslaving another. In attempts to deracinate the issue even further, some students may offer Egyptian enslavement of Hebrews as a case where a darker skinned people enslaved a lighter group. The critical thinker may approach the discussion by suggesting that, first, describing the specificities of black enslavement does not equate with supporting Jewish enslavement. That is, both are forms of institutionalized oppression. Second, the former example is more accurately used as evidence for religious oppression rather than racial oppression based on skin color. Third, black enslavement ended fairly re-

cently. The critical pedagogue understands that invoking the reality of institutional racism produces evasive responses. Rather than evade the situation, the critical thinker turns it into a teaching moment.

Finally, critical thinking examines how whiteness becomes encoded as normal in everyday life. Institutions are material places and maintain a certain objectivity to them. They are durable and exist independently of our individual will. However, we maintain them through our daily belief systems and perceptions. So far, the discussion has centered around the experiences of minorities with institutional racism. As we turn to the experiences of whites, we notice that the world looks different. For example, critical thinking interrogates the ability of white consciousness to define itself as the marker for universal humanity by downplaying its own racialization process. It is not uncommon for whites to refer to themselves as individuals or just human. For educators to achieve a sense of clarity about institutions, they recognize that this form of race thinking obfuscates the role of whites in society, as racialized subjects. It is a perspective that masks white participation as color-blind, value-neutral, and racially unmotivated. Therefore, it clouds our ability to ask certain questions about group power because color-blind perspectives attempt to make whites, as a race, invisible. In the end, detecting white visibility may represent the first and final act of critical race thinking. By demystifying whiteness, the critical thinker is on her way to a more complete understanding of institutional racism.

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## Race

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Critical thinking about race is necessary in today's world because it is a pervasive concept that structures daily experiences in schools. Race is a relatively *modern* concept, the origin of which can be traced to the centuries of European expansion and colonization. Critical thinking about race begins with the understanding that it is defined as a social relation based on skin color and other related physical attributes. Moreover, these attributes represent the outward appearance of race, the essential issue being that race is a relation of power. A critical theory of race makes the concept of power central to any discussion about the concept of race.

To the extent that race represents a form of grouping, it is a social construction. It is the attempt to create social groups out of individuals who did not originally see one another as belonging to the same group. We construct such groups as "races" for purposes of stratifying them in society. Critical thinking on race asserts that, although genetics is partly responsible for the kind of skin color a person is born with, the notion that we should then stratify society on the basis of skin color is evidence of a social, as opposed to ge-

netic, phenomenon. Furthermore, to the extent that students invest in the meanings they create out of the concept of race, it becomes a real part of the way they see themselves and those around them. Because people create institutions based on racialized meanings, race, a socially constructed concept, becomes real in our everyday lives.

To begin, race is not just a synonym for group. Critical thinking recognizes that, in everyday language, people tend to assume that the concept of race has always existed, even in biblical times. A common example is that the images of black and white were used in the Scriptures. One may assume that lighter or darker people were organized into their appropriate groups. But a critical teacher understands that ancient societies were organized less on the basis of skin color and more on religious principles. She teaches students the point that Egyptians enslaved Hebrews not because of their skin color, but because of their religious beliefs. By contrast, North and South American enslavement of Africans occurred through modern beliefs about race as understood through discourses about skin color, with black being

inferior to white. So, to the critical teacher, any talk about a human race outside of skin color does not invoke the modern notion of race as an organizing concept. For it is quite easy to notice that whites and blacks experience the human race in different ways. Thus, the first point of critical thinking is that race does not represent a mere synonym for group because, if this were the case, women and men would represent different races because they constitute different social groups. For that matter, poor and wealthy people would also belong to different races; but we know this to be false because many races comprise economic classes, though not proportionately. Race is a *particular* grouping of people, usually and primarily based on skin color, which is then related to other physical attributes, like hair, eyes, nose, and lips. Ultimately, race is a construct used to distinguish the master race from the subordinate races.

To understand race, critical thinking must be able to distinguish between several concepts. For example, critical teachers distinguish between race and ethnicity, despite the fact that many people use them interchangeably. Whereas race is a way of organizing society into ostensibly discreet groups based on physical traits, ethnicity signifies the cultural group to which a person belongs. It may be the case that we use the same term for both a racial and an ethnic group, such as black or white designating a race and culture. To the extent that whites represent a physical group to which we attach racial meanings, they constitute a race. But to the extent that they share a culture and participate in its practices, we may call them an ethnic group. The same can be said for blacks, who comprise a race and culture group. Both white and black races are multicultural because multiple ethnic groups make up their identity.

The same term, black or white, is used to signify two concepts—race and culture—which is the crucial difference between a term and a concept. With the former, critical thinking is concerned with the process of naming a group; with the latter, it is concerned with the meaning of that group. In the case of the Asian American race, one can belong to an ethnic group, such as Japanese or Thai. Here the distinction between term and concept is easier to note.

A related concept is nationality, sometimes used interchangeably with race or ethnicity. A critical thinker notes that nationality invokes the concept of nation, one which may be geographically real, as in the United States, or imagined, as in the Filipino nationalist movement that far beyond the Philippines. Living in a national context or place represents the more general use of nationality, with the politicized form of nationality seen in recent examples like the black power or Chicano movement. The first definition of nation is tied to the idea of a State, as in the struggle for an independent Palestinian nation; whereas the second definition is sociological and refers to a group of people, like the many indigenous nations in the United States. Race is related to ethnicity and nationality in these subtle ways, but critical thinking distinguishes it from the other concepts to maintain its specific meaning and preserve its utility as an analytic tool.

With the event of European colonization of Africa, North America, South America, Australia, and other parts of the world, the birth of the modern races began. In short, the critical teacher imparts the knowledge that organizing people and society into races became meaningful, although not necessarily in its positive sense. During this period, a history teacher finds justifications for mistreating the darker others because of their assumed incivility,

savagery, or subhumanity (Takaki, 1993). In general, the contact between European and non-European worlds was not innocent and occurred through the racialized justifications about the inferior other and the superior Westerner (Mills, 1997). The upshot of the relationship is that the white and black races were co-created, much like the horizon needs the curvature of the land for its identity. Again critical thinking notes that this relationship is not one based on equality. Rather, the creation of the white race represents the domination of other races. The Western world conceptually created the darker races to understand itself as a relatively cohesive group, previously made up of diverse ethnic and national identities, like Germans, British, or French. The beginning of the darker races was also the beginning of the white race.

A critical thinker can interpret the example of slavery in several ways. On one hand, it represents an economic phenomenon made possible by early capitalism and the use of human labor for profit. On the other hand, modern slavery is undeniably racial in the way it was made possible by Westerners' assumptions about their superiority over darker peoples. It was logically easier to enslave people throughout the Americas when the victims were considered savages, less human, and uncivilized. It is true that Africans also enslaved each other but none so pervasive and enduring as their enslavement under the white race. White enslavement of Africans also took on a different form, where people were sold as property or chattel, rather than as payment for a debt or as spoils of war. In this sense, critical thinking arrives at the conclusion that modern slavery was more extensive and justified through racial meanings. Lastly, the legacy of slavery centuries later in the form of Apartheid, housing and school segregation, and job

discrimination makes race a structuring principle in everyone's lives today.

Currently, American mainstream discussions and images around race revolve around a crude black-white ideology. As a result, Asian Americans and Latinos are asked to choose a pole with which to associate. Critical thinking must disrupt this tendency. In a country where the history of tensions between races has been apparently fixed by a black-white discourse, other races are limited to affiliation status. It suggests that we locate Asian American, Native American, and Latino racial experience in an arbitrary place between the black and white experience. The black-white divide places these experiences in no-man's land because "yellow" or "brown" are presumably colors somewhere between white and black. In some official documents, such as the U.S. census, Latino is recognized both as a race and descent; thus, Latinos are asked to denote both heritage and racial affiliation. Critical thinking must question the simplistic versions of the black-white dichotomy in favor of a more complex engagement with multiracial experiences.

When analyzing race talk, critical thinking appreciates the way that people use language to signify or refer to race. For instance, the phrase "people of color" is often opposed to the term "white." This commonsense usage serves to delay a more critical understanding of race because it suggests that white is *not* a color, thereby mystifying the racialization process for whites. Also, the distinction between *minority* (i.e., people of color) and *majority* (i.e., whites) fails to deal with race in a specific way because, depending on the geographic location, whites do not represent the majority, such as the case of future projections for California. It is more accurate to think of minority in terms of

power relations, such as minority substituting for subordinate races, rather than minority as a numerical count. A critical thinker only has to invoke the example of former South Africa where Africans were the majority in numbers and the minority in power. For similar reasons, although many people still use the descriptor Caucasian for certain phenotypes, the preference for the term white is gaining currency because it more accurately reflects a group in its social relation to power.

The point of critical thinking about race is to suggest that no element of a racialized society remains untouched by the concept of race. Either a society is completely racialized or it is not. Either one is alive or dead; there is no such thing as being a little dead. The critical thinker understands that, despite one's inability to explain the racial element of every occurrence or event in one's life, this does not mean that it is not racial in nature or has no racial consequences. The goal of critical thinking is to develop a sophisticated racial analysis that is convincing and compelling. Let us take the O. J. Simpson case. The concept of miscegenation, or interracial marriage, remains a charged issue and one did not have to use the race card to make the Simpson case racial. It already was.

The challenge of critical race thinking for educators is twofold: to unmask race and to avoid reifying it. Unmasking race requires that the critical thinker understand the inner workings of race in our everyday lives. From the television shows that we watch, to the neighborhoods in which we live, and to the knowledge that we possess about the world, race frames both the content of the message and the way we interpret its meaning. One, television sit-coms and dramas consistently mask the reality of race in exchange for a distorted repre-

sentation of the world. The series *Friends* takes place in New York, one of the most diverse cities in the world, with a primary and secondary cast that is all but absent of people of color. In the United States, network prime time shows consist of mainly white actors and actresses; when people of color are portrayed, they are cast in stereotypical representations.

Two, neighborhoods are the lynchpin of a racially segregated society. Ghettos are almost exclusively populated with blacks, which affects black children's educational experience because school funding is directly related to property values. For Latinos, barrios represent paltry housing conditions and the low-status schools into which they feed. Three, our knowledge about the world has racial origins because our experience with the world is segregated and truncated. Hence, when we see an overwhelming number of blacks in the sports industry, our knowledge about them becomes limited within this sphere of public life and "all" blacks begin to take on the appearance of an athlete, especially males. When, as in southern California, you see a disproportionate amount of Latinos mowing lawns, then that is the image you cultivate about them. This is not merely a statement about stereotypes, but the structured knowledge we have about the world, so that the act of knowing becomes a racialized moment. To counteract this situation, the critical teacher problematizes her own racial position in and knowledge of the world.

Critical thinking about race must also avoid reifying it. That is, we must risk making distinctions without naturalizing them. The possible danger for educators is that we make race even *more real*, and in the process turn wood into stone. The reification of race occurs through a long process of telling stories and at some point

believing in them, of a story told one too many times. So, the critical teacher must search for a nonreifying way to talk about race, a perspective that unmasks its structures without investing them with more power than they already possess. Otherwise, we reach the point wherein a social construction graduates and becomes real. Stories about monsters may not be based initially on anything real, but when retold with compelling force, we surely create our own.

Critical thinking understands that although the concept of race is a social construction the racial experience of people, white and non-white, is real. It is real because it is lived and has material consequences. When European colonists acted on their racial beliefs by exploiting the inferiorized and infantilized other, they made the concept of race come alive. Critical race educators avoid the problematic suggestion that anything associated with race is unreal. Making this claim is tantamount to devaluing the reality of some of the hurtful interactions people have on a

daily basis, especially those moments experienced by people of color. This does not suggest that our interpretation of racial experiences is always correct, which is a function of our ability to analyze them. After validating racial experiences as real, the critical educator works with students to arrive at critical understandings of race. Finally, critical race thinking is always self-reflective because racialization is present in any discussion about race.

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