

# Final Reflection ‘Deconstructing Race and Racism’

## *Introduction*

With seven motivated students and two engaged supervisors, we spent a semester digging into what it means when we say that race is a social construct; how racism as a power structure originated and developed; and how it manifests in various aspects of life and society. Throughout the course, we aimed to focus on anti-racism. We would meet twice a week and our classes would vary from class discussions, to student-led sessions/presentations, to guest lectures. Our classes were mostly discussion-based, which allowed for all students to speak and engage in learning processes together. By the end of the course, we all had a much better understanding of the social, political, historical, economic, contextual and intersectional nature and implications of race and racism. With this document we would like to reflect on some aspects of our course.

## *Guest lectures*

We were lucky to be able to host a wide range of guest lectures from amazing professors and activists. However, two lectures stood out to us: the lecture by Rui Jun Luong from Asian Raisins, and the one by Marie Pfaff. The reason why these stood out was because they were the only two lectures that weren't given by professors, but by activists who also happened to be closer to us in age. Despite having a focus on anti-racism, our class was very academic. This was enriching at times, but sometimes also made some of us feel detached from what's happening in the “real” world. Hearing about the first-hand experience of these inspiring activist women was very grounding, and enriching, as opposed to reading academic articles *about* activism. In the class we all have different levels of involvement with activism in our personal life, but these lectures helped activism enter the classroom.

## *Readings and theory*

We took a more thematic approach when it came to designing the syllabus and choosing readings, rather than a more theoretical approach. As such, we did not explicitly assign many classic critical race theorists to read, but instead we took a case study and themed approach to our classes. During these explorations, fitting theorists would come up naturally. This allowed for a more applied and contextual class, in which we could all bring in our own accumulated knowledge to apply to a particular topic. However, some theorists that we did discuss (e.g. Fields & Fields, Mbembe) proved to be helpful in identifying theoretical frameworks that we could apply later on in the course. Thus, integrating more theory would have been helpful as well.

## *Safe space*

At the beginning of the semester, we dedicated a meeting to creating guidelines for our classroom. The idea was to foster a “safe space”, where we were all free to learn and make mistakes, but always stay conscious and respectful of each other. While we believe this is important in all classrooms, it is especially important when discussing sensitive matters, such as racism and other types of power relations and oppression. The guidelines of our safe space were as follows:

- What's said in this space stays in the space
  - e.g. controversial statements, personal experiences
  - Radical honesty meetings
- Swas (our honorary member) is *always* welcome
- Give everyone space to speak, don't talk over each other
- Check up meetings (2-3)
- Be respectful even in disagreement
- Don't judge (no canceling)— all coming from different perspectives

At the end of the semester, we reflected on what we managed to follow, and how we might have failed to create a safe space. The conclusion was unanimous, we all felt like this was a success. Despite not sticking to our radical honesty meetings and check-up meetings, we all knew that we could bring up concerns at any time if we felt the need to. In our final reflection meeting,

### *Activism*

As Kendi's book make clear being an anti-racist requires an awareness of the realities of racism and its role in maintaining racial inequity through racist policies and attitudes. As such educating ourselves and expanding our knowledge base beyond race and racism being isolated from institutions and daily life around the world is the first step in becoming an antiracist. However, we can't really measure how we internalise what we learn or how much of an antiracist it makes us. Learning about race and racism does not necessarily make an anti-racist, it is how we apply what we have learned. Many of us have taken what we have learned from the class and applied it to other courses and even for some, to their thesis. Part of being an activist is being able to use knowledge and personal experience to speak to injustice and disrupt the status quo. We have all become more knowledgeable and more confident in that knowledge. Some of us have even started and joined anti-racist initiatives, BIPOC forums and heritage networks, in the pursuit of becoming anti-racist activists.

### *Supervisors*

We were able to build and maintain a good rapport with our supervisors, who proved invaluable when it can to both academic and bureaucratic matters. As aspiring academics (and activists), much of our work consists not just of learning theories and concepts, but of practicing how to articulate these concepts and apply these theories to case studies and the world around us. Given their academic experience, our supervisors were able to aid in this process, pushing us to explain things more clearly or comprehensively, or else make connections to related scholars and concepts. As a result of the relatively egalitarian learning space we created, supervisors (when they did their readings or, somewhat more sheepishly, when they did not) were able to participate in classes alongside fellow students and—again, thanks to their academic experience—could help to elevate discussions, bringing in concepts or making connections upon which students could expand.

*Comment from supervisors: 'how did you manage to lift this amount of work?'*

What was important for this course, as in any honours course, is that we were all passionate in and outside of the classroom around the topic of anti-racism. Since we are all aware that in order to be anti-racist, we have to learn in which ways we personally and as a society are racist, we knew that there were so many topics to delve into. The list to be tackled is non-exhaustive, so it was important to us that we educate ourselves on as many perspectives and layers as possible, so while we knew the amount of content we wanted to get through was ambitious, we were highly motivated to do so. We agreed that we did not feel the amount of workload as much because of the personal interest we had in the literature, sometimes our preparations for the class would transmit into our personal lives and discussions with others too making the work more manageable in the case of mental power. Our weeks we coordinated individually would up the workload a bit, though since we signed up for weeks we were the most interested in, it never felt like a burden. Though of course, this also meant that it was hard to stop reading and wanting more information on certain topics above the recommended readings we had every class, so it was also important to find a balance and remember that the educative journey of this course does not end with this class and is a continual effort throughout our lives.