

## READ, LISTEN, AND WATCH: MEDIA RESOURCES FOR CONVERSING ABOUT RACE

*Facilitating discussions about race can be challenging for even the most experienced educator. In this article, Anthony Keith provides a framework for using multimedia resources to guide student reflection and discussion on race.*

By Anthony R. Keith, Jr.

**“COMPLETE AND UTTER CHAOS!”** Shayla, a white undergraduate student in her second year of college, uttered these words as she sat in my office with tears in her eyes, after describing her experience when a professor introduced racial issues in a class discussion. “She just lost control of the class. At one point, this guy started accusing me of being racist, and it hurt my feelings. But instead of doing something about it, the professor just sat there and watched the class battle each other until the period was over.” When I asked Shayla whether the professor provided any guidance or gave an overview of how the class would be structured that day for discussion of this topic, she replied, “No.” When she left my office, I started to wonder how those of us who work in education are assisting students in their learning and engagement with race. Because I work in multicultural affairs, I receive numerous requests from faculty members, staff, and student groups to assist with their efforts to facilitate conversations and coordinate campus programs on race-related topics. However, I often find myself overwhelmed and overcommitted. I know other educators are just as capable of facilitating these dialogues, and I want to provide resources to support them in their efforts.

Therefore, in this article, I suggest three types of media resources that educators can use to engage students in dialogues on race. For each of these resources, I provide an overview of the resource, learning outcomes, and strategies to enhance students’ development

on racially complex issues. To ground the media in relevant theory, I suggest using the holistic development and self-authorship model referred to in Patricia King and Marcia Baxter Magolda’s 2005 article “A Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity.” According to their model, we can infer that students’ understanding of race is attributable to three factors or domains:

1. *Cognitive factors, or “ways of knowing”*: This component suggests that self-authorship occurs when students have moved from accepting knowledge as certain and derived from external sources to seeing knowledge as constructed and contextual. Thus, considering race to be a social construct constitutes complex cognitive development.
2. *Intrapersonal factors, or “ways of constructing personal values”*: This component suggests that self-authorship occurs when students have moved from a lack of awareness of their identity to understanding how to integrate their identities, values, and beliefs with other perspectives. Thus, complex intrapersonal development means being aware of and comfortable with the idea that race is one part of a multidimensional identity that intersects with other identity factors such as sexual orientation, class, gender, and ethnicity.
3. *Interpersonal factors, or “ways of seeing relationships with others”*: This component suggests that self-

authorship occurs when students have moved from a self-centered perspective on society to experiencing their identity as a member of a larger society. Thus, students who exhibit mature interpersonal development recognize themselves as contributing members of society and recognize the role they play in how society defines race.

To explore these three ways of knowing, I propose that readers first examine the context for understanding race as a social construct through the book *Drop* by Mat Johnson, then explore values and beliefs about race expressed through the spoken word poetry of artists Beau Sia and Yellow Rage, and, finally, highlight the significance of racial relationships by watching clips from the FX television series *Black. White.* Although I discuss the three components of identity separately for ease of understanding, it is important to recognize that they are connected and should be regarded holistically.

### DEFINING RACE: THE INITIAL STEP

**F**IRST, it is important to begin where students are developmentally. Stephen Quaye and Baxter Magolda note in their chapter on racial self-understanding that some students enter college without having developed a strong sense of racial identity. Therefore, it is important to consider that you may be providing them with their first or one of several introductions to race-related topics. At the initial stage of development, students may be expecting authority figures like faculty and student affairs educators to clarify and define what the “right” definition of race is. Starting with how students define race centers the dialogue on their experiences and understandings. Because students will have varying definitions of race, I suggest providing them with a basic and broad definition of race as a social construct; this definition can be used as a foundation for further exploration.

Members of any society participate in an ongoing process that influences, shapes, and modifies the definition of race. One of the most powerful tools that shape American students’ understandings of race is the media. As a mechanism for communicating messages, the media plays an important role in determining what messages are consumed about race. Because college students typically are heavy media consumers, it may be helpful to assess how what they are reading, listening to, and watching contributes to the social construction of race. Examining these media influences can provide directions for facilitating students’ development of racial identity. Educators can prompt dialogue

on race by engaging students with the media resources discussed in this article.

### (COGNITIVE) READ IT: MAKING MEANING OF RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

**H**OW STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT and make meaning of issues of race is a critical starting point to consider prior to engaging them in dialogue. Several studies by researchers such as Vincent Tinto as well as Jeffrey Milem and Paul Umbach conclude that college students’ pre-college characteristics affect their social and academic integration into higher education. Thus, it is important to consider what environmental factors have influenced what students think they already know about race upon entering the college milieu. The fictional book *Drop* provides an ideal illustration of the meaning-making process of understanding race. Chris, the main character, shifts his understanding of blackness from his community’s definition to his own understanding based on his personal experiences.

Chris grows up in a predominantly black community where drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, criminal activity, and low high school and college graduation rates are the norm. Chris, however, is one of the few in his community to earn a college degree and is not convinced that being black is limited to what he has experienced in his neighborhood. He is dissatisfied with the portrayal of the black race as lazy, uneducated, and the source of amusement in popular music, fashion, and films. Chris chooses to expand his definition of his race by changing his environment and moving to London.

During his first few months in London, Chris interacts with different people, starts a professional career in advertising, experiences new foods and music, and gains a new appreciation for experiencing culture outside of his home community. He is satisfied that he has reconstructed what it means for him to be black. It is important to note here that due to the social construction of race, one’s racial identity may not be consistent across geographic regions or other environmental settings. Thus, what it means for Chris to be black in Philadelphia is not the same as being black

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in London. Being black in London does not have the same negative connotation for him as it does in Philadelphia. The two locations do not share similar histories or social demographics. However, Chris struggles to completely disconnect from his former life and fantasizes about returning to his home in North Philadelphia, hoping to find a way to integrate his personal experiences of being black with the definition of black given to him by his native community.

Chris later returns to Philadelphia and creates a marketing campaign for the city that reconstructs the portrayal of black people, changing them from social burdens to social blessings. His campaign presents the idea that black people are part of the Philadelphia community and that how they define themselves relates directly to how the city defines itself. Ultimately, Chris synthesizes his educational and professional experiences abroad to provide a source of hope and restoration for the community in which he was raised. At the end of the book, he describes how it feels to be comfortable with his and his community's definition of blackness: "Comfortable with our destinies, and our place in the world. No other life to run to, no lot to run desperately from. Funny how much nicer this town was when you couldn't feel it sitting on you" (p. 193).

*Drop* can help students consider how race is defined as they interact with people in different contexts. As educators, it is worthwhile to consider that a high percentage of students' understanding of race could be limited by a lack of racial diversity in their native surroundings. Chris's experiences are similar to those of college students who leave their homes and other places of comfort to attend institutions with more racially diverse populations of students. Like Chris, college students can experience discomfort when their initial understanding of race is challenged in the new social setting; their initial reaction may be to leave the institution. Chris's fictional experiences can help students navigate the initial challenges of exploring constructions of race.

**How to Use This Resource.** For those who wish to support students in their meaning-making pro-

cess of understanding race by using the novel *Drop*, I suggest framing the dialogues according to the principles of Baxter Magolda and King's Learning Partnerships Model, which is described in their book *Learning Partnerships*. Their model espouses (1) validating your

students' knowledge by recognizing their ability to develop their own perspectives, (2) situating learning in learners' experiences, which respects their perspectives and enables them to engage in a serious exploration of those perspectives, and (3) inviting students to mutually construct meaning rather than imposing your perspectives on them. After having students read through *Drop*, invite them to do some reflective journal writing about the issues of race explored in the book. Instruct them to divide their journal into two sections: (1) Chris and (2) Me,

then answer some processing questions from both perspectives. Questions can include

- What is your definition of race, and how has it changed over time?
- What are some external influences that affect your views of race (for example, friendships, media, parents, or government)?
- In what ways are Chris's and your views of race similar and different?

### (INTRAPERSONAL) LISTEN TO IT: MAKING MEANING OF A RACIAL IDENTITY

**I**N MY WORK, I often hear students discuss individuals who do not exemplify what they perceive to be a genuine racial identity and associate them with terms like *sellout* and *Oreo* (someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside). I participated in a program on Latino identity in America with one of my student groups, and one of the activities involved a "You know you're Latino if . . ." test. As I listened to the students come up with answers for what made someone "genuinely Latino," I realized that I was actually listening to the values associated with the

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social construction of race. It sounded like a group of people who have taken ownership of a particular racial identity and created criteria for membership. To avoid reinforcing racial stereotypes, I will not name these values in this article but note that the broader conversation included eating certain foods, listening to certain types of music, and sharing specific philosophies and histories. In seeking other methods to learn about the personal values and beliefs associated with racial identities, I came across spoken word performances by Asian poets Beau Sia and Yellow Rage. I noticed that these artists used their art form as a platform to explore the concept of racial identity.

Beau Sia, a Chinese American poet, starts one of his performances on the first season of the HBO television series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* by stating, "If there is anyone in the entertainment industry watching me perform, no matter how you feel, and if you're casting any films and you need a Korean grocery store owner, a computer expert, or the random thug of the Yakuza Gang, then I'm your man." He continues, "If you need some martial arts-like stuff, 1-800-Collect, the Gap, or Roloids, then I can be believable, because I am all of those things and more, and I will broken English myself to sidekick status if that's what's expected of me."

Sia's tone of voice in this performance is sarcastic. He wants his listeners to understand that his racial identity has been constructed for him by external influences like the media; therefore, members of society expect him to exemplify these constructions. Those expectations then take the shape of stereotypes that can help Sia earn a living, should he choose to accept them. Asian poets Michelle Myers and Catzie Vilayphonh, collectively known as Yellow Rage, seek to challenge

society's expectations of race in one of their poems from the first season of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*: "You expert on me with your fake Asian tattoo, you expert on me with your Tae Bo and Kung Fu. So what, you are a fan of Lucy Liu, so what, you read the *Joy Luck Club* too, that makes you an expert on how I should look? What . . . do you know about being Asian?"

When I compared these performances to the "You know you're Latino if" exercise mentioned before, I thought about how students may experience stress

when trying to justify themselves when their racial identity is trivialized. This frustration is explored further in Yellow Rage's performance: "Stop trying to guess what I am, stop trying to tell me what I'm not. I was born in Seoul, which makes me Korean, and these slightly slanted eyes ain't just for seeing. I see right through you!" Educators should help students develop a complex racial identity by helping them explore varied ways of constructing their racial identity and the meanings they associate with these constructions.

The projection of personal values and beliefs associated with racial identities is common in academic settings. Consider, for example, how students commonly look to one or two racial minorities in class to act as the voice of an entire race. I recall an experience as the only black person in one of my classes when the professor was discussing historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). He asked me whether more black parents are encouraging their children to attend HBCUs. I remember feeling insecure about my response and chose instead to tell my personal experience with my family and my college choice; I could not speak for all college-bound black youth. My experience is similar to Latino or Asian students who are asked their views on immigration

reform or ideal campus programs celebrating their particular cultural heritage. One person's racial identity does not make her or him an expert on her or his race. Rather, as I have noted throughout this section, students make sense of their racial identity differently based on their values and beliefs, and these various constructions should be welcomed and encouraged.

**How to Use This Resource.** In addition to using the Learning Partnerships Model, educators can have students serve as listening partners. The listening partners approach (described in Quayle and Baxter Magolda's chapter) involves having students interview each other about their racial experiences then having a facilitator type, copy, and distribute these stories to the group. The group can then reflect on these stories which emphasize themselves as constructors of knowledge and validate their voices. Using listening partners enables students to empower themselves to be heard by others and to overcome stereotypes. One way

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to work toward this outcome is to have students explore the racial stereotypes and projected racial identities of the poets in the spoken word performances I have described. For example, facilitators can use the following exercise: (1) give students a sheet of paper with a large microphone image in the center; (2) invite them to write the name of one of the artists above the microphone image; (3) instruct students to list all the racial stereotypes explored by that particular artist throughout the performance, writing the stereotypes around the image; and (4) have students become the voice of the artist by reading aloud to the group everything they wrote down on their paper. This kind of activity can provide students the opportunity to practice their ability to not only listen but speak about racial issues among their peers. Potential follow-up questions include the following:

- How did it feel to say those words out loud?
- What happens to society when these words and phrases are used?
- How does your personal or perceived racial identity affect your ability to talk about these issues?

Finally, you can ask students to create their own microphone and be their own voice. Invite them to share with the group if they so desire.

**(INTERPERSONAL) WATCH IT:  
MAKING MEANING THROUGH RACIAL  
RELATIONSHIPS**

**T**HE FRIENDSHIPS AND BONDS that students have with members of different races are linked to their own cultural background and to their conscious or subconscious prejudices. As I mentioned earlier, those prejudices can be shaped by society’s expectations or stereotypes of racial groups. To introduce students to the idea that their relationships with others can shape society’s defi-

inition of race, consider having them watch episodes from the FX television series *Black. White.*

*Black. White.*, produced by R. J. Cutler, documents the cross-racial immersion experiences of members of a black family and a white family. By using costume and makeup, the members of the Marcotulli family, who are white, were made up to look like they were of African descent, and the members of the Sparks family, who are black, were made up to look like they were of European descent. Both families had to live in the same house with each other for an extended period of time and participate in a variety

of exercises that highlighted racial issues, including joining youth groups, attending nightclubs, and visiting neighborhoods that were predominantly black or white. In looking at the social construction of race in *Black. White.*, educators should focus on the concept of making someone appear to be of another race. The series chose to achieve this appearance by changing the skin color, hair texture, and facial features of the family members. However, missing from the changes in appearance are the historical context and values of the targeted racial groups. The history of being black or white in America is not transferable, and this fact is a crucial piece of knowledge for students to acquire as they develop their understanding of race. Within the context of *Black. White.*, the makeup cannot account for the historical significance of the enslavement of African Americans by White Americans in the United States. To broach this conversation with students, educators must pay close attention to the relationships between students of different races and possible tensions between races.

In *Black. White.*, both families sought to understand these racial relationships during their reflective moments after removing the makeup; they openly discussed how it felt to be “black” or “white” and asked questions to learn more about the other culture. For example, while wearing their black makeup, the parents of the Marcotulli family had to go out to a predominantly white country western bar. Despite the stares by onlookers at the establishment, the couple

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ended up having a great time. This was most likely because they were white people wearing removable black makeup; therefore, they were still accustomed to the values, practices, and norms of white culture. A key point to consider when working with college students about race-related topics is that despite the social construction of race, the color of someone's skin and their ethnic features are not so easily removed. This fact becomes an issue when, for example, someone's race affects how trustworthy she or he is perceived to be by members of other races.

In addition to putting on the appearance of another race, the families were also encouraged to interact as if they were of another race, which often resulted in stereotypical behavior. In one episode, the mother in the Marcotulli family called the mother in the Sparks family a bitch while having a casual conversation. Afterward, Mrs. Sparks, who was quite vexed, explained how the word *bitch* has been used to degrade and oppress black women and should never be used by anyone, especially a white person. Mrs. Marcotulli's explanation was that she thought they were just hanging out like black women normally do and that she meant no harm in using the word. Despite artificially changing their appearances, these women had difficulty appreciating and understanding the historical significance of some words and behaviors.

It has been my experience that most students feel there are certain words they can and cannot say when referring to members of other racial groups. Most white students will not want to engage in a conversation about race for fear of saying something that will be perceived as stupid or politically incorrect. This fear usually arises because on most college campuses, white students make up the racial majority and do not have the opportunity to reflect on themselves as racial beings. For educators who are facilitating dialogues on race, it is important to create a space that is safe for dialogue, encourage participation, and monitor their own feelings and those of their students.

*Black. White.*'s attempt to create experiences that reflect customary activities of each racial group is another lens for looking at race as a social construction. The black son of the Sparks family was assigned to attend etiquette classes with white students while

wearing his white makeup. According to this series, etiquette classes are socially acceptable "white activities." The idea of exclusive spaces and activities for particular racial groups is a key topic to discuss with students. It is essential because a student's sense of comfort, belonging, and acceptance as a racial being is shaped by society's approval. For example, students of color on a predominantly White college campus may feel excluded from participating in homecoming activities because they are rarely asked to serve on planning committees and are often underrepresented at most events — including the homecoming court. A 2005 study on racial ally development by Robert Reason, Elizabeth Roosa Millar, and Tara Scales suggests that racial awareness of individuals of the racial majority can be sparked by placing them in situations in which they are the minority.

**How to Use This Resource.** When educators are using *Black. White.* to promote interpersonal racial development, I suggest that they use the steps in Anna Ortiz and Robert Rhoads's Multicultural Education Framework to help structure the discussion. The steps include (1) understanding how people and culture mutually shape

each other, (2) learning about other cultures through participation in cultural events, (3) recognizing and deconstructing white culture and privilege, (4) discussing important aspects of students' own culture, and (5) taking necessary steps toward promoting an equitable society. Educators can work toward these outcomes by facilitating a discussion about some of the concepts of the television series and then having students engage in a reflective activity. Questions to explore after students view the series could include

- How did members from both families attempt to understand each other?
- How did members from both families communicate with each other with and without the makeup?
- How successful or unsuccessful were members from both families in posing as someone of another race?
- What are some factors that could contribute to helping the families in the video understand each other better?

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As a follow-up activity, invite students to participate in the creation of a campus race map. Using a large-scale campus map and two different colored pushpins (for example, red and blue), have students identify (1) places where they usually hang out with their friends on campus (red) and (2) places on campus that they feel are racially exclusive (blue). Have them consider the racial makeup of the group in relation to where they hang out on campus. Also ask them to discuss why some spaces are perceived to be racially exclusive. Finally, engage them in a dialogue about what can be done to encourage the red pushpins for different racial groups to become closer and reduce the number of blue pushpins on the map.

### ENCOURAGING DIALOGUE ON RACE

**ULTIMATELY**, educators can use the resources described in this article to promote students' understanding of race, encourage students' intrapersonal exploration of racial identity, and support students' assessment of their relationships with others in terms of race. By enlivening King and Baxter Magolda's Developmental Model of Intercultural Maturity with these resources, educators can foster students' holistic development and promote students' understanding of racial issues. By using varied types of media resources, educators can support students' diverse learning and engagement styles. It is important, however, to establish clear and understandable goals prior to introducing the topic of race with students. While all issues about race cannot be addressed in this article, the most important message is that having a dialogue is a necessary step in the process of developing an understanding of race. I hope the reader finds the novel *Drop*, the spoken word performances from Beau Sia and Yellow Rage, and the TV series *Black. White.* helpful in making sure that such conversations are productive.



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- Yellow Rage (Michelle Myers and Catzie Vilayphonh). "Listen . . ." *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, Season 1, Episode 2. \$14.99 on Amazon.com or online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi2LoWPImZE>

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