**Undoing the Violence Inherent to Safe-Space Dialogue**

Excerpts from Zeus Leonardo 2010, ***Pedagogy of Fear: toward a Fanonian theory of safety in race dialogue*** (Modified: ASDIC Metamorphosis 2015)

We ask for safe-space dialogue. But what does that mean? If dialogue seeks to undo racism, then we must ask if notions of “safe dialogue” give legitimacy to, or reinforces, an oppressive system (white supremacy), or if, rather, safe space dialogue engages us in a process that is creative enough to produce a new social consciousness, a new human subject with a new language and a new humanity.

One of the main premises of safe-space discourse is that it provides a format for people of color and whites to come together and discuss issues of race in a matter that is not dangerous as well as inclusive. Thus, the conventional guidelines used to establish a safe space – such as being mindful of how and when one is speaking, confidentiality, challenge by choice, and speaking from experience – are used to create an environment where fundamental issues can be broached and no one will be offended. Taken unproblematically, this trend is reasonable. However, the ironic twist is that many individuals from marginalized groups become both offended and agitated when engaging in apparently safe spaces.

In their naiveté, many white participants in a racial dialogue fail to appreciate the fact – a lived experience – that race dialogue is almost never safe for people of color in mixed-racial company. But before we romanticize its opposite, or same-race dialogues, the idea that homogeneous spaces are automatically safe for people of color is a mystification (confusion); for, that kind of “safe space” results precisely from a violent condition: racial segregation.

Something has gone incredibly wrong when people of color feel immobilized and marginalized within spaces and dialogues that are supposed to undo racism. This situation should give us doubt regarding whether or not safe-space dialogue really allows for the creativity necessary to promote a humanizing discussion on race, or if it functions as a negotiating table that seeks peaceful compromise without engaging in the “violence” necessary to both explore and undo racism. *Here “violence” is* *understood as “violating” agreed upon social norms, i.e., imbreachment, infringement, transgression. Here “violence” means violating by challenging and disrupting the racial order. The racial order includes: white speak – people of color listen; white “comfort” trumps the requirements of truth-telling.*

Racism constitutes a system of relationships and arrangements sanctioned by custom and social expectations (norms). It operates as “background noise” in all cross-racial dialogue. Safe space is not truly possible where these norms are allowed explicitly or implicitly to operate in the background as “white noise.” To directly address such norms is to “violate” the social expectation of *deference to whites* – their comfort determines what can or ought to be talked about. If racism causes discomfort, then it is not to be talked about. If people of color’s stories about racism causes whites discomfort, then it is not to be talked about.

We want to suggest that the reason why safe-space dialogues partly break down in practice, if not at least in theory, is that they assume that, by virtue of formal and procedural guidelines, safety has been designated for both white people and people of color. However, the term ‘safety’ acts as a misnomer (an inaccurate naming) because it often means that white individuals can be made to feel safe. Thus, a space of safety is circumvented – avoided, and instead a space of oppressive color-blindness is established. Colorblindness suggests that “color,” that is, the experiences of people of color that set them off from whites, ought not be seen (recognized). Colorblindness refuses the actual differences in life experiences between people of color and whites. It wants to say that sense we are all humans – we are all the same. Nothing else matters. Only our human commonality matters – not our lived particular experiences as humans, shaped by racial social arrangements and by historical and everyday events.

If we are truly interested in racial dialogue, then we must become comfortable with the idea that for marginalized and oppressed minorities, there is no safe space. As implied above, the mainstream race dialogue context is arguably already hostile and unsafe for many people of color whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimized. Violence is already there. In other words, like Fanon’s understanding of colonialism, safe space enacts violence.

Those who are interested in engaging in racial dialogue must be prepared to (1) undo the violence that is inherent to safe-space dialogue, and (2) enact a form of liberatory (freedom giving) “violence” (violating racial norms) within race dialogue to allow for a creativity that shifts the standards of humanity. The shifting of the standards of humanity would involve listening with deep respect to the perspectives of the other with empathy, genuineness, warmth, and the offering ones self to the dialogue in humility and risk-taking vulnerability, speaking and listening from a place of truth and authentic feelings.

In other words, anger, hostility, frustration, and pain are characteristics that are not to be avoided under the banner of safety, which only produces ‘culture of silence’. Such natural, honest feelings must be recognized on the part of both whites and people of color in order to engage in a process that is creative enough to establish new forms of social existence, where both parties are transformed. Such “violation” of racial norms is not a form of violence that is life threatening and narcissistic, but one that is life affirming through its ability to promote mutual recognition.

A certain kind of violence that shifts the standards of humanity for people of color and whites is necessary if race dialogue is more than an exercise in safety but a search for liberatory (freedom giving) possibilities. This kind of honest, authentic dialogue may be “violence” for some, as it forces them to account for race in a *condition of risk*, not safety. If it is a safe condition, then it is the *safety of being able to take risks, of putting oneself at risk*, a condition many people of color already navigate. It is also “violent” to people of color in a way that surgery may be thought to be violent, as it removes a previously violent way of being (racism) from being sheltered and concealed and thereby grafted onto their bodies.