

Women, Race, and Racism

A Dialogue in Black and White

Andrea Ayvazian and Beverly Daniel Tatum

Beverly Daniel Tatum: . . .

Jean Baker Miller has written eloquently about the constructive power of relational connections and the potentially destructive force of relational disconnections and violations. This theme of connections, disconnections, and violations is certainly central to our thinking about how we can connect across racial lines. What happens when our experience is validated by another in a mutually empathic relationship? We feel a strong sense of connection. But when we have experiences that are not validated, for example, when I as a black woman encounter racism and I am unable to talk about that experience with white colleagues, I may feel a sense of disconnection from them. Or should I choose to share those experiences and in fact find them invalidated by my colleagues, I may question my own perceptions. Without validation from others, I may choose to deny my own perceptions in order to avoid the isolation that comes from disconnection. Repeatedly separating myself from my own experience in order to stay in relationship with others ultimately results in a psychological state of violation. Negotiating the choices involved in maintaining connections across racial lines is a central focus of our dialogue

Andrea Ayvazian: . . . Beverly and I are venturing into new territory by offering an analysis of our own relationship as a case study of women connecting across racial lines. We want to speak very personally . . . [I]n traveling and doing speaking with Beverly, white women often stop me in hallways and restrooms and at the coffee machine and say, “You two seem so close. How did you create that bond?” . . . We are going to focus on the following three areas, which we call the critical junctures in our relationship: how the relationship was established, the theme of mutuality in our relationship, and difficult periods we have faced. A thread that is also woven into our talk is what we call “common differences,” areas where there is sameness between us, where we have similar feelings, viewpoints, even experiences, and yet these similarities are expressed in different ways in our lives. We will close by talking about our friendship as a work in progress. . . .

CRITICAL JUNCTURES

Ayvazian: . . .

In many ways, my kinship with Beverly is *very* easy. Deep affection and admiration flows between us and the friendship is strong, nourishing, and treasured. However, it is also fair to say that nowadays any adult relationship that crosses racial lines is “not easy.” If the friends are conscious of the social, political, and economic realities in this country today, their “kinship,” . . . will inevitably have times that are “not easy.” And we have faced those times.

. . . Beverly and I do not live in the same neighborhood, although we live in the same town, and we do not work in the same place. Our children do not attend the same schools. We were brought together by an agency that does antiracism education, paired up as a biracial team to do some antiracism training at a college in the Boston area. We were brought together initially on a professional basis and immediately had the experience of preparing to work together as a team. . . . Beverly and I call that first professional collaboration, during which our relationship was formed, our “trial by fire.” The group of college students with whom we were working proved to be a very challenging group. . . . Yet, this adversarial experience actually pulled us together as a twosome. Going into what turned out to be a hostile environment forced us to really scrutinize the material that we were presenting to the group.

Consequently, Beverly and I had the experience of talking very deeply about painful issues around race and racism very early in our professional/personal relationship. We had potentially difficult conversations analyzing racial inequity because we had to scrutinize the material we were presenting to this challenging group. These conversations in the first days of our relationship, we have discovered, are of the sort that biracial friendships sometimes avoid for months or years. Looking back on it now, we believe that this process was a bonding experience.

We also found that our rides to and from Boston were opportunities to talk not only about our work but about our personal lives. We discovered some common ground as women, as mothers, and as professionals in our community. Early on, Beverly was very helpful to me as I was going through a difficult period with my then 1-year-old son. We forged close personal ties through what was initially a professional connection.

Tatum: . . . As Andrea has told you, we don’t live in the same neighborhood, our children don’t go to the same school, and we don’t worship in the same places; our lives are separate in many ways. Even though we frequently work together and certainly spend leisure time together now that our friendship has developed, our paths would not likely have crossed in other ways. Given the reality of social segregation, work does provide one of the few places where women of color and white women may come together across racial lines. So, it is not an accident that it was our work together that laid the groundwork for a friendship to develop.

. . . [O]ne of the things that has been very important is that at the beginning of our relationship there was an examination of our values as they related to the work that we did. We were forced to talk at a deeper level—not the superficial chitchat that you might engage with someone over the coffee machine—regarding what we thought about a very significant issue, in this case race relations in the United States. The mutuality that evolved in that relationship was very much in keeping with what Jean Baker Miller calls the “five good things.” When a relationship is in fact mutually reinforcing, it gives you a feeling of increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater self-knowledge, increased self-worth, and—most important in the context of a friendship—a desire for more connection (Miller, 1988). . . .

But as in all relationships, conflict arises. There certainly has been some conflict in our relationship, which we want to talk about, too, because it is also an important part of how one negotiates relationships that are going to be genuinely mutual. The most significant conflict, a real test of mutuality in our relationship, occurred when Andrea and I were conducting a workshop in St. Louis about 3 years ago. At that time, we were facilitating a workshop with a group of clergy on racism and, as we often do, we made reference to other “isms,” including heterosexism. This topic . . . triggered a rather heated discussion about homosexuality in which a range of religious viewpoints were expressed. As we struggled to deal with this issue . . . Andrea and I became aware of the fact that we had differing strategies for interacting with our participants on this issue. While we were

able to deal with that difference productively in the context of the workshop, as we were processing the event on the flight home we had a conversation that led to a real test of the mutuality in our relationship.

As background information for this incident, . . . I had just joined a church, which was a very important and significant step in my personal life, and as we talked about the controversy that had arisen in our workshop, we talked about the positions that our own religious communities had regarding homosexuality and heterosexism in the church. I am a member of a Presbyterian church. At this writing, that denomination is in the midst of a struggle around whether or not to ordain gay men and lesbian women. Andrea is a Quaker and belongs to a Meeting that is openly gay affirming and sanctions and supports same-sex commitment ceremonies. So our two worship communities have very different positions.

Andrea said to me that she didn't understand how I could be a part of a religious community that was exclusionary in the way that the Presbyterian church currently is, and in fact suggested that I should find another church. When she first said it, I was taken aback by the comment but had some trouble figuring out exactly what it was about it that bothered me. In fact, I shared her concern about the heterosexism in my denomination and in my local church. I have raised, and continue to raise, questions about this issue with my pastor and with fellow parishioners. On the other hand, my local congregation is a relatively progressive, predominantly black, Afrocentric congregation that is very affirming of my racial and spiritual identity . . . I experienced Andrea's suggestion that I should leave this congregation as an affront. . . .

It occurred to me that there was really a lot of white privilege in her statement. As a black woman living in a predominantly white community, there are not many opportunities for me or my children to be part of a community where our African American heritage is explicitly affirmed. Consequently our Sunday worship experience in a congregation that defines itself as "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian" is extremely valuable to me. I did feel that her statement that I should withdraw from this community was a statement of her white privilege. In fact, she was taking for granted the many churches or worship communities that she can choose from because almost all of them are predominantly white and will affirm her racial identity. . . . Her statement to me was a failure to recognize that privilege.

I felt that I had to say something to her about this. At the same time, I hesitated because this relationship was important to me and I did not want to alienate our friendship. Yet, it was a real juncture in terms of this issue of connections, disconnections and violations, because I could feel myself disconnecting. . . . In order for us to be able to maintain the growth and development of our relationship, certainly being able to talk about my spiritual journey and my worship community was an important point of connection that I needed to be able to maintain. I decided to share my perspective with Andrea, and I am happy to report that she responded in a very validating way. She simply listened to what I had to say and then said, "You're right."

Ayvazian: I want to speak to this because a potentially serious "disconnection" threatened our relationship—a relationship that had developed strong bonds, one that had become mutually important. When Beverly raised her feelings and concerns with me, two things went through my mind—two things that I knew she and I had said specifically to white people many times in the past! One was that when a person of color tells you something you have said or done is racist or reveals your inattention to white privilege, take a deep breath and begin by assuming she/he is correct until proven otherwise. The other point is that as white people strive to be strong white allies, we do not have to hold ourselves to a standard of perfection. It is impossible, given our socialization, our background, the struggle, the sensitivity, and the pain surrounding these issues, that we can be perfect white allies. I try to remember that I am not called to be perfect. I am called to be faithful and

consistent on these issues. Beverly was exactly right. . . . I tried to follow the very advice that I had given to others. . . . That was an important juncture: a disconnection threatened, but we managed to talk it through.

There was another time that a disconnection threatened but was overcome by both of us being aware of what was going on in the relationship. This happened around the time of the Rodney King beating and the Simi Valley verdict in which the four Los Angeles police officers were acquitted. . . . In our shock and grief following the Simi Valley verdict, we essentially separated for a period of time and turned to different communities for comfort and support. Bev talked about her reactions to the events primarily with other African Americans. . . . In my own state of pain, shock, and anger, I found myself talking to two white men who I specifically called and met with, two men who identify as white allies. Meeting with them was the appropriate place for me to take my grief and do some healing and action planning in order to move forward.

Following the Simi Valley verdict it was appropriate for Beverly and me to separate for a while and immerse ourselves in our own groups to work on these issues. . . . This is an important point because white people can feel a loss, and even a sense of personal rejection, when this happens. . . . Beverly and I see these as normal, necessary, and even predictable after racial trauma. The bridges that have been built may be perfectly strong, but there still may be a need to separate for a time.

Tatum: I want to add just a few comments to what Andrea has said. In fact, the weekend when the events following the Simi Valley verdict were unfolding, I was at a small women's conference, a gathering of about 20 women, to which I had been invited. The only person I knew in the group was the woman who had invited me, and I was the only woman of color there. As we were arriving, everyone was very much aware of the riots that were unfolding in Los Angeles following the acquittal, and what struck me was the reluctance among the group to talk in any serious way about what was going on in Los Angeles. A few people expressed a need to talk about what was happening and what it meant for the country and for their own particular communities, but generally speaking the majority of the participants seemed to disregard these events as someone else's problem, not of concern to us as a group. I felt very alienated by that response, I have to say. Perhaps because I was with white women I didn't know, it did not feel like a safe place for me to completely engage. I was quite concerned about what was happening in communities of color in Los Angeles and in other parts of the country in response to this verdict. Yet I felt that my concern, a part of who I was, a part of my own perspective as an African American woman, could not be safely brought to this meeting. I certainly experienced that as very disconnecting, and in fact I went home early from the conference and declined the invitation to attend the following year.

Ayvazian: . . . White people often say to me, "It sounds like you two work together on issues of racism and talk about them very openly in your friendship, but are you, Andrea, always in the position of learner?" Beverly and I want to take a moment to remind all of us that each individual has multiple social identities. We feel this point is important because there are ways that Beverly and I are, in some areas of systematic oppression, both in the dominant category. We both receive the privilege or advantage, and we support each other in being strong allies. I am not always in the position of being dominant, and Beverly is not always in the position of being targeted. In the area of race inequity and racism—in that form of systematic oppression—I am clearly dominant. I receive the privilege, the unearned advantage and benefit of being white, and Beverly is targeted.

But there are other areas where Beverly and I are both targeted and areas where we are both dominant. We're both targeted as women, and we're both dominant as Christians, as heterosexuals, as able-bodied, as middle class. We felt it was useful to remember that as

women we both feel targeted in groups of men where we are negotiating around money, for example. We are both disadvantaged systematically in a society that overvalues male attributes and characteristics. . . . The fact that we are both practicing Christians and women of faith and identify very strongly and publicly in that way means we are both dominant. We are not Jewish or Muslim. We are both able-bodied, both heterosexual, both middle-class women, and we offer each other support in remembering that we have a responsibility to interrupt anti-Semitism, to interrupt homophobia and heterosexism, to interrupt classism, and so on. . . .

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COMMON DIFFERENCES

Ayvanzian: . . .

We are two mothers with school-age children who have many similarities but who have made some different choices, we believe, because of our racial difference. In particular, we have made different choices about the schooling for our sons and the environments we feel they need in order to thrive. My son is in a public school in our town and fits in well in his kindergarten class and in his school. During a parent-teacher conference this past spring, his teacher said to me, “Andrea, your son is just like a thousand other rambunctious, big-for-his-age 6-year-old boys that I have had in my teaching career.” And I thought to myself, “I’m sure he is. I’m sure he doesn’t stand out in very many ways. He’s like a thousand other children that this woman has had in her long career of teaching kindergarten.” In our predominantly white community, the same could not be said about Beverly’s sons. . . .

Tatum: . . . Like many of the black families I interviewed and wrote about in my book, *Assimilation Blues: Black Families in a White Community* (Tatum, 1987), I have worried about how my children will be responded to by what has been to date an entirely white teaching staff (with the exception of an occasional student teacher of color). Though it may only be an illusion, I believe I have been able to exercise more control over my children’s classroom experiences as a result of enrolling them in private schools. There have been times when I have felt that racial issues were present in both peer and teacher interactions, and both my husband and I have been actively involved in negotiating those issues with the school and our children.

The task of raising young African American children, especially boys, in contemporary society is not an easy one. My children are also big for their ages, but unlike for white boys for whom physical maturity is often a social advantage, being black and big for your age places you at some psychological risk: 7-year-old black boys may be thought of as cute; 14-year-old black boys are often perceived as dangerous. The larger you are, the sooner you must learn to deal with other people’s negative stereotypes, and you may not yet be cognitively and emotionally mature enough to do so effectively. The smallness of their private school environment, where I can easily make myself known as a parent and where my children may be seen as individuals rather than representatives of a racial group, may offer some small margin of protection for them. They will need all the margin they can get. Though I am a product of public schools myself and I support quality public education, I have not regretted our decision to send our children to private schools.

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CHOOSING THE MARGIN

The last point that we want to talk about as another example of common differences is what Beverly and I have come to call from “margin to center” or from “center to margin.” Both of us have been influenced by the works of bell hooks, particularly *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), and Audre Lorde’s work, *Sister Outsider*. . . . Beverly and I have remarkably similar political views. We share very similar progressive politics, but again in this area of common differences we have expressed our personal politics in different ways. . . . As a white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied person, I receive considerable privilege in society. (I’m in so many dominant groups.) I start at the center where social, political, and economic power rests. Consequently, bell hooks’s book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, speaks to me, but in the reverse. I recognize that I start at the center and I feel called to move to the margin.

As I move to the margin, I try to take other progressive people, specifically in my case well-intentioned white people, with me into more progressive politics, living a more progressive agenda, choosing the margin. To accomplish this, I have made decisions like choosing, since 1981, to be a war tax resister, which means I don’t pay a portion of my federal income tax every April; I make a public protest, objecting to the priorities reflected in the military portion of our federal budget and our ongoing preparation for and involvement in war. Also in my journey from center to margin, my life partner (who is male) and I have chosen not to sanctify our union and our love of each other in a formal wedding. Instead we had a ceremony of commitment that could be replicated exactly for same-sex couples. We made this decision so that we can advocate as allies to gay, lesbian, and bisexuals as a couple that has chosen in one small way not to accept heterosexual privilege. Because I start with so much privilege—so clearly at the center—these are two ways that I can move to the margin, stir up good trouble, and invite other people like me to question their politics and live their commitments to the principles they hold dear. . . . There are ways that because of my privilege I’ve had the luxury to step out of the center, to do what is unexpected and in some ways unacceptable. But I have not during the last 5 years suggested that Beverly make the same choices. . . . I recognize that my daily life is more advantaged and more comfortable than hers because of my color. Consequently, I do not advocate that she should choose war tax resistance. She expresses her political convictions in other ways. The same is true around formal marriage and same-sex unions. It has not been an issue for me and it has not been a source of disconnection for us that Beverly has made different choices for her behavior as a strong ally to gay men and lesbians. Her allied behavior is evident in other ways. . . .

Tatum: As Andrea said, this idea, from margin to center, has been important and I’d like to refer to a reading that I found very helpful from Letty M. Russell’s book, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (1993). She refers to the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, and uses this idea to make the following point. She says, “We make choices about moving from margin toward center or from center toward margin according to where we find ourselves in relation to the center of power and resources and the cultural and linguistic dominance in any particular social structure. Our connection to the margin is always related to where we are standing in regard to social privilege, and from that particular position we have at least three choices, not to choose, to choose the center, or to choose the margins” (p. 192).

As Russell points out, our first choice is not to choose. If we make this choice, if we choose not to choose, we are essentially saying that those of us who are marginalized by gender, race, sexual orientation, class, or disability have the possibility of doing nothing. But, as she says, in so doing we internalize the oppression. I think that if we consider

not choosing, if we think about internalizing our oppression and allowing ourselves to be defined as marginal, then we have in effect been psychologically violated. . . . because it forces us to disconnect from our own experience, to try to ignore and not name the particular alienation that we are exposed to in our society.

Our second choice . . . is to choose the center. She says, “those on the margin choosing the center do so by emulating the oppressors and doing everything to pass or to be like those who are dominant and be accepted by them” (p. 192). Whenever we make this choice we are choosing disconnection in the sense that we are saying, “Yes I want to be in relationship with you. If I have to deny certain aspects of my experience to do so, then I will. I will disconnect from that part of my experience in order to maintain my connection with you.” . . .

Our third choice is for the margin. Here Russell says, “Those on the margin claim the margin by working in solidarity with others from the margin as they move toward the center. They seek a transformed society of justice where they will be empowered to share the center and no one will need to be marginalized” (p. 193). As I reflect on this choice, it seems to me this is the choice of connection. This is the choice of saying, “I will be connected to those who are able to acknowledge and affirm my experience in the world, who are able to stand on the margin with me.” . . . Society can be transformed by those on the margin only if we “choose” the margin. Otherwise we collude in our own oppression and the oppression of others.

I choose to stand on the margin as someone who is defined by society as marginal in terms of my race and in terms of my gender. I also recognize that there are places where I am in the center and need to choose the margin because, as Andrea has already pointed out, there are places where I am dominant. But the primary point here is that those of us on the margin—or in the center—claim the margin by working in solidarity with others from the margin as they move toward the center. It is in this context that I can warmly embrace Andrea as my friend, as someone who has chosen to stand on the margin with me. . . .

Ayvazian: . . . We have forged a relationship that is not based on the false goal of color blindness. We recognize the differences in our life experiences and the difference that race makes in a relationship, and we have built a sturdy bridge across that divide.

In closing I want to share with you two lines of a Pat Parker poem called “For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend.” The first two lines are as follows: “The first thing you do is forget that I’m black. Second, you must never forget that I’m black.” Do I forget that Beverly is black? Sure I do. She is a dear friend with whom I spend time. Love, admiration, and affection flow between us. . . . But do I really forget that Beverly is black? Yes and no. . . . That is who she is in the world, and yes it is forgotten, and no it is not actually ever forgotten. But in the end, I have discovered that the issue . . . for me is, how I have come to understand social, political, and economic power and my unearned advantage and privilege as a white woman in a racist society. . . . It is my understanding of my own whiteness, not my response to her blackness, that allows me to interact with Beverly in a way that continues to foster mutuality, connection, and trust.

. . . Beverly calls us “partners in justice”: shoulder to shoulder we move toward our goal.
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