

# *Of Color*

## A TEACHING COMPANION

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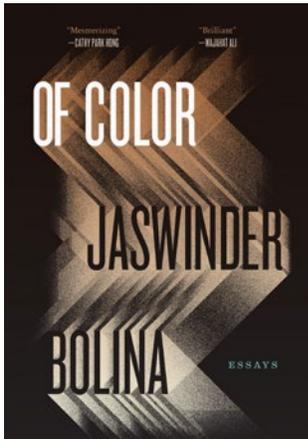
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## Ground Rules & Guidelines



*Of Color* is a collection of essays from the award-winning poet Jaswinder Bolina. Through memoir, analysis, and storytelling, these essays cover a wide breadth of urgent subject matter: the weight of legacies of race, nation, and history upon art and the artist, the myriad hazards that people of color face when navigating American institutions, and the importance of the individual story amid a chaotic cultural context. The collection also offers us instruction, hope, and possibilities of renewal. It thus makes for an excellent and timely teaching tool in a variety of learning contexts.

Racism, xenophobia, classism, and white supremacy are not easy conversation topics under any scenario—especially the classroom. The educator has many ethical considerations here: every class contains mixed demographics, literacies around racial equity, aversions or appetites for risk-taking, and occasions for both tokenism and embodied authority. And even an all-white classroom taught by a white teacher requires these same considerations—as much as any other classroom.

You can scaffold these discussions by spending some time building consensus and buy-in from your students beforehand. *Of Color* asks us to consider how selfhood is negotiated through encounters with others; collect the desires and anxieties of the class and establish shared ground rules students can commit to together when discussing and collaborating on projects related to this work. You may ask them to contribute such rules with these guiding questions:

- What do we want to learn here? How will we accomplish this?
- What makes us feel safe, supported, and heard? How do we honor and acknowledge differences here?
- What worries us when we have conversations about race? What dissatisfies us about most conversations about race? What are common roadblocks?
- How do discussions about contemporary politics—and in particular, divisive topics—usually go in our classrooms? What would make for a satisfying discussion, even if we must eventually agree to disagree? Are there modes of conduct we can all consent to following?
- What do we expect from our instructor? In what ways do we trust their authority to facilitate conversations around this text?
- How do we handle conflict, disagreement, and antagonism here? Can we establish a protocol that is fair and just to resolve these issues?
- What do we expect from each other in regards to our own stories? What kinds of responses do we welcome, and which are never acceptable?
- How do we communicate and demonstrate respect and care for each other? How do we hold ourselves accountable for the goals we said we would accomplish together?

## Discussion Questions

### WRITING ON RACE

- Why are these essays necessary to describe the complexities of race? What dimensions of race and racism, class, and xenophobia are explored in each essay?
- What are the implications of this collection's title, *Of Color*? What is connoted by the preposition "of" in the book's title, as well as within the term "people of color?"
- How does Bolina problematize the contemporary professional practice of writing? What are ways that literary culture reproduces certain fictions about race?
- Bolina writes across forms: poetry and essays. Based on what you know from *Of Color* and from your own experiences as a reader, what do each of these two modes afford both the writer and the audience? In what ways are they different?
- What are critiques you have heard lodged against writers who directly address racism in their work? (For example, contemporary critics of "political correctness" have organized campaigns against multicultural or anti-oppression reading lists; meanwhile, faculty may be placed on online campus watchlists for writing about racial equity). How can the essays in *Of Color* instruct us to repudiate these claims? What responses could we formulate against these critiques now that we've read this collection?
- Writing on racism, classism, xenophobia, and other modes of oppression often requires delving into unpleasant, painful, and traumatic places. Where does *Of Color* offer us optimism and pleasure? How do those moments motivate us as readers, and why are they necessary in a thoughtful discussion of tough subjects?

### RACE IN/AND LANGUAGE

- We might assume that race is primarily identified visually—through phenotypes like skin color or hair texture. According to Bolina's experiences, how are the logics of race also at work linguistically?
- Why are English departments and creative writing programs so white? What are the material conditions in these institutions that reproduce class and race within literature? In your own experience and from your own knowledge, how have these issues been addressed, and have these solutions been effective?
- What does Bolina mean by "In my writing, I have only the parlance of whiteness to express my brownness. The parlance of privilege." (pg 35)? What is the "parlance of whiteness," and how is it marked? When are poets of color "permitted to bring alternative vernaculars into [their] work?" (pg 34)?
- Consider Bolina's acknowledgment that class distinction manifests itself lexically on pages 71–72: that terms like *second shift* and *dividends* are not equally used across communities and are "embedded" in "frames of reference." Why is this "downright existential" for poets?

## MICRO/MACRO-AGGRESSIONS

- How does Bolina contextualize smaller-scale microaggressions and invalidations into larger aggressions—like colonialism, national history, or acts of war and empire?
- According to Bolina’s own account, in which ways are some microaggressions disguised as desire, fascination, or interest? How do these forms of fetishization compare to more derisive or hostile experiences of racial othering? What effects do they have upon their targets—and upon larger communities and institutions?
- What does Bolina mean when he writes that race “becomes metaphysical” (pg 45)? Why does the disjuncture between his interior experience (the “version of who I am”) and the sum of outside oppressions (“the lessons offered by all such acts [of prejudice] taken together” [pg 46]) matter? Can these two ever be consciously integrated by a person of color, and if so, how?
- How does Bolina account for the differences and continuities between the racially-motivated “adolescent joke” and the “semiotic suspicion that [he is] something other than an ‘ordinary citizen’” (pg 45) by the TSA, the neighborhood watch, or the police?

## DIVERSITY

- Based on your own experiences and observations, how is the term “diversity” deployed out in the world? What possibilities—and limitations—of this idea does Bolina describe in his own experiences?
- According to the author, how does the figure of the immigrant navigate the tension between sameness and difference, “[speaking] across the moat between *us* and *them* ... [seeing] through both sides of the bullet hole” (pgs 18–19)? How does this description complicate or challenge other cliched discourses about immigrants or assimilation in the U.S.?
- In what ways does racial difference materialize in Bolina’s relationships with strangers, colleagues, and intimate others (like romantic partners or family)? What accounts for the variety of these expressions, or the flexibility of racial discourses, across these types of relationships?
- Consider the controversy surrounding Sherman Alexie’s editorial selection of Michael Derrick Hudson’s poem under the pen name Yi-Fen Chou—as well as critics’ complaints of political correctness, affirmative action, and supposed dispossession of white writers within the changing publishing marketplace on pages 51–54. How does Bolina describe the double bind that writers of color find themselves in when they navigate this marketplace? What responsibilities might white writers, publishers, and literary professionals assume to acknowledge and address practices that either tokenize or under-represent writers of color?
- What does Bolina mean by “Whatever threat or violence awaits this nation in the years ahead, none of it lurks because we permit diversity and difference to enter here” (pg 83).

## *The Contemporary*

- A version of the book's opening essay, *Empathy for the Devil*, was first published in 2012. In it, Bolina writes:

“...I don't want to engage in easy liberalism, the activist mindset that contemplates, mourns, and criticizes but does nearly nothing to change the conditions that allow atrocity in the first place ... Such a mindset ... operates at a safe distance, and that distance is part of the problem too. In that space, self-righteousness and cynicism fester. There every atrocity is born.” (pg 17)

How do you make sense of this insight today, given events in the news, political life, and culture at large that have taken place since 2012? How can we put this passage into dialogue with current critiques about “cancel culture” or performative activism?

- After reading *Of Color*, what are your major observations about race, representation, and the craft of writing? How do these observations square with the events we are currently processing in the news, in culture, and in contemporary literature? Did we learn anything from this book that is particularly instructive in this moment?

## *Classroom Activities*

### LINGUISTIC PROFILING

*Of Color* describes the difficult double bind that writers of color face within educational and publishing institutions: they are often pressured into assimilating into the vernacular of whiteness, or tokenized into making their race apparent or a spectacle. This activity asks students to reflect upon race-based judgments made through language in order to articulate alternatives: first, by making snap judgments based on language alone, then by enumerating and externalizing those judgments in a guided discussion.

#### *Learning outcomes:*

- Diagnose ways that racial ideologies are embedded within language
- Confront assumptions and judgments made through speech or writing
- Imagine anti-oppression alternatives as readers and writers, or as speakers and listeners

#### *Procedure:*

1. This activity may be performed with either audio or text. Before class, collect samples of either from a diverse selection of speakers or writers. If using audio, you can choose clips from speeches, popular media, podcasts, or interviews; if using text, you can choose poems, prose, paragraphs from essays, or even copy from cookbooks or screenshoted Tweets with avatars and handles redacted. Be sure to include some examples with code switching, affectations or parodies of class or racial differences, and a diversity of topic matter. You should also include material from people who have compelling migration stories, are mixed-race, or are underrepresented in their fields—as well as a few samples from people whose backgrounds are overrepresented in their fields.
2. Offer students an important disclaimer before starting the activity: *We are constantly making racialized judgments about people based on the words they use, the ways they speak or write, and the conscious—and unconscious—stereotypes we anticipate as readers or listeners. I will give you a series of samples; as you are reading/listening to each one, visualize the person behind the words—what do they look like? The goal of this activity is not to guess correctly; instead, this is an exercise to uncover our racialized assumptions. You will write your guesses down in your own notes, and they are for your own self-assessment; I will not collect them.*
3. Instruct students about the procedure for the activity, or pass out a worksheet to guide their responses. After exposing themselves to each sample, they should respond to two questions (in ideally 1–2 minutes): (1) What is this person's race? (2) Why do you think so?
4. After all the samples and responses, reveal the answers by introducing the people behind their words. You might make a slideshow that includes images and biographical details, or video clips that give students a more nuanced or direct perspective of these peoples' ideas about their identity and their own work.

5. Facilitate a discussion to debrief the activity. Some questions you might ask:

- Did any of your responses surprise you? Why? How did this activity make you feel?
- Let's focus on the second question which followed our snap judgments, *why do you think so?* What clues or cues do we use as cognitive shortcuts when we are imagining race? What signifiers, pronunciations, dialects, or other linguistic data do we use to make these judgments?
- What is code switching? In which codes (which registers or vernaculars) is prestigious media or literature produced? Who code switches—when, and why? When do we see white writers or speakers code switch, and to what effect?
- When do we see non-standard vernacular dialects in literature or media? What does their usage convey? (*For example: in Disney's Aladdin, the protagonists speak in a standard American accent, the villain in a British accent, and all the side characters in an ambiguously Middle Eastern accent*)
- How are dialect and language used in practices that tokenize people?
- Can you think of other times or places where people are linguistically profiled? (*For example: calling in to inquire after an apartment listing, writing a cover letter for a job application, submitting a manuscript to a publisher, etc.*) What are the consequences?
- What are discourses you have heard about diversity and representation (in literature, in media, in business, etc)? How do we measure diversity, either formally or informally? Is there a way to take peoples' language use into account? What could that look like?
- What should we take away from this activity? What are our responsibilities as readers, writers, and listeners who are committed to anti-racism?

#### VIGNETTES OF OUR DIFFERENCES

Race is a complex sociological construction, and it seldom operates consistently across contexts and scenarios. *Of Color* captures some of these nuances through Bolina's autobiographical episodes gathered from various encounters: strangers, professional life, family, and larger institutions alike all reveal different shades in which differences are re-imagined or re-negotiated. In this activity, students write and share brief memoiristic vignettes that—in sum—underscore the contradictions and inscrutability of race and racism.

#### *Learning outcomes:*

- Uncover a nuance or specific iteration of race or racism, as embedded in an individual experience
- Comprehend both the incoherence—and pervasiveness—of race as an ideology by comparing its manifestations across our daily lives
- Build empathy between students who have had different experiences

**Procedure:**

6. *This activity may be performed entirely in the classroom, or alternatively, portions may be assigned as homework.* To begin, ask students to write a one-page vignette that details a time in which the feeling of their own racial difference revealed itself to them. Taking cues from *Of Color*, this vignette might be a memory from an otherwise everyday experience, the embodied experience of reacting to an event in the news or a controversy, or a more intense or antagonistic encounter.
  - Remind students that they will share their work with each other—they can control how intimate or personal their pieces are. *You may consider allowing these pieces to be anonymized for Step 2, depending on the culture of your classroom.*
  - This assignment may come readily to students of color, who are often used to thinking about their own othering; you may remind white-identifying students that they should try to locate a memory in which their whiteness was reaffirmed, disciplined, or drawn into relief.
  - Students' vignettes need not make definitive statements about race or racism, but you may encourage them to open up at least one insight or revelation from the specific experience they are describing.
7. Students share their pieces. You might do this any number of ways, depending on the size and culture of your class: collating them into an anthology for them to read as homework, posted on the classroom walls as a gallery walk, collected digitally on a discussion board or blog, or passed between desks. Set up some ground rules with the class about which kinds of reactions and feedback are invited, and which are unacceptable.
8. After students have read their collective archive, facilitate a debriefing conversation. Some questions you might ask:
  - This activity contained two experiences: recalling a memory that revealed a dimension of race, and holding your classmates' memories as their witness. What were both of these experiences like, and how did they make you feel?
  - Between our vignettes, what is something that surprised you? A pattern you identified between pieces? A contradiction? A very unique experience?
  - Based on all of our pieces together, can we say we say there is a domain in life where race is not operating in some way? If you can think of one, can anybody else here see a way that it *is* operating?
  - Is race always identified visually? Can we think of examples from our pieces where other senses—like sound (*voice, music, etc*) or smell and taste (*food, environment, etc*) also index racial difference? What does that suggest about racism?
  - Can we put our finger on what race “is?” Or is it messier than that?
  - What are messages we have heard about race and racism—and supposed solutions to

racism—in our educations, in the media, and in general discourse? How do we reflect upon those clichés after reading this collection?

- If we were to polish and publish this collection as an anthology, what would the blurb on the inside jacket say? What would the book's title be? Would you want to edit your entry now that you've read the others? What else would you include?
- What does our collection direct you to do after you leave class today?

# Research Projects

## AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Autoethnography is a genre within the social sciences and humanities that uses the researcher's memories, emotional responses, and subjective experiences to answer an empirical research question. *Of Color* is an example of a text that also blends autoethnographic, self-reflexive writing in the pursuit of a guiding question. Here, students treat their own biographies as subjects worthy of critical inquiry.

### *Learning outcomes:*

- Recover personal memory as a source material for a research question
- Formalize considerations of positionality, privilege, and our assumptions in the process of seeking and creating knowledge

### *Assignment:*

9. **Present students a topic, book or reading, or other prompt** that advances the learning outcomes of your own class and curriculum.
10. Introduce autoethnography as a research methodology, as well as the goals for the assignment. (For more resources, you can download a copy of *Teaching Autoethnography: Personal Writing in the Classroom*, available at the [University of Minnesota's Open Textbook Library](https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/263)<sup>1</sup>). Some acknowledgments you might make:
  - Autoethnography is a form of writing that relies heavily on the subjective experiences, perceptions, and worldviews of the writer.
  - It is highly personal; thus, we strive for sensitivity, kindness, and openness when workshopping and sharing our work. We are here to evaluate our writing, not each others' experiences or choices.
  - In the process of describing our observations, memories, and experiences in language, we are also simultaneously interpreting and analyzing them; description is not a value-neutral activity.
  - Autoethnography can also be framed as journaling, diary-writing, or memoir—formats with which students may already be familiar and comfortable.
11. **Students formulate and choose a research question.** Through mind-mapping or outlining, ask students to address a number of subtopics or themes (say, three) that will help provide evidence for a clear thesis statement.
12. **Invite students to freewrite on each of their chosen subtopics;** they can set a timer for 10–20 minutes for each, for example. In their freewriting, they can recall and describe a memory, a conversation, a reaction to a piece of media or literature as they were consuming it, a series of internet searches or social media activity, or any other event that places them and their reactions at the center.

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1 <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/263>

13. Using these fragments of freewriting, have **students code their own texts** with a highlighter or marginal notes, identifying further questions, themes, surprises, patterns, anomalies—anything that captures or sparks interest.
14. Students revisit their research question, their subtopics, and their own annotated autoethnographic writing to **build out a bibliography** of written sources as they would any other research paper. Depending on your class, you may set a requirement for the number or type of sources they will use to develop and support a research argument. Their autoethnographic writing also serves as one of their primary sources; you may also invite them to do additional self-reflective writing during the process.
15. **Ask students to draft a research paper that blends their traditional sources alongside evidence from their autoethnographic writing.**

### *Workshopping Opportunities*

You may choose to integrate collaborative workshops throughout this assignment, including the research question design, outlining, and autoethnographic and essay writing portions of the process. Some guiding questions for peer reviews and discussions of autoethnographic work:

- What are insights that you learned about this subjective from your peers' subjective experiences? What are new questions you have?
- What details about your peers' experiences surprised you? What context or understanding would you still like to discover?
- Do we understand the relationship between events, perceptions, and feelings in these pieces?
- Is it clear how these experiences are networked into the larger research question? What would strengthen the connection between subjective experience (the autoethnographic writing) and the other sources in the paper?
- How do we account for our embodied differences (say, race and ethnicity, gender identity, the neighborhood we live in, etc) in our own writings? Does this inform the questions we ask in our research, or the tools we use to answer those questions?
- How do we balance our subjective writing with the other sources in our bibliography? What analytic work does our autoethnographic writing provide in our interpretation or interrogation of the traditional sources?
- What kinds of insights are generated in this paper? How are these insights different from the ones derived from a traditional research assignment?
- How do we understand *Of Color* now that we've undertaken the challenging—and perhaps messy—endeavor of blending scholarship with memoir and memory?

“In these lyrically intelligent, exceptionally alert essays, Bolina examines the essential interpermeability of social groups. Told from the perspective of a person of color who can pass for multiple ethnicities, a father of a mixed child, a son of immigrants, an embedded participant and an invisible narrator, *Of Color* is a crucial addition to the growing canon of works about race in contemporary America.”

—SARAH MANGUSO,  
author of *300 Arguments*

“Jaswinder Bolina’s insightful, raw, and honest collection of brilliant essays illuminate the joys and pains of being a specific person *Of Color* and through his unique lens we also come to understand the universal ongoing story of America.”

—WAJAHAT ALI,  
author of *The Domestic Crusaders* and  
contributor to CNN and the *New York Times*

“In *Of Color*, Jaswinder Bolina explores race and class relations with mesmerizing insight. Bolina writes with beautiful nuance and depth, diving into the geopolitical, personal, and racial contradictions of what “brown” means in today’s America. This is a powerful and wise collection of essays, one that will make reverberations into how we look at this country in the future.”

—CATHY PARK HONG,  
author of *Minor Feelings*

“I am charmed by Bolina’s cautious, open-eyed, worldbuilding impulse. His collection moves from the polemic to the personal with the candidness and flair of a rollicking dinner conversation. *Of Color* is one of a growing collection of books that should inform and, if we’re lucky, reinvent how creative writing is instructed.”

—AISHA SABATINI SLOAN,  
author of *Dreaming of Ramadi In Detroit*



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