



# Praxis in Practice: Collaboratively Building Resources to Teach and Learn about Everyday Racism

by [Diana Lee](#) on [June 27, 2016](#) in [Voices from the Field](#)

For the past several years, I have been part of the [Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics \(MAPP\)](#) research group at the University of Southern California, learning the diverse forms that multidisciplinary researcher-practitioner collaborations can take and seeing how these ongoing partnerships can inform and enrich the work of everyone involved. Under the guidance of Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, MAPP has been working on a multiyear research project exploring “innovative networks and organizations that deploy participatory politics to get young people involved in efforts to heighten public awareness and promote social change.”<sup>1</sup> An important part of this project has also been working with our partners in the Media Arts + Practice Division at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts to translate these research findings into an accessible and participatory web resource, *By Any Media Necessary*.<sup>2</sup> Our hope is that educators and activists can use the wide variety of resources available through BAM as a tool to help students master the kinds of skills and competencies necessary for effectively harnessing digital media and participatory politics towards their social justice goals.

Built on Scalar, a free, open source, media-rich publishing platform, the *By Any Media Necessary* (BAM) site features a range of resources designed with and for activists and educators. These resources include original media produced by activist groups and networks, critical reflections and conversations with project partners and participants, curricular resources and activities, a book companion to the forthcoming *By Any Media Necessary* book, and more. We developed BAM with the goal of being accessible and useful to multiple kinds of users, and it is important to us that we continue to work collaboratively to build on and improve the resource for use in learning spaces. We also believe this can only be accomplished by engaging in ongoing conversations with activists and educators about their experiences navigating and using the site.

This iterative and reflective development process is also reflected in my own engagement and growth working with this project. As a pedagogically oriented researcher scholar, I often grapple with how I can best bridge the demands and values of academia with my desire to directly support educator practitioners and learners in their everyday teaching and learning activities. Working with MAPP and on BAM has not only shown me but also allowed me to participate in the different forms that these kinds of efforts can take.

I research the impact and pedagogical potential of mediated counternarratives to racial microaggressions, the layered, subtle, and often unintentional forms of everyday racism experienced by people of color.<sup>3</sup> Different from overt and intentional acts of discrimination, these everyday, casual expressions reflect and reinforce the racially biased status quo of society,<sup>4</sup> which makes them difficult to “see” and difficult to address in the moment they are happening. Although often dismissed because of their seemingly small, fleeting, and unintentional expression, the damage of microaggressions comes from their cumulative impact. This repeated and prolonged experiencing of

these assaults can happen unpredictably, anywhere, any time, and often among well-meaning people in “safe” spaces. By learning from ground-up participatory projects and movements such as “The Microaggressions Project” and the “I, Too, Am Harvard” photo campaign, we can see vivid examples of how people are harnessing the power of visual expression and participatory, networked communication to create powerful counterstories that expose, resist, and speak back to racial microaggressions. I work to understand how these expressive and dynamic exemplars of participatory activism serve as spaces of communing, healing, and advocacy for those experiencing these everyday forms of racism and am committed to exploring how they can be examined and adopted for transformative teaching and learning in other educational spaces.

Through my involvement with MAPP as a graduate student researcher, I have been able to workshop my own reflections and ideas about these projects. I have learned from peers, mentors, and practitioners, as well as from the myriad ways other activists and groups are creatively using a wide range of expressions, strategies, and tools to advocate for their social justice goals. As part of my contribution to building the By Any Media Necessary (BAM) web resource, I created a page to highlight one of the projects I study—the “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign—describing and listing it as one of the featured organizations and networks that are doing the kinds of impactful, innovative civic activities that we are so excited about. In doing so, I was able to move beyond thinking about what and how this campaign was doing the work they are doing, and pivot towards putting it out there for a targeted educator and activist audience. My goal was to show how good of an example and pedagogical resource the campaign could be to help teach and unpack issues as complex as racial identity, United States race relations, systemic discrimination, and the kinds of participatory actions one could take to face these issues.

Being a part of MAPP and working with networks of like-minded educators also helped amplify and affirm my own role as a contributor to the building of a resource such as this. The beauty and uncertainty of an online, openly accessible web resource is that you never know who might see what part of your work when, and you don’t always know if and how it might speak to them. In working with teachers, I could tangibly see how they were relating to and using the site and learned from what was helpful and inspiring to them. Perhaps most rewarding to see was when educators used BAM as we intended, taking a part of the resource and creatively extending and expanding on it to enrich their own work.

For example, in 2014 the MAPP team began workshopping the By Any Media Necessary site with groups of K-12 teachers affiliated with the National Writing Project. Much like the values that guide MAPP, including the creation of the web resource itself, these gatherings were designed to invite interaction and creativity and included multiple avenues for varied kinds of participation. Many of these meetings would start with a low-key participatory word association activity. Everyone would be prompted to immediately begin contributing to a mediated group icebreaker, setting a collaborative tone and illustrating how a simple video-editing app such as MixBit could be used to quickly and easily create participatory projects and engagement. During these meetings, MAPP facilitators would also engage the groups in one or more of the skills-building workshops listed in BAM. We did this so participants could experience first-hand what the workshops are like, reflect on how they might be helpful in their own work, and offer feedback about how they can be improved.

We also asked teachers to work directly with the web resource to see how it might be useful for their classrooms. In these workshopping meetings, MAPP team members would provide a brief history of the project and give a general overview of the different parts of the site, pointing out potential areas of interest such as workshops, conversation starters, the digital media toolkit, featured groups and organizations, and the media library. Without further directed guidance, the teachers would then be asked to explore the resource on their own and then share back what they found. Here, we focused on which aspects of the site stood out to them and the paths they took to find the resources, media, organizations, people, or networks they found interesting. The teachers were then given “homework.” We asked them to continue exploring BAM, find something they could incorporate into one of their

class lessons by the next meeting, and then share their lesson planning thought processes and resources back with the group. The following is a curricular unit that came out of one of these teacher meetings.

In our Kansas City, Missouri, working group, high school English teacher Nicole found the “I, Too, Am Harvard” photo campaign through her exploration of BAM and used it to develop a multiday lesson plan about racial and regional identity, stereotypes, and citizenship. She was inspired by the story and creations of these young activists who used artistic and creative expression, participatory culture, and social media tools to create and spread counternarratives to stand up to their experiences of everyday racism. Nicole’s goal was to design a lesson that would get her senior English class students critically thinking about and discussing how assumptions about their identities could affect their views and expectations of themselves, as well as their behaviors and interactions with others.

The teaching unit she created has students practicing multimedia and multilevel analysis skills. It also has students engaging in varied modes of participation, including individual, small group, whole class, and partner work. Students read, write, reflect, and dialogue about complex topics such as the intersections of racial, class, regional, and national identity. They also learn to critically evaluate the media and cultural objects they encounter, such as videos, images, and hashtags, as well as more traditional “literature,” like classic poems and essays. The last part of the unit also has students creating and articulating their own voices to their community, which is an important and often overlooked aspect of the media literacy conversation. In addition to teaching how to critically decipher media, creating opportunities for young people to practice creating, communicating, and engaging through different forms and networks is a crucial skill necessary to help develop prepared, engaged citizens in our increasingly mediated and digitally connected, networked world.

Watch Nicole discuss her lesson plans in this video, or read more about it below:



Video 1 – Discussion of lesson plans by high school English teacher, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo8OSLZW1ao>

To get students started with thinking about individual, group, and structural relationships between complex notions such as racial and regional identities, stereotypes, and citizenship, Nicole begins this unit with an individual-level “Train of Thought” activity. Students are provided with a set of statements or quotes about some of these concepts, such as “People who make comments about you generally have your best interest at heart,” and each student individually writes down their immediate stream of consciousness associations and reflections about the statements.

This activity allows students to get situated and begin to gather their thoughts about some of these personal and complex concepts before sharing their opinions and perspectives with others.

After this brief period of reflection, the next activity, “Four Corners,” starts to expand out, involving working as a class as a whole and in small groups. Each corner of the classroom would be designated to represent one of four feelings: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. The teacher reads out statements one-by-one, such as, “A person’s racial identity is shaped entirely by how others perceive them,” and students will move into the corner that corresponds with how they each relate to that statement. Once students have chosen their corners, they will discuss with their small like-minded groups about why they chose to stand there, and then each group will be asked to share back to the larger class about their points of view. This active, dynamic activity gets students literally changing their perspectives as they move around the classroom space and encourages students to discuss and practice articulating their thoughts about these topics. This includes hearing from peers who might have opposing or different perspectives than their own and fine tuning their own opinions and perspectives while among a group of like-minded peers.

After this activity that involves the class as a whole, the next part of the lesson involves students sitting back down to work in pairs to read “I, Too” (also sometimes called “I, Too, Sing America”) by American poet and social activist Langston Hughes, whose work was influential during the prolific period of African American arts and cultural expression often referred to as the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. Students are asked to read, reflect, discuss, and synthesize their reactions to the poem:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I’ll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody’ll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

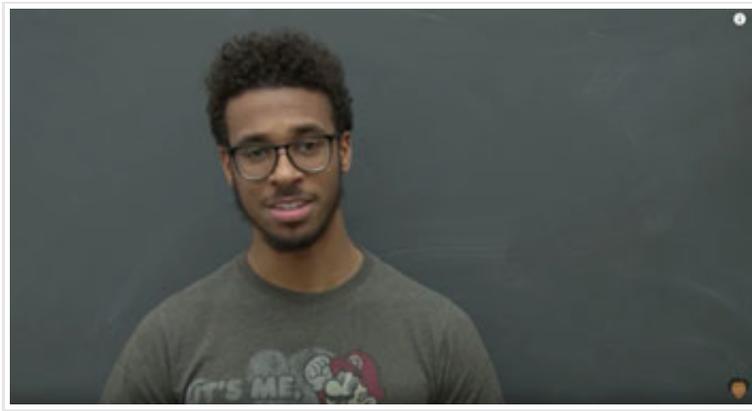
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.<sup>5</sup>

Students analyze the poem together in pairs, including what we might think of as traditional literary analysis, such as responses to the words, punctuation, and cadences used, as well as consideration of the social and historical context of when the poem was written, how it might have been interpreted then, and how it still resonates today.

The next activity prompts students to start applying the ideas they have been engaging with to their own identities and experiences. Borrowing from both the poem and the “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign, locally situated phrases that begin with “I, Too, Am...” are provided to encourage discussion and reflection on concepts such as identity, belonging, community, and citizenship. For her class, Nicole uses statements about Kansas City neighborhood and regional boundaries, such as “I, Too, Am Wyandotte County” and “I, Too, Am Schlagle High School.” She also includes a prompt emphasizing an intelligent learner’s identity (“I, Too, Am Educated”) because being “from” certain neighborhoods, counties, or schools in her area come with particular assumptions and associations about intelligence and being better or worse than other districts. To address citizenship, national identity, and its intersections with race, class, and regional borders, she also uses the phrase “I, Too, Am a Citizen.” This resonates because there is a significant population of undocumented students and families at her school, and this statement serves as one way to discuss the experiences and difficulties dealing with the fluidity of the national boundaries and policies that impact their lives. Similar intersectional approaches to the multifaceted nature of identity include structuring in a way to talk about other aspects of identity, including gender (“I, Too, Am Woman/Man”), age (“I, Too, Am Young Adult”), and humanity (“I, Too, Am Human”). Still in pairs, students are asked to reflect, discuss, and write down their associations and responses to these statements about their everyday lived realities.

For the next phase of the lesson, Nicole then has the class as a whole examine the “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign as a case study. From the I, Too, Am Harvard campaign description page found through the BAM web resource, she plays the campaign’s promotional video and has them briefly discuss as a group initial reactions and comments to the introductory video. Then, in pairs, they are asked to look through the digital protest portraits displayed and circulated through the campaign’s Tumblr site<sup>6</sup> and choose one with a message that they have a strong reaction to, whether it is because they can relate to it or because they disagree with it. Students then write down at least one question or comment they have about the image they choose and share back with the class for group discussion.



Video 2 – Image from “I, Too, Am Harvard” preview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAMTSPGZRil>

Following this activity, as a counterpoint and different perspective about racial identity and discrimination, the next activity involves students reading American novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston’s essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Similar to the analysis they did with the Langston Hughes poem, students are asked to analyze the text critically, including considering the messages of the essay, the language and imagery used, the social and historical contextual factors, and how it might resonate in the contemporary moment. To further guide critical reflection and connect these concepts to student’s current realities, students are then asked to respond to questions about their personal experiences, such as questions about experiencing discrimination (e.g., “Do you have experience being treated differently because of how you look?”) and their opinions about appropriate responses to discrimination (e.g., “Is it ok to be angry when you’re treated differently?”). This activity helps students think about racial and other kinds of discrimination as they manifest in the everyday. The questions also challenge students to articulate how they might respond to discrimination, including how they have responded when experiencing it in the past, how they might respond in the future, and how the consequences for responding could vary greatly depending on your social identity and the context of the situation.

The final activity in this series culminates in the students applying all that they have examined, read, wrote about, and discussed with their peers to practice another critical part of learning to be literate, engaged citizens: participating in creating their own “I, Too, Am...” statements. Students are given time to craft these individually and share back with the class about why they chose what they did and how it relates to themes from previous lessons.

The unit described above is from a summer workshop session with Nicole and a group of teachers affiliated with the Kansas City Writing Project. The overall structure and flow of the unit articulates several ways to design multimedia, participatory lessons that explore themes such as racial and regional identity, stereotypes, discrimination, citizenship, and belonging. Additionally, while the unit can be adopted as a whole, different parts of it can also be easily taken to fit one’s own classroom or learning environment, depending on student and community needs, time, and resources.

This curricular plan is a reflection of the kinds of rich and generative creations that can come from an ongoing commitment to sustained, mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborations between researchers and practitioners. It offers a hopeful example of what an academic book and web resource like *By Any Media Necessary* could potentially do, not only to highlight and amplify the voices of those engaging in innovative civics and participatory politics but also to support educators and researchers who want to help foster these same kinds of practices, civic engagement, media literacy, and engaged learning in their own classrooms and communities.

**Notes** (← returns to text)

1. “Project Background,” *By Any Media Necessary: Mapping Youth and Participatory Politics*, University of Southern California/MacArthur Foundation, last modified March 28, 2016,

<http://byanymedia.org/works/mapp/project-background>.↵

2. All references to By Any Media Necessary (BAM) from *By Any Media Necessary: Mapping Youth and Participatory Politics*, University of Southern California / MacArthur Foundation, <http://byanymedia.org>.↵
3. Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).↵
4. Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel G. Solórzano, "Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 18, no. 3 (2015): 297–320, doi:10.1080/13613324.2014.994173.↵
5. Hughes, Langston, "I, Too," *poets.org*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-too>.↵
6. "I, Too, Am Harvard" photo campaign's Tumblr page, last updated August 7, 2014, <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com>.↵

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### About Diana Lee

Diana Lee is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism who researches the creation and circulation of mediated counter-narratives in response to racial microaggressions. Through multimedia visual culture and storytelling resistance practices, she explores how these networked participatory cultures aim to collectively process, speak back to, or educate about these everyday manifestations of racism and their layered, cumulative effects. She is particularly interested in the potential healing and empowering impact of participating in these resistance practices for those who frequently navigate microaggressions in their everyday lives, and how these kinds of engagement can be utilized and fostered for education in other contexts of learning.

Diana has worked on several mixed-methods research projects in education, psychology, mental health, immigration, youth culture, media literacy, and communication. Before doctoral studies, she worked in education research and evaluation with the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) and the National Writing Project (NWP), and in after school programming and development at Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES).

Diana holds a B.A. in Sociology from University of California, Berkeley, an Ed.M. in Learning and Teaching from Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a M.A. in Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University.

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