

**“We cannot deny that this is a race issue”:
Blending the ethnography of communication and critical communication
pedagogy to analyze a social drama on race**

Deanna L. Fassett, Tabitha Hart

In April 2018, two black men were arrested while waiting for a friend at a Starbucks store in Philadelphia, PA. The incident, which was caught on video, went viral, sparking widespread public outrage. Starbucks’ response was contrite, with the company’s CEO acknowledging regretfully how “reprehensible” the arrests were. One month later, Starbucks took the unprecedented step of closing all of its shops across the United States in order to provide implicit bias/diversity training to all of its employees (Siegel and Horton, 2018).

This incident, which can be understood as a social drama revolving around race (Turner, 1982; cf. Edgerly 2011, Philipsen 2000), provokes questions relevant to ethnographers of communication who are interested in the nexus of language and social interaction, social justice, and public pedagogy. For example, (how) did Starbucks’ public communication about the arrests and the company’s subsequent response (the training sessions) affirm and/or constitute understandings of “implicit bias?” (How) did customers take up strategic rhetorics (or communicative codes) of whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995) in their public responses to Starbucks? (How) did Starbucks’ online communication explicitly violate local codes governing talk about race? And finally, (how) could Starbucks’ response be considered effective public pedagogy (Giroux, 2011, 2004)?

To explore these questions, we utilize a theoretical/methodological framework blending EC and critical communication pedagogy. While these two approaches are typically viewed as oppositional, recent scholarly collaborations suggest potential for using them in complementary ways (Castañeda de Rossmann, L., Edgerly, L., Fassett, D. L., Hart, T., Ho, E. Y., Milburn, T., & Nainby, K.). Here, we apply this framework to a dataset comprising approximately 2,000 posts from Starbucks’ Facebook page. These posts, collected in May, 2018 immediately after the Starbucks diversity training took place, reflect in-the-moment conversations between Starbucks and the public at large on the company’s response, the diversity training, and the issue of race as a focus of public conversation. Our analysis adds to a small but important body of EC work informed by and dedicated to issues of social justice.

References

- Baertlein, L. (2018, April 16). Starbucks CEO says arrests of two black men 'reprehensible'. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philadelphia-starbucks/starbucks-ceo-says-arrests-of-two-black-men-reprehensible-idUSKBN1HN2AL>
- Castañeda de Rossmann, L., Edgerly, L., Fassett, D. L., Hart, T., Ho, E. Y., Milburn, T., & Nainby, K. (2017). *Mindfully connecting critical communication pedagogy (CCP) and the ethnography of communication (EC) towards social justice goals: A roundtable discussion*. Paper presented at the Western States Communication Association, Santa Clara, CA.
- Edgerly, L. (2011). Difference and political legitimacy: Speakers' construction of "citizen" and "refugee" personae in talk about Hurricane Katrina. *Western Journal of Communication*, 75(3), 304–322.
- Giroux, H. A. (2011). The crisis of public values in the age of the new media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 28, 8-29.
- Giroux, H. A. (2004). Cultural studies, public pedagogy, and the responsibility of intellectuals. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 1, 59-79.
- Nakayama, T. K. and Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, 291-309.
- Philipsen, G. (2000). Permission to speak the discourse of difference: A case study. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 33(2), 213-234.
- Siegel, R. and Horton, A. (2018, 17 April). Starbucks to close 8,000 stores for racial bias education on May 29 after arrest of two black men. *Washington Post*. Accessed 30 November 2018 from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/17/starbucks-to-close-8000-stores-for-racial-bias-education-on-may-29-after-arrest-of-two-black-men/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.64139723d66a
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. New York: PAJ Publications.