Oftentimes sociology instructors rely heavily on textbooks to teach students course content. This may happen for a number of reasons. They may feel nervous about teaching or lack confidence with respect to their authority, legitimacy, or “expert” role in the classroom. This experience may be especially common with graduate student instructors and new professors. Or, they may lack preparation time as they juggle the demands of teaching, research, and departmental service, not to mention personal and family obligations. Regardless of the reason, the content of the course textbook takes on great importance, and therefore, we must understand what messages our textbooks are sending to students.

The purpose of this paper is to exercise reflexivity in examining how we—that is academic sociologists—inadvertently support the racial status quo by uncritically relying on textbooks to explain seemingly familiar concepts such as “race” and “racism” to students. Using a non-white sociological imagination, this paper addresses two questions: 1) what do we teach students about race and racism through the use of textbooks and 2) what can we do to make sure our textbooks are not reinforcing the status quo?

To answer our questions, we analyze racial discourse in eight undergraduate Social Problems textbooks. Discourse consists of, “ideas and practices that when taken together organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it puts together social power” (Collins 2004:350). Our focus is on social representations that are shared across textbooks and that guide the audience’s assumptions about race and racism. By examining such social representations, we hope to identify the ideology that underlies discussions of race and racism in Social Problems textbooks and to situate that ideology within current research and theorizing about these topics. Identifying these underlying representations and ideologies is important because ideology affects racial inequality and power by defining for students
“what exists, what is good, and what is possible” (Therborn 1980:18). Racial ideology is a primary mechanism in the reproduction of racism at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of society. By understanding it we can work towards antiracism, starting by changing our teaching practices.

We take a critical look at our role as educators in the production and reproduction of racism, but first we remind our readers that not everyone has equal access to higher education. In spite of a national ethic proclaiming the importance of equal education, the reality in the United States is that education is both a signifier of and a source of inequality, with race, class, and gender disparities growing ever larger at higher levels of education (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Across the nation minority students are underrepresented in institutions of higher education. Students who are able to gain entry into the white world of higher education tend to be concentrated in specific sites such as technical and community colleges (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996). While there has been a steady increase in the number of students attending college over the last fifty years, the number of minorities (Blacks, Latinos, and Asians) completing social sciences programs in particular has substantially declined (Coates 2002). Moreover, scholars of color are significantly underrepresented in faculty positions within the higher education system as a whole (Astin et al. 1997). As a result, sociology classes often consist of white instructors teaching primarily white students about emotionally-charged and potentially threatening topics: racism, white privilege, and whites’ role in perpetuating racial inequality.

What affect does this educational environment have on students of color attending college? The white habitus, a white culture of solidarity, is omnipresent and exerts “painful and enervating” (Feagin and Sikes 1994:92) pressures on students of color. One pressure, the high visibility of their racial status as different from the dominant group (whites), means that students of color carry the burden of being viewed as the representative of their entire social category. They must withstand a classroom environment where white students and instructors are insensitive to the racist aspects of the campus culture for minority students. The classroom environment itself is one that is a white space. Moreover, students of color rarely have opportunity to interact with and form relationships with faculty or administrators because scholars of color are underrepresented in positions of power within higher education (hence the term “ivory tower”).