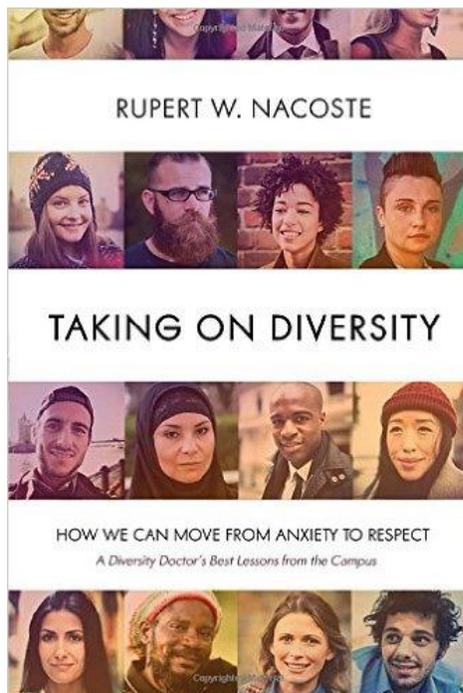


Book Review

A Diversity Doctor's Best Lessons from the Campus

“Taking on Diversity: How We Can Move from Anxiety to Respect” by Rupert W. Nacoste

By Kathy-Anne Jordan



In *Taking on Diversity*, Rupert W. Nacoste examines the struggles and emotions related to our encounters and interactions with diverse others and provides strategies to facilitate peaceful intergroup relations. *Neodiversity* is the term he uses to describe the various social markers of difference—race, class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and so on—that we encounter on a daily basis and the anxiety that often results from interacting with others who vary from us in terms of one or more of these markers. Neodiversity, then, not only describes the current social landscape, it refers to our encounters with difference across a

variety of contexts, and therefore requires that we learn how to adapt; specifically, it requires change in how we think about and respond to diversity.

At a time when students on college campuses across the United States are posting photos of themselves in Blackface, and college administrators are responding to an overall increase in racial incidents and protests, Nacoste's work provides a valuable contribution to a much-needed conversation on race and underscores the importance of teaching young people how to accept and respect, rather than simply tolerate, diverse others. Troubled by the language of hate that youth tend to use in their interactions with each other and their apparent indifference and lack of awareness regarding the implications of their hate speech, Nacoste, a professor of social psychology, declares that his calling is to help “penetrate that thick fog of dangerous confusion” in order to prepare his students for the neodiversity that confronts them. He sees his role as helping them shed the baggage of lies and misinformation they learned about the history of race relations in the United States, and also helping them to effectively negotiate the sometimes challenging terrain of intergroup relations.

Describing the motivation for his current work on diversity issues, Nacoste recalls “People Get Ready,” his favorite Curtis Mayfield song from the 1960s. The song signaled the arrival of a train where faith was the only ticket needed to

board and *change* was the final destination. Nacoste's abiding faith in the change he envisions is evident throughout this text, which centers on the experiences of his students in a course he developed on interpersonal relationships and race. At the beginning of the semester, he forewarns them of the difficult days ahead and the pain involved in the "real psychological learning" that would take place as they progressed through the course; he queries them about the concerns and questions they hope to engage (e.g., navigating racial differences in a workplace, living with a member of another race, why racial groups tend to divide into cliques, why Muslims become stereotyped as terrorists, why people internalize their stereotypes)—or their "neodiversity tensions and anxieties," as he puts it. He comes to realize that many have been traveling on the wrong-line train, where false teachings pervade.

Nacoste's approach to teaching has earned him the respect of his students because it is infused with passion, life experiences, and personal values; he also provides a safe space for honest, open dialogue, which is extremely important in a classroom of over fifty neodiverse students discussing sensitive topics. In his course on interpersonal relationships and race, students learn historical truths about America's racial past, which replace the sanitized and "sales pitch" versions of American history—commonly taught in middle and high schools—that breed ignorance, insensitivity, and intolerance. He believes that in order to understand intergroup relations and issues in an American context, it is first necessary to understand America's racial history, since race serves as the prototype for intergroup matters in this country. One course assignment involves reading and responding to the text *Blood Done Sign My Name*, which deals with the 1970 murder of a Black man, Henry Marrow, at the hands of White men who were ultimately

acquitted by an all-White jury. Students respond to this text with a range of emotions that include anger, horror, disgust, sadness, and disbelief, but they do not fall apart or lose pride in our nation, as Nacoste observes; instead, they ask "What about now? What mistakes are we making that we can stop making, right now?"

In preparing his students for the neodiversity that confronts them, Nacoste also teaches them about the social psychology of interpersonal/intergroup dynamics, where they learn to evaluate and respond more effectively to the intergroup tensions that emerge when people from different backgrounds interact with each other. Through first-person narratives included within each of the eight chapters, the book offers a brief, but candid glimpse into the minds of young people as they struggle to understand and resolve the dilemmas of diversity within their own lives. Although the work mainly focuses on the experiences of college students, readers will immediately recognize that the book offers useful insights that can benefit all of us.

"Taking on Diversity: How We Can Move from Anxiety to Respect—A Diversity Doctor's Best Lessons from the Campus." By Rupert W. Nacoste.

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About the Author

Rupert W. Nacoste is alumni distinguished undergraduate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University (NCSU), where he has also served as the vice provost for diversity and African American affairs. At NCSU, he is the recipient of numerous awards for teaching excellence, including the 2013 UNC Board of Governors Teaching Excellence Award. He is the author of *Making Gumbo in the University* and has lectured frequently on diversity issues.

About the Reviewer

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