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Racing (Erasing) White Privilege in Teacher/Research Writing About Race

Amy Goodburn

To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start a dialogue.

Lisa Delpit
*Other People's Children:
Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*

Perhaps one of the most difficult beliefs to interrogate, to examine from another's angry gaze, is the construct of race. The recent heightened dialogues about race construction in the United States—examinations of how people are defined by racial categories and questions about how these descriptions are constructed in relation to an often invisible white norm—has been unsettling for many. Even before the O. J. Simpson trial divided the opinions of Americans along so-called racial lines, the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* were pro-claiming headlines such as “Planet of the White Guys” and “Growing Up Black and White,” respectively. In addition to *Ms.* magazine's increasing focus on the needs of women of color, fashion magazines like *Elle* and *Glamour* have begun

to include articles about race, such as Naomi Wolf's "The Racism of Well-meaning White People." On talk shows, news programs, and college campuses, race is a topic of dialogue everywhere.

Of course, this attention to race is certainly not new to English Studies, where pedagogical and curricular issues have long been theorized with respect to issues of race, class, and gender. Within literary studies, it has become commonplace to argue for including texts that have been traditionally excluded from the academy because they are not written by white male authors. Within composition studies, researchers are increasingly becoming aware of the ways that the discourses and literacy practices of students of color have been devalued in school settings. Moreover, educators who advocate critical and multicultural pedagogics long have been examining the ways that students' experiences in schools are shaped by social constructs of difference. For the most part, all of these groups usually conclude with calls for "differences" to be valued as resources rather than deficits in the classroom. In these ways, educators argue, students (and texts) who are defined as "other" will be given a space within English Studies.

But in focusing so much on social constructs of difference in terms of the "other," English teachers (most of whom are white) have not fully considered the implications of theorizing their own racial positions in terms of their "whiteness."¹ Thus far, there has been little questioning of how white teachers relate these discussions about difference with respect to their own positions of power and privilege, nor has there been much examination of how these discourses connect to—or are absent from—their teaching and research practices within writing classrooms. The implications for this absence of discussion about race with respect to white teachers' positions are far-reaching. As Beverly Moss and Keith Walters argue in "Rethinking Diversity: Axes of Difference in the Writing Classroom," issues of diversity "challenge us to give great thought to who we are, why we use language and literacy as we do in our professional and private lives, and what roles language and literacy play in the construction of our identity, as well as the identities of those we believe to be similar to and different from us—inside and outside the classroom" (1993,135). How we construct the identities of others in terms of race and acknowledge (or fail to acknowledge) the privileges and power attendant upon our own raced positions in the classroom raises ethical questions about the ways that we construct our research agendas, carry out these projects in our classrooms, and disseminate the results of these projects to others.

In this essay, I examine several spheres of "race construction" and the ethical implications of these constructions for how I—as a white composition teacher/researcher—named, described, and interpreted student response in a dissertation chapter I wrote on a student discussion of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* within a writing course focused on "difference." This essay describes my own process of coming to understand the ways that my readings of classroom events were/are shaped by my position as a white teacher/researcher

and the implications for understanding what naming these moments might mean for others engaged in composition research. In particular, I examine three different contexts in which my racial position informed (or remained invisible in) my analysis of these classroom scenes. First, I describe how I collected data on the initial class discussion of *The Bluest Eye* and why I selected this classroom moment as significant within the context of my research about multicultural writing classrooms. Second, I examine the taxonomy that I used to situate several different students' written and oral responses to this discussion and the ways that this construct diverted attention from the importance of race, as well as veiled my own position as a white interpreter of these responses. And third, I examine the implications for the ways that this research was disseminated and received within the composition community as I engaged in my job search.

Rereading the various spheres of race construction embedded within these scenes highlights the complexities inherent in studying and writing about how students respond to issues of difference, like race, within writing classrooms. By reflecting on some of the difficulties, however, I hope to raise consciousness about the privilege of white researchers within composition studies' accounts of writing classrooms, as well as to begin to suggest how this awareness might change how we discuss and write about issues of difference in ways that do not appropriate or co-opt "others." Ultimately, then, this essay aims to suggest strategic interventions for how constructs of race can be described and theorized within composition studies research.

Racing the Subject in Composition Studies

The issue of race with respect to the teaching and researching of writing classrooms has not been totally absent in composition studies. Theorists and scholars interested in anti-racist and critical pedagogies have focused for years on the ways that students resist notions of white privilege. For instance, critical educators like Cy Knoblauch and Jody Swilky have examined how teachers might disrupt or intervene in the hegemonic notions of white privilege that students bring to their reading and writing about texts. And not surprisingly, English teachers of color have long investigated how their racial locations are read by students within their classrooms. For instance, doris davenport's "Dismantling White/Male Supremacy" chronicles her experiences as a "black-feminist-lesbian-working-class-Southern poet" teaching a class with "two black wimmin and twenty-two 'invisible ethnics' (whitefolks)" (1992, 59, 61). In "Racism and the Marvelous Real," Cecilia Rodriquez Milanes describes her experiences as a "Latina instructor of alternative pedagogy" who taught a majority of Long Islanders, a minority of white working-class students, and a handful from "racially diverse, depressed, and violent areas of New York City" (246). And in "The Teacher as Racial/Gendered Subject," Cheryl Johnson describes her experiences as a black woman who teaches the literature of black women writers to primarily white students from middle-class backgrounds.

These teachers speak to the difficulties inherent in raising issues like white privilege in the classroom, foregrounding their own bodies as the embodiment of the racial “other” and emphasizing the ways that students might challenge and educate each other. As Adriana Hernandez notes, the population of the classroom is one of the most valuable resources for analyzing and critiquing constructions of difference. In summarizing different feminist teachers’ experiences in the classroom, Hernandez writes:

The presence of other people in the classroom articulating resistance to the norm provides the possibility to work in a dialogical process. In this way, different voices can be heard, the material is not presented in linear mode as “fact,” and knowledge gets produced as a process. (1994, 320)

However, even in discussions about the need for multicultural pedagogies, few white teachers and researchers have begun to consider the implications of their own racial positions for how they read, interpret, and write about their students. In fact, as Christine Sleeter discusses in “How White Teachers Construct Race,” the predominantly white teaching force within the United States is rarely asked to examine its own racial identity. In her study of teachers participating in a year-long multicultural workshop, Sleeter observed two common responses that white teachers held toward racial identity—of themselves and of their students—in their classrooms. The first response was that white teachers tended to deny the salience of race as a factor in their classrooms by arguing that they are “color-blind” in their teaching. Because they viewed themselves as “riot seeing” racial differences in their students, they argued that they treated all students the same. The second response involved teachers who did acknowledge race as an important factor in students’ lives, but emphasized cultural notions of “assimilation” as a means of giving students of color access to social institutions. In other words, white teachers wanted to provide ways for these students to assimilate within white culture without questioning the nature of these social institutions, particularly as they are tied to white privilege. Sleeter found that these white teachers (whom she names Euro-Americans) view participation in ethnic identity as an individual choice, associated with one’s private family history rather than a collective experience shaped by social structures. Drawing on Peter McLaren’s term *raceless subjectivity*, Sleeter suggests that for these teachers, being white is a position that seemingly transcends race.

In the same vein, Sharon Stockton’s *College English* essay, “Blacks vs. Browns,” describes how her students’ responses to texts emphasized the ways that the “authenticity” of the white man or woman is presented as “transcending” race, collapsing constructs of whiteness into universal characteristics that are raceless. Stockton argues that such binary logic about race allows white teachers to be silent observers, detached and uncritiqued in relation to positions of race in ways that reify their own positions while denying the realities of their students’ lives. The consequences of white teachers not examining their notions of “race-

less subjectivity” are far-reaching, particularly with respect to how they view (and judge) the experiences of students of color in relation to such an invisible white norm. With the exception of the Webster Groves Action Research Project, whose teacher-researchers shifted their initial questions of how to improve the writing of black students to how to raise consciousness of white teachers about multiple forms of literacy (Krater, Zeni, and Devlin Cason 1994), there are few narratives of white teachers describing and interrogating their own positions as raced subjects within writing classrooms.

Given this absence of consciousness by white teachers about their raced positions in classrooms, it’s not surprising that much composition research within writing classrooms also avoids discussions of how white researchers’ interpretations of classroom moments are raced. Thus far, there has been little interrogation of what it means to be a white researcher with respect to ethnographic authority in writing research. As Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie note, most researchers do little more than include a statement or “confession” of positions (“as a white, female, middle-class researcher”) in order to respond to the critique that one’s position is always partial and situated (1995, 9). But, as Peter McLaren suggests, such confessions fail to analyze forms of white ethnicity, thus making white culture “able to occupy the position of the privileging signifier and position in a fixed relation of binary opposition to people of color” (1993, 224). Of course, it’s easy to understand teachers’ notions of “raceless subjectivity,” given the ways that larger cultural discourses about race operate in the United States. As Russell Ferguson suggests:

In our society, dominant discourse tries never to speak its own name. Its authority is based on absence. The absence is not just that of the various groups classified as “other,” although members of these groups are routinely denied power. It is also the lack of any overt acknowledgment of the specificity of the dominant culture, which is simply assumed to be the all-encompassing norm. This is the basis of its power. (1990.11)

It is this power to remain silent, to view oneself as a “raceless subjectivity” in relation to others who are raced, that allows white teachers and researchers not to question how their own actions in the classroom are shaped by their raced positions. Consequently, many are now calling for white teachers and researchers not only to acknowledge their own investments and privileges with respect to race, but also to interrogate and reread their actions in light of these investments. For instance, in her essay “White Is a Color!,” Leslie Roman argues that it is important to recognize whiteness as a structural power relation, an institutionalized whiteness that, both individually and collectively, confers cultural, political, and economic power. In recognizing the ways that whiteness shapes white researchers’ readings, Roman, like Kirsch and Ritchie, describes her goal as “critical socially contested realism,” a process that goes beyond merely confessing disclaimers of privilege and “aims to treat as its legitimate texts for collective deconstruction all claims to know and represent reality made

in the classroom, including those of the teacher, those manifest in the formal and hidden curriculum, and those implicit in classroom social relations” (1991, 83). Similarly, Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” examines more concretely the daily effects of white privilege by laying out twenty-six conditions or assumptions that were “passed on” to her as a white person (1990, 32).

One way to begin deconstructing “these claims to know” is by making visible white people’s participation within these texts. For instance, theorist Ruth Frankenberg has begun to name and describe the racialness of white experience with the phrase *the Social Construction of Whiteness*, a standpoint and a set of discursive practices from which white people look at themselves, others, and society. As Frankenburg (1993) suggests, to use the term *whiteness* is to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism because it “asserts that there are locations, discourses, and material relations to which the term *whiteness* applies—these locations are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of dominance” (6). Based on her study of life-history interviews with thirty white women, Frankenberg attempts to describe the “discursive repertoires” or strategies for thinking through race that are learned, drawn upon, and enacted through cultural practices in people’s lives. In keeping with poststructuralist views of the subject that view material experience and discursive dimensions as integrally interconnected, Frankenburg aims to examine how discursive repertoires of race, particularly “whiteness,” generate and continually transform the ways that people think about and act upon their own raced assumptions (22).

Of course, naming and interrogating what constitutes “whiteness” is not without its problems. As AnnLouise Keating’s (1995) essay “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ (De)constructing ‘Race’” cautions, theorists interested in naming constructs of “whiteness” oftentimes reinforce fixed categories of racialized meanings that perpetuate and support negative stereotypes. Keating’s misgivings about emphasizing “whiteness” or other racialized identities within classroom pedagogies stem from her experiences with class discussions in which self-identified white students were made to feel guilty about their privileged positions (915). Like Keating, I am dubious of the extent to which pedagogies that ask students to name “whiteness” in literary texts enables them to resist existing stereotypes. While I support pedagogies that seek to empower students through studying and understanding the role that “difference” plays in people’s lives, I think that the lens needs to be shifted away from reading our students’ responses to texts and onto how we, as teachers and researchers, read and write our students as “raced” texts.

Toward this end, this essay examines the discursive repertoires that I used for thinking about race when I was researching and writing about multicultural pedagogies within my dissertation research. Like Frankenburg, I believe that the discursive repertoires we use for thinking about race in our research are integrally connected to the material conditions of our classrooms. In reflecting on the research text that I produced in a study of multicultural writ-

ing classrooms, then, I am interested in critically rereading the discursive repertoires I used to write about these classroom scenes. How did my research process—the selection and analysis of data, the “writing up” of interpretations, and the dissemination of results—contradict, conceal, and/or explain away (in Frankenburg’s terms) the materiality of the classroom and the larger social context in ways that reveal my complicity and perhaps investment in racist structures and attitudes? And what are the implications for how I read these cultural narratives of race, in terms of my own classroom and in terms of contributing to research accounts in composition studies?

In the winter of 1993, I conducted an ethnographic study of three college-level writing classrooms focused on issues of difference.² Because I was interested in theories of critical pedagogy and social-oriented pedagogies within composition studies, I intended to examine how teachers and students negotiated writing and talking about difference in writing classes centered around these issues. In the chapter I discuss, I was a participant-observer in a class of eighteen students: ten men (eight white, one African American, and one African American/Native American); eight women (six white and two African American); and a white woman teacher. As a participant-observer, I sat with the students each class period, taking field notes, audiotaping discussions, and participating in small groups and class activities. I also periodically interviewed the teacher and the students throughout the term. This class was a second-level writing course focused on issues of difference within the United States through the study of literature.

As a graduate student who was interested in social-oriented pedagogies within education in general and composition studies in particular, I was familiar with the literature about social constructs of “difference.” From the onset, then, I assumed that I knew what “difference” was. After all, I had read the work of critical educators such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Shirley Grundy, bell hooks, and Patti Lather, as well as radical compositionists such as Mark Hurlbert, Susan Jarratt, and Ira Shor. I had studied theories of resistance and hegemony, of multiple subjectivities and positionalities, and I was committed to pedagogies that raised student consciousness about how their own experiences are shaped by these social discourses. What this literature did not prepare me for was the way that my lens as a white woman researcher shaped the ways that I was interpreting student and teacher behavior through the terministic screen of race.

White-ing Out Researcher Authority

The first sphere of race construction that I’d like to examine centers around a single classroom discussion on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and the decisions I made in selecting, reconstructing, and analyzing this classroom moment. Rereading the choices I made in representing this discussion illuminates how my ethnographic authority as a researcher was “whited out” or seemingly

assumed to be a “raceless subjectivity” within the chapter entitled “Students Negotiating Textual Authority” that I produced. From the onset, the decisions I made about what was “significant” about this discussion and how to describe this significance were shaped by my position as a white researcher and the frameworks that I relied on to theorize this position. To illustrate the nature of my assumptions, I present three paragraphs from this chapter that describe how students discussed *The Bluest Eye* and why this discussion was significant for understanding the students’ responses with respect to difference:

The discussion began with Ann [the teacher] asking students to write questions that they had about the book. After collecting these questions, Ann asked students to describe their overall responses in reading. Some students called it “vile” and “obscene.” One said that it was “rude” and “graphic” while another said it was “realistic” and “true to life.” Some said the ending was too abrupt and left the reader hanging. Others said it was too depressing, and one student said that the novel was written only “to get a rise out of you, to shock you.” This statement led Ann [the teacher] to ask, “Is there anything else in this book besides pure shock value? What else did you guys get out of it?” The students’ responses reflected how they viewed the purpose of the texts in general. Several students commented on literary aspects, saying it has “a lot of symbolism.” or “the writing is very descriptive” while others described it in more prescriptive terms as “an educational tool” and “a good moral.”

The discussion of *TBE*’s value as a text soon moved into a discussion of themes that students found significant. For the first forty minutes students comfortably discussed issues of difference on a wide range of topics, including gender and sexual politics in the characters’ lives, the portrayal of religion and hypocrisy, and the book’s explicit language. In the last twenty minutes, however, the discussion turned to the issue of race. Some argued that the novel is a commentary on how standards of beauty are tied to race, with white culture setting standards that devalue other cultures. A few interpreted the novel as a condemnation of interracial conflict within black communities, while still others argued that the novel illuminates the struggles of those who are trying to achieve the American dream. The students quickly became polarized around the question: “Is racism a focus of this text?” Some students argued that racism is an important issue in the novel while others argued that readers would have to be “looking for” racism in order to see it as significant. The discussion soon came to an impasse and one woman, visibly upset by the students’ comments, asked Ann to end it. Ann agreed, gave the students a short break, and when the students returned she directed them to a peer response session.

I have chosen to focus in detail on *The Bluest Eye* discussion and the students’ and teacher’s subsequent responses to it because this classroom moment was representative of how students engaged in talking and writing about issues of difference throughout the term in relation to Ann’s pedagogical goals. Besides my own fascination with how the discussion became polarized as soon as racial difference became an issue, students also were interested in accounting for

the classroom tensions and misunderstandings that this discussion seemed to produce. Although *TBE* discussion was never resumed as a class, almost all of the students continued to write about it in their response papers, with most of them referring to the discussion explicitly (many even noted the date). When I interviewed students about the course, most of them still wanted to talk about this particular discussion. Ann’s reading of this class discussion was further reflected in a response she wrote to one of the students. Thus, this class discussion seemed an especially fruitful site for exploring how and why students responded to Ann’s pedagogical goals in foregrounding issues of difference in the texts that they read. (Goodburn 1994, 84–86)

The first issue I want to examine from this excerpt is the way that I chose to write about this class discussion and the position I adopted in “writing it up” as I did, particularly in terms of either including or not including racial identities in my written analysis. At the time that I originally wrote about this discussion, I felt competing tensions and conflicts in how to represent it. While I felt that it was an important moment in the classroom—particularly as it related to my research focus on how students and teachers negotiate authority in multicultural writing classrooms—I also knew that it was impossible to extract its significance from the context of the discussions that preceded and followed it. Moreover, I was highly conscious of the ethics involved in representing this scene. I had read Kenneth Burke and knew that whatever terministic screen I selected would necessarily involve a deflection of other interpretations. I knew that I could not possibly be “objective,” and yet I wanted this classroom moment to have some ethnographic authority, to legitimize why I recorded this scene instead of others, for instance, and to argue for its relevance in terms of the overall focus of this chapter, as well as the entire dissertation.

In considering how much context to provide in the first paragraph, for instance, I chose not to use identity markers such as gender or race to describe the students who made these comments. Because I was using these few paragraphs as a springboard for discussing the different positions that I saw students adopting throughout the class in their written and oral responses, I did not want to “tip my hand” by elaborating on these contributors’ social positions. For instance, the second to last sentence in the second paragraph would have read much differently if I had written, “one white woman, visibly upset by the comments of an African American woman, asked Ann [the teacher] to end it.” The text also would have read much differently if I had described the polarization of the discussion as being between white and black students. In trying to render an “objective” representation of what was said without identifying the participants in terms of their social identities, I stripped much of the context from this description.

Indeed, what I don’t say in the original text is that I found it exceedingly difficult to write. As a writer, I felt almost paralyzed by describing students in terms of social categories of difference, in part because so much of my

dissertation was focused on questioning how these categories are used, how students and teachers view them with respect to pedagogy, and the problematics involved in such representation. I was highly conscious of the ways that my own descriptions or labels for students' social positions might reify or perpetuate some of the issues that the chapter itself was intended to problematize. For instance, while I was interested in examining how students position themselves in class discussions in terms of social constructs like race and gender, I also felt it was important to represent the students' own views of themselves with respect to these constructs rather than imposing my own categories. If students didn't define themselves as being raced, for instance, then should I have used terms such as "Euro-American," "Anglo-American," "Caucasian," or "white" to describe them? Who held the power in defining such social identity positions and what are the implications of these definitions for how I read (or misread) their responses? And if I did choose to use social descriptors like these, how much additional context did I need to provide the reader to fairly represent the significance of these positions?

While I knew quite a lot about the students' backgrounds and histories after being a participant observer in this class for ten weeks, I had no clear idea of which details to include to fairly render and account for the complexity of their responses. For instance, if I used only race or gender descriptors, then readers still wouldn't be able to appreciate how the nineteen-year-old African American woman's reading of *The Bluest Eye* was shaped by her experiences in a women's studies class, her despondency over the recent death of her mother's fiancé, and her newfound commitment to political activism. These were the issues that I struggled with at the time I was writing this chapter and, although most of the literature I read about ethnography argued the need to provide context, little of it discussed the problematics of representation in these terms.

But beyond the struggles that I can recall when writing this text, these three paragraphs also reflect more unconscious assumptions I held in writing about this discussion, assumptions that "whited out" my presence in the text and that call for further examination of the authority I assumed in writing about this classroom scene. First, my decision not to name the participants in this discussion allowed me to veil my own participation under the guise of the "objective" ethnographic recorder. That is, I do not describe what I was doing during this discussion or say whether I was a contributor to it. Nor does this description include my responses to or interpretations of the discussion. Although I wrote a research journal about the discussion that night, that information is not incorporated in these paragraphs.

Despite these attempts to render an "objective" recording of the discussion by consciously erasing myself from the text, however, my assumptions as a white woman "recording" this scene are still revealed. For instance, my ethnographic authority is illuminated in the second paragraph when I describe how "For the first forty minutes, students comfortably discussed issues of difference on a wide range of topics ..." and "students quickly became polarized as

soon as racial difference became an issue." Not only do I describe what students said in this discussion, I also interpret the discussion as being relatively "comfortable" for them. In the same way that my decision not to include racial identity tags veiled the ways that students' racial positions shaped the dynamics of this discussion, my language in this paragraph reifies my invisible authority as a white researcher to interpret the dynamics. In other words, what did I mean by the term *comfortable* and why did I apply it to this classroom setting? As a teacher, I do not subscribe to the view that classrooms are "safe spaces" for students, and Ann's stated goals as a teacher were to disrupt and challenge students' notions with an oppositional and conflict-driven pedagogy. So why did I use this language in my field notes to describe this scene? How was I interpreting this comfort level and for whom? The teacher? The white students? The African American students? Or for me? Why did I view this discussion in terms of the participants' comfort levels to begin with, and what are the implications for the ways that I read it as polarized as soon as the issue of race began to be raised?

In rereading the assumptions laden in my original text, I am not arguing that the "turn" in this discussion was entirely a figment of my imagination or solely a projection of my own fears as a white woman uncomfortable with hostile arguments about race in the classroom. As the third paragraph of my original text suggests, the students' own preoccupation with this discussion was manifested in their response journals, interviews, and subsequent class discussions. But in reflecting on the ways that I constructed this text, I find it interesting that I didn't problematize these paragraphs in a way that revealed my own investments and assumptions inherent in focusing on this discussion to begin with. For example, in describing "my own fascination with how the discussion became polarized as soon as racial difference became an issue," I did not feel compelled to justify *why* I found it fascinating or how this fascination was perhaps tied to my own position as a white woman researcher invested in examining issues of difference. Indeed, in giving only one sentence to my own interest, this paragraph seems to try to justify why I felt the discussion was important more in terms of student and teacher interest, rather than in terms of my own investments.

Beyond these three paragraphs and even the entire forty-three-page chapter, it's also important to question why I focused on issues of race only in the classroom populated with students of color. In the other two chapters devoted to analysis of particular classrooms, I focused on issues of religious authority and gender. While at the time these issues seemed to be the most important factors shaping student response (in one class, seven of the students identified themselves as Fundamentalist Christians, a fact that certainly shaped that particular class' dynamics), when considered within the larger context of my research project about issues of difference, this absence of discussion about race in the all-white classrooms is troubling. Why did I not examine how the all-white population of students in the other two classes that I observed located

their authority to read and write about texts in terms of the social construct of race?

McLaren's notion of "raceless subjectivity" is connected, I think, to the ways that I allowed my own position of whiteness to remain uninterrogated in my gaze of these three classrooms. Although all three classes read texts about race and racism and had lively discussions about racism in U.S. culture, I did not find the classroom scenes within the all-white classrooms to be as interesting or compelling, perhaps because my own assumptions and privileges of whiteness went unchallenged. Because I considered myself a liberal who was acutely aware of how racism is structurally organized within institutions, I did not fully interrogate the white students' responses—which tended to view racism in individual and psychological terms—or my own presumptions in not writing about them. And because the white students generally did not view themselves as even having a race, there was definitely a lesser degree of tension in discussing race issues, a condition that remained unproblematized by them and me throughout the term.

Deferring Race Through Taxonomy

The second sphere of race construction that I wish to examine concerns the taxonomy that I used to structure the students' responses following these initial introductory paragraphs and the ways that this heuristic also deferred and erased issues of race. As suggested previously, when I was writing this chapter, I was fascinated by the ways that students responded to *The Bluest Eye*. In compiling this data, I had primarily a collection of stories—of the classroom discussion, the students' response papers, and the interviews in which students retold the story of the discussion through their own perspectives. But I didn't have a framework for making sense of these stories. When I first started writing about them, I had pages and pages of narrative that included excerpts from all of these different contexts to account for how and why students responded in the ways that they did. This draft did render the complexity of these multiple perspectives. It also was unreadable. Members of my dissertation committee suggested that I create a taxonomy to help "order" these students' responses in some way. As they continually told me, I needed to make an argument about the data, one that could contribute to conversations already ongoing within composition studies and the discourses of critical pedagogy. In essence, I was faced with the rhetorical dilemma that most researchers face: claiming authority and validity for one's interpretations in the "writing up" of the data, as well as positioning one's interpretations within the discourse community that one wishes to enter.

After reviewing the data that I so highly valued but couldn't explain the significance of to others, I decided to use a taxonomy that would help distinguish and compare different students' oral and written responses. Borrowing from Giroux's use of the term *the politics of location*, I chose to categorize by pairs six of the students' responses with regard to their own politics of loca-

tion, first as a means of defining the varying stances that students took to *The Bluest Eye* in their oral and written responses, and second as a means of exploring the limits of these locations for students' assumptions about how texts can and should be read in general.

For instance, in the first pairing of students, I profiled Pat and Vaughn, a white male and an African American male, respectively, whose assumptions about texts as repositories of authors' meanings shaped the ways that they could respond both to *The Bluest Eye* and to their classmates' responses to it. In supporting the categories of the taxonomy, I provided examples from these students' written response papers, oral contributions to discussions, and out-of-class interviews to highlight how these six students' literacy assumptions shaped their classroom negotiations. I concluded the chapter by examining the implications of these students' differing locations for how the teacher, who named herself as a critical teacher, could enact a pedagogy designed to examine and value issues of difference. By examining these students' varying assumptions about literacy and where authority of meaning lies within reading, I suggested, the teacher could have better understood the ways that her goals were contested and resisted.

Like any interpretive framework, this taxonomy selected moments and deflected others. In many ways, it allowed me to account for some of the context that was stripped away in the original opening paragraphs. In categorizing the responses and experiences of six individual students, I was able to locate some of these originally "nameless" responses within the context of the students' positions of race, gender, age, educational status, and classroom history. At the same time, however, this taxonomy felt limited in ways that I couldn't fully articulate. There were so many issues of difference shaping students' responses that it was difficult for me to account for them all. And the biggest difference of all—the issue of race—seemed to become submerged within the framework of literacy that I was encouraged to construct. It's not that I wasn't able to discuss issues of race within the chapter; rather, the taxonomy seemed to defer or subsume race as a category of analysis under the larger rubric of literacy or textual authority.

In fact, I was encouraged by some colleagues not to make race constructs and their relationship to student response the priority of the chapter because they felt that such an approach wouldn't "fit" easily into composition studies discourse. One friend who read an early version of this chapter said that I needed to eliminate some of the race theory and put in more composition theory to give the chapter more "weight" and "scholarship." And although I intuitively felt that the students' responses to the text, their assumptions about literacy, and issues of difference were integrally connected, I found it difficult to find a space within composition studies discourse for this discussion.

In organizing this chapter, I also was encouraged to think of my audience in terms of the types of jobs for which I would be applying the following year. I was told that I needed to demonstrate that I was conversant in the literature

of composition studies and not just trying to “sneak through the back door” with cultural studies. While I thought that race construction was integrally connected to the discourses of composition studies, I began to question its importance in light of others’ responses—which is not to say that I entirely omitted discussions of race within the original text. In the conclusion of the original chapter, for instance, I noted how “for many of the white students, discussions about race meant discussing the lives of people of color, with little sense of how their own racial locations are implicated in the construction of otherness” (Goodburn 1994, 121). But this statement is quickly subsumed by the larger focus on textual assumptions rather than assumptions about how constructions of race in U.S. culture shaped students’ readings. In effect, the focus on race became deferred within the organizational structure of the taxonomy, a structure that I used to ground my research in ongoing conversations within composition studies. While I knew that I wasn’t satisfied at the time with this organizational structure, I realize now that what I considered solely rhetorical constructs of organization were also political choices in how issues of race were constructed and/or erased.

Racing the Market

The third sphere of race construction in my research took place two months after I finished writing this chapter. Immersed in job-search rituals, I was preparing the “job talk” that I planned to deliver during on-campus interviews. To assist me and two other students who were interviewing, members of my dissertation committee and a few other students served as an audience for our practice talks. Writing this talk was difficult for me because of the multiple audiences to whom I would be speaking. I was visiting the English departments of five different state universities—three in the Midwest, one in the South, and one on the West Coast—all of which held very different assumptions about the value of composition as a research field in general and the goals of multicultural pedagogies in particular. Because I did not want to give a different talk at each institution, I was left with the rhetorical problem of disseminating the results of my research in a way that would appeal to the broadest interests of these varying (and sometimes internally divided) audiences.

Because most of the audiences consisted of faculty who teach literature, I chose to focus on the ways that my research participated in the conversations about multicultural pedagogies with regard to how students read and respond to texts. Consequently, I again returned to the chapter on *The Bluest Eye* discussion, pulling out excerpts that spoke to the ways that the oral and written responses of two of the students from the taxonomy were read (and usually discredited) by the teacher and the other students. I argued that teachers who aim to enact multicultural pedagogies need to take into account the rhetorical context of the classroom, and that using “multicultural” texts as a means

of valuing difference is more problematic than current discussions of multicultural pedagogies suggest.

After finishing this practice talk, the audience members posed various questions, asking me to extend the implications of my argument and highlighting places where I needed to provide more context. I was feeling pretty confident about delivering this talk for the on-campus visits when one of my committee members—the only African American person on this committee of three — asked the question, “Why did you choose to pair the stories of Vaughn and Staci in this talk? Why did you choose two African American students’ stories when they weren’t paired together in your chapter?”

My committee member’s questions disarmed me. I hadn’t thought much about why I chose these particular students, beyond the fact that I found their stories to be the most interesting of the six students that I had profiled, and I hoped that the audiences would find them interesting as well. Although they had not been paired together in my original taxonomy, I was using the data to construct a slightly different argument than the one in the original chapter, which was directed to an audience of composition scholars rather than literature ones. Moreover, I had more data from these two students than any others in the class because they had continued to write about the impact of *The Bluest Eye* discussion long after other students had abandoned it. But even as I mouthed these responses, I was still unsettled by my committee member’s question, just as she looked unsatisfied with my answers.

As I thought about her question more that evening, I began to wonder why I found these two students’ responses to be the most interesting. Was it because I found them exotic and other to my own experiences? Why did I not find the politically conservative white male’s responses—one of which was an oral contribution of, “Shit. I’m so sick of minority shit” when *The Bluest Eye* was selected by the class—as interesting as the ones that I had selected? The more I began to think about the selections that I had made in composing this job talk, the more I began to feel troubled by the implications of my choices. At the time, I framed my committee member’s question about issues of representation within the job talk as a rhetorical problem, a question that led me to consider differently the authority that I was claiming for these stories by using this particular taxonomy. If, indeed, the pairing that I had pulled out of the original text was not accurately representing the students’ experiences, then how could I revise it to more fairly represent the data in my dissertation? Upon returning from these campus visits, I revised the original chapter by pairing these two students’ responses within this taxonomy.

But even after I finished writing and defending my dissertation, my committee member’s question continued to echo in my mind. And as I began to read more critical pedagogical discourses that discussed the politics of race and representation, I began to think about how my own choices of race representation were situated within the larger contexts in which I—as a white female graduate

student who desired a tenure-track job within an English department—was participating. These reflections led to larger questions that my committee member might have been hinting at, but (perhaps out of kindness) never explicitly stated and that I, as a white person unconscious of my privileges of whiteness, never fully considered: Was my decision to choose the stories of two African American students for this job talk an unconsciously racist one? Beyond the problematic that I might have found these students' responses interesting because they were exotic or different from myself, was I using their stories as a way of proving my own tolerance or white liberalism? Was I just trying to get on the race bandwagon by showing that I could work with and write about students of color and thus prove that I was a good multicultural hire?

Certainly most of the MLA job advertisements called for candidates who were conscious of multicultural issues and could meet the needs of diverse student populations. How was my decision to focus on these two students an effort to tap into the predominantly white liberal intentions of these hiring committees? What were the ethical implications involved in choosing to speak about these two students when, of the fifty-nine students that I studied in these three classrooms, only four were African American? In effect, why did I, a white teacher who was studying the classrooms of two other white teachers consisting of predominantly white students in a university predominantly populated by white students, decide to write about two African American students' oral and written responses to a discussion about a text written by an African American woman in a course designed to address issues of difference? And, just as significantly, why did no one else on my committee find it problematic for me to do so?

The fact that these questions went unasked by me and most of my colleagues during my job search points to my white privilege in uncomfortable and painful ways. Indeed, asking these questions led me to consider my investments and interests in multicultural and critical pedagogies to begin with. While I had always been attracted to the goals of these pedagogies—committed to examining how issues of difference are defined, represented, and interrogated within the classroom—I never considered the question, "What's in it for me?" What were my own investments in researching these issues, particularly my interest in race and identity? And what were the politics involved in representing myself to other English faculty in terms of these goals? Was I simply participating in the type of discursive games that Hazel Carby (1982) critiques in "White Woman Listen": engaging in the textual discourses of multicultural and critical pedagogies as "fictional substitutes" rather than working to establish real social relationships with racially oppressed people, thereby disavowing myself from my complicity in perpetuating racist educational practices? In effect, was this job talk, and the larger dissertation project from which it was drawn, primarily produced and received as textual currency to participate in the multiculturalism economy of the profession? And what are

the implications of the fact that this talk was successful in securing me job offers, while the discursive repertoires of whiteness implicit within it remained unquestioned and uninterrogated? And, most significantly to me now, where does this examination of my own complicity within these discursive relations leave me, as one who still remains committed to the goals of multicultural and critical pedagogies, and yet who is suspicious of her own privileges and investments in researching these issues?

Racing Research with Whiteness

My goal for this essay is not to present a seamless narrative of my research process, a before-and-after story of "once I was a racist researcher/teacher, but now I've seen the light." Understanding racist relations of dominance and my privileges of whiteness as a white woman professor within these relations is much messier, an ongoing project in which I must always work to uncover and struggle against the invisible norms of power that my culture affords me. Indeed, even the production of this text needs to be questioned in terms of how it participates in the relations of dominance that I seek to critique. After all, its publication helps to legitimate my place in the academy—serving as the textual currency that I need to accumulate in my drive for tenure—while perhaps preventing others' texts, including those of researchers of color, from being published.

Some might argue that focusing on constructs of whiteness privileges white liberal guilt and diverts attention away from the material problems that people of color face in and beyond the classroom. I am aware of these criticisms, as well as the concerns that discourses of race can be co-opted and normalized within the profession in ways that participate in and perpetuate racist structures. But given the fact that the overwhelming majority of research within composition studies is written by white researchers and that the teaching force in the United States is increasingly white while the student population increasingly is not, I feel it is imperative to acknowledge that constructions of whiteness are inherent in how we teach and do research and that, therefore, systems of white privilege do need to be interrogated with respect to how students and teachers are textually represented. And I hope that this re-presentation of my own research processes raises questions about how composition researchers can extend their consciousness about how to develop a language of difference to discuss and write about issues of race—including whiteness—in ways that do not "other" others.

But where does all this reflection lead us? As one white friend recently asked, "If whiteness is so invisible, then how are we supposed to be conscious of it? Can we only theorize it after the fact?" The best answer that I could offer is, "It's not that hard, and it's not that simple." Race construction itself is constantly in process and ongoing, a shifting terrain always dependent on provisional contexts. While I am certainly more aware of examining issues of race construction within classrooms of all white students, I can never be fully aware

of the ways that my position as a white teacher/researcher privileges me not to see discursive fields of reference that might challenge my authority as an interpreter of raced realities. Like Sleeter, I believe that one of the best ways to deconstruct racism within education is to populate the teaching (and I would add researching) force within the United States with educators of color. Yet the burden to problematize one's own assumptions of whiteness shouldn't fall on the "other." White teachers/researchers should not rely on others to unsettle their own positions of privilege and power.

Writing teachers and researchers have long considered themselves to have a unique vantage point for examining how language instruction participates in racist relations of dominance and for theorizing how new languages of difference can be more developed for anti-racist struggles. Yet it's one thing for teachers to ask students to examine stereotypes in the media and write about how difference has shaped their lives, and quite another to ask teachers and researchers to consider the ways that their projects are implicated in perpetuating racist assumptions and institutional structures. We need to move beyond defining texts as multicultural because they are written by those other to ourselves and begin thinking about how all discourses are inherently raced, through social constructions of whiteness as well as social constructs of color. Moreover, composition teachers and researchers need to examine their own investments in multicultural pedagogies and projects, questioning the extent to which their own assumptions run counter to their proposed anti-racist struggles. Beyond examining the discursive repertoires that students use for discussing or resisting discussions about race, then, we need to question the discursive repertoires and assumptions within which we, as composition researchers and teachers, are located when we write about race—and when we don't.

Notes

1. In this essay, I am purposely using the term *white* instead of other terms such as *Caucasian*, *Euro-American*, and/or *Anglo-American* to focus particularly on the construct of race. While I recognize that the term *white* refers to a color, not an ethnic identity, and that race is a social construct, not a biological fact, I choose to use the term *white* because it brings to the foreground the popular discourses that currently shape our students' notions of race in ways that the language in academic journals does not. Similarly, I use the terms *people of color*, *teachers of color*, and so on provisionally, recognizing that their use further perpetuates the construction of a binary opposition between white as the normative position and all other racial positions as *other*, a construction that this essay aims to critique.

2. A more detailed account of the goals and methodologies of the entire study can be found in *Critical Composition Pedagogies and the Question of Authority: Scenes from Three College-Level Writing Classrooms* (Goodburn 1994). For another perspective on the particular class I will be discussing here, see "Collaboration, Critical Pedagogy, and Struggles over Difference" (*Journal of Advanced Composition*, Winter 1994, with Beth Ina).

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