

(Note to Readers: I have edited the text of this symposium dramatically. The editors' opening is much longer.  
L.Albrecht)

## R SYMPOSIUM

### R

*Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2005, 359–402

## Whiteness Studies

**Tammie M. Kennedy, University of Arizona**

**Joyce Irene Middleton, East Carolina University**

**Krista Ratcliffe, Marquette University**

*The Matter of Whiteness: Or, Why Whiteness Studies  
Is Important to Rhetoric and Composition Studies*

*Nothing has trained me for this . . .*

—Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root”

*The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by  
assertion.*

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

The idea of a symposium on whiteness studies occurred to Tammie Kennedy, a doctoral student and intern at *Rhetoric Review*, after she attended a 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) panel on whiteness. Organized by Joyce Irene Middleton, this panel featured Kathleen Welch, Laura Gurak, Michelle Kendrick, and Kris Ratcliffe. The panel's focus was the matter of whiteness. The matter of the title nods to Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, Cornel West's *Race Matters*, Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women Race Matters*, and Toni Morrison's “Black Matters”—all of which play with the term *matter* so that it signifies in three distinct ways: First, it signifies that bodies matter (everyone's body has value); second, it signifies that bodies are composed of matter (bodies are material entities); and third, it signifies that the matters associated with bodies emerge via cultural socialization (bodies are marked, or coded, by socially constructed cultural categories such as gender, race, class, age, nationality, etc.). So when the CCCC panelists referred to the matter of whiteness in terms of theory, pedagogy, and technology, they were invoking all three significations: the value of bodies, the materiality of bodies, and the troping of bodies.

Most people would agree that every body has value. But many people in the US frequently collapse the distinction between the materiality of bodies and the troping of bodies. In other words, when most people use the term *white* as a racial category, they often assume that white signifies a biological fact of nature: Some people are white . . . some people are not . . . period. But influenced by postmodern language theory, critical race theorists such as legal scholar Patricia Williams have argued that such assumptions cause all kinds of trouble—personally, socially, professionally. Tammie, Joyce, and Kris agree—hence our collaboration on this symposium on whiteness studies. We take the opening epigrams from Adrienne Rich and Toni Morrison as a challenge: We invited contributors to submit brief position papers that offer readers a training ground from which to contemplate how and why rhetoric and composition studies should engage

whiteness studies.

### ***A Brief History of Whiteness Studies***

In 1992 Toni Morrison brought whiteness studies to the attention of English studies, including rhetoric and composition studies, and to film studies (and visual rhetoric), when she published *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In this highly influential book, she clarified that whiteness studies is not about individual white people per se; rather, it is about how whiteness as a cultural and racial category functions within US language use and haunts US people, literature, and institutions. In other words, she defined whiteness as a powerful trope in the US that may be critiqued by examining race and whiteness together. But whiteness studies did not originate solely with Morrison; in the late twentieth century, it had emerged as an academic discipline from two related but distinct scholarly threads: white trash studies and critical race studies. Although they both seemingly foreground whiteness, they offer whiteness studies different focuses, purposes, and effects.

White trash studies analyzes class issues associated with poor whites in the US. It takes its name from a pervasive cultural stereotype in order to undo that stereotype, much as queer studies embraces the term *queer*. White trash studies gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s as a means of critiquing representations and misrepresentations of lower-class white culture, whether these (mis)representations appear in Dorothy Alison's fiction (*Bastard Out of Carolina*), John Waters' movies (*Pink Flamingo* and *Hairspray*), or Jeff Foxworthy's comedy ("You know you're a redneck if . . ."). By the mid 1990s, white trash jokes were de rigeur, and college students were throwing white trash parties, all of which seemingly indicated that white trash signified the last US social group that could be openly ridiculed in a socially acceptable way. Alongside such (mis)representations, scholarly texts emerged to counter stereotypes of "white trash" culture that have haunted US culture for centuries. For example, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz published *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1996), and Anthony Harkins published *HillBilly: A Cultural History of an American Culture* (2003). Such studies examine among other things how "white trash" culture functions as a scapegoat. This scapegoating haunts US literary and popular culture—for example, the Snopes family in William Faulkner's fiction, Emmie Slattery in *Gone with the Wind* and, of course, Jed and all his kin in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. But with white trash studies emphasizing issues of class, issues of race were not always front and center. That focus was left to the purview of critical race studies and critical whiteness studies.

Critical race studies takes its name from its function, which is to critique race and whiteness as they play out, paradoxically through visibility and invisibility, in US culture. Seminal works include Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw et al.'s *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (1995), especially Cheryl I. Harris' highly influential article, "Whiteness as Property" (*Harvard Law Review*, 1993) and Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992). In a post civil rights era, with many codes of racism no longer visible, these lawyers noted the need to develop scholarship that would help our society continue its positive work toward true racial equality and diversity and avoid misreading the absence of visible signs as the achievement of race neutrality. Largely interdisciplinary, these legal scholars observed that these studies on race and whiteness help to critique all forms of oppression—sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism, etc. Gaining a wide audience in the 1990s, critical race studies claims, among other things, that all representations of race—including whiteness—must be put on the

table if genuine conversations about race are ever to occur in the US. Such claims spurred the emergence of whiteness studies as a corollary to critical race studies. Publications such as the journal *Race Traitor*, first published in 1993 and edited by John Garvey and Noel Ignatiev, tried to point out the dysfunctions of whiteness in US culture; studies such as David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) examined how whiteness intersects with class, nationality, and historical moment; studies such as George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* examined how whiteness constructs identities and intersects with economic and property issues; and studies such as Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1995) foregrounded how gender was at play in these intersections.

Despite its good intentions of promoting social justice and antiracism, whiteness studies garnered skepticism from both conservatives and progressives. Conservatives found the study ludicrous because they believe that only individual action, not group racial identity, determines the content of one's character as well as one's success. In fact, the rhetoric of conservatives misappropriates Martin Luther King, Jr.'s highly quoted passage on being judged by "the content of one's character" to argue against whiteness as a racialized group identity. But this argument simply serves to recenter whiteness as the dominant category in racialized discourse. Progressives found whiteness studies troublesome because they could see both possibilities (for example, fostering productive conversations and actions about the race in the US) and potential problems (for example, reifying the category of whiteness in a way that rechannels money and attention to white folks). To explain how whiteness studies furthered the social justice mission of critical race studies, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic published *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (1997). Importantly, such studies of whiteness are careful to discuss how race never exists in a vacuum in the US but always intersects with other cultural categories, such as class, gender, sexuality, religion, region, age, etc.

Because white trash studies and critical race studies both invoke whiteness, they seemingly share a common cause, yet the effects of their invocations are sometimes startlingly different. Although white trash studies invokes whiteness in its name, when it tries to equate the plight of poor whites with the plight of poor nonwhites under the umbrella of class, it erases the privileges that whiteness affords people marked as white in US culture; this erasure troubles many critical race theorists. Conversely, when critical race studies examines the plight of poor whites and poor nonwhites, it insists that race marks class issues differently on these two groups; this insistence resists the erasure of race. Importantly, this critical resistance to e-racing race in whiteness studies drives this symposium on whiteness studies in rhetoric and composition...

**...*Questions about Whiteness Studies: Why Rhetoric and Composition Studies Should Engage Whiteness Studies***

**Q:** What can whiteness studies contribute to rhetoric and composition?...

**Q:** Is whiteness studies just about white people?...

**Q:** Isn't whiteness studies simply attempting to make white people feel guilty?...

**Q:** Doesn't whiteness studies skew history by showing only the bad side?...

**Q:** Doesn't whiteness studies address an issue that's not really an issue any longer?...

**Q:** Isn't whiteness studies just returning attention to white people?...

**Q:** Doesn't whiteness studies simply perpetuate racial discrimination?...

**Q:** Isn't whiteness studies political—you know, just political correctness?...

**Q:** Doesn't whiteness studies make students uncomfortable?...

**Q:** What does whiteness studies have to do with teaching...(FILL IN THE BLANK—any discipline/subject)?

**Lisa Albrecht, University of Minnesota**

*“Actions speak louder than words” (author unknown)*

A balance between anger and love fuels my work for social justice. My anger often feels like molten lava erupting from a volcano. It is hot, dangerous, and sometimes gets in the way of my caring. I don't mean to be hurtful when I'm angry, but sometimes it just comes out of me that way. The love part comes from Che Guevara's life. If you are a change agent (Che says revolutionary), then you do the work out of love for all people and for our planet.

Today, I write this response in the heat of anger. I am sick to death of racism. I am sick of seeing it every day in my life, and in academia. I am profoundly disturbed by the poison of racism and its effects on both people of color and white people. The context for my anger today is about how the University of Minnesota is once more trying to close General College, which was my academic home for nineteen years. It has been an incredible access gateway for poor students and students of color and has survived three previous attempts by the University of Minnesota's administration to shut it down. The door keeps closing for our most precious students, and I am enraged. My anger today is very much connected to the topic of this symposium.

I don't teach, write, read, or do activist work by focusing on the “subject of ‘whiteness’” in and of itself. Nor do I ever simply “talk about race.” My life work is about multi-issue global movement-building for social justice. Central to this work is eradicating white supremacy. Whiteness studies, without action, is a self-indulgent activity for us—white people. Studying “whiteness” will not eradicate white supremacy.

What is of utmost importance for me as a white person, and first up in my working for racial justice, is the simple act of always naming whiteness in the classroom, in my writing, in my reading, and in my work as an educator activist. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg when we talk of racial injustice. White academics who still teach Peggy McIntosh's seventeen-year-old article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” without teaching Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation* are not doing enough. It's high time we move beyond discussions of personal racism and white privilege. We must move toward a historical and contemporary analysis of institutional racism and white supremacy. Once we, white academics, do our own homework, we need to remember Paulo Freire's ideas: Reflection alone is never enough, nor is action without reflection. Our goal must be praxis—what are we going to do about ending white supremacy?

I write this essay after having left the field of composition/rhetoric after nearly thirty years. I am now in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota where I am designing and implementing a new undergraduate interdisciplinary minor in Social Justice. The mission of the Social Justice minor is to offer undergraduate students the opportunity to both theorize about the meanings of social justice and practice “doing” social justice advocacy in community organizations. We envision an interdisciplinary, cross-collegiate undergraduate program where students can create socially just communities in their classrooms

and where there is respectful space for all opinions. We envision dialogic classrooms where students find spaces of possibility, where learning draws on theory and practice, and where students value learning in various communities beyond the university. We envision teaching faculty, students, and community groups becoming partners in creating and sharing in an authentic collective learning experience. We believe in equity and fairness in every aspect of human experience and the importance of recognizing the struggles for liberation and the social movements of many peoples globally.

It was not possible for me to do this work as a writing professor. I taught freshman writing through the lens of human rights and social justice, but I was constantly being asked to justify how my courses were about writing. Writing was first; social justice was second. My colleagues saw a disconnect. I am no longer interested in explaining myself or in “doing” multicultural and feminist curriculum transformation in composition studies. Frankly, I don’t have the patience to undo the damage that we, white academics, have done by simply adding a band-aid to the wound. We, white people, have to own our histories. The gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” are so profound on this planet that we have no time to lose. Do we, white people, understand how incredibly angry people of color are with us? What will it take for us to understand? How many more lives lost?

What I have found to be the most difficult part of working for racial justice is challenging my own white brothers and sisters in our white-led institutions. We resist; we wallow in shame and guilt, and then we dismiss each other’s work. In the academy we try to out-theory each other with jargon-riddled prose. We rarely look at activism or think creatively about how to “do” racial justice. Sure, we hire “our” person of color and claim all “our” friends of color. In composition we add brown authors to our comp/rhet textbooks and teach about multiple voices, but ultimately we continue to valorize white academic discourse. When I hit this point of anger, I know I have to stop, take a deep breath, and remember Che’s message about love. I am not any better than my white sisters and brothers. By virtue of living in white America, I am also racist. Blowing off steam is necessary for me, and that is why I share this with you. It’s part of my journey as a white person, and I hope it might help other white people grappling with what to do about racism.

One way that I come at this work today is by reading, teaching, and learning about the white people who came before me who have worked for racial justice. We, white people, have been denied our histories also. Do you know these names? Constance Curry? Lois Mark Stalvey? Anne Braden? David Gilbert? Lillian Smith? Mab Segrest? Virginia Foster Durr? J. Waties Waring? Marilyn Buck? Tim Wise? These people are just some of my role models. I have learned from them that other white people have come before me. I have learned how different white people in different historical moments have fought racism. This gives me hope for today and tomorrow. I would rather teach, read, and learn about activist white people than study “whiteness.”

The message I would like to leave with white readers is simple. We must look at each other eye to eye, talk about our struggle as white people working for racial justice, and do something. Words are not enough.

#### **Works Cited**

- Aptheker, Herbert. *Anti-Racism in US History: The First Two Hundred Years*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993.
- Braden, Anne. *The Wall Between*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1999.
- Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Refusing Racism: White Allies and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York:

Teachers College P, 2002.

Curry, Constance, et al. *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000.

Gilbert, David. *No Surrender: Writings from an Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoner*. Montreal, Canada: Arm the Spirit, 2004.

Segrest, Mab. *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002.

———. *Memoir of a Race Traitor*. Boston, MA: South End, 1994.

Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. New York: Anchor, 1963.

Stalvey, Lois Mark. *The Education of a WASP*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989.

Thompson, Becky. *A Promise and a Way of Life*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

Wise, Tim. *Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

———. *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. New York: Soft Skull, 2005.