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Rhetoric and composition studies has no recognizable, critical theory or body of knowledge about race that attends to the field's foundation: language, rhetoric, persuasion, literacy, or writing. The field is in a crisis, a theoretical wasteland, when it comes to critical race praxis. Presently, it is stuck in racially liberal paradigms, such as multiculturalism, diversity, and color-blindness that are anti-progressive and linguistically and rhetorically lacking. These paradigms sustain what Charles W. Mills terms an "epistemology of ignorance" that regards knowledge of race and racism as hazardous to white dominance (17). To respond, I propose a theory of racial literacy that answers Keith Gilyard's call for a "narrative about racial formation that would be useful in composition classrooms, one accessible yet sufficient in scope" (49).

I argue that racial literacy is a topic of investigation for the field of rhetoric and composition studies because it examines race as a discursive system with implications for knowledge construction, interpretation, and literacy performance. To move from racial liberalism to racial literacy, the field needs to make three shifts: 1) shift the rhetorical subject from the individual to language; 2) shift the theoretical paradigm from racial liberalism to racial literacy, and 3) shift from a pedagogy stuck between racial liberalism and critical pedagogy to one grounded in racial literacy strategies. The three shifts I propose should spark a new discussion in the field

about students' right to study language, similar to the 1974 College Composition and Communication Resolution *Students' Right to Their Own Language*. In chapter 2, I survey the field of rhetoric and composition to reveal its lack of critical engagement with race. In chapter 3, I outline the theoretical foundation of racial literacy, analyzing race as a discursive system. Chapter 4 describes my experiences implementing racial literacy in a rhetoric and composition classroom, while being attentive to university parameters and students' rights to study language. I also provide a preliminary examination of the implications of teaching in the age of Barack Obama since his election as President of the United States. Looking to the future, chapter 5 lays out strategies for grounding racial literacy in the field.

RACE(ING) AROUND IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION CIRCLES:  
RACIAL LITERACY AS THE WAY OUT

by

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To Mary Turner, Georgia, 1918

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: RACE(ING) AROUND IN CIRCLES

This is a dissertation project about language and race, more specifically, about the field of rhetoric and composition studies theorizing and teaching about race as language. But, in order for the field to embrace this new way of integrating race, it must first acknowledge that it is race(ing) around in rhetoric and composition circles, not sure which way to turn when it comes to critical race praxis. One of the reasons the field has lost its grounding in terms of race (if it ever was on solid ground), is the complicated identities and functions of race. Rhetoric and composition studies has not theorized about the discursive power of race and how race as language should be taught in the classroom.

Race is a paradox. It is everywhere, yet nowhere. It is real and an illusion. It means something even when we profess it means nothing. Many Americans believe that race no longer matters in our daily lives. Yet, just as many other Americans believe that race does matter. I take the position that race touches almost every part of a person's life whether we acknowledge it or not. For example, race affects our personal lives, from who we choose to marry and where we choose to live. It affects our professional lives in hiring and firing decisions. It affects our treatment at healthcare facilities when staff respond to patients differently based on racial biases.

Race is a part of the fabric of American life, from the founding of the country to the recent election of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. Race maintains an enduring presence.

The politics and paradoxes of race have never been more present in my lifetime as they were during the 2007 – 2009 election season. The country began to grapple with the ways race screens how we see patriotism, leadership, competence, and power. Who can lead the most powerful nation on the face of the earth? Will rural white voters identify with an African American named Barack Obama? Are African Americans afraid for Obama's life? Does the election of Obama mean we are a post-racial society? These questions revealed that the country does not understand or know how deal with its long history of race and racism.

At the same time as the nation wrestles with what race means, so too, must the field of rhetoric and composition studies. The national and racial moment of progress created by the 2009 presidential election should spark academic moments of progress. This dissertation seeks to promote progress within the field of rhetoric and composition studies in relation to race theory and pedagogy. If race influences how we live and who we vote for, then it also influences how we teach and construct knowledge. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I am concerned with the field's lack of critical engagement with race. Rhetoric and composition studies has no recognizable, critical theory or body of knowledge about race that attends to the field's foundation: language, rhetoric, communication, persuasion, literacy, or

writing. As Howard Winant describes, “[W]e are experiencing a crises of racial meaning . . . . “The old is dying and the new cannot be born” (69). Those of us who specialize in racial pedagogy face a moment of crisis, he asserts. Although Winant writes of the crisis in race and ethnic studies departments, the same can be said of rhetoric and composition studies. The field is in a theoretical wasteland, when it comes to critical race praxis. Presently, we are stuck in racially liberal paradigms, such as multiculturalism, diversity, and identity-politics that are anti-progressive and linguistically and rhetorically lacking. These paradigms sustain an epistemology of ignorance, as defined by Charles W. Mills, which is an inverted epistemology that regards knowledge of race and racism as hazardous to white dominance (“Racial Contract”17-18). How might we see ourselves out of this racial crisis within the field of rhetoric and composition studies?

My argument is that rhetoric and composition studies should embrace a paradigm based in racial literacy that deconstructs race as a discursive construct that has real consequences in our lives. We should make three shifts: 1) shift the rhetorical subject from the racialized individual to the language of race; 2) shift the theoretical paradigm from racial liberalism to racial literacy, that privileges the discursive roots of race and the power of language to construct reality; and 3) shift from a pedagogy stuck between racial liberalism and critical pedagogy to one grounded in racial literacy strategies. In doing so, we answer the challenge put forth by critical race and rhetoric and composition scholar Keith Gilyard: to find the

source of a “narrative about racial formation that would be useful in composition classrooms, one accessible yet sufficient in scope” (49). This new critical race paradigm will lead us to new questions about race, literacy, knowledge, language, and power: How do words function in society where race is everywhere yet nowhere? How do we use, adapt, and avoid language in the presence of race? What does it mean if we as literacy specialists and language instructors cannot communicate effectively and critically when the topic is race? When race enters the context, does language fail us, or have we failed to understand language? Racial literacy, as an impetus for these questions, yet not the final answer to them, has the potential to form a theoretical and practical body of critical knowledge about race and language that is relevant to rhetoric and composition studies.

### **Racial Literacy, a Disciplinary Project**

This project stems from my positioning in the academy as a rhetoric and composition scholar specializing in critical theories of race, pedagogy, and language. As a graduate student teaching assistant with full instructional responsibilities, I was groomed in the racially liberal and pedagogically progressive paradigms of my home department and the larger field of rhetoric and composition studies. Both discourse communities acknowledge that words and race matter in institutional and individual lives. Nevertheless, neither community has articulated how words and race matter together, beyond discussions of political correctness or personal injury.

More specifically, the field has not examined how race was constructed as a word or linguistic sign nor how it functions as a discursive system. As such, this racial literacy project is a disciplinary project to aid rhetoric and composition studies in this task. I acknowledge that racial literacy, race theory, and language theory have implications beyond the field of rhetoric and composition studies because it privileges an analysis of race as language, when other cultural identity constructions, such as sexuality and gender, intersect with race in powerful ways. My task here, however, is to present the racial crisis I see in rhetoric and composition praxis and to offer an alternative that grounds critical race theory and pedagogy in critical language theory and pedagogy.

*What is Racial Literacy?*

Within rhetoric and composition studies, “racial literacy” is not standard phraseology, nor is there a pre-existing theory. Racial literacy, as I propose, focuses on what legal theorist Lani Guinier calls the “durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic” (“From” 100.) Racial literacy within rhetoric and composition studies deconstructs the grammar of race, beginning with an understanding that race, as Stuart Hall describes, is a signifier that operates at a discursive level. Race is a word within a larger language system but also is a word that functions as a language system itself. Racial literacy, as a theory and pedagogical practice, falls under the rubric of critical literacy and critical

race pedagogy but argues for a more directed and deliberate examination of the construction race and racism via language. Furthermore, racial literacy is a critical understanding of how race functions within various literacy practices, such as reading, writing, speaking, and viewing, and how literacy functions within a racialized society. Racial literacy also deals with how we make meaning or interpret the world given racial socialization and institutional racism. Under racial literacy, knowledge that we gather, make, and disseminate via literacy performance is racially influenced.

Important research has been done on literacy, race, and language use: Shirley Brice Heath's study of literacy in diverse communities, Elaine Richardson's history and theory of African American rhetoric and literacy, and Vershawn Ashanti Young's analysis of literacy, race, and masculinity are a few examples. My racial literacy project could not exist without such work. Nevertheless, racial literacy as I theorize narrows other conceptualizations by returning to the discursive roots of race. For the purposes of this project, racial literacy is not about the history of racism within education and literacy instruction, dialects, English as a second language, or *Students' Rights to Their Own Language* in the academy. Racial literacy as I propose extends the research of other scholars who write about race, racism, language, and literacy, and who even use the exact terminology but do not provide extended analysis of race as a discursive system. In sociology, for example, France Winddance Twine locates racial literacy in the home not in an academic field. In "A White Side

of Black Britain: The Concept of Racial Literacy,” Twine defines racial literacy as the invisible labor performed by white parents trying to cultivate black identities in their mixed-race children (900-01). The white parents she observed made deliberate choices about schooling, travel, consumerism, and extra-curricular activities in order to improve the children’s self-esteem and to teach them how to cope with racism. The parents encouraged their children to discuss and to analyze media and textual representations of black people. They taught alternative history lessons and helped their children connect their experiences with the larger racial context. For Twine racial literacy involves providing children with the tools of critical analyses and positive self-esteem to counter racism. Literacy and parental involvement in this sense are powerful and probably every progressive educator’s dream. I argue, however, that to use the concept of racial literacy necessitates not only cultivating positive self-images in “mixed-race” children, but also necessitates getting to the roots of race and racism to understand why the resistance is necessary in the first place. How, through language, race came to be, and specifically, how the term “mixed-race” signifies and creates racial subjectivities. This is a distinction between Twine’s sociological and familial framing of racial literacy and my discursive and disciplinary framing of racial literacy.

I also extend racial literacy definitions found within the field of education by focusing first on language analysis. Jane Bolgatz’s *Talking Race in the Classroom* remains the sole book-length discussion of racial literacy. Although other race and

pedagogy collections exist, none use the concept or the phrasing racial literacy as Bolgatz does. *Talking Race* is a manual for initiating discussions about race in secondary classrooms, although the strategies can be used at other levels, too. Bolgatz's ethnographic analysis of a high school classroom's race-talk integrates teacher and student voices to demonstrate that racially literate conversations can happen in the classroom. Bolgatz defines racial literacy as "a set of social competencies" that require listening to diverse viewpoints and speaking about taboo topics from a critical and knowledgeable perspective (1). For Bolgatz, racial literacy involves "view[ing] racial issues through a critical lens that attends to current and institutional aspects of racism. Racially literate students understand that various forms of racism have developed historically and that they can contest these practices" (1-2). I will reference Bolgatz's definition and research in the pedagogy chapter of this project, as I believe her work is valuable in its practicality and generalized definition of racial literacy. Bolgatz begins by defining race as a social construct, but she stops short when it comes to race as a linguistic construct. What is missing is the emphasis on the roots of race and racism *based in language*. Given the weight Bolgatz puts on facilitating classroom discussions, more analysis of how race began to communicate via language would round out her project.

The educational research study conducted by Rebecca Rogers and Melissa Mosley addresses language and literacy within the context of white identity development. In "Racial Literacy in a Second Grade Classroom: Critical Race Theory,

Whiteness Studies, and Literacy Research” Rogers and Mosley argue that the “pervasive silence in literacy research around matters of race, especially with both young people and white people” demands integrated research methodologies that take into account the intersection of race and literacy (463-65). Using civil rights picture books, Rogers and Mosley examined white students’ responses to race and racism and guided them through age-appropriate literacy instruction that critiqued language use. The researchers analyzed students’ development of an anti-racist white identity by focusing on how and why the students referred to “the whites” in the picture books. Their lesson planned for three “whiteness ‘moves’ on the students’ racial literacy journey: noticing whiteness, enacting white privilege, and transforming whiteness into liberatory alliances” (483). In their study, Rogers and Mosley found that young white children can and do talk about race, but their talk must be guided by racially literate instructors. And, they note, “racial literacy can create spaces for white, working class children to step into texts to identify, problematize, and, most importantly, reconstruct whiteness in relation to social justice” (483).

Although Rogers and Mosley base their research in language use -- how students use “white” and what it means -- their purpose as they state is to develop an anti-racist white identity. For me, the purpose of racial literacy in the classroom, first and foremost, is to develop critical consciousness about race, language and literacy. By focusing on identity-development, a study and praxis such as theirs runs

the risk of liberalizing racism and compartmentalizing it within personal issues of whiteness. As I see it, the core of racial literacy, race as a discursive construct, can be taught to any population, regardless of personal race affiliation.

In addition to my divergences from racial literacy as theorized by scholars in sociology and education, I also define racial literacy over and against racial liberalism because the field seems stuck in racially liberal paradigms disconnected from critical language theory or use and dependent more so on tolerance and diversity paradigms. Racial liberalism is a belief, an ideology, from the post-World War II period wherein the United States government sought to construct an international image of itself as a tolerant nation. The U.S. needed to reconcile its discriminatory treatment of African Americans with its professed high ideals and moral superiority in the world. “At racial liberalism’s core,” Jodi Melamed explains, “was a geopolitical race narrative: African American integration within U.S. society and advancement toward equality defined through a liberal framework of legal rights and inclusive nationalism would establish the moral legitimacy of U.S. global leadership” (4). Guinier also tells us that “post-World War II racial liberalism rejected scientific racism and discredited its postulate of inherent black inferiority” (“From”100). The race ‘problem’ was also presented as psychological and individual challenges opposed to structural challenges within the economic and political systems (“From”100). The goal, then, was to reconcile the image of America abroad, so as not to appear like a fascist nation, and to persuade the American populace that

the country was progressing racially. To do so, political progress was made in dismantling visible signs of segregation and furthering civil rights laws that promoted tolerance and racial integration. Racial liberalism also advocates incremental and conciliatory measures based on the exigencies of the times. Racial liberalism purports to address race, but its primary focus is on appearing tolerant and embracing diversity without disrupting the racial hierarchy.

The pivotal moment in racial liberalism came with challenges to school segregation. Guinier, in “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” argues that school desegregation did little to dismantle the racist educational, economic and geographic structures. Reflecting on *Brown v. Board of Education* and school desegregation, Guinier writes that the well-intentioned liberals, black and white, based their school desegregation argument in social or interpersonal aspects of racism. Looking back, we see that racism was more insidious than being excluded from white schools or having the opportunity to socialize with whites. The argument in *Brown* focused on surface or outward appearances—a racially liberal approach to racism—when it should have focused on the structure of racism within the educational system, for example the distribution of funds and divisions of labor based on race ( 92-113).

A racially literate approach, Guinier argues, would have diagnosed the converging and diverging interests of poor and working class whites and blacks, thus revealing the short-sightedness of the argument for school desegregation. As

the architects of *Brown* focused on race and the psychological impact it had on the self esteem of African American children, the architects of the school system devised other ways to maintain the racial hierarchy in education, even as the courts desegregated schools. A racially literate examination of institutions would have seen how those in power cloak the interests of disadvantaged groups with race and even pit these groups against each other in order to maintain the status quo (“From” 113-116).

To respond, Guinier argues that race should be used as a “diagnostic device, an analytic tool” to identify the underlying problems within institutions: “Racial literacy begins by redefining racism as a structural problem rather than a purely individual one. Race reveals the ways demography is often destiny – not just for people of color, but for working-class and poor whites as well” (“Admissions” 201-03). For Guinier, racial literacy as the process of “making legible racism’s every-shifting yet ever-present structure” in order to see how “race adapts its syntax to mask class and code geography” (“From” 100). While attune to the legal, geographic, and economic layers of racism, she does not address the linguistic aspects. I believe her usage of the terms *literacy*, *legible*, *syntax*, *code*, and *grammar* are misleading given that her “thought experiment,” as she calls it, does not examine race as language system. In my view, race and racism must be examined as a variety of systems, of which the linguistic system is my focus here, and the phrasing *racial literacy* most adequately qualifies.

As in the case of *Brown*, racial liberalism can mask as racial literacy when it is presented as a tool to achieve racial integration in education. In “Reading, Writing, and Race: The Constitutionality of Educational Strategies Designed to Teach Racial Literacy,” Kaufman argues that “ a school districts’ use of student assignment to create a meaningful number of diverse students in a school in order to serve its compelling interest in teaching racial literacy should survive any credible constitutional challenge” (1). Kaufman believes that school systems have been committed to teaching racial literacy for a long time, and because of this commitment, the courts should support their efforts to create [racially] diverse learning environments. Racial literacy includes the following objectives, according to Kaufman:

An understanding of the biological and social complements of race itself; an understanding of the history of race throughout the world and in America; an understanding of the current projected racial composition of the world, the country, the state, the county, the school district and the school; an understanding of the relationship vel non [or not] between race and politics, law, society, geography, language, culture, religion, family and education; an understanding of the connection vel non [or not] between race and perceptions of the world and one’s self; an understanding of the racial prejudices and biases that may exist in each student; an understanding of the strategies that may be used to overcome such prejudices and biases; and an understanding of the value of racial differences and racial tolerance. (2)

The problem with Kaufman’s use of racial literacy is that it actually is racial liberalism because not only does it avoid any discursive analysis of race, but it also promotes a paradigm based in tolerance and diversity. Kaufman suggests that race

*may* have an effect on politics, *may* have an effect on the self, and *may* have an effect on language, etc. Racial literacy, I argue, stresses the *definite* connection between race and language; race and the self; race and politics, etc. In the end, Kaufman is arguing for school reassignment to promote racial tolerance not racial literacy. In my view, racial literacy is not about tolerance but about critical analysis of the discursive properties of race. At this point, it is important to state how I am using the terms *race* and *literacy* in this project. Both terms are loaded with meanings and require contextual definitions.

### **Contextualizing Race and Racism within Rhetoric and Composition Studies<sup>1</sup>**

The definitions and meanings of race throughout time and across continents are innumerable and beyond the scope of this project.<sup>2</sup> When I refer to race, I am attending to the contemporary critical social, political, and discursive theories of race most relevant to the field. Throughout this project I will use the term race primarily as 1) a social construction, 2) a myth and a folk belief, and 3) an ideological discursive system. All of these incarnations of race are political and powerful, more closely addressing the needs of rhetoric and composition studies than, for example, materialist and philosophical analyses. Together, I apply these

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of “defining” race and racism, I “contextualize” it because an exercise in defining these terms would be a separate project. I recognize the complexities of theorizing about race and racism in academia, given the voluminous discourses on the subject. As such, I situate my use of the terms within the context of rhetoric and composition studies, and I privilege discursive perspectives of race, not over and against materialist ones, for example, but in keeping with the linguistic and rhetorical foundations of the field.

<sup>2</sup> For a broader presentation of race and racism, see Frederickson; Gossett; Smedley, and Winant.

characteristics of race to what Charles W. Mills calls “The Racial Contract” to show the hegemonic nature of race in society as funneled through language.

To begin, race is a social construction not a biological fact. It is often referred to as an invented category. This viewpoint seems to go without saying in academic discussions of race today. Simply put: biological races of people do not exist. What this means is race, or hierarchical distinctions of groups of people based on physical characteristics, was invented by human beings for a specific purpose during a specific time period. Nevertheless, what this does not mean is that race does not exist. In fact, race is constantly being re-made, with boundaries stretched and redrawn to accommodate political, economic, and social forces. This process is what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call “racial formation”: the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55). They posit that race is a sociohistorical concept, given meaning in time, space, and place based on social relations. They define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (55). This racial signification has been fundamental to meaning-making and structuring of the social world. Over time the nation-state and institutions within it have engaged in “racial projects” “an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56). For the purposes of power, particular institutions—be it the justice system or educational system—determine what race

*means* and how things and people are *organized* based on a specific definition of race (56, original emphasis).

One of the first racial projects was the invention of race itself. The American Anthropologist Association (AAA) states that the modern concept of race originated from naturalistic science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many scholars agree that the evolving colonial America needed to justify the institution of slavery and codify white supremacy, thus came race. Accordingly, scientists and anthropologists relied on “the great chain of being” theorem that ranked physical differences along a hierarchy. Following the physical differences, scientists linked biology to behavior, whereas “leaders among European-Americans fabricated the cultural/behavioral characteristics associated with each ‘race,’ linking superior traits with Europeans and negative and inferior ones to blacks and Indians” (AAA). In short, the AAA claims that the Enlightenment “knowledge” of race as a biological fact is a myth.

As instructors, teaching about race as a social construction works as a rhetorical strategy to destabilize students’ commonsense beliefs about race, but we fail to show how, even in the presence of scientific research that disproves biological races, how race still lives and impacts us in powerful ways. A more rounded argument is needed, in particular, one specific to rhetoric and composition studies. The narrative of race relevant to rhetoric and composition studies can begin with race as social construct but also as myth.

Race can be thought of as myth in two senses: as a false belief system and as a narrative statement of fact. In *The Race Myth: Why We Pretend Race Exists in America*, Graves writes that “most Americans still believe in the concept of race the way they believe in the law of gravity—they believe in it without even knowing what it is they believe in” (ix). Yet, we continue to live as if people can be grouped by physical differences into separate and distinct races. For Graves, race is less biology and more bigotry. It is a social-construction meant to place groups of people along a hierarchy stipulating who is the best and who is the worst of the human species. Race as a false belief system grounded in bigotry operates under five pillars:

- Biological races exist in human species.
- Races have genetic differences that determine their intelligence.
- Races have genetically determined differences that produce unique diseases and cause them to die at different rates.
- Races have genetically determined sexual appetites and reproductive capacities.
- Races have genetically determined differences in athletic and musical ability. (xiv)

These myths, according to Graves, were used to justify the subjugation of nonwhite peoples around the globe. The persistence and power of the myths continue to operate as deep-seated prejudices and commonsense.

Myth as false belief system is one way of discussing race in rhetoric and composition studies. Another way is to understand that myth can also function as statements of fact. Roland Barthes offers insight into the nature and function of myths. Myths, according to Barthes, derive from history not nature, with the intent

of transforming history into nature. Myths are “rooted in what we say about the world rather than the nature” of the world (119). What we have said about differences in skin color, for example, that dark complexions are less than, maybe even sub-human, become attached to nature through myth. Racial mythology relies on physical differences to create statements of supposed facts that function as myths. As Barthes explains,

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (143)

In this sense, myths reveal the fluidity of language, that with words we can construct reality and make people and things mean what we want them to mean. Myths also dehistoricize groups of people, removing them from context and filling them with an essential nature. So, racial mythology in the narrative of the American story hides the history of indigenous peoples, land removal, and forced genocide within myths of natural savagery and the vanishing Indian. Racial mythology also operates as statements of fact: it is a fact that whites are more intelligent or that blacks are violent. Scientific studies, social theories, and the like have been conducted to “prove” these already present statements of fact. From the eighteenth-century to the present, the construction of race has served as a long-standing statement of fact about human differences. The myth of race and the subsequent myths about color, nature, and character are used to organize the society into a hierarchy. It is a

circular argument because race is myth, yet the myths are used to justify race. And, as Barthes notes, these justifications are “eternal”; they seem to be with society forever, as race appears to be.

Although biological race is myth, we must think of it as more than a lie. Race as myth explains and justifies. The myth of black inferiority, for example, explains why “they” act like that, or why “they” are not successful. Racial mythology makes the racial hierarchy, the structure of institutions, and personal beliefs about race okay. Nevertheless, just because race is more myth than biology does not mean we can easily do away with it. Myths function as folk belief. They are the cultural stories we tell children to acculturate them. They are the indirect lessons immigrants learn when assimilating into society. They are necessary.

I began this chapter describing race as a paradox: it is everywhere yet nowhere; it is reality yet illusion. Race is so difficult to capture because through a process of racial formation race is now a part of our beliefs, our value systems, and our everyday way of life. It functions at the level of common sense, even though it makes no sense. In *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, Audrey Smedley argues that we must examine race as a sociocultural reality and through the lens of “folk belief.” Folklore can be understood as the traditions, beliefs, myths, wisdom, and culture of a specific group of people. Everyone living in the U.S. is conditioned, to varying degrees, into the system of race through folklore. Race

lives in the folk through our participation in and creation of culture and in various institutions.

In addition to race as social construction, myth and folk belief, race also functions as ideology. This racial literacy project does not deny the material and physical components of ideology but privileges the discursive, as defined by Terry Eagleton: “a set of discursive strategies for legitimating a dominant power” (Eagleton and Regan 234). What might these discursive strategies be? Myths, folk beliefs, literacy practices, words, etc., that use language to communicate ideas about race. Furthermore, ideology, according to Louis Althusser, are the beliefs and practices within a society that come to be viewed as natural, universal, and commonsensical: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions” (297). In terms of race, society is structured and operates based on the “imaginary” and mythologized racial pronouncements during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Althusser describes the institutions that create and disseminate ideology as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA’s) (297). From the beginning of the construction of race, political, social, and academic institutions created and disseminated “imaginary” racial pronouncements that began to cement a racial discourse and mythology. The ideology of race, beliefs, customs, values, etc., creates “black” people and “white” people, for example. These types of people are ordered in society, infused with arbitrary meanings, and socialized or typecast by ISA’s into racialized subjects. This “crystalliz[ation]” process of racial ideology, as

Eduardo BoNIFLla-Silva describes, is racism, which “performs practical functions” (16). Racism keeps groups of people in their political, economic, and social places in the hierarchy. Racism is covert and overt; it is obvious and hidden. It is not merely ideological, although it is based on racial ideology. Racism is a structure, argues BoNIFLla-Silva: “a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shape the life chances of the various races. . . . Racism (racial ideology) helps to glue, and at the same time, organize the nature of and character of race relations in a society” (18). The question becomes, how much of race and racism still matter today. The stance I take in this project is that race and racism are present powerful forces that society has not transcended or overcome. On the contrary, race and racism manifest and function in new ways.

One way to understand this “newness” of race and racism is through Mills’ description of the “Racial Contract” and BoNIFLla-Silva’s description of the “new racism.” In *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills begins by claiming that “White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (1). He argues that the ideal social contract articulated in the works of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke have misrepresented civil liberties for Western civilizations as a “raceless” political ideology. In fact, Mills argues that the social contract was a Race Contract, written by and for whites. Mills explains that the original Racial Contract is an agreement “between members of one subset of humans . . . to categorize the remaining subset of humans as ‘nonwhite’

and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities. . . ." (18). The first act of the Racial Contract was the "norming and racing" of individuals to determine personhood and subpersonhood (53). Also important was the racializing of space, or the marking of territory for persons and subpersons. Privileged spaces were reserved for whites, while all others were restricted in substandard physical locations (49-50). Violence was necessary to uphold the conditions of the racial contract (87), as well as psychological conditioning of whites and nonwhites. Everyone was socialized into believing in and abiding by the racial contract (89).

That was the old Racial Contract, where in the earlier period colonial slavery and Indian removal and genocide were visible signs of racial stratification and racism. The later period (from the end of Jim Crow, extending into the present) where racism is less formal and not as obvious, constitutes the new Racial Contract. Or, as BoNIFLla-Silva describes the "new racism":

(1) The increasingly *covert* nature of racial discourse and racial practices; (2) the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience 'reverse racism'; (3) the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references; (4) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally, (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations (18, original emphasis).

Rhetoric and composition studies has a role to play in terms of understanding the new racism and new Racial Contract. Where BoNIFLla-Silva names the new racism's

vehicles as “racial discourse and racial practice,” “racial terminology,” indirect “racial references,” “invisibil[e] of mechanisms,” and “rearticulation” of overt practices, rhetoric and composition studies’ focus on language, discourse, and articulation can directly addresses these characteristics.

The racial crisis that rhetoric and composition studies resides in is a result of the latter period of the Racial Contract and the new racism, and the field’s inability to recognize them. In fact, racially liberal approaches to difference in the field suggest that racism, in masse, is in the past and that racial terminology must be avoided. The focus, then, becomes individual attitudes that are stuck in the past. The teaching of tolerance and multiculturalism serve to help those few individuals who have not embraced a liberal stance on race. In this project, I contextualize both race and racism as structures, discursive structures that sustain the Racial Contract and the new racism. Racial literacy seeks to decode the discursive systems of race and racism, which should be the primary task of rhetoric and composition scholars who theorize and teach about race.

### **Contextualizing Literacy**

I have discussed what race is in the context of this project, now I turn to defining literacy. Similar to race, the definitions and types of literacy are innumerable: functional literacy, cultural literacy, critical literacy, multicultural literacy, media literacy, health literacy, new literacies, emotional literacy, and the

list goes on and on. A brief look at how literacy developed and how national organizations promote it provide some context for my usage of literacy in this project.

According to Edward Gordon and Elaine Gordon, authors of *Literacy in America: Historic Journey and Contemporary Solutions*, as early as 1840, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write. As the U.S. and the world changed, so did literacy. It morphed into the ability to sign one's name, the completion of a certain level of education, and even the interpretation of the Constitution. Wars, compulsory school attendance, industrialization, and immigration were just some of the factors affecting how literacy was viewed and used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (272-75). Passage of time, however, has not brought us any closer to unanimity as it relates to literacy.

Some of the same issues the U.S. faced in the past continue to challenge the way we view and use literacy in the twenty-first century. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) represent a longstanding debate and tension in literacy studies. Should reading, writing, and arithmetic be the fundamentals of an education and constitute literacy, or should education and literacy include a variety of other skills, functional and critical, that promote participation in democracy? UNESCO describes literacy as a human rights issue that affects social and economic participation. In "Literacy – a UNESCO Perspective," the Director General Koichiro

Matsuura writes, “Literacy is about more than reading and writing - it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture” (1). UNESCO promotes literacy as a form of empowerment, not only as a means to eradicate poverty but also to realize one’s full potential as a human being who is a participant and meaning-maker in society. In the UNESCO pamphlet, Matsuura traces the organization’s philosophy of literacy, indicating that UNESCO once advocated only the traditional 3 R’s of literacy (reading, writing, and arithmetic), but as new critical theories of literacy developed, it began to focus on the more radical aspects of literacy and social justice.

The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), established by the U.S. Congress in 1991, focuses on “building a competitive workforce” through improved literacy rates. The institute publishes on its website the following definition of literacy from the Workforce Investment Act: literacy is “an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” Whereas UNESCO works towards a holistic definition of literacy, one that includes addressing social inequality, the NIFL centralizes the power and function of literacy in the workforce – an English speaking workforce. One conclusion we can draw from the NIFL definition is that literacy in the U.S. should benefit corporate capital first and individuals second.

This racial literacy project emphasizes critical literacy principles, not to the neglect of functional literacy tools, but in addition to them. As a subset of critical literacy as theorized by Paulo Freire, Donaldo Macedo, Ira Shor, and Henry Giroux, racial literacy specifically focuses on how questioning the neutrality of language and the power of language to create reality. Freire, the forerunner of critical literacy theory asks students and teachers to develop “critical consciousness,” that is an awareness of the world in which we live and how we can be agents to change that world (Freire and Macedo 29). A critically conscious person knows how to “read the word and read world” (29). In this manner, literacy begins with interpreting what happens in the world and then how words/language is used to describe or to shape the world. Ira Shor provides another component of critical literacy, stating that critical literacy is “language use that questions the social construction of the self. . . . to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it.” Racial literacy, as I practice, challenges students to see how they are constructed racially inside the larger racial narrative of the country and then how their racialization influences their literacy and meaning-making practices.

Racial literacy also pulls from Henry Giroux’s characterization of critical literacy:

Literacy in its varied versions is . . . the practice of representation as a means of organizing, inscribing, and containing meaning. . . . Hence, literacy becomes critical to the degree that it makes problematic the very structure and practice of representation; that is it focuses attention on the importance of acknowledging that meaning is not fixed and that to be literate is to undertake a dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences. (qtd. in Bowden 142).

Whereas critical literacy emphasizes deconstructing multiple subjectivities, such as gender, race, and class, and understanding representation and meaning-making in a variety of contexts, racial literacy deliberately focuses on race because I contend that rhetoric and composition studies has yet to integrate critical race analysis into its language and literacy theory and pedagogy. From this critical understanding of the function of race as a word in the world, students will be able to see how their literacy behaviors—methods of representation, interpretation, and construction of knowledge through various literacy acts of reading, writing, speaking, and viewing—are impacted by one word, *race*.

### **The Implications of a Discursive Analysis**

I recognize that the approach I am taking in this project is subject to critique on several levels, one of which is my insistence that rhetoric and composition studies privilege the rhetorical and discursive formulations of race and racism. Joseph Young and Jana Braziel, in their book *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge: Cultural Amnesia and the Academy*, argue against scholars I privilege here (Gates and Hall, for examples), suggesting that to study race as a discursive construct is to study an 'empty' category or a 'free-floating signifier', that has no substance or meaning at all (5). That to look at race as language is to not see race at all, for the reality of race, some argue, rests in discriminatory practices, in violence, in

economic exploitation, and other “real” occurrences. Such is the paradox I began the chapter with: race is real yet not real.

What I highlight in this study is that rhetoric and composition studies’ focus is language, not race. Language is real, just as race is real. Language is a social construct, just as race is a social construct. To say that race is part language and to privilege the study of race as language within the field is to acknowledge the power of language to not only reflect reality (or to name and describe racial violence and discriminatory practices), but also the power of language to create the same. This privileging of the power of language does not diminish the power of race. In fact, it sheds light on an often overlooked or poorly critiqued characteristic of race. It moves us beyond political correctness and media sensationalism and toward an approach to the study of race that is based in the field’s foundation.

This movement is necessary because, similar to politics and religion, race is one of those taboo topics that people silently agree not to talk about in public. *Race* is a dirty word for many people. And, its derivatives, *racism* and *racist*, are what Richard Weaver might call “devil terms”: terms that signify the worst of a culture. They are the opposite of “god terms,” which refer to “that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers,” such as “American” and “freedom” (212). “Devil terms” are “terms of repulsion” that “defy any real analysis.” “Communist, Nazi, and un-American” are prime examples (222-23). God-terms and devil-terms are culture and context specific. The politics of

the day might bring forth new terms and diminish others' power. What has remained constant, however, at least since the Civil Rights movement, is that *race* and its derivatives, *racism* and *racist*, are problematic terms for the average citizen and the educated academic.

As Victor Villanueva explains, if we no longer speak of race or racism, then they get ignored. When we pretend they do not exist, we reify the invisibility of white privilege and power and we give stamina to the “new racism,” more subtle, insidious, and blended forms of racial oppression. Villanueva argues that language facilitates the new racism by using politically-correct terms to mask race and racism: diversity, identity, culture, multiculturalism, and ethnicity. These words function as tropes “signal[ing] what is to be said and what is not to be said” (5). As rhetoric and composition scholars, we, too, can fall victim to masking race and racism because the tropes are standard parlance in our field and are safer pedagogically.

Furthermore, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes,” explains that careless language use in regard to race is akin to the destructiveness of racism. To teach about race is to teach a “dangerous trope” (5). If done carelessly and without attention to its construction and functions, material, social, discursive, and so forth, rhetoric and composition instructors can do more harm than good. Gates explains the connection between race and language:

The biological criteria used to determine 'difference' in sex simply do not hold when applied to 'race'. Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference than to assuage or redress it. (5)

Gates challenges us to be more careful in our use of language so as not to reinforce "natural" differences. To do this, we must understand the signifying properties of race, specifically, how it came to be in the first place.

So what do we call what we are doing with race in rhetoric and composition studies? Are we doing anything, at all, or have we relegated *race* to the category of devil term? My dissertation argues that we are producing an epistemology of ignorance that reifies the new racism of the new Racial Contract, when we should be producing critical knowledge about language and race. As I discuss in detail in the next chapter, race operates as an "absent presence" in the field of rhetoric and composition studies (Prendergast 36). Gilyard paints the picture of race within the field as such, "[M]uch of this [race] talk and its attendant activity has been emotive rather than analytic. In other words, *theorizing race* has yet to catch up with all the personal, albeit necessary, reflections in classrooms and professional outlets" (ix original emphasis). As a white dominated field with liberal and progressive leanings, rhetoric and composition studies has not grappled with how race and racism functions in the discourse of the field or how race and racism function as discourse. On the contrary, in the field race and racism are presented as individual flaws in identity and attitude. Instructors ponder how to deal with racist comments

in class. Departments convene around diversity hiring discussions. Conference panelists lament the failure of white people to admit their white privilege. Students purchase multicultural readers that mask race and racism by promoting tolerance. Debates continue about the colonizing of effects of academic discourse and *Students' Rights to Their Own Language*. As rhetoric and composition studies continues race(ing) around in circles, the field fails to see how its inability to face race head-on promotes an epistemology of ignorance that sustains the racial hierarchy it purports to resist. This racial epistemology of ignorance is a part of the larger Racial Contract theorized by Mills, that regulates knowledge, determining what can and should be known. This epistemology of ignorance is a tool for the maintenance of white supremacy, Mills argues,

[O]n matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. (18)

An epistemology of ignorance blinds whites to white supremacy and privilege. It is purposeful and powerful, operating through society in a hegemonic fashion. The epistemology of ignorance is sustained via cultural institutions, social customs, language, religion, and other everyday behaviors. Rhetoric and composition studies is implicated in the reification of this epistemology in that it produces knowledge that intentionally distorts neglects, misrepresents, and lies about people and events.

As a part of the Racial Contract agreement, academic disciplines, such as rhetoric and composition studies, agree to regulate racial knowledge in such a way that keeps white supremacy and privilege in place. Racial liberalism, as I describe in this project, does just that. Therefore, I propose a theory and practice of racial literacy that counters the epistemology of ignorance by revealing the ways race functions in the discursive realm.

I should point out, too, that racial literacy does not propose a dismantling of the racial system or complete overhaul of rhetoric and composition studies. Racial literacy is an alternative to racial liberalism and a response to the epistemology of ignorance. Also, I acknowledge the complexities of using the master's tools to destroy the master's house (Lorde). Even as I write about race, language, discourse and power, I am writing within the same system and seeking academic credentials by the same field. Nevertheless, as Adrienne Rich explains, "This is the oppressor's language / yet I need to talk to you" (Cooper 15). Racial literacy proposes an examination of how the master's house was constructed by race discursively so that we, as a field and as individuals, might live and learn as literate beings outside of the master's racial discourse as much as possible. This is a process, a habit of being. It is about coming to know more about the past and present functions of race, language, literacy, and power. It is also an imperfect process, in so much that a practitioner of racial literacy is a racially socialized being operating within a system that supports

racism, and it should not be thought of as having an end point. Because race and language float, institutions change, and beliefs evolve, so must racial literacy.

### **Chapter Overview**

I began this discussion with a brief description of race, Barack Obama, and the 2008 presidential election. This national moment of the first African-American President of the United States offers us the opportunity to really address how race functions in our society. Throughout the project I refer to Obama and his election as a contextual marker for where we are as a country when it comes to race and racism. The field of rhetoric and composition studies should use this moment to re-examine its theory and pedagogy regarding race, given that so much of this historic change in our nation was brought about by language and rhetoric. As such, my dissertation questions the efficacy of racial liberalism in the field of rhetoric and composition studies and argues for a new paradigm based on the theory and practice of racial literacy that grounds race praxis in critical language and discourse analysis.

In chapter 2, "Rhetoric and Composition Studies: Between Race and a Hard Place," I argue that the field of rhetoric and compositions studies has an ambivalent history with critical race analysis and that the racial knowledge produced within the field falls under the category of racial liberalism. To demonstrate this, I briefly survey the field's engagement with race, followed by an analysis of rhetoric and

composition readers that promote racial liberalism and produce an epistemology of ignorance. I contend that the problem of racial liberalism within the field necessitates three shifts: shifting the rhetorical subject in the field and in classrooms from the individual (student) to the language of race (discursive system); shifting the theoretical paradigm from racial liberalism that promotes tolerance and an epistemology of ignorance; and shifting the pedagogy from racial liberalism to racial literacy. I conclude the chapter by revisiting the debate over *Students' Rights to Their Own Language*, and suggest that the field reframe the debate around students' rights to study language because the field's desire to be racially tolerant and progressive without being critical of race from a linguistic standpoint has resulted in a racial crisis of theory and pedagogy disconnected from our foundation of language.

In chapter 3 "Toward a Theory of Racial Literacy," I develop the theoretical framework for racial literacy awareness and practice within the field of rhetoric and composition studies. Here, I shift the rhetorical subject from the individual student emphasized within racial liberalism to the language of race within racial literacy. I begin by examining the linguistic properties of race and the power of language to create reality. Stuart Hall's theorization of racial signification grounds my argument for racial literacy because of its emphasis on the term *race* as a discursive construct. I also integrate the linguistic analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure whose theory of the sign informs Hall's argument. With a clear understanding of *race* as linguistic term or sign and the implications of racial signification, I move into Roland Barthes' and

Jacques Lyotard's discussions of the ideological and discursive nature of racial myths and grand narratives, which I argue are the invisible mechanisms that carry racial ideology within racial discourse. Through racial narratives and folklore, race functions in the common sense realm of reality, shaping how we make meaning of our world. Kenneth Burke's theory of "terministic screens" offers insight into this characteristic of race as a filter and molder of reality. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of how race functions as a speech act. J.L. Austin's and Judith Butler's theories of language performance illuminate how words do more than describe but also perform. I argue that the reiterative process of *race* through constant resignification has created a powerful discourse that creates and regulates bodies and knowledge.

"Chapter IV: Racial Literacy in the Classroom" moves from the theoretical to the practical to illustrate what racial literacy can look like in the classroom. I problematize teaching racial literacy from a critical pedagogy perspective that seeks to convert students. In the first part of the chapter, I describe my teaching philosophy and reluctance to coerce students into acknowledging an anti-racist stance. The racial literacy classroom, as I construct it, attempts to create an environment that does not harm or pressure students into my personal beliefs about race and racism but, instead, promotes racial literacy critical consciousness that hopefully students will develop into a habit of being in the world. The second part of the chapter describes how I construct my racial literacy course based on my

racial literacy tenets and within the university requirements, which I use to develop the syllabus and course description. These tenets and requirements compel me to focus on the critical components of the course: transparency, argumentative discourse, speaking ethics, and a racial literacy as critical consciousness. This section provides pictures of my course, student voices, and instructor reflections on the challenges and successes of teaching racial literacy. Furthermore, racial literacy has implications outside of my classroom, and in part three, I argue that the Writing Center should integrate racial literacy training into its curricula. To support this argument, I report findings of an experimental study I conducted with one of my racial literacy classes. The study revealed that when tutors are not familiar with racial literacy they resort to racial liberalism by emphasizing grammar and promoting political correctness in writing. The chapter concludes by acknowledging that teaching racial literacy has to evolve with changes in racial politics in the nation. The election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States will create new questions, questions that I could not anticipate when I was teaching racial literacy prior to the election. The challenge for racial literacy instructors becomes more complicated when racial liberalism persists and Obama's election can be used to support it. In response, I offer strategies for instructors to interpret the election from a racially literate perspective.

I conclude the project in chapter 5 by looking forward to how rhetoric and composition studies can stop race(ing) around in circles and begin to face race head-

on. To face race head-on, I submit that the field should look to critical race theory and the ways scholars in legal studies have mobilized to create a critical body of racial knowledge relevant to their field. I also submit that the field should re-orient itself with linguistics by focusing on the structural and social aspects of language that help students see the power and function of race as a linguistic system. The field must also produce new scholarship for students in the classroom and for teacher training. None of these changes can be done, however, if the field does not confront white fear. I use Robert Jensen's four categories of white fear to implicate the field in its complicity with racial liberalism and the maintenance of the status quo for personal and professional profit. As with all theories, there are limitations. The project concludes with a hopeful look forward to further theorizing of how to teach racial literacy from an intersectional perspective. The project also makes clear that, in the end, new racial knowledge will not be enough to change the field or society. Persuasion and mobilization by people committed to changing how race and racism function will be necessary to see progress.

CHAPTER II  
RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION STUDIES: BETWEEN RACE  
AND A HARD PLACE

The 2008 presidential campaign and the election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States provided classrooms all over the country, even the world, with plenty of material to discuss, whether about political rhetoric, race, gender, citizenship, or voting rights. Obama's written texts also gave the public insight into his views on race. His autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, for example, is a text full of narrative, political reflection, race and gender (masculinity) analysis, in addition to the excellent prose. In his book of political essays entitled *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Obama devotes an entire chapter to his views on race, racism, and public policy. These published and public texts testify to his willingness to face race head-on in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, when it came time for Obama to run for the highest office in the land, he steered away from race-talk as much as possible, because, I believe, he knew that the sound-byte political campaign culture could not adequately capture the nuances of racial politics nor the critical race dialogue that the country needed to have. So, as much as possible, Obama avoided race-talk during the campaign.

That was until his former pastor Jeremiah Wright entered the picture. After weeks of racially-inflammatory news coverage of the former pastor, candidate Obama was forced to address race in front of a world audience. He was between race and hard place.

The rhetorical moment presented Obama with two options. One, he could cower under the media scrutiny and characterizations of blackness, anger, and anti-Americanism, which would have probably derailed his campaign. Or, two, he could face race head-on, as he had done in his books, by speaking honestly and knowledgeably about race in America. He chose to do the latter in what is now commonly referred to as “The Race Speech” (Oliver 253-270). Afterwards, media reported that college and high school classrooms across the country used the speech to engage students in a national conversation about race.

What does Obama’s decision to face race head-on during the campaign season have to do with rhetoric and composition studies? Similar to Barack Obama, rhetoric and composition studies is stuck between race and a hard place. It is at an impasse when it comes to theorizing and teaching about race. At the intersection of racial liberalism, multiculturalism, and identity and diversity politics, the field finds itself wondering which way to go. I posit that in spite of the various manifestations of racial pedagogy, the field has two options: one, it can cower and hide behind racial liberalism, as it has been doing; or, two, it can face race head-on, in a risky, uncompromising examination of race, language, and power. My hope is that the

field, not just individual teachers, will use this national moment of progress to create an academic moment of progress. Rhetoric and composition studies should interrogate how race functions in our representation of ourselves and in the dissemination and creation of knowledge. From there, we can choose a more effective way to integrate race into the linguistic and rhetorical foundations of our field.

I have addressed race and literacy in chapter one so that we understand race as a social construct and literacy as meaning-making practices involving critique and (de) construction through reading, writing, speaking, and viewing in an effort to promote critical awareness of and engagement with the world. In chapter two, I argue that rhetoric and composition studies is stuck between race and a hard place. The knowledge and discourse it produces about race is steeped in racial liberalism and incongruent with the field's linguistic and rhetorical roots. To demonstrate this, I employ Jacqueline Jones Royster's metaphor of disciplinary landscape to examine how the field creates and disseminates knowledge. Next, I briefly survey the racial landscape, historically and presently, of rhetoric and composition studies to highlight insufficient body of knowledge about race in the field. Then, I provide an illustration of the field's knowledge and discourse of race with a rhetorical textual analysis within the field. In the conclusion, I maintain that the discourse on race and the field's reluctance to face race head-on deny students the right to study language, but more problematic is the field's production of an epistemology of ignorance

within a larger Racial Contract that keeps the status quo in place. My theory of racial literacy, proposed in chapter three, will respond to this crisis of racial praxis within the field.

### **Race and Knowledge in Rhetoric and Composition Studies**

All knowledge is not valued equally. As an African American woman in the field of rhetoric and composition studies, it did not take long for me to recognize this fact. What intelligence, articulation, persuasion, and communication mean in the field is not necessarily what it means in my home community. In graduate classrooms, I learned to adapt to and to adopt authorized knowledge. For example, in terms of race, I experienced being sought after to speak in forums or workshops about race and racism (possibly due to some perceived “knowledge” of them), but noticed that these conversations rarely resulted in changes in the department or administration of the rhetoric and composition program. Authorized knowledge about race and racism was merely disciplined or domesticated knowledge about race and racism, knowledge that was attune to the problems but not critical enough to necessitate a remedy to the problem.

Rhetoric and composition studies, similar to many disciplines, privileges knowledge or epistemology, the study of knowledge, that is firmly rooted in ancient Greek philosophy. Two examples are Plato and Aristotle. In brief, the Platonic view is that knowledge already exists “out there” and, as such, must be attained or

recollected through philosophical dialogue. Aristotle's view of knowledge was less abstract than Plato's. He sought to classify objects, using empirical research, observation, and evidence to prove truths. Today, multiple manifestations of Platonic and Aristotelian epistemologies ground legal, scientific, political, and various other discursive and pragmatic systems. In rhetoric and composition studies, knowledge, according to Thomas Kerr, is no longer based in science and enlightenment philosophies that value fixed, discoverable knowledge, but now is based in theories of social construction created within discourse communities (Heilker and Vandenberg 136-39). James Berlin also characterizes knowledge in the field this way: "Knowledge itself is a rhetorical construct . . . [just as] epistemology is rhetorical, is itself a social and historical construct" (*Rhetoric* 165). What this means is people and communities make knowledge. The implication for the field of rhetoric and composition studies, then, is that the knowledge it produces is constructed by the people within the discourse community. Then, the field has some relative control over knowledge it produces about race. My survey of the field reveals that the knowledge constructed about race within the field of rhetoric and composition studies is limited within a racially liberal paradigm, which directs the attention of students and scholars in one direction when the more critical issues of race are in another direction.

Royster's metaphor of disciplinary knowledge construction as landscape illustrates that rhetoric and composition studies also sees and values knowledge

from limited perspective. If we imagine ourselves standing on a cliff, what we see depends on where we stand and in which direction we face. Even still, what we see further depends on what we decide to look at. Royster believes that the publishing process of the history of rhetoric, for instance, is a knowledge-making and interpretive process that displays who and what the field believes and values. Presently, the written history of rhetoric, or the landscape, continues to believe and to value Western, elite, male viewpoints and experiences. This is problematic because valid knowledge is confined to a particular group of people, a particular place, and a particular social class. And, the field of rhetoric and composition studies also operates based on the disciplinary habits of this exclusive group, which excludes the experiences of others (148-49). Royster challenges the field, particularly historians, to make four shifts: shift from a Western perspective; shift rhetorical subjects; shift the circle of practice; and shift the theoretical paradigm. These shifts will open the history of the field by chipping away at the exclusionary paradigm and reforming disciplinary habits (150-65). Rhetoric and composition studies should look to these shifts because it needs to reform its disciplinary habits about race and racism.

Standing in the twenty-first century and looking back, we can survey the racial landscape with a brief history of race in rhetoric and composition studies. To date, there is no book-length history of race within the field. Discussions of race have been subsumed under the headings student language rights, second language

learners, academic discourse, class politics, multiculturalism, and cultural studies, with these themes coinciding with demographic changes in the national populace. The Civil Rights movement era in the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to the reinvigorated feminist movement in the 1970s, brought about drastic changes in the academy. This new population brought with them diverse dialects, learning styles, cultures, and reasons for attending college. The change in racial dynamics and population prompted ideas of accommodation, assimilation, and reform. Howard Winant describes the transition within the field of racial studies this way:

As the United States underwent a transition from the fairly explicit white supremacy and racial domination of the pre-civil rights era to reform-based and incorporative logic of 'color-blindness', diversity, and so on that had become the new racial 'common sense' sometime in the 1970s, racial studies had also to confront the newly emergent, hegemonic situation. (70)

He goes on to say that issues of racism, privilege, and discrimination were still important, but because some reform measures were incorporated into public policy and government administrations, society faced new challenges. The academy as a whole had to adapt to the changes, with new pedagogical, empirical, and theoretical questions emerging. Debates intensified in academic departments across the university, with the salient questions being: What is the significance of race? Does race still matter? (70-71).

Of course race still mattered, because even though the movement era forced some structural changes and demanded the incorporation of previously excluded

groups of people and their voices, the racial status quo remained intact. The post-civil rights goal within the academy was not to dismantle the racial status quo but to manage the diversity. Ideologies of pluralism, such as multiculturalism and diversity, created a “Race Industry, an industry that is responsible for the management, commodification, and domestication of race on American campuses” (Mohanty 148). Put another way, race studies and the new raced bodies had to be “disciplined” into the university in such a way not to disturb the system or disrupt the habitual classroom practices. The post-civil rights model has served to tolerate difference, to domesticate race, and to discipline physical bodies and bodies of knowledge into a paradigm that maintains the invisibility of white supremacy and the assumptions, knowledge, and values it produces.

Rhetoric and composition studies was not immune to this racial domestication. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I have witnessed the field’s ambivalence with facing race head-on, instead opting to domesticate or to cage race (as if it is an ugly monster) within progressive-minded agendas that circumvented the race issue. The 1980s and 1990s prompted an increased awareness of politics, identity, and literacy, which gave rise to new ways of seeing and producing knowledge within the field and classroom. Kenneth Bruffee’s work on collaboration; the ethnographic research of Shirley Brice Heath; the analysis of class politics in autobiographical writings of Mike Rose; the debates about academic discourse and cultural codes in Lisa Delpit’s writings; and the influence of gender on literacy as

discussed by Elizabeth Flynn, are examples of the myriad voices and challenges to standard theories and pedagogies within the field. Although there was an awareness of difference and attempts to embrace and manage difference, racially liberal frameworks of multiculturalism and diversity shifted attention away from race and toward tolerance. Keith Gilyard describes the field's conversion to multiculturalism in the 1980s as a detour around meaningful analysis of race, racism, and racialized discourse. Gilyard explains the mistake scholars made in conflating multiculturalism and anti-racism:

While the former often gestures toward a formulaic polycultural curriculum, the latter insists on unflinching criticism of racist domination and its impact on education, including composition curricula. Multiculturalism, then, with its characteristic emphasis on rather low-level sensitivity training, serves to obscure the problematics of racism, which include consideration of class.  
(47)

While the field embraced multiculturalism, it also “inscribe[d] another othering discourse” (48). People of color were written about as “Others,” as different, sub-normal, and exotic. Difference, although acknowledged, was not interrogated from the vantage point of hierarchy and privilege. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate argue that “the ever-expanding multicultural paradigm follows the traditions of liberalism, allowing a proliferation of difference. Unfortunately, the tensions between and among these differences is rarely interrogated, presuming a ‘unity of difference’—that is, that all difference is both analogous and equivalent” (62). The institutionalization of difference for tolerance sake masked as racial progress but in

reality it was racial liberalism, given that the structure of academe and departmental culture (publishing, tenure, promotion, and requirements) remained the same. Nevertheless, a survey of the field does reveal attempts by scholars to problematize theory and practice of race in the field.

*An Overview of Critical Approaches to Race in Rhetoric and Composition Studies*

As a post-civil rights scholar, I find myself within a field that domesticates race, disciplines physical bodies and bodies of knowledge. The challenge for me as a racial literacy scholar and instructor is to be undisciplined in how I choose to teach and in the knowledge I choose to create. Residing in the field from this perspective requires searching for critical approaches to race in rhetoric and composition studies that will aid in my racial literacy praxis. Thus far, however, what the landscape reveals is a field shaped by the racially liberal politics of the times that, when forced to accept and acknowledge difference, responds to changes by remaining on the surface or outskirts of critical, structural analysis. The detour to multiculturalism and diversity presented new problems around issues of conflict within the classrooms. Scholars soon recognized that poorly theorized and planned for discussions of difference and race could create a volatile learning environment. I realized this when I attempted to embrace a multicultural approach to teaching composition. One of the first approaches to teaching about difference in the classroom I encountered was Mary Louise Pratt, who used the metaphor of the

“contact zone” to describe the classroom as a place where people in unequal power relationships and with discordant cultural histories engage in often volatile but necessary conversations. But, the contact zone did not suffice for me because the emphasis is immediately on conflict and contact between students. Student discomfort, student tension, student dis-ease, and student resistance become the focus and the goal in a contact zone paradigm. Supposedly, if students are engaged enough to argue, then they are moving in the necessary steps to see across difference. Under this paradigm, the multicultural rhetoric and composition classroom could not avoid the discomfort that talking about difference evokes. The field set out to understand how to deal with difference within the classroom, including but not limited to the challenges of writing, difference, and resistance. Anthologies such as, *Writing in Multicultural Settings* (Edited by Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, Johnella E. Butler) and *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies* (edited by Andrea Greenbaum), attempted to address these concerns by problematizing the teaching of writing from social-epistemic and cultural studies perspectives.

As the field “managed” race and difference, with emphasis placed on student-to-student or classroom environmental conflict, some scholars began to link race more closely to language and rhetoric through cultural studies. In a broader sense, cultural studies proponents, such as Berlin, emphasized studying the function and effects of discourses, thus blurring the boundaries among media studies, literary

studies, and composition studies. In “Composition as Cultural Studies: Collapsing Boundaries,” Berlin describes his department’s philosophy and pedagogical strategies for teaching writing from a cultural studies perspective. The premise for the shift to cultural studies lies in the fact that Berlin locates

‘consciousness formation at the center of cultural studies’ (102) and proposes that, since ‘the subject is the point of intersection of various discourses—discourses about class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion and the like—and it is influenced by those discourses’ (103), it is necessary to ‘examine signifying practices in the formation of subjectivities within concrete material, social, and political conditions’ (104). (qtd. in Heilker and Vandenberg 54)

Race, for Berlin, is just one cultural code that the field should examine in an attempt to get students to see how knowledge is formed and how they are formed by discourse. Gilyard, however, offers a useful critique of Berlin’s composition as cultural studies paradigm. His critique undergirds my larger argument for the racial literacy in rhetoric and composition studies. Gilyard not only wants students to examine cultural codes in their present incarnations and functions, but also for the field to examine what exactly the race code is, from a linguistic perspective. Writing of Berlin’s “Composition and Cultural Studies,” Gilyard critiques:

Neither in his essay or in subsequent works does Berlin get around to explaining the controlling, hegemonic discourse that “race” is. . . . if a rhetorician as critically sensitive and astute as Berlin, who was obsessed with how cultural codes implicitly operate, failed to “crack” the race code for us, it is strong testimony to how potently invisible, or invisibly potent, that particular code signifies. (48)

In other words, the task of the field and instructors who attend to cultural studies and the race issue should first be able to deconstruct the code itself. For, how can we teach students how to construct alternative knowledges if we do not understand how racial knowledge functions in the first place? “Not to do so in the context in which we work,” concludes Gilyard, “is to confirm the prevailing discourse and to be implicated in the maintenance of an exploitative social order to the exact extent that said discourse promotes exploitation” (49). In other words, the field first must undergo a rigorous examination of the knowledge it disseminates and produces about race.

This examination of race within the field is necessary because it has been ignored and circumvented. As an instructor, I, too, ignored and circumvented race in my classroom as I embraced the racially liberal paradigms of my graduate program. This is not to say my students and I did not discuss race or racism in the classroom. We did, but it was never intentional. I sensed that the multicultural textbooks and the pedagogy I employed were insufficient; however, I did not yet have the critical clarity to know what was missing. In my classroom and in many other classrooms, race was an “absent presence,” as Catherine Prendergast argues (“Race” 36). The field’s relationship with race is one-sided. Race influences the field in ways that are under-theorized and unacknowledged, yet, the field does not influence the discourse on race in any significant way. In basic writing theory, for example, race appears and disappears, often through coded language. Race

functions as an “absent presence,” in that “discussions of racism in composition are confined to determining how to handle individual, aberrant flare-ups in the classroom, without exploring racism as institutional, normal, and pervasive” (36). Prendergast wants the field to examine the connections among race, racism, and writing. By examining the writing of critical race theorists (in legal studies) who write outside the confines of legal discourse in order to draw attention to race and racism, composition scholars can begin to see how its discourse on race constructs students as foreigners and leaves whiteness uninvestigated.

To attend to race, many scholars have turned to Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” as the go-to reading for addressing race in the composition classroom. But, what instructors soon found out was that bypassing a sustained, larger discussion of race as political, economic, social, and discursive systems that impact everyone, white students resisted, complained, and refused to acknowledge that white privilege exists, especially not in their lives. A deeper and broader understanding of white privilege was necessary. Papers from the Whiteness Studies Symposium within Rhetoric and Composition Studies, for example, outline reasons why the field should integrate critical whiteness studies into the classroom. It begins with language and bodies: the value of bodies, the materiality of bodies, and the troping of bodies. The “white body” as a troped body leads to a discussion of what does “white” mean? Where did it come from? How is it a linguistic construction? I agree with scholars who argue for theorizing and

teaching whiteness in rhetoric and composition studies. However, I depart from them in that critical whiteness studies should be a part of extended racial literacy praxis, not the focus nor the substitute. I have found that when we single out “whiteness,” or any other racial construction, we single out students, thus making critical engagement even more difficult. Rhetoric and composition studies should go back to the root, race, and analyze it from a discursive standpoint, which inevitably leads to discussions of whiteness.

Also within the racial landscape of rhetoric and composition studies is beginning a discussion of critical race theory (CRT), a sustained, structural analysis of race within legal studies. I briefly mentioned what Prendergast finds useful in CRT. Gary Olson is another scholar in the field who promotes CRT. In “Working with Difference: Critical Race Studies in Composition,” Olson outlines the central tenets of the theory, and then moves quickly to demographic changes within the U.S. Other than to say the field should integrate CRT, Olson does not provide much instruction in how the field should proceed. He emphasizes, instead, how the U.S. population is becoming more and more diverse, thus altering the “predominantly white and middle class” higher education population; as such, white composition instructors must engage racial difference in reaction to “record numbers of minorities and international students enrolling in college” (209). To highlight the problem, Olson explains, “Even a cursory glance at composition scholarship, however, indicates that

writing instructors and writing program directors are not well equipped to cope, both pedagogically and administratively, with the influx of students of color” (209).

Similar to the turn to multiculturalism in the 80s, Olson proposes another turn, this time to critical race theory. Regardless of the turn, the field needs to deal with the term *race*, not because the country is diverse or, as the scare-tactic goes, whites will no longer be a majority in the near future. The field should deal with the term *race* because terminology, language construction, rhetoric, and discourse are the stepping stones of the field. If we do not know how to theorize about or to teach one word (or to read the word in the world, as Freire would say), then how can we teach students to do so?

Thus far, the history of the relationship with race and rhetoric and composition studies has been tenuous and shrouded in diversity, multicultural, cultural studies, whiteness studies, and critical race theory initiatives. To be clear, I am not saying parts of these curriculum initiatives are not necessary. What I am saying is that the racial landscape of the field of rhetoric and composition studies reveals an ambivalent, poorly theorized body of knowledge that refuses to address race head-on. What follows is an examination of how the field reproduces racial liberalism and racial ideology that mythologizes race and maintains the racial hierarchy.

## **Reproducing the Racial Landscape in Rhetoric and Composition Studies**

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) held its annual Conference on College Composition and Communication in March of 2007. According to the program chair Cheryl Glenn, the conference theme “Representing Identities” challenges those in rhetoric, composition, and communication studies to “consider identities as they are constructed through reading, writing, speaking, listening and silence.” New York City, a microcosm of world cultures, is the perfect place to “investigate identities based on culture, ethnicity, race, sexuality, or ability” and the ideal location to “interrogate the identities we ascribe to our students and to probe our own identities as teachers, students, researchers, and historians” (5). The 375- page program booklet, a “special issue,” features people of various hues, ostensibly of various identities and cultures on the cover. A first-time visitor or participant in the conference, like myself, might assume that the actual conference—panels, attendees, presenters, and the like—is as diverse as the host city. My preliminary investigation of the conference revealed the opposite. In fact, the old adage “don’t judge a book by its cover” rang true. As I examined the program booklet I noticed the absence of titles and descriptions of conference roundtables and panels engaging race explicitly and critically. Another glaring absence was the presence of the people of color represented on the front cover. The sense I got as a first time participant was that the national representative body of College Composition and Communication specialists was promoting diversity and

multiculturalism cloaked in the language of cultural studies yet was continuing to practice within an exclusionary paradigm supported by disciplinary habits of avoidance, masking, and denial.

I use the CCCC booklet as the gateway to my discussion of race, discourse, and authorized texts because I believe national representative bodies of all disciplines shape the discourse of the field and its dissemination of knowledge. The power of a national body like NCTE resides in its ability to authorize knowledge via publishing, conferences, and job promotion. So how a body presents itself, and how it presents race, directly affects the field.

In chapter one, I defined ideology as beliefs and practices within a society that are naturalized by way of institutions and discourse. Discourse is the collection of signifying practices or symbol using behaviors that produce knowledge. The field of rhetoric and composition studies produces discourse, knowledge, and ideology, but not to the de-construction of race and racism. In fact, an analysis of texts within the field reveal racial liberalism within the field at its worst. To reiterate, racial liberalism, as Charles W. Mills describes, is an ideology, representation model, and political practice of presenting one's self as racially-tolerant, concerned with liberal rights of the citizenry, but in actuality, evading the most difficult realities of racial subordination. Mills explains that "a cultivated amnesia, a set of constructed deafnesses and blindnesses, characterizes racial liberalism: [there are] subjects one cannot raise, issues one cannot broach, topics one cannot explore" ("Racial

Liberalism” 1391). Operating within racial liberalism, the rhetoric and composition texts that follow promote cultural amnesia and reproduce racial myths that dehistoricize and “Other” groups of people. I attend to several questions in this section that point back to my larger argument about the racial landscape in rhetoric and composition. What does the discourse say about racial knowledge and ideology? What is the knowledge about race disseminated in rhetoric and composition readers? How do these texts shape the racial landscape of the field? What do these texts say about the progress the field has made in critical theories of race, rhetoric, and composition?

#### *Mandated Racial Knowledge for Students*

The CCCC conference booklet promotes to professionals, but the same critique can be leveled at publishers and editors who market to instructors, who then mandate that students purchase certain texts. Co-editors Xin Liu Gale and Frederic G. Gale reminded the field in their 1999 collection on *(Re)visioning Composition Textbooks* that the field needs to conduct a more systematic study of the “normalizing, even anti-progressive force that textbooks play in composition pedagogy” (xi). Textbooks operate as official knowledge within the field, especially to students who do not understand the history of rhetorical constructions of texts. Yes, all texts and the knowledge within them are social constructions. But when instructors mandate that students purchase the texts, students believe that the

information the texts provide is required for academic success. In other words, what is written in the book, required by the teacher, and purchased with money is critical to a student's success in a course.

Years later, here we are with three texts that illustrate how entrenched the field is in racial liberalism and how the field reproduces racial myths. First, I attend to *Crossing Cultures* (edited by Annie Knepler, et al. ) and *American Contexts: Multicultural Readings for Composition* (edited by Audrey B. Joyce ) Second, I examine *Language and Prejudice* (edited by Tamara M. Valentine) separately because this reader presents itself as a critical language and cultural studies reader that challenges the status quo. I frame my analysis around three components of racial ideology: racial othering; political and legal authorization; and dehistoricization.

### *Racial Othering*

Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism* inspired critical scholars to investigate what he termed as "Othering." Othering refers to the cultural representations, racial myths, and institutional policies that characterize groups of people as exotic, different, uncivilized, primitive, and abnormal. The "Others" are non-white Westerners, who, because of nature, are inferior to the biologically superior race of white people. Said traces the construction of racial Othering back to the biological determinism of the nineteenth century that divided "races into advanced and

backward, European-Aryan and Oriental-African” (206). The legacy of Othering plays out in constructions of the Us / Them binary, where the Us is always White and the Them is always non-White (of color). Layered with nationality, the Us refers to White American, and the Them refers to non-White (of color), regardless of citizenship status. The White, Western, American is the center, where standards of human behavior and knowledge emanate. How does Othering apply to rhetoric and composition texts?

The cover of *Crossing Cultures* pictures a pink-complexioned male sitting in a canoe with an elderly, brown man dressed in Asian ethnic attire. Next to the visual markers of clothing and brown skin color, students might assume the male tourist is a white Westerner. The brown man is the tour guide, rowing the canoe while the white tourist takes in the scenery. The picture is serene, a vast body of blue water with mountains in the background meeting the horizon. Just based on the title of the book, *Crossing Cultures*, and the visual representation on the front cover, the implication is the white male studies people of color, “Other” people or “exotic” people. The title and the picture describe who is meant to cross and who has culture. Furthermore, the brown man must do the physical and intellectual labor necessary to help the tourist (white man) cross cultures. In the picture, we see the passive white male learning from and about Others and no one learning about him.

Instead of a realistic photograph, *American Contexts* uses “colored” gingerbread men to represent people in multi-cultural/colored America. This cover

emphasizes color and connection. The olive background contrasts with the bold white letters of the title, and the “colored” people in shades of red, green, blue, orange, and purple fill the centered square. As if paper dolls cut from construction paper, the people share the same physical shape, just different colors (excluding white). They even touch hands in a “We are the World” rendition. Furthermore, multi-colored lines entangled throughout the people suggest infinite connections and lasting relationships. Visually, this cover says although we are different colors, we are all the same and we like each other.

What is missing, however, is an obviously white figure linked to the colored figures. Half of a pale greenish and pink body stands in the corner of the picture, as if to represent lighter-complexioned people. The rhetorical argument on the front of the text, however, suggests that the “multicultural” students will study will be about people of color not white people. White is invisible, in the background (or corner), while simultaneously remaining the center—always and already validated. Similar to the white tourist, the white student with this text prepares to embark on a colorful journey to learn about others not himself because white is not a color, not a race. White is the normalized, always and already validated center.

### *Native Informant*

*Crossing Cultures* and *American Contexts* also represent the Other as the “native informant” charged with educating the class on an entire group of people bell hooks writes about this problematic occurrence in many multicultural classrooms where students of color are singled out as representatives of a group (43). The native informant supposedly has inside knowledge based on his/her authentic experiences within Other communities. He/she is looked to when matters of race enter the class discussion, as if the only valid knowledge the informant has is about race and difference. The concept of native informant has been critiqued and investigated in depth by Gayatri Spivak, who cautions that “these generalized native informants . . . [mouth] for us the answers that we want to hear as confirmation of our view of the world” (342). In other words, the dominant culture relies on native informants to justify its already present beliefs about race and difference. Spivak also warns that the native informant is a construction from dominant Western ideology. As such, readers must judge the information carefully.

The tourist on the cover of *Crossing Cultures* is a white, Western construction of the native informant. The text *American Context*, however, employs much more explicit use of this racialized subject informant in its explanation of the readings, authors, and themes in the text. The editors explain the three criteria they used for constructing the text:

1. All forty authors are highly regarded American writers from *one of the four ethnic/racial groups recognized by the Census*. Every writer selected is an award-winning, respected writer, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gary Soto, Bharati Mukerjee, and N. Scott Momaday. (xxvii)
2. These authors are recognized as *spokespersons for their groups*. They have written books and essays on current, often controversial socioeconomic issues . . . have engaged in political activism. Thus, knowledgeable, affected members of a group address the issues of importance to members of that group. It is the voice of the *'inside'* that the reader will hear. (xxvii)
3. The authors write about a wide variety of topics (such as *bilingual education, dropouts, gang warfare, and single mothers*) that are debated in today's media. The readings should help readers better understand how writers from different ethnic groups address these current issues. These topics should appeal both to students from *a minority racial/ethnic group* and to those from the *dominant culture*. (xxvii)

The first criterion presents a problem with how the Census is used, nationally and academically. I attend to the Census in the section to follow. Here I focus on how the editors “group” people into racial and ethnic categories in order to essentialize experiences and viewpoints. The editors reconstruct the authors as native informants, placing into the category as “spokespersons” for their race or ethnic group. The voice of the “insider,” who is a “spokesperson,” is bound to give the tourists authentic information about the topics such as “bilingual education, dropouts, gang warfare, and single mothers.” And, these topics must be important because they are “debated in today’s media.” Based on the editors’ own words, the media authenticates and authorizes issues relating to race and ethnicity in America. Most troubling to me as an African American female is the representation of African American cultural experiences in a one-dimensional, pathological fashion. Reading

the preliminary material of this text, I am reminded not only of the media's fascination and promotion of racial stereotypes—the violent black man or the promiscuous, irresponsible black women—but also of the academy's fascination with such topics as well.

Finally, the editors use the “group”-ing technique to create a mythical solidarity, oneness and essential nature to racial and ethnic groups. Again, what is missing is the White group, which is masked under the guise of “dominant culture.” Whiteness operates in the background, uninterrogated, innocent, and invisible. If we were to look a little deeper into the rhetorical construction of race in this text, in particular, we might ask, how and why is the “dominant culture” dominant? What makes it dominant? Is it based on population? If so, then why isn't this culture mentioned as a Census category in the text? Or, is dominant based on uses of power over and against “minority” groups? Further probes might inquire, what makes a group a minority? Is that based on population? When do numbers count and when do they not? What do numbers have to do with domination? What do gang warfare and bilingual education have to do with domination?

In sum, the Other or the minority is essentialized into a racial group plagued with violence, single mothering, and other “abnormal” cultural circumstances. The only knowledge produced about these groups is negative knowledge, which the spokesperson conveys as an authority. But, if the spokesperson is the authority in one context, then the government can serve as the authority in another context.

### *Racial Authorization by the Government*

In both texts, the editors use the U.S. Census Bureau as the authorizing agent on matters of race. In the preface to *American Contexts*, the editors explicitly link multiculturalism with the Census. They write: “Following the categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau these readings are divided into four ethnic/racial groups of writers: African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American” (xxvii). Similarly, the editors of *Crossing Cultures* discuss the changes to the 2000 census,

According to the census data, one in five U.S. residents is either foreign born or first generation, the highest level in U.S. history. Furthermore, the questions asked in the census itself seem to reflect our changing attitudes towards race and ethnicity, acknowledging that many of us identify with more than one group. For the first time the census allowed each person to check off more than one box for race or ethnicity. (xvi)

Based on the editors’ explanations for their choice of texts, racial and ethnic categories, students, again, are presented with another institutional authority sanctioning knowledge about race. Just as instructors mandate that students purchase the texts, which validates the knowledge contained within it, the editors turn to the institution of the government Census Bureau to validate their rhetorical choices about race.

Why is the editors’ choice for racial authorization problematic? On one level, their claims of census truthfulness and its construction of racial and ethnic categories are incongruent with the actual 2000 Census. The actual census

questionnaire lists “White” as race; in fact, it is the first race listed. Yet, neither text represents “White” as a category even though both sets of editors emphasize using the racial and ethnic categories of the 2000 Census as a barometer for selecting readings and a rationale for constructing the text. Their intent, I speculate, was to show and to celebrate the complexity of identity and the multiple choices available for filling out the Census. Nevertheless, the reading selections in the text and the editors’ own rationale for their rhetorical choices require affixing traditional categories of race as a means to crossing cultures.

Furthermore, to use the government as the authority on racial categorization clouds the government’s role in creating race and authorizing racism, particularly through domestic terrorism. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain of racial formation, “Since the earliest days of colonialism in North America, an identifiable racial order has linked the system of political rule to the racial classification of individuals and groups” (79). What they call the “racial state” was comprised of “major institutions and social relationships of U.S. society—law, political organization,” and so on (79). Additionally, “for most of U.S. history, the state’s main objective in its racial policy was repression and exclusion. Congress’ first attempt to define American citizenship, the Naturalization Law of 1790, declared that only free ‘white’ immigrants could qualify”(81). This history of the racial state problematizes any usage of the Census as a progressive authority on race and ethnicity.

### *Racial Myths and Historical Inaccuracies*

*Crossing Cultures* and *American Contexts* also produce racial myths and historical inaccuracies. The historical introductions to each section play into the racist cultural narratives perpetuated in by media and in many history textbooks. For example, the editors reiterate the myth that the only issue African Americans care about is racism. They explain that

the ten essays in Part 1, selected from the large body of writing by African Americans, show an individual's perspective on some aspect of racism, the discriminatory treatment of a minority group because of a trait such as skin color, which continues to be an important issue in American society. (1)

Every selection deals with racism, not other aspects of African American culture like Hip-hop or Kwanzaa. A range of African American experiences does not exist in the text. As a result, studying about African Americans means studying about racism and fuels the belief that African Americans “play the race card” unnecessarily, meaning they make false statements about racism in an attempt to defame or get the upper hand.

Another example of perpetuating cultural myths is the editors' description of affirmative action. They explain that “affirmative action programs [were] designed to help victims of past discrimination attain equality with the dominant group. However, many conservatives oppose affirmative action, calling it ‘reverse discrimination’ (3). Here, “dominant group” replaces “whites”; and, “conservatives”

substitutes for “whites” who sued institutions claiming reverse discrimination.

Further into the text, the editors present a timeline to historicize affirmative action:

1970 – The Equal Employment Opportunity commission ordered businesses, universities, and agencies to have ‘hiring, promotion, and admission’ policies favoring African Americans. This ‘affirmative action’ policy was to be in effect until the organization reflected the racial composition of society. (4)

The myth and historical inaccuracy here is that affirmative action was just for African Americans and that they received favor over everyone else, especially whites, when in fact affirmative action was constructed to benefit racial minorities and women. My final example is from the Native American Writers section. The myth of the vanishing Indian, that Indians just disappeared one day without provocation, finds a new home in *American Contexts*:

Native Americans, unlike members of other minorities, are not immigrants, but the descendants of conquered peoples, the original inhabitants of lands that later became the United States. . . . This indigenous population was nearly totally eradicated, either through military defeat, the devastation of disease, or destruction of the native culture. . . . By the end of the nineteenth century, after the Native American population had been almost totally eradicated, the survivors were forced to assimilate to the dominant culture. (323)

Here the editors conveniently forget to say that the “dominant group” or whites were once immigrants too. But more troubling, is the use of the passive verb form, which renders the agents of genocide, devastation, and destruction invisible. Roland Barthes theorizes about the function of myths, by stating that they dehistoricize groups of people thereby creating a story not based in history but the teller’s telling

of history. The editors of *American Contexts* function as tellers of history and creators of myths. The stories they tell mislead students at best and sustain racism at worst. All of which occur under what Thomas West calls “boutique multiculturalism” where “difference is increasingly commodified, managed, and co-opted”( 2). Multicultural composition readers like *Crossing Cultures* and *American Contexts* continue the long tradition of racial liberalism that masks and contributes to institutional racism.

### **Language and Prejudice: A Special Case**

The Longman Topics Reader for use in rhetoric and composition studies entitled *Language and Prejudice* (2004) deserves special consideration given its particular focus on language. At first glance, this reader might be appealing to instructors who want to keep a cultural studies theme in the classroom but who would also like to emphasize how language functions rhetorically within cultural contexts. The reader is divided into six chapters , beginning with an overview of how language functions in society, and then moving into the connection among language, power and five cultural constructs: society, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and ableism. The readings range from personal narratives to theoretical essays. In the preface, the editor explains why a reader on language and prejudice is important:

Students learn that their use of terms and expressions that exclude, dehumanize, and stereotype a group of people based on sex, race, ethnic origin, region, age, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, or minority status perpetuates an inaccurate and unfair view of the world and the people who live in it. (Valentine ix)

From the beginning, language is defined as a meaning-making system that can create a false reality when used against people for varying reasons. Chapter two deals with how poor language choices can dehumanize people based on ethnicity. The editor chooses to use the term *ethnicity* and not *race* because, she writes, “Scientists do not agree on the definition of race, sociologists have replaced the concept with terms that capture the dynamic social, rather than biological, distinctions which identify the variety of ethnic groups” (36). Valentine’s argument here is problematic in that it ignores the rhetorical and discursive meaningfulness of the term *race* and does what Victor Villanueva warns of, using terms such as *ethnicity* and *culture* to mask race and racism. Beyond a two sentence explanation for what *race* was created to signify, the editor avoids critical analysis of *race* as if there is no meaning in the term at all. The chapter continues with *ethnicity* as the paradigm, vaguely defined as national origin, religion, and cultural heritage.

From the beginning of chapter two until the end, the incongruence of using *ethnicity* to discuss prejudice and discrimination is glaring. Students begin the chapter with a “Prejudice Quiz” that “assesses [students’] knowledge of the dynamics of prejudices” (37). I find all of the questions problematic for various reasons. I will mention one here to demonstrate why theory of racial literacy that

addresses language and race is needed. Question #14 asks whether sexism, racism, ageism, xenophobia, homophobia, and prejudices toward those with disabilities all have basically the same dynamics. The correct answer, according to the editor, is yes, “they are all basically the same” (43). The editor does not provide any further explanation, definition, or examples. All of these complicated and sometimes intersecting oppressive systems are minimized to being “basically the same.” With the other questions focused on how individuals respond to or enact prejudice, these power ideological, material, and political systems are relegated to the individual as well.

As the chapter concludes, the editor has blended, replaced, and conflated *race*, *racism*, *prejudice*, and *ethnicity* so much so that students are left wondering what exactly these terms mean. By the personal nature of the selections chosen, these terms are subsumed under the heading of bad language choices that individuals make. These bad choices indicate that people do not appreciate diversity, and if they would only stop saying bad things about people, then society would be prejudice free. The final section of the chapter provides “Guidelines for Avoiding Racist Language,” which reveals who and what the editor had in mind when constructing this particular chapter. The editor explains that we need some speaking guidelines “to achieve a more bias-free society, [therefore] we must heighten our sensitivity to the pervasive power of prejudicial language. To do so is a statement of respect for the cultural diversity that exists in the world today” (38).

The purpose of the “Language and Ethnicity” chapter is to promote tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, which falls neatly under the rubric of racial liberalism. The problem with this section, however, is that she assumes a white audience even as she instructs readers not to assume white.

**Rule 4. Do not assume ‘White’**

As with other *isms*, do not assume that the reader or listener shares the same racial or ethnic identity. Avoid talking about ‘we/us’ and ‘they/them,’ making generalizations such as ‘we behave like this’ and ‘they behave like that.’ Emphasizing the differences between people often implies that some groups are superior to others. (84-5) [emphasis in original]

Although I applaud the editor for acknowledging that white operates as the norm in our society, her inability to see how it operates in her presentation of race and ethnicity is an indicator of Mills’s argument for an epistemology of ignorance that blinds whites to the reality that they have constructed.

Finally, Valentine provides a chart of the “Meanings of Ethnic/Racial Terms.” Terms such as *Oriental*, *Negro*, *Spanish*, *White*, and so on are defined in terms of what is politically-correct. These terms are dehistoricized, stripped of the racial, political, economic, and moral meanings attributed to them throughout history. Although the editor begins the chapter acknowledging the biological fallacy of race, she defines the terms as if they are biological without any attention to the social constructed nature of them. “White,” for example is defined as an “Accepted term when referring to any White person of non-Latin extraction, that is non-African

descent, non-American Indian descent, non-Asian descent, non-Hispanic descent, etc” (88). In this sense, “White” is anything other than “Other” people.

### **Implications of Racial Liberalism in the Field**

The examples of rhetoric and composition studies’ texts I analyzed above illustrate how racial liberalism operates in the field. Further, they illustrate how rhetoric and composition studies’ readers can function as signatories of the Racial Contract agreement, a contractual agreement among whites to keep white supremacy in place. Mills states that the purpose of the contract to place whites in a privileged position over and against non-whites. These privileges come by “exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it” (11). Furthermore, the Racial Contract is not only political and moral but also epistemological. Under the Contract,

[W]hite misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way accidental, but prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (19)

What does this mean in terms of rhetoric and composition studies? The promotion of racial liberalism is simultaneously the promotion of racial ignorance because

racial liberalism, as I have shown, mis-interprets, even mal-interprets the past, which keeps the racial status quo in place. Furthermore, racially liberal paradigms of teaching race in rhetoric and composition have erased *race* from the vocabulary, have constructed race as an “absent presence,” and have reinforced racial ideology. An epistemology of racial ignorance has been used not for resistance to oppression but for the survival of an oppressive racial system and racially liberal academic field of study. Instead of helping students come to know more and to know in better, more critical ways, the field has been limiting knowledge and promoting ignorance in a variety of ways: multiculturalism, diversity, dishistoricization, racial essentialization, and racial othering, to name a few. The common saying goes: “What you don’t know won’t hurt you.” Actually, what the field doesn’t know, and what it keeps students from knowing continues to hurt the field’s chances of moving to a place of sustained critical praxis with race.

If the field produces an epistemology of ignorance through its deployment of racial liberalism, then it also acts as a signatory on the Racial Contract, from the contractual syllabus we give to students to the purchasing of multicultural texts, these acts constitute a binding agreement among the university, the instructor, the student, and the historical entity of the Racial Contract. The knowledge produced in the texts, outlined in the syllabus, and discussed in class, is validated by “white epistemic authority”—the field of rhetoric and composition studies—which continues to be a beneficiary of the contractual privileges through the economic,

professional, and discursive exploitation and denial of groups of people designated as non-whites.

What are the implications of racial liberalism for me as an instructor and scholar within the field? To be clear, I do not want to be a signatory of the Racial Contract within the field of rhetoric and composition studies. I understand that I participate in and sustain in more ways than I can understand the larger Racial Contract. We are all implicated in and processed through white supremacy. Nevertheless, once I know better, personally and professionally, I am obligated to do better. What I am clear about is that racial liberalism as I have surveyed in the field and as I have taught within in the past teaches students how not to know. Racial ignorance disciplines and domesticates everyone into their places. My place as an instructor was to fall in line with the validated knowledge of race that promoted tolerance for difference but not a critical understanding of difference and power. My place was to use language to code and mask race, when I should have been using language to unmask and to decode race. Of course, these small pedagogical acts are not enough to say I am not a signatory of the Racial Contract. But, they are enough to say that I am aware of the Contract and that I am actively engaged in helping my professional community and my students resist the contractual obligations on which race and racism live. And, it is through the study of race as language, or racial literacy, that I choose to resist.

## **Necessary Shifts within Rhetoric and Composition Studies**

To counter the epistemology of ignorance that racial liberalism produces and to resist the Racial Contractual obligations, I propose three shifts for the field of rhetoric and composition studies: shifting the rhetorical subject, shifting the theoretical paradigm, and shifting the pedagogy. I offer preliminary explanations of these shifts here. Subsequent chapters will elaborate more fully on each shift.

First, I propose shifting the rhetorical subject under examination from an individual to language. When it comes to race in the classroom, the tendency is to discuss individuals, attitudes, and emotional reactions to race. The subject, then, becomes the student, which can lead to defensiveness and anger. As a teacher-scholar, I do not want to make the students' racialized subjectivity the object of study in the classroom, although we must address how language constructs us as individuals and as members of groups. I propose shifting to language as the rhetorical subject to examine how words, such as *race*, signify. Furthermore, because we have avoided and masked race for so long, if we choose to integrate it into our rhetoric and composition praxis, then we should first attend to it as a rhetorical subject or discursive construct.

Second, the field should shift the theoretical paradigm when it comes to discussing race. What this means is instead of continue to recognize the interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric and composition studies and pull from media and cultural studies, legal studies, etc., because it needs the insight and histories

these fields produce. Nevertheless, rhetoric and composition studies should ground its praxis in language and rhetorical theory. In this way, the field shifts its theoretical paradigm. Third, I propose a shift in how we represent / misrepresent race in authorizing texts of the field. The composition readers we require students to purchase, for example, operate as official racial knowledge. As such, it is imperative that we examine how these texts deconstruct or reconstruct the hegemonic racial discourse we profess to resist.

These three shifts should spark a new discussion in the field about the students' right to study language, which coincides with the 1974 College Composition and Communication Resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language." Discussions of *Students' Rights to Their Own Language* dominated discussions in my graduate course work, with race always being an undertone to the discussions. The field began to address student language rights in the 1960s, following the rights rhetoric of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. In 1974, the field adopted a language rights resolution to validate linguistically marginalized students' right to use and to study their home dialects in the university. The resolution, "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (*SRTOL*) worked against the notion that Standard American English is superior to other dialects, such as Black English Vernacular. Composition scholar Geneva Smitherman is a persistent advocate for *SRTOL* and often meets resistance within the field and in public opinion when debates about Ebonics and bilingual education are

sensationalized in the media.<sup>3</sup> Although individual scholars such as Mary Soliday and Gilyard and Elaine Richardson, have conducted research and designed courses on the effectiveness of *SRTOL* in first-year writing courses and in basic writing based on students' racial and ethnic identities, the field has yet to produce and sustain a critical body of knowledge about the power of language and race.<sup>4</sup>

My philosophy of language education links more closely to Delpit who argues that students of color, in particular, should be taught the skills and the process necessary to use academic discourse successfully. According to Delpit, instructors should help students understand and negotiate the "culture of power," the codes and rules for participating in power, be they linguistic forms, communicative strategies, ways of talking and writing (24). She explains:

Students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own 'expertness' as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (45)

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<sup>3</sup> For a historical overview of *SRTOL* within a larger discussion of teaching about language and power, see Harmon and Wilson's *Beyond Grammar: Language, Power, and the Classroom*.

<sup>4</sup> In "Towards a Consciousness of Language: A Language Pedagogy for Multicultural Classrooms," Soliday proposes that students become researchers of their own language use and use their research for the content of a first-year writing course. In "Students' Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric," Gilyard and Richardson, propose an Afrocentric pedagogy to help students enter into academic discourse from a critical perspective. These two approaches privilege language analysis, at the same time as they highlight the value of difference and deconstruct the myth of one superior language.

Delpit argues that the above approach is a right that students have, and so, in good faith and in the interest of the students, instructors should offer students the opportunity to access power, even if the instructor has a philosophical or pedagogical disagreement with how that power is structured and used.

My argument is tangential to Delpit's in the sense that students have a right to their own language and to the language of power and access in the academy, but also a right to understand the language of race that impacts their lives, their language, their literacy, and other aspects of being in the world. Race is a code. It has rules, just as academic discourse or any other communal dialect. Race also reaches across and into various discourse communities, impacting how language is used and valued. But, if we do not understand how race does what it does linguistically and rhetorically, then it is difficult to see how we can present a more rounded picture of language use in various settings. In short, students have a right to study language when it comes to race and other cultural studies themes, and they have a right not to be the subject under investigation in a classroom discussion about race. As such, we need to re-evaluate how we are teaching about race in the field and what knowledge and representations we put forth. It should shift our stance and our perspective of the racial landscape whereby we can see more clearly how rhetoric and composition studies is stuck between race and a hard place.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Barack Obama was stuck between race and hard place as he campaigned for the presidency. He met the

challenge by surveying the racial landscape of the U.S. and decided that it was time to face race head-on in a national address. In his “Race Speech,” he articulated for the world a narrative about race that spoke to and about the anger, resentment, and ambivalence people have with talking about race. He offered the country two choices: we can either continue with the sensationalism, going around in circles only to repeat the mistakes of the past, or we can look to what we have in common and work towards solutions. He was asking the country to shift—to see and behave differently when it comes to race.

Similarly, rhetoric and composition studies needs to shift—to see and behave differently when it comes to race. Gilyard begins the shift with his theoretical collection *Race, Rhetoric and Composition*, and even points to the necessary discursive analysis of race as he answers the question: “What is the source, then, of a narrative about racial formation that would be useful in composition classrooms, one accessible yet sufficient in scope?” (49) In chapter three, I answer Gilyard’s question by offering an expanded discussion of racial formation through discourse and signification as the basis for racial literacy praxis in rhetoric and composition studies.

CHAPTER III  
TOWARD A THEORY OF RACIAL LITERACY

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked in an interview to the *Washington Times* that the U.S. still has a problem dealing with race because of a national “birth defect.” That “birth defect” stems from the ugly picture of slavery. Although Africans came to the U.S. in chains and were a founding population, as “descendants of slaves [they] did not get much of a head start, and I think you continue to see some of the effects of that” (“Secretary”). Rice makes clear that the U.S. has a difficult time talking about its past and how the past is still relevant today

Notwithstanding Secretary Rice’s exclusion of the indigenous population already inhabiting the land soon to be named America, she makes a valid point that the birth of our nation is flawed. In fact, race was such an integral part of the nation-building project that a common saying goes, race is as American as apple pie and baseball. Race and racism are in the country’s DNA, including but not limited to the institution of slavery, immigration exclusion acts, reservations, Jim Crow laws, and so on. Secretary Rice admits that the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States shows that our country has progressed in terms of race relations, and we should be proud of how far we have come. However, she offers a caveat: “We

shouldn't deceive ourselves that we are race-blind." Rice knows that race is still an issue for many people, but she also recognizes the progress the nation has made: "I do think we've gotten to the place that we don't see a person and say, 'That's a black person, therefore they must be ...' And that's an enormous step forward" ("Secretary").

Condoleezza Rice, who grew up in segregated Alabama during the Civil Rights movement, has seen many of changes in the United States, changes such as her becoming the second African American and first African American woman Secretary of State. Rice implies another change that foregrounds my theory of racial literacy: when we see "blackness," we do not necessarily assume or link negativity to it. A person might ask how we can assume that Rice is speaking of a *negative* characteristic when, in fact, she did not complete her sentence. The legacy of this critical connection stems from America's nation-building project (its foundation), which was inextricably linked to a racial project. The European-American ruling class needed free labor and free land. So to justify enslaving Africans and stealing indigenous land, eighteenth and nineteenth century scientists, philosophers and anthropologists devised theories about the inferiority of dark-skinned peoples versus the superiority of light-skinned peoples. These theories codified the racial hierarchy, defining "white" as human with positive attributes and "black" as subhuman with negative attributes. Even the U.S. Constitution designated African Americans as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of state representation to the

federal level. And so, race and what it has come to signify, is so embedded in our laws, language, thought patterns, beliefs, and customs that it operates on the level of common sense or folk belief. Herein lies the critical connection between race and language and the need for racial literacy.

In chapter two I argued that the theory and practice of race in rhetoric and composition studies needs to shift from racial liberalism to racial literacy. The field has not critical body of knowledge about race based in its foundation of language, writing, rhetoric, or literacy. As a result, attempts to teach about race result in promoting an epistemology of ignorance, where students and instructors are encouraged not to know. To respond to this crisis in racial praxis, I propose a theory of racial literacy for rhetoric and composition studies. Chapter three provides a theory of racial literacy based on the premise that the linguistic and signifying properties of race are powerful and invisible. This shift changes our theoretical focus from one of tolerance and inclusion to one of linguistic and interpretative analysis. I argue, in order to understand race, we must understand language.

In theorizing racial literacy I show, first, how race signifies. Stuart Hall's *theorization* of racial signification grounds my argument for racial literacy. Hall shows how race functions more like a language than biology, given the way race floats and meanings shift. Second, using Roland Barthes and Jean-Francois Lyotard I examine the ideological and discursive nature of racial myths and grand narratives. Third, I analyze how race impacts interpretation and performance. Kenneth Burke's

theory of terministic screens helps us to better understand how the term race continues to reflect and deflect parts of reality, thus determining what we see and believe. J.L. Austin's and Judith Butler's theories of performative language illuminate how race functions as a speech act. Fourth, I highlight the potential of racial literacy to interrupt or subvert the reiterative process of race within the field of rhetoric and composition studies, using an excerpt from Frederick Douglass' slave narrative. Again, the purpose for grounding racial literacy in language theory is to make visible one way race functions and to provide the field of rhetoric and composition studies an alternative to the various manifestations of racial liberalism.

### **Race: A Discursive Analysis**

Similar to most people, I was socialized into race, beginning with my parents and then reinforced in schooling. I remember my parents saying, "You have to work twice as hard as a white person." These lessons began early in life, so I would not grow up believing that all people are treated equally and are judged based on merit. I did not have the language to talk about unearned privilege, white supremacy, or racist ideology back then; I just knew the world was unfair because of this thing called race. Inside I questioned the folk theories of race and Judeo-Christian origin stories, that blacks were a result of the Biblical curse of Ham and that all people descended from Adam and Eve, two blonde haired and blue-eyed white people. These explanations did not make sense to me, just as they do not make sense to

many of my students. As an adult and an instructor of critical race and language theories, I hear these same lessons and explanations about race. At the beginning of each semester, I ask students to define race and to write about how they learned about race. They remark that parents, school, and the media are their main influences when it comes to learning about race. What they learn, however, sounds similar to the sentiment that Secretary Rice was trying to debunk: “Those people are like . . . . Don’t sit by . . . . Be afraid of . . . . They only want . . . .” What I try to do in my classroom is move students to a point where they question these racist folk sayings and desire to know how they came to be. To do this, I turn to language.

Racial literacy begins with this understanding: language and race operate in tandem. Race would not exist without language, and our language operates within a racialized society. The etymology of the term race in the English language provides insight into how race was constructed. From the fifteenth century into the sixteenth century, European explorers ventured into territories previously unknown. When they did, they encountered groups of people who were also unknown to them. As Smedley explains in *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*,

Europeans imposed upon [these people] meanings and identities that fit within their own historical understandings, experiences, and preconceptions of what the world was all about. Somewhere in the process they used the term ‘race’ to characterize differences among human groups. (37)

Historians and etymologists do not have record of the exact source of the term, but what information they do have points to *race* in all the languages of European

settlers. Early uses of *race* were applied to groups of people from different origins, not skin color. Over time and in different languages, *race* was used to indicate kinship, class, species, descent, breeding line, or stock. Smedley's summary of the term's speculated history, leads her to assert that *race*, as employed by the English in North America in the latter half of the eighteenth century,

was elevated as the one major symbol and mode of human group differentiation applied extensively to non-European groups and even to those groups in Europe who varied in some way from the subjective norm. Of all of the terms commonly employed to categorize human beings, 'race' become, . . . the most useful term for conveying the qualities and degrees of human differences that had become increasingly consonant with the English view of the world's peoples. (40)

The English deployment of the term and its reference to "breeding line" or "stock" held significant, long-term implications for the groups of people it was used to privilege and to oppress, two of which are the value judgments made of one's lineage or stock, and the emphasis on innate, inbred nature of what is being judged. Smedley concludes, "The term 'race' made possible an easy analogy of inheritable and unchangeable features from breeding animals to human beings" (40).

During the end of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, racial ideology began to crystallize as the nation-building project took form. The political and economic exigencies made it necessary to codify the racial hierarchy with white at the top and black at the bottom (Smedley 183-208). Bill Ashcroft writes in "Language and Race," "Colour had become the unquestioned sign of the relation

between external characteristics and inner capacities, despite its complete metaphoricity, arbitrariness and unreliability in describing those external features” (313). It is here, the point of contact between the term *race* and what it began to signify that a discursive analysis of *race* progresses.

### *Racial Signification*

In *Race: the Floating Signifier*, Stuart Hall posits, "Race is more like a language than it is like a way in which we are biologically constituted" (Media 8). Race is a "floating signifier" in that it gives meaning to physical differences, such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features, but these meanings are never finally fixed. Furthermore, the meaning of the physical is derived not from some natural essence but from "shifting relations of difference which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field" (8). Therefore, the meaning of race is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. Race, according to Hall, is a discursive construct; it operates like a language, although it does not reside purely in language. Discourse, as he defines, is a "system of meaning" (10). People make race what it is and make differences what they are when we categorize, classify, and label—through thought and language—and they shift these categories and meanings of differences over time and circumstances. This systemic process creates race as a discursive system.

Hall's characterization of race as a "floating signifier" invokes the Sausurrian model of linguistic analysis. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* laid the foundation for much of language theory today. As a structuralist, Saussure was concerned about the structure of language more than the speaker, history, or context surrounding language.<sup>5</sup> He analyzed the nature of language, how it functions, and the relationship of language to reality. Saussure argued that language is not a 'nomenclature,' or a 'list of terms corresponding to a [preexisting] list of things' (65). For example, there is no direct link between the word "tree" and the physical thing in the natural world. In other words, there is no direct link between language and reality. Saussure proposes a theory of semiology—the study of the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Language is a system, and the parts of the system fit together to form a whole. One element in the system, for example the term *black*, would not mean or be without the simultaneous coexistence of another term, *white*. It is through linguistic patterns and co-dependency that these terms fit within the system. Saussure posited a fundamental disconnect between the patterns people use and believe in and "natural" patterns. The irony, however, is that humans need linguistic patterns and connections to make sense of the world. Saussure writes: "in itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure" (110). The

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<sup>5</sup> Racial literacy, as I will show, does not privilege a structuralist framework over a new historicist or post-structuralist, for example. Racial literacy pulls relevant features from each to show how race functions linguistically but also historically, contextually, institutionally, and individually.

central concept in Saussure's structuralist approach is the sign, which he defines as "the combination of a concept [signified] and a sound pattern [signifier]" (67). The link between a concept and a sound pattern is arbitrary. So what does this mean in relation to race? How is race a floating signifier?

When the idea or concept of race (a hierarchy based on physical differences) combines with the sound pattern (the articulation of R-A-C-E), race becomes a sign dependent on other signs and signifiers constructed within the emerging discursive system of race. As a "floating signifier," the meaning (concept/idea) of R-A-C-E changes depending on the context. The idea of race means something and functions differently in Brazil than it does in the United States. Hall marks the birth of race as a signifier (the articulation of R-A-C-E) when, during the Enlightenment, scientists, anthropologists, and philosophers linked nature with culture. Hall explains the genesis as such:

[Nature and culture] operate metonymically. It is the function of the discourse and the race as a signifier, to make these two systems – nature and culture – correspond with one another, in such a way that it is possible to read off the one against the other. So that once you know where the person fits in the classification of natural human races, you can infer from that what they're likely to think, what they're likely to feel, what they're likely to produce, the aesthetic quality of their productions, and so on. It is constituting a system of equivalencies between nature and culture, which is the function of race as a signifier. (13)

What this means is that race began with the need to name and to categorize physical differences in order to create and maintain a system of power. Once these

differences were organized in a language system—or discourse—they began to mean something (Media 5). It is “the interplay between the representation of racial difference, the writing of power, and the production of knowledge” that makes race such a powerful discursive system that regulates and controls how individuals and institutions function (10).

Knowledge not only resides in discourse but also in folk belief. It operates in the common sense realm, and over time, “race,” as a discursive classification system with positive and negative attributes arbitrarily linked to different racial categories, becomes commonsensical. The result, as Hall notes, is we do not need to ask if Blacks are intelligent. Racial common sense tells us they are not. Racial common sense (nature = culture) derives from the arbitrary linkage of skin color to intelligence, just ask skin color has been linked to other nonphysical attributes. When we look back at Secretary Rice’s statement, “I do think we've gotten to the place that we don't see a person and say, 'That's a black person, therefore they must be ...' And that's an enormous step forward” (“Secretary”), it becomes clear why her incomplete sentence still produces a complete thought. Hall claims that through repetitive linguistic and rhetorical pairing of unintelligence with blackness in our culture, race is constructed:

The moment you say that [sic] blacks, already the equivalences begin to trip off people’s mind. Blacks then, sound bodies, good at sports, good at dancing, very expressive, no intelligence, never had a thought in their heads, you know, tendency to barbarous behavior. All these things are clustered, simply in the classification system itself. (Media 3)

These common sense assumptions are linked to other racial groups as well. The repetitive pairing of Whites as intelligent or Hispanics as dirty creates a racial discourse of common sense that is powerful and sustaining.

### *Race, Myth, and Narrative*

Another part of the racial discursive system of meaning is the operation of race as mythology. As defined in chapter one, myths “are rooted in what we say about the world rather than the nature” of the world (Barthes 119). Myths also dehistoricize groups of people by replacing history for nature. Racial myths are a part of the racial signification system or the grammar of race. One of the enduring racial myths has been the myth of the black rapist. This myth was constructed after the Civil War and the end of slavery to justify lynching African American men, although women and children were lynched too. Historically, as slaves and free domestic laborers, African American women were the main victims of rape at the hands of white males. This dehistoricization of the rape of African American women helped to create a related myth. The myth of the black whore deemed African American women as “unrapeable”; therefore, white men were not charged or culturally and politically stigmatized as rapists. The myth of the black rapists, however, represented African American males as always preying on white women, thus needing to suffer a violent, torturous death. Through popular culture, like D.W.Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, the first blockbuster film made in America, the myth

was reiterated over and over again, which fueled racial fears and helped to cement the myth within North American racial ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, racial signification through the repetitive linking of nature and culture and the creation of myths that state what eternally is because of nature, this powerful racial ideology and discourse produces a “grand narrative” of race. The term *grand narrative* was introduced by Lyotard to describe why a particular society does what it does: why, for example, a society chooses to govern through democratic processes, or why a society makes laws prohibiting certain behaviors. Lyotard was writing against the universal grand narratives of society, doing so from a postmodern perspective. He argued for the demise of the “master narratives,” such as the purity of scientific truth, that structure society. The grand narrative legitimates knowledge, according to Lyotard, and produces a “social bond” (think also of Mills’ “Racial Contract” from chapter one). Lyotard explains,

a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence—“know-how,”—knowing how to speak,” and—knowing how to hear” [*savoir-faire, savoir-dire, savoir-entendre*]—through which the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond. (21)

In other words, a community knows how to be, how to determine valuable knowledge, and how to listen. The choices a society makes and the “little” stories it

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<sup>6</sup> See Riche Richardson. *From Uncle Tom to Gangsta: Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*. In chapter one Richardson charts the evolution of the myth from Reconstruction to the O.J. Simpson trial.

tells about itself are connected to a larger story, or grand narrative. Think of how the stories children learn about the founding of America, Christopher Columbus, and the happy Pilgrims and Indians during Thanksgiving. These narratives operate under the grand narrative of emancipation for humanity. What grand narratives do, however, is mask the conflicts of history, replacing them for a totalizing story that serves as legitimate knowledge. The telling and re-telling of narratives, similar to the telling and re-telling of the myth of the black rapist, constructs a reality out of no reality.

In thinking about race as a discursive construct, we can frame the individual significations—blackness linked with violence or rape—to the master signifier or grand narrative of race. All the elements that go into composing race, language, violence, economic stratification, and so on, operate under the grand narrative of race, which is the biological and cultural supremacy of white people to all others.

### **Race as Discourse: the Effects on Interpretation and Performance**

If race signifies, references, and narrates within society, then it has definite implications for how we see and make meaning of the world. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke names this characteristic a “terministic screen.” Similar to Saussure, Burke distinguishes man from animals through our use of symbols or sign systems. Terms, such as *race*, help us create reality and apprehend reality. We manipulate terms and they manipulate us, too. As such, we are not in total control

of terms because of ideology, the prevailing idea and belief systems around us (4-6). *Race*, then, can be thought of as a terministic screen, based in the ideology of race that directs and deflects our attention toward and away from particular representations of reality (45).

As a racial literacy instructor, this characteristic of *race* as a terministic screen is critical to my teaching because it helps students to understand how race as a grand narrative affects interpretation and knowledge. When I have asked students if race influences the meaning a person gets from a text or a movie, they responded “yes,” without hesitation. What they are not sure about is how or why this happens—why, for example, two people can look at the same picture or read the same story and derive two different racialized meanings. To help them see how race screens our interpretations of reality, I use historical examples of racial violence.

The phenomenon of race riots, for example, illustrates the delicate interplay among race, language, and violence, and the ways race is a floating signifier and terministic screen. In *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Cultures*, Sheila Smith McKoy rereads the “riot act,” demonstrating how two cultures privilege whiteness and pathologize blackness. “Race riots” in the U.S. were at their height at the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. African Americans living in urban areas, in the North and the South, lived in fear for their lives and for their property. “White mob violence” began to emerge in a response to the perceived dismantling of white supremacy. White

rage of African American political, economic and social advancement along with rumored violations of white womanhood sparked “white racial violence” against African Americans and their property (5-7). James Weldon Johnson called the summer of 1919 “The Red Summer” because of all the blood shed in twenty-six cities across the nation (Tuttle 14).

In spite of the reality of white racial attack on black bodies and property, public imaginations of lawless violence links to blackness, more specifically blacks attacking whites. McKoy exposes the rhetorical constructions and linkages of blackness with violence. Through manipulation of language, media representation, legal obfuscation, and other political maneuverings, whites erased themselves as provocateurs, and subsequently constructed a mythology of black urban violence that persists in public imaginations today. In the end, those with the power to name and to disseminate their interpretations, especially through visual and written texts, also had the power to link nature (blackness) with culture (violence). “Race riot,” “black rebelliousness,” and “racial uprisings” are “misnomers” for white mob violence targeted against African Americans (15). What race is and signifies, then, floats depending on necessity. In the case of riot acts, the need was to link African American resistance and skin color to violence while simultaneously linking whiteness to innocence and civility. *Race*, as a terministic screen, calls attention to physical differences and then signifies certain cultural attributes, with blackness equaling savagery or violence. Coupled with *riot*, and situated in media

representations, legal proceedings, and other cultural formations, the phrase *race riot* blinds us from the reality of white initiated violence and white supremacy.

Race not only implicates interpretation of reality, but also performance in reality. Growing up, I remember my parents teaching me and my brothers how to act in public. Most parents do this, correct? My African-American parents found it necessary to teach their African-American children how to act in public because they knew that certain behaviors would make white people suspicious and possibly even provoke harassment or violence. It is well known that many African-Americans are suspected of stealing from stores, and so my parents reiterated the racial performance lesson to “Keep you hands out of your pockets,” “Don’t touch anything,” and “Always leave the store with your purchase in a bag with your receipt in hand.” There are a host of other racial performance rules most people could relate without any problems. Depending on a person’s racialized upbringing, he/she might not be familiar with rules prescribed in another person’s community, but the point still remains: race has prescribed ways of acting in the world that impact everyone. Racial literacy investigates these performance prescriptives by examining how race functions as a speech act.

As a speech act, race was constructed “to do” something in the physical and psychological realms, and to regulate the actions of groups of people. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin outlines his speech-act theory. Austin argues that most of our language utterances are performances or acts. We “do” things with words.

Words, in many instances, are actions. He is responding to the positivist argument that “the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely” (1). For Austin, to concentrate on the “constative” statements resulted in neglecting other types of utterances—“performatives” (1-4). The business of a performative is not to describe or to report but to perform. Performatives say and do. They cause something to happen, to change as a result of enunciation. A commonly used example is the statement “I do” used in marriage ceremonies. To say “I do” does more than describe the state of affairs but also it precipitates a change in the state of affairs. Without “I do,” a marriage would not have occurred and a ceremony would not have been performed. Austin evaluates performatives by a success/failure test not by a truth/falsity test. If “I do” was stated, then the act/ceremony was successfully performed. It is important to note, that the line dividing a constative and a performative are not clean and definite. In fact, Austin suggests that most utterances are performatives of some kind, even constatives. Austin states: “When we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act” (139). In other words, it is not so much the grammar or composition of an utterance or term (the form) that we should focus on but the operation or resulting act of the utterance (the function). Then we begin to see how language does more than describe reality; language creates reality, too.

The language of race also creates racialized subject. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here.<sup>7</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, she states that "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25). What this means is that humans are not born "masculine" or "feminine"; instead, they are processed into being so through a string of repetitive acts and significations. Gender identity is performance because, according to Butler, language and discourse "do" gender—they call it into being. Butler writes:

Consider the medical interpellation which . . . shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or 'he', and in that naming, the girl is 'girled' brought into the domain of language and kinship through interpellation of gender. But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (8)

This process determines how humans enter society, already called into being through language, and destined through social customs to be "girled" unless an intervention of some sorts occurs.

When we act, we do so within language, be it "It's a girl" or "It's a boy."

"Language hails us and we are both recognized and recognizable in that moment,

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<sup>7</sup> I recognize the challenges inherent in equating gender construction with racial construction, in particular that race and gender intersect upon bodies differently. Throughout this project I reference intersectional implications, as in the myth of the black male rapists, but an extended analysis is beyond the scope of this project.

giving us agency and subjectivity” (*Excitable* 16). The language of race, operating as a speech act, also hails us into subjectivity. When we say a person is not guilty of a crime, for example, this proclamation of innocence creates a change in the physical realm, allowing and instructing a person to walk out of a court house and to live as a free person. Similarly with race, the courts have performed speech acts that pronounced people black or white. The case of Homer Plessy which resulted in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal law is a well-known example. To be called “black” by law, even though he was only “one-eighth black” meant that Plessy was to walk, live, and be, in other words perform, in such a way congruent with the nineteenth-century racial hierarchy (Fireside 202). On another level, to be told “You are white” as a child prompts a different set of performances than if the same child were told “You are black.” The question then becomes what does it mean to be black or white? I end this chapter by exploring the phenomena of “acting white” and “acting black” that students inquire about in my racial literacy courses.

### **Performing Race and Literacy**

“Acting black” or “acting white” are well-known cultural references to how individuals behave in society, especially when it comes to literacy. I assert that the performative nature of race also monitors and controls how institutions and individuals perform literacy, which an understanding of the discursive roots of race would help to clarify. Every year mainstream media outlets like *CNN* and the *New*

*York Times* run stories about “acting white” and “acting black,” often to display the cultural deficiencies within African American communities. Paul Tough, writing an editorial in the *New York Times* asks, “So where does the idea of the burden of ‘acting white’ come from?”, only to conclude that the notion that academically smart African American students are belittled or even physically beaten for “acting White” is a myth. Barack Obama, in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, even made reference to the cultural dilemma:

Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can’t teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, and that children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.

As Obama suggests, to fear being told you “act white” threatens the academic achievement of many African American students. This is a known and common cultural reality, almost on the level of common sense. To “act black” means to speak in a community-approved, non-elitist dialect and to promote anti-intellectualism. Students who are caught doing otherwise—studying, attending classes, speaking standard academic English—are characterized as “acting white.”<sup>8</sup>

But where does “acting white” and “acting black” come from? To review, race, as a floating signifier, was socially-constructed to classify humans within a hierarchy based on physicality, primarily skin color, with the binary and hierarchy of white

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<sup>8</sup> See Young for how this affects African American males, in particular.

over black used to justify slavery within the nation-building project. Through multiple significations of racialized terms, nature and culture were linked. Linguistically, the term *race* draws our attention to and away from various aspects of reality and even shapes our interpretations of reality. The terms *white* and *black* function in the same manner.

Race was constructed to not only name but also to perform—to prescribe actions and ways of being. From the beginning, when the terms *white* and *black* were applied to a racial hierarchy, they no longer merely connoted cleanliness, purity, and peace or ugliness, filth and evil, as they did in Ancient Greece (Ashcroft 315). They explicitly denoted who could “act” like a human, fully actualized in mind, body, and spirit. To “act white” meant to take advantage of all of the privileges white racial status afford—the right to vote, to read and write, to marry (depending on gender and class, of course). To “act black” meant to submit to an oppressive system that prohibited the right to vote, the right to read and write, and the right to marry. That is why people who were classified as “white” risked injury or death if they were caught sympathizing with or aiding someone classified as “black.” To “act white” meant keeping the racial hierarchy in place and following the racial rules.

A well-known scene from the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* illustrates how race as performance becomes tied to literacy and intelligence. Douglass, a slave, was prohibited from reading and writing. Not only was this a social custom but also the law in many states. And, whites were prohibited from

teaching slaves how to read and write, as Douglass's mistress learns when her husband forbids her instruction of Douglass. The rigid boundary between black and white, slave and free created another rigid boundary between illiterate and literate. Race signified for Douglass slave status. Slave status signified illiteracy. Alternately, race signified for the mistress and the young white boys that Douglass tricked into teaching him free status. The status of a white free person signified literacy, or at least afforded him/her the opportunity to become literate. Of course, class and gender influenced literacy too, but as Prendergast notes in *Literacy and Racial Justice*, literacy is essential to the maintenance of white identity. In fact, historically, multiple discourse and political communities have designated literacy as a form of white property (7). As a white propertied woman (with land, human beings, and literacy), Douglass' mistress must conform to "acting white" and follow her husband's demands to stop teaching Douglass the black slave to read and write.

Accordingly, to "act Black" meant staying in one's place (in the hierarchy) and following the rules—do not read and write, do not speak "educated" English, and do not demonstrate intelligence. The consequence for breaking the rules could mean death. But, Douglass, like many slaves, broke the signifying chain of race and literacy by refusing to "act black." As Douglass learns how to read, he begins to connect the words on the page to his reality as a slave. He begins to understand how race created the social circumstances under which he toils:

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! That very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. (43)

From a critical literacy perspective, we can say that Douglass is learning how to read the words on the page and how to read the world in which he lives. When he comes across the word *abolition*, he is especially troubled, not fully understanding it, even though he can pronounce it. The freedom that he desires in the world is tied to the word he reads on the page, literally and figuratively. The irony of race as a floating signifier is that because it is not fixed, it can be undone, or at least destabilized. As Douglass gains literacy, he also gains racial literacy. He uses reading and writing to precipitate his own freedom and then the freedom of others when he becomes an abolitionist. Douglass' racial literacy performance was one of many repetitive acts that contributed to breaking the signifying link between blackness and U.S. colonial slavery.

In summation, a theory of racial literacy begins with an analysis of race as a discursive construct. Racial literacy attends to the power of language to create race,

to screen and construct reality, and to mandate performance. Racial literacy, as Douglass' narrative illustrates, intervenes in the master narrative of race as a signifier and prescriber of literacy. The narrative of the recent presidential election also intervenes in the master narrative by disrupting long-held myths about skin color and nature. As Secretary of State Rice stated, the election of Obama brings the nation one step closer to recovering from its original birth defect. In the next chapter, I show how the rhetoric and composition classroom can apply this theory in order to shift from a pedagogy of racial liberalism to a pedagogy of racial literacy.

CHAPTER IV  
RACIAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

As much as I wanted to lead my students in a chant of “Yes We Can!” during the 2008 presidential campaign, I restrained myself. I also did not tell students that I was a grassroots organizer and fundraiser for Barack Obama. As the media pundits joked, I was drunk on the Obama Kool-aid. Nevertheless, I restrained from expressing my commitment to Obama’s candidacy in the classroom. I did not wear my Obama t-shirt nor did I pass out stickers and campaign literature on campus. Of course, I wanted my students to vote for Obama, but my classroom is not the place where I recruit or convert because I do not believe teachers should promote a particular political party or candidate. My role as an instructor is to inspire students to be engaged citizens, regardless of their political ideologies.

Of course, a philosophy such as this complicates the teaching of racial literacy. Do I tell students where I stand on race and racism? After all, they, too, are ideologies and require making a political stance. Are not all classrooms infused with racial and political ideologies? How do I determine where to draw the line? I recognize that all classrooms are infused with a political ideology. Our classroom pedagogies—the theories and practices we subscribe to as teachers—derive from and promote a particular ideology. That is, they are infused with a belief and value

system that shapes the nature of knowledge and academic success. As James Berlin states, "Ideology . . . addresses and shapes [subjects] through discourses that point out what exists, what is good, and what is possible" ("Composition" 103). This is one of the purposes, if not the main purpose, of the university, to tell students what is good knowledge and to steer them into the possibilities for using that knowledge. As discussed in the previous chapter, relations of power determine which ideology and what knowledge is produced. My relative power as the instructor in the classroom frames the ideology. As a practitioner of racial literacy, then, I choose to use that relative power to counter the always, already present ideology of racial liberalism that persists on many university campuses by focusing on how to teach about race and racism in rhetoric and composition studies. My theory and pedagogy do take a political stance, as do all theories and pedagogies, but my purpose for teaching is not to use my authority or the instructor's lectern to push my political stance and beliefs on students. This is not teaching; this is coercion. This chapter describes my attempts to teach and inspire without coercing or converting students into my ideal version of an anti-racist. It also describes the challenges of this type of racial literacy pedagogy.

To teach racial literacy within a discipline, a university, a department, and a classroom, all of which are immersed in racial liberalism, requires attention to a host of problems, some of which include: How does an instructor teach a racial literacy course within the university parameters? What resources are available

across the university to aid a racial literacy pedagogy? Given the lack of student textbooks on critical race and language awareness, what type of readings and assignment choices does an instructor have? What happens if or when the classroom discussions get overly personal or tense? What if a student says something that is racist?

I acknowledge that these are all probable circumstances and that teaching about race and racism is not easy. Nevertheless, these circumstances derive not so much from our inability as racialized beings to talk about race and racism, but more so from our lack of knowledge and guidance in how to teach about race and racism in rhetoric and composition classrooms. In this chapter I take the position that rhetoric and composition instructors can better negotiate the tensions of teaching about race and racism when they stay focused on teaching racial literacy, meaning the power of language and the power of race as language. Again, this is a difficult task, and I offer my experiences teaching racial literacy as an example of the possibilities and the problems of this praxis. In part one, I describe my teaching philosophy and the ways I approach the racial literacy classroom as an African-American woman. This positioning is important because often instructors do not consider how their racialized position and authority in the classroom impact student reception and learning. The second part of this chapter describes how I construct a racial literacy course and how I teach it based on my racial literacy tenets and the university's parameters. Using student voices and anecdotes from

class, I show how my students and I increased our racial literacy. The third part of this chapter considers the implications of teaching racial literacy and of using Writing Center services. In this section, I argue that racial literacy should not be taught in a vacuum and that Writing Center tutors should be trained in racial literacy, too. The chapter concludes by looking at the implications of teaching racial literacy in the age of Obama. I begin in part one by framing my racial literacy course within my general teaching philosophy and personal beliefs about race and racism.

### **“First, Do No Harm”: Who I Am and What I Believe about Teaching**

I come from a family of educators and from a race-conscious community. Growing up and even today as an adult, my parents and community continue to promote that education for an African American means attending college, learning how to speak, reason, and participate in professional workplaces, and understanding the importance of racial knowledge and resistance to racism. The academy, however, is not my home community. I am often met with resistance when it comes to racial knowledge and resistance to racism. Students and instructors vary in their commitment to understanding race and attacking racism. As an African American woman, I do not feel obligated to confront racism every place I see or experience it because I understand that racism functions as a system larger than any one individual. Just as instructors get tired and frustrated dealing with individual incidents of racism, so too do non-instructors. The average person can get

exhausted, lose hope, and become cynical when confronted with the realities of race daily. Even the years of research, teaching, and writing about race that went into this dissertation project began to steal the energy and enthusiasm from me.

Although my project calls for change within rhetoric and composition studies, in theory and in practice, on the individual and on the institutional levels, I do not subscribe to the philosophy that racial literacy instructors must confront racism wherever it arises or that instructors should convert students into practicing anti-racists. This is a personal and a professional decision that I have made rooted in my experiences and in my religious faith practices. I see that my role as a racial literacy scholar and instructor is to reveal racial liberalism for what it is, to theorize an alternative stance relevant for the field, to promote that alternative in scholarship, to practice that alternative in the classroom, and to reflect on and revise my racial literacy praxis to adjust to the times. My role as a racial literacy instructor also requires that I inspire students to learn and to adopt racial literacy as a habit of being in the world. Inspiration is the key word. By supporting knowledge and inspiration through my teaching, I hope that students work against racism in their personal and professional lives, but this development is not something I can determine in a semester.

Accordingly, as I inspire, I do not harm. When we teach about race carelessly, we risk reinscribing the ideas and behaviors of racism. In our classrooms, for example, the topic of race often evokes feelings of dread, anger, sadness, and

confusion. Knowing this, I intend, then, to “first, do no harm,” as the Hippocratic Oath states. My teaching philosophy is grounded in this premise, regardless of the content of the course. Does this mean that all of my students leave each course feeling good and affirmed in their knowledge and beliefs? No. In fact, most students remark that they leave class angry, disheartened, and confused, on a weekly basis. The difference, however, is that I believe in teaching about race in a way that students are angry about the history or about the systemic nature of race, not angry with fellow classmates or with me as an instructor because I could not control the class. To do no harm does not mean that my classroom is a comfortable space; it means that I will try to create a safe environment where students can deal with their discomfort without the fear of being judged or punished. I do not pretend that this is easy. It is difficult, and it begins weeks before the semester begins. The process of creating a classroom environment for my racial literacy course that keeps the Hippocratic Oath in the forefront begins with me being attentive to the harm that instructors can do to students if we are unprepared, overly-personal, and ego-centric when it comes to teaching about race in the classroom. Once I am clear about who I am as an instructor and what my purpose is in teaching racial literacy, I move into constructing my racial literacy course.

## **Constructing the Racial Literacy Course**

The racial literacy classroom is new territory for me. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what a racially literate space looks like and feels like. Many days I feel like racial literacy is an experiment because neither the students nor I have experience learning about race as language in a public setting. There are advantages and disadvantages to exploring in this manner. Advantages: the teacher and the students are free to experiment and to create new compositions, new ways of learning collaboratively, and new ways of seeing themselves and the world. Disadvantages: the teacher and the students are not free, creative beings because they have been socialized into racial models and paradigms. This is the conundrum that I face in my racial literacy courses. To deal with this conundrum and offset some of the disadvantages, I remain focused, as much as possible, on my core racial literacy tenets and the application of those tenets within the university parameters.

As a racial literacy instructor, I believe these tenets are necessary because they state succinctly and definitely how race and racism should be taught in the course. They begin with the power of language to create reality and then move into a definition of race as a social construction and a discursive system. These tenets also help students and instructors explain racial literacy to people who are not enrolled in the course.

### Racial Literacy Tenets

1. Language is a powerful mechanism within society that not only describes reality but also creates reality. As such, language as a system should be analyzed for its power and ability to shape the physical and ideological world.
2. Race and racism are endemic to the United States and continue to evolve and manifest in new and powerful ways.
3. Race and racism are social constructions that have real discursive, material, psychological, physical, social, and political implications in the lives of individuals but also in the workings of institutions.
4. Race has a grammar, meaning a linguistic system that solidifies into a discourse of ideas, myths, stereotypes, and narratives that structure the hierarchy, which are used to justify racist actions.
5. The discursive system of race is a rhetorical or argumentative system controlled by those in power but reinforced by everyone in varying degrees.
6. More knowledge about race and racism on the discursive level gives individuals the tools to resist race's discursive power through critical literacy and action.

It is important to look at how these tenets fit within the student learning goals of the undergraduate curriculum. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I have taught racial literacy as an English (ENG)102-Speaking Intensive course and as a Freshman Seminar (FMS)116, Reasoning and Discourse course. Both courses are the second part of the ENG 101/102 or FMS 115/116 mandatory first-year writing sequence. As with most universities, these courses, or equivalences are required, unless students have passed the necessary tests to move on to the next

level. With this in mind, I have to construct the course around the university outcomes listed below:

### Student Learning Outcomes

1. Communicate effectively and clearly through speaking and writing
2. Interpret and evaluate argumentative discourse
3. Construct cogent, logical and critical arguments
4. Locate, synthesize, and evaluate relevant information
5. Demonstrate an understanding of the aims and methods of intellectual discourse
6. Weigh evidence and evaluate the arguments of differing viewpoints
7. Give an oral research presentation based on the university speaking guidelines
8. Lead a discussion using open-ended questions and thought-provoking analysis of texts

The next step is to connect the student learning outcomes (SLO) with the racial literacy tenets. The SLOs and racial literacy tenets overlap in some instances and should not be read in isolation from each other, although I have placed them into categories below for clarity and succinctness.

### Merging the Racial Literacy Tenets with the Student Learning Outcomes

#### **SLO1, SLO7, SLO8: About what are students communicating in speaking and in writing?**

The speaking and writing content of the course centers around language, race, racism, knowledge, and interpretation, as outlined in the racial literacy tenets. Students also speak about texts from a variety of genres, concentrating on the rhetorical situation and the function of language and race in the texts.

**SLO2, SLO3, SLO6: What forms of argumentative discourse are students interpreting and evaluating? About what are students constructing arguments?**

Under racial literacy, *race* is contextually defined as an argument about groups of people, and their biology and character. Students evaluate the master narrative argument and its affects on interpretation. Students construct their own arguments in response to the master narrative argument and its by-products (stereotypes, myths, performance rules, etc.).

**SLO4: How do students locate, synthesize, and evaluate information relevant to racial literacy?**

Students engage in research throughout the semester, beginning with the etymology of racialized and racist terms, then moving into an extended research-focused group project. Students take the information from their research, evaluate it, and synthesize the information with what they have been learning in class.

**SLO5: How do students demonstrate an understanding of the aims and methods of intellectual discourse?**

The primary way students meet this outcome is in their final racial literacy reflection paper that asks them to write about the purpose of their racial literacy development and the racial literacy discourse community in which they participate. They reflect on methods used in the course and in their intellectual development. In the end, their reflection should indicate that they understand how and why knowledge about race is created, resisted, or hidden by individuals and institutions.

Once I have linked the racial literacy tenets to the student learning outcomes, I then proceed to enact my racial literacy pedagogy. After teaching racial literacy over a period of three years and engaging in the necessary scholarly reflection and discussion, I noticed that my approach to racial literacy practice focuses on four areas: encouraging transparency; turning personal arguments into systemic arguments; facilitating intensive racial literacy speaking activities; promoting racial literacy critical consciousness inside and outside of the classroom.

### *Transparency*

The first critical component of my racial literacy course is transparency, which means that I am upfront with students about the course content, the objectives, the difficult journey they are about to begin, and the relevant experiences I have had with race and racism. One of the problems with racial liberalism in the classroom has been tricking students into talking about taboo subjects. In other words, students who register for an English course are shocked when they walk in class one day and the instructor says we are going to talk about race. Talking about race out of context and with little preparation for the discussion sets up the classroom for failure. Instructors can do more harm than good if they do not adequately prepare themselves or their students for learning about race. With this in mind, I publicize the description of the course in as many places as possible: on the English department and Freshman Seminar websites, on flyers hung in bathroom stalls, on the Blackboard welcome page, and in emails to registered students before the semester begins. The description of the course is accessible and enticing to students, particularly first and second year students who register for the course.

### Course Description

What happens in a classroom when race is the topic? Are students eager to discuss race and racism? Or, do students sit in silence, avoiding eye contact with some of a different race? Why is it so difficult to talk about race? Why do students dislike reading and writing about race? This course will explore why race is such a controversial topic in America and how we develop the literacy skills to communicate about race in an informed and civil manner. The course challenges: 1) Your definition and ideas about race and racism; and 2) Your definition and ideas about literacy. The ultimate goal of the course is to understand how the language of race influences our daily lives and how we read, write, view, and speak.

Transparency also means that I discuss my racialized and professional positioning as a figure of authority. I do this by talking about the role of a college instructor, where knowledge comes from, how grading occurs, and who makes the final decisions about academic success. I tell my students that I am an employee of an institution with rules and standards that I must follow. This discussion of authority and institutionalized knowledge leads to an initial discussion of racial authority and institutionalized racial knowledge. The course, I explain, attempts to uncover what people in authority have said about race and the knowledge that has been produced.

Furthermore, I understand that students might see me as a “race woman” or “race teacher,” possibly even an instructor who privileges one race over another. We talk about this, about the race of an instructor and if it matters in the classroom. My aim is to put as much in the open as possible, asking questions, making speculations, and acknowledging that we are socialized to see race and to think about it in terms

of power relationships. As I put myself on the spot as a racialized instructor, I ask students to open up about themselves and their backgrounds. We discuss our hometowns, high schools, and families, in an informal auto-ethnography type of assignment. The purpose is to paint a picture of race in society, in community, and in families—all of which we have, so no one is singled out. We are all a part of some social institution that is racialized.

Another activity that promotes transparency is the free-write I assign the first week of class. On one side of a note card, I ask the students to name the race to which they identify. On the other side of the card, I ask them to write how they know they are a particular race. In a short yet complicated question, students attempt to answer, “How do you know you are \_\_\_\_\_? Some responses have included:

“My parents told me I was Hispanic.”

“I learned I was black when someone at school called me a nigger. I went home and asked my mother what nigger means.”

“I just know. Nobody told me.”

I provide answers to the same questions, revealing my willingness to risk exposure and to risk grappling with race in my own life. This initial free-write begins the process of opening up to the class and questioning the hidden assumptions and taken-for-granted knowledge about race that we are socialized into. From there, we can move into what it means to be a particular race, which leads into race as argument and discourse.

### *Race as Argument and Discourse*

The second critical component of my racial literacy course is staying focused on race as argument and discourse. Not only is race one huge argument, but race creates huge arguments in classrooms, in families, and in workspaces. Arguments, tensions, conflicts, confusions, and so on keep us from addressing race in a critical and open manner. Shifting the pedagogy from racial liberalism to racial literacy requires that I frame race as an argumentative discourse system, first, and then attend to the personal arguments that race can produce. Under a pedagogy of racial liberalism, tolerance is promoted to deal with individual arguments. Under a pedagogy of racial literacy, critical analysis of language and race is promoted to understand how the institutional arguments about race create individual arguments.

To do this, the students and I come to a working definition of a system by analyzing systems familiar to them, such as a computer system or the solar system. We come to understand a system in the general sense as *an organism made up of individual parts that function to complete a task*. We discuss how some systems have been operating for so long that the rules, procedures, and individuals attached to it keep the system running with very little attention or energy. The first text I use in the course, a film from popular culture called *The Matrix*, describes society as a system in which individuals are born into, participate in, and resist. The purpose of starting with popular culture is to use a text familiar to the students. I have found

that most students have seen the movie, and so, a review of relevant scenes is all that is needed to spark discussion. In one particular scene, the main character Neo learns what the matrix is. His mentor Morpheus tells him it is a system that is all around us that operates as a prison for our minds. This scene helps students to see how race, as a part of the matrix, keeps their minds imprisoned within stereotypes and beliefs about racial groups. *The Matrix* serves as an extended metaphor for our world and, from there, we analyze race as a powerful part of our world through language.

Extending from *The Matrix*, I give the students their initial investigation assignment that places race within argumentation. I ask them to

- Research the etymology of the term *race* in the English language
- Discuss a brief history of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which places this “authorizing” text within the realm of rhetorically constructed knowledge
- Examine the early arguments for *race* and the support social and biological scientists used to form their argument of *race*

Instead of me giving students all of the readings and information, I have them explore interactive websites, such as *Understanding Race.Org* and *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, both of which have a wealth of information about the social, legal, and scientific constructions of race. I also use the three-part video series *Race: the Power of an Illusion* to historicize the construction of race, from its biological and genetic fallacies to its legacy in economic and political discrimination. (All three of the above need to be in bib) These videos provide engaging visuals for how arguments about

race transformed over time. Some of the topics we discuss include, court cases, the one-drop rule, anti-miscegenation laws, immigration restrictions, and Constitutional contradictions. Because the discursive analysis of race is virtually non-existent in scholarship accessible to students and in educational media, I provide supplemental notes to the videos and websites. The purpose, again, is not to focus on the history, although history is important, but to show the history of racial argumentation and the ways that the statements, evolving language, and repeated social acts including and excluding persons based on race arguments created a racial discourse, or a system of meaning, that endures today.

*What Does Speaking-Intensive Mean in a Racial Literacy Classroom?*

Talking about race and racism in public is difficult for most people. The classroom is no different. One reason is because the country as a whole has yet to openly and honestly deal with its racial past. Racial literacy seeks to uncover ways we talk around race, mask race through code words or tropes, and reaffirm racial stereotypes or mythologies while speaking. Racial literacy speech includes deliberate critical discussions about race in a public setting, but this discussion should begin first with the linguistic roots of race. Thus, we must shift from only talking about each other, to talking about race and language. We acknowledge the difficulties of talking about race, but we also acknowledge the potential rewards of talking about race.

When I have taught racial literacy, it has always been in a speaking-intensive course, meaning the university requires that instructors use formal and informal speaking activities to promote learning. Knowing this, I focus on developing speaking ethics in the classroom, guiding students in an oral research presentation, and preparing students to lead a discussion about race and language.

The process of developing speaking ethics begins with a few instructor-initiated rules, clearly explained and open for discussion in case students want to expand on them. I feel it is necessary, however, to stipulate in the beginning what will and will not be tolerated in the classroom. I do this because I want to engender trust with my students, so they know I will protect them from deliberate intimidation or ridicule. At the same time, I explain to students that the course content will make them uncomfortable, defensive, angry, and sad. These emotions and others are to be expected. We deal with these potentially disruptive emotions by journaling, conferencing, and open discussion. The speaking ethics I mandate in the course are 1) we attempt to focus all discussions within the parameters of race as something larger than an individual; 2) we attempt to be open to others' viewpoints and questions, assuming that everyone has good intentions even when they make bad speaking choices; and 3) we attempt to face race head-on by stating the uncomfortable and the controversial and by asking the forbidden questions. These are the three rules I established for the course. The students and I spend the

first week or so modeling and discussing them, and, if necessary, the students add to them when the classroom environment requires that they do so.

For the oral research and discussion-leader activities, I require students to attend the university Speaking Center. The Speaking Center is staffed by undergraduate and graduate students majoring in communication and those who have been invited to work in the center based on recommendations from professors. Students can attend the center to get help with any stage of their speaking assignment. I have found that the Center is the most beneficial to students when I have prepared them to receive outside help from people who are not familiar with racial literacy. I reaffirm for students that speaking about race and racism gives us an opportunity to deal with it. This is necessary because many people believe that not speaking about race and racism means the issues do not exist. One student asked me in class, "If race doesn't exist, then why are we talking about it?" I did not have to respond to the student that day. Other students remarked that the problem is that we do not talk about it. The class went on to discuss how race and racism are all around us, yet we do not talk about it. So, when students have to engage with the larger university campus, it is important that I restate for them why we are doing what we are doing in the course. In the end, I have been pleased with their presentations and with the help they have received from the Speaking Center because students return to the class more confident speaking about race and racism.

### *Racial Literacy Critical Consciousness*

The fourth critical component of my racial literacy pedagogy is education for critical consciousness as theorized by Paulo Freire. In chapter 1, I stated that critical consciousness for racial literacy requires reading the racialized world in an analytic way in order to offer problem-solving strategies to the racism that exists. A racial literacy critical consciousness means a person is able to see how he/she is racially shaped by economic, social, political, educational, and other institutional forces. In a semester-long racial literacy course, critical consciousness develops differently for all students. What I have found is that students begin to question what they previously believed not only about race and racism but also about their literacy practices in the classroom. For example, James, an African-American male, became aware that his effort in the classroom and his word choices in writing are influenced by the race of his teacher.

James came to my office for a conference because he wanted to discuss his paper about the “black box” on the U.S. Census form. Each student had to self-identify according to government stipulations and then write a paper describing what his/her box(es) mean. He wrote about how the “black box” meant he had less cranial and mental capacity than non-black people: “To say that all blacks have the same brain mass is eccentric. Surprisingly, there is no gene that says I am black.” I was interested in James’s word choice “eccentric.” He revealed he used a thesaurus, a common strategy for emerging writers. What surprised me, however, was his

reason for using the thesaurus. He stated that he always searches for “long or exaggerated words” when he has a white teacher because they expect more.

“So, you’re saying I am trying to act white?” I teased him, relying on a presumed cultural connection we shared.

“Naw, naw,” he laughed.

I wanted to know more about his racial literacy processes, but I did not want to steer him too much. So we discussed another aspect of his paper. I could tell James continued to think about my “acting white” comment because moments later he interrupted me to say, “It’s not that I think you are trying to act white. I guess you remind me of white teachers.”

“How so?”

“It’s not that my black teachers weren’t smart or good. It’s just that, you know, we didn’t have to do as much. I’m not saying they were bad.”

“Of course not,” I assured him.

“Yeah, that’s it. You remind me of my past white teachers.”

I took notes during that exchange and asked James to explore this more in his final paper. He wrote:

When I write my papers for courses in which I have white instructors, I often use long or exaggerated words to try to prove my point. Also, I noticed that I work harder on class work assigned by my white teachers than those who are black. However, there is one exception to this. Ms. Johnson, my FMS teacher, demands a certain respect and level of work ethic that I would expect from my white teacher. Although I've slacked off in the classes of my black teachers in the past, I don't do it in my FMS class because she reminds me of my white teachers. I know that blacks constantly feel the need to prove themselves to white people, or as in my case, blacks who remind them of white people, but I never knew that I did it so subconsciously. I must say that noticing a thing like this was proof that my racial literacy was changing.

James's reflection demonstrates his racial literacy development, his awareness of the ways language, power, and race (and racial mythologies about intellect and work ethic) collide. For me as a racial literacy instructor, James's articulation of why he used a thesaurus and how racial socialization impacts his literacy development are more important than understanding the history of census categorization or biological determinism. Racial literacy is about coming to know how race regulates institutional knowledge and individual meaning-making practices. James realized that his literacy practices were influenced by race, and hopefully, this realization will help him to act outside of racial prescriptions as he matriculates in college.

As the instructor, I do not always know when a particular writing assignment, reading, or activity will spark the critical awareness and discussion needed to develop racial literacy. I believe that the readings I have chosen for the class, for example Richard Rodriguez's memoir *Hunger for Memory* will captivate the students and give them insight into a particular racial experience unfamiliar to

them. In the case of Rodriguez, I was shocked and disheartened by the students overt refusal to engage the text, and as I later learned, they dismissed the book based on Rodriguez's picture on the front cover. Of the hundred or so pages of *Hunger of Memory*, the class discussed approximately twenty. No one wanted to talk, and when they did, their comments were riddled with dis-ease, uncertainty, privilege, angst, and to some degree, racism. I admit, the course required that students push themselves on a daily basis. Each activity, reading, video, and guest speaker asked students to problematize, to deconstruct, or to critique themselves. It is possible that after reading Tim Wise's *White Like Me* and participating in a privilege and culture activity that revealed what whites have lost in their quest for power that my students were burnt out on all the race talk and analysis. Looking back on it, I should have given them a break and time to adjust to what they had been learning. Instead, on I pushed. Sensing my students' resistance to Rodriguez based on their preconceived ideas about "Mexicans and illegal aliens," as one student commented, I asked them to journal, to write openly and honestly about what was happening in the class. I asked students to think about what voices they privilege or who they believe and listen to based on race. I asked them to think about how the image of a person (what they see racially), influences their opinion of a person. More importantly, who do they trust to tell them the truth? Meagan, a white female, wrote:

I believe today was very hard for many of us to really understand what we have been doing all semester long. . . . I wasn't willing to analyze my own thoughts. I honestly believe that the reason I felt this interview and book were unbelievable was because he was a minority and I don't look at him as being right always or maybe even worthy of what he's talking about. This is a terrible thing but I have to look at myself and understand why I felt this way about this work.

Like Meagan, most students responded that the Rodriguez discussion was difficult and that they noticed some things about themselves that they did not like. Meagan's racial literacy critical consciousness centered on whiteness and addressed how she and other white students responded. Meagan concluded that the class wasted time:

I noticed many of the people who said bad things about the book or interview were white and many of the blacks didn't have anything to say unless they were put on the spot because they were able to relate with him because they have been a minority, but the whites weren't. It was harder for the white students (including myself) to see him as being notable and worthy of what he was discussing. Many probably won't claim they did this but I realize I've got to analyze my thoughts in order to be able to understand and analyze Rodriguez. Everyone wanted to stop at judging and didn't want to think about what was happening because they had already dismissed the book. By doing that we wasted our time. We could have really learned something from this book but I believe too many people just dismissed it and therefore made the time useless.

I disagree with Meagan that the class wasted time. Although that particular day was excruciatingly painful, the students did learn something. The racial literacy classroom challenges students to look at how and why they react to texts the way they do. The racial literacy classroom forces students to think about whose words they value and whose face they trust. Students must re-examine their preconceived

notions about race, language, knowledge, and worth. This is racial literacy critical consciousness. Hopefully, students will continue to develop in this manner and make different choices in the future.

As the Rodriguez assignment illustrates, the racial literacy classroom is an unpredictable space. But, as the instructor, I must be able to negotiate the tensions, the uncertainties, and the problems that arise, at the same time as I remain focused on the student learning outcomes. I must be able to take challenges and turn them into learning opportunities. In my classroom, I can do this. When it comes to racial literacy development outside of the classroom, I have little control.

### **Stepping Outside of the Racial Literacy Classroom**

Similar to most academic content, racial literacy should be applicable and useful outside of the classroom. I believe in learning to develop one's mind, but what we do with our knowledge is important too. A racial literacy critical consciousness should be evident outside of the rhetoric and composition classroom. At the same time, however, for racial literacy development to continue, other discourse communities must promote racial literacy awareness. In this section, I focus on the discourse community of the Writing Center in order to show? Or to argue what?.

During the fall of 2007, I taught a racial literacy freshman seminar and conducted a study about student perceptions and experiences using the Writing Center as a part of the racial literacy course. I began the study and the semester with

the following questions: What happens when students have to make meaning of *race in writing*, and when they seek advice from the Writing Center? What happens when students who choose to learn about the social construction of race and racism from a critical literacy perspective ask for help from a writing tutor who chooses not to or cannot engage race critically? Does the Writing Center enable or disable a student's racial literacy development? How should a racial literacy instructor integrate Writing Center services into the classroom and still provide students with a critical learning experience? What role, if any, should the Writing Center play in racial literacy development? As I will show, teaching racial literacy and integrating Writing Center services is a messy practice that requires constant reflection for students and for me as the instructor. Nevertheless, racial literacy praxis in the classroom and in the Writing Center can help move the rhetoric and composition field from the stagnate practices of racial liberalism to the transformative practices of racial literacy.

As a former Writing Center consultant at the university and community college levels, I am aware of the benefits students receive from the services. I am an advocate for more funding, personnel, publicity, and integration of the Writing Center into the center of intellectual inquiry and academic practice. At the University of North Carolina Greensboro, the Writing Center (WCG) functions within the rhetoric and composition program, which is housed in the English department. It is a global Writing Center in the sense that any student or employee of the

University can use the Writing Center free of charge. Its director is a rhetoric and composition specialist and a close friend of mine. Advanced undergraduate and graduate students staff the center as consultants, while undergraduates enroll in a three-credit tutoring course and graduate students attend workshops prior to the semester opening of the Center. The director and her assistants also participate in Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives, serve on committees, research, attend conferences, and publish in the field. According to WCG's website:

The purpose of the Writing Center is to enhance the confidence and competence of student writers by providing free, individual assistance at any stage of any writing project. Staff consultants are experienced writers and alert readers, prepared to offer feedback and suggestions on drafts of papers, help students find answers to their questions about writing, and provide one-on-one instruction as needed.

Given WCG's purpose and my knowledge of its day-to-day practices, I feel comfortable requiring my students to attend WCG, not only in my reasoning and discourse courses, but also in my Women's Studies and African American Studies courses where writing is a form of evaluation. The semester I conducted the study of my racial literacy course I required all twenty-two students to attend the Writing Center at least four times during the semester, preferably once a month for each writing assignment. Using experiential data collected from my racial literacy classroom and from student reflections of their Writing Center consultations, I examined the messiness of teaching racial literacy and requiring students to attend WCG where racial literacy has not been directly or deliberately addressed. In this

section I describe how I integrated WCG in a racial literacy seminar and the pedagogical strategies employed in class. Second, I present student perceptions and beliefs about their WCG sessions, placing the responses into three categories: evasion, appropriation, and engagement. Third, I examine my difficulties with evasion, appropriation, and engagement as an instructor and a scholar. Fourth, I look to the future of racial literacy teaching and tutoring.

My purpose here is not to judge WCG, Writing Centers in general, directors, staff, or my students, but to complicate our discussions of literacy, race, teaching and tutoring in an effort to push us to risk and to reveal more, including myself. My argument is not new; we know on some level what ails us all: literacy instructors (and I include WC consultants in this category) must stop avoiding critical examinations of race and must begin a discursive analysis of race construction, specifically how we maintain race and racism through language. What is new, however, is my insistence from the perspective of racial literacy to probe the inner workings of race, literacy, power, and Writing Center practice. This task, as I will show, is neither easy nor clean; it is messy. Theorizing, teaching, tutoring, and writing about racial literacy can be chaotic. Nevertheless, as Ann Berthoff tells us “naming begins the chaos” (70). In other words, once we begin to name or to identify the parts, the conflicts, the assumptions, we can use the chaos to make meaning and to move forward.

My analysis focuses on four students, James (mentioned in an earlier section), Taylor, Keisha and Lisa, the four students who provided the most critical analysis of their racial literacy development throughout the semester and who attended the Writing Center more than the required four times. I also provide snapshots of whole class discussions about Writing Center experiences in general. What follows is a discussion of student responses from their pre and post Writing Center consultation forms, their class discussions, and written reflections. It is important to note that the students' responses represent their personal perceptions about the Writing Center consultations.

To prepare my students for their consultations, I detail specific WCG policies: consultants should not write on student papers, should not assign the paper a fictional grade, and should not steer clients to write about particular themes, topics, or issues. On the other hand, consultants should listen to the needs of the clients, should engage the client in a dialogue about the paper, and should meet the client where he/she is in the writing process. It is not my intention to critique WCG's policies; instead, I focus on my students' perceptions of their Writing Center consultations and the impact they had on racial literacy development. In all of my courses, I require students to outline their goals for the consultation and then to reflect on their visit. I do this because a student's literacy development, regardless of the subject, should not only be measured by the final product, but also by the process, including his/her integration of University-wide services, be it the Speaking

Center, Multicultural Resource Center, or Writing Center. For first-year students, I provide more guidance in pre- and post- consultation forms.

#### Pre-consultation Questions

1. What is racial literacy? (Describe it in your own words so you can help the consultant understand the course and the assignment.)
2. What are your expectations for the session?
3. At what stage are you in the writing process? (invention, outlining, drafting, revising, or proofreading and editing). Why are you seeking assistance at this stage in the process?

#### Post-consultation Questions

1. Did the session meet your expectations? Explain
2. What did you discuss with the consultant?
3. How much do you think your consultant understood about race and writing? Explain.
4. Name a positive aspect about the session.
5. Name something that could have been improved.
6. What else would you like to say?

I recognize that preparing students for the Writing Center can be problematic in that my agenda as the instructor has the potential to overpower their agendas as the writers. Nevertheless, these questions not only help students communicate their needs but also communicate the emphasis of the course. Question number one challenges them to articulate what racial literacy means and what the course is about to consultants who are unfamiliar with the topic. Unlike writing a paper for a literature course or a history course, most consultants have no background with racial literacy or have never heard of the course. As such, my

students must be prepared to explain what they are learning and how the course fits into the general education curriculum. The consultation forms also provide students with material to write their course reflections about their racial literacy development. I encourage students to look across the spectrum of their learning and engagement with University services and to reflect on if and how their racial literacy has changed. The pre- and post- forms constitute one element of their semester racial literacy journey.

From these forms, class discussions, and student reflections, I have recognized three categories of consultant interaction within these student responses: evasion, appropriation, and engagement. Sentence here explaining these terms. Again, these are my terms and categories, not the students. And, just as racial categorization is problematic, the taxonomy I construct presents problems too. For, it is not my intention to stigmatize or to define student experiences or WCG consultants as racist, anti-racist, racially liberal, or the like. My intention is to unmask the messiness of racial literacy teaching with an integration of Writing Center services. To do so, I must give space to student voices and perceptions of their experiences.

### *Evasion*

In this section I provide an analysis of student responses regarding their stated purposes for attending WCG and the actual services they received. I place the responses under the heading *Evasion* because students perceived consultants' aversion to discussing "racial papers," as my students called them. Questions two and three of the pre-consultation form ask students to state their intentions for the session and their writing process stage. I am not sure if students relay this information to the consultants; I encourage them to, nonetheless. A class discussion about Writing Center consultations revealed that students who stated that they needed help with the "message" or "ideas" in their papers were redirected to issues pertaining to grammar. Keisha noticed the consultant kept focusing on commas, when indeed Keisha wanted to talk about her ideas, "how to say more," she explained. Another student indicated, "He [the consultant] didn't help me with my paper but I fixed some verbs and misspelled words."

Grammar is safe, appears race-less (although we know it isn't), and in some cases, is easy "to fix." When students in a racial literacy course meet a consultant who would rather insert commas in a paper than insert him/herself into a dialogue about race and writing, the session can become disabling to the student's writing, thinking, and racial literacy development. For example, Taylor indicated that she wanted to know if her ideas about the "white box" on the U.S. Census form were "all

over the place.” Instead, she received a lesson in proofreading and editing. On her post-consultation form she answered the following points:

**Name a positive aspect of the session.**

Taylor: “I cleaned up some errors I had and learned some new rules.”

**Name something that could have been improved.**

Taylor: “Next time I will proofread my paper better before I take it to them.”

One of the dangers of evasion is students who are not in the proofreading and editing stage may begin to feel as if they did something wrong, that they have to fix all grammar errors before they discuss other aspects of the paper. I sensed embarrassment in Taylor’s reflection that she should have caught the mistakes before going to the Writing Center, although she just wanted to see if her paper “made sense.”

Student awareness of evasion is a critical step in the racial literacy process, and the students and I began discussing this on the first day of class. “How do we evade talking about race?” I asked them.

“We don’t talk about it.” “We say racism doesn’t exist.” “Everybody gets upset and just walks away,” they responded.

“How do we evade writing about race?” I continued. This question was more difficult because most students revealed that they either have never written about race or only study race in terms of Black History Month. We went on to discuss how difficult it is to read “racial stories” in class, and to say “racial words.”

“Everybody gets quiet,” or “The teacher changes the subject.” Everyone agreed. As the semester progressed, we discussed how to be aware of evasion in our writing, namely, how we use politically-correct words to avoid offending readers, how we write about a handful of culturally-approved topics, or how we write about feelings and individuals not actions and institutions. So when the time came to prepare for the first visit to WCG, we had already discussed fears of exposing our “racial writing” to strangers who are not in the course. “They [writing tutors] won’t get it,” my students told me.

“And if they don’t, then tell me why you think they didn’t get it. Write about what happened,” I responded. Before the end of class, I warned them against getting bogged down in grammar. “We have time for that. Concentrate on telling your story.”

It is possible that my students’ papers were, in fact, ready for proofreading and editing, but the students did not know it. Or, given the classroom preparation, the students could have been overly-sensitive to any grammatical reference. Whatever the case, the students perceived that, although the consultants were “nice” and “friendly,” they did not address the students’ needs.

### *Appropriation*

In this section I focus on student perceptions of consultants encouraging them to use politically-correct language. Across campus, first-year students engaged

in a discussion of the All-Freshman Read book *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons. I gave my students the assignment to choose a word from the text and write a paper defining the word given its historical, contemporary, and literary context. Some of the words students chose were *colored*, *white trash*, *nigger*, *white*, and *bastard*. As I mentioned earlier, racial literacy requires research into the etymology of racialized terms in an effort to understand how race signifies, and, by extension, how other words signify race. We discuss the obvious terms such as “nigger” and the not so obvious such as “disadvantaged” or “at-risk.” Racial literacy also involves deconstructing language to see how it is used to maintain systems of injustice. Because we in the United States refuse to address race and racism seriously and publically, when we encounter these terms, we either ask the speaker to make a public apology, act as if we do not hear the word, or relegate the speaker to the category of racist. We function similarly in the classroom and in the Writing Center.

Although my students did not experience a consultant writing on their papers or steering away from the overall message of their papers, they did experience consultants mincing at “racial words” and suggesting they “say it another way.” Lisa told the class and reflected in her semester paper that every time her consultant came to the word *white* while reading her paper aloud, the consultant’s voice lowered to a whisper. Although she did not suggest that Lisa replace *white* with another term, her appropriation of the word while reading it suggested to Lisa that this was a term that should not be spoken or shared in public.

Lisa's classmate Keisha chose to write about the word *colored*. We discussed this word in class at length because it appears on the first page of the novel and because a white female in the course related that her father taught her to use the term to describe blacks because it was less offensive. The word *colored* precipitated lengthy discussions of acceptable and unacceptable terms. Keisha explained to the class that the consultant asked her to change *colored* to *African American*: "It was too bold for my paper," Keisha noted. I place Keisha's response in the category of appropriation because the consultant's remarks (as perceived by Keisha) signify an act of taking possession of something without permission. Using *colored* was central to Keisha's paper and to her racial literacy development. It signaled for Keisha as a student, and for me as an instructor, that her literacy would not be confined to politically-correct discourse. I also use the term appropriation because of the implication of property removal, to take someone's property without permission, be it physical or intellectual. Keisha was in the process of claiming her property, her racial literacy. To have her words appropriated by someone with more perceived literacy authority (sanctioned by the institution) threatened Keisha's agency and undermined destabilizing academic hierarchies that Writing Center theory and practice seek to disrupt with peer tutoring.

If Keisha had followed the advice of the consultant and replaced every occurrence of *colored* with *African American*, she would have had a more difficult time with the assignment given she had to include analysis from *Ellen Foster*.

However, she did not change the word; instead, she wrote about her experience: “I didn’t want to use *African American*. I wanted to use colored because that is what was in the book. I hope I don’t have that consultant again. It’s like she didn’t even read my paper to see what it was about, just kept telling me it wasn’t right to use *colored*.”

### *Engagement*

Although most students perceived that some consultants displayed discomfort in the session, avoided the racial content of the papers, or suggested they change their papers to sound more politically-correct, these same students reported successful WCG sessions wherein consultants engaged the content of the paper and the students. First, the consultants displayed a level of excitement and interest in the topic. This perception of my students was important because it signaled that the student had an ally in the difficult task of making meaning of race in writing and writing through race. “My guy had obviously read past racial papers,” a student told the class. Whether or not this was true, my student sensed that his consultant had experience with “racial papers,” and as a result, did not attempt to evade the topic or appropriate his words. Second, students perceived some consultants had been trained or educated in racial literacy. Contrary to comments from the beginning of the semester when students indicated fear that the consultants would not “get it,” some students met graduate students who either attended a racial literacy

workshop I facilitated and/or were knowledgeable of critical race and literacy theories. Excitement and knowledge made all the difference for my students. Take James's semester reflection as an example:

Since being in this class, I've become more observant of human behaviors and the way people, including me, think when it comes to race. After writing my first paper for this class, I went to the Writing Center. I was a little nervous because I knew that there wasn't a single black writing consultant in there. The title of my paper was 'What it means to be Black,' and there were several times in the paper where I referred to the many advantages of white people. As my consultant read my paper, she was agreeing with it. I couldn't believe that a white person was actually acknowledging their advantages. I thought that all whites were simply in denial when it came to race.

Reading James's comments, one can be tempted to equate 'agreement' with 'engagement.' It is not my intention to suggest (and I do not speak for James) that consultants have to agree with student ideas or arguments about race. What is important from my perspective as an instructor is that the consultant engaged. Racial literacy requires engagement, as should Writing Center consultations. More importantly, James's racial literacy expanded as he acknowledged his preconceptions about whites, denial, and race. Nervously, he anticipated a white consultant denying that racism in the form of white privilege even exists. Amid the whiteness of WCG, James confronted his own racial literacy biases and reported repeat visits to this particular consultant.

I return to Taylor, a consistent seminar student and WCG client. She went to WCG seeking a non-white face, but “there were none,” she wrote. Her semester reflection examined her initial assumptions:

At the beginning of the semester I was really excited about learning about other cultures and races. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. I guess that is why I wanted a tutor who wasn't white. When Mrs. Johnson asked me why I was looking for a non-white person, I wasn't sure. I guess I thought all white people would agree with me and the tutor would question what I was writing. After being in this class, I realized I wanted somebody different so I could learn from them. Maybe they could help me understand race better and what they have to go through.

Taylor and I discussed a draft of her reflection in conference. I asked her if she still believed that all white tutors think alike. After her experience with a white male graduate student, she explained, “There are white people who know about race.” “He asked me questions, sort of like you do in class that made me think harder.” Similar to James, Taylor was becoming more racially literate because she was recognizing how racial perceptions affected her tutoring expectations. This developmental process would have been hindered, however, if she had not met with a consultant willing to engage racial literacy.

During that conference, I also wanted Taylor to recognize that her desire for a non-white tutor to teach her about race was just as problematic as her belief about white tutors. I asked her to recall a classroom discussion when an African-American male asked a Hispanic-American student to explain why “illegal aliens” come to the United States. She recalled that everyone in the classroom looked at the student,

waiting for him to teach the rest of the class. That day we discussed the concept of “native-informant,” of racial minorities being held as representatives of and spokespersons for a group. We also discussed exoticization, difference, and otherness.

“Oh,” she said, remembering the look on her classmate’s face during the illegal alien discussion.

“We all do it sometimes,” I assured her.

“But why are they all white?” “The tutors?” She was angry now.

“Now that is a good question. I look forward to reading your final paper.”

Not only did I learn a lot about my students, about racial literacy in and outside of the classroom, but also I learned about myself and how I evade, appropriate, and engage. Evasion for me as racial literacy instructor means not answering the question, “Why are the tutors all white?” Because that would lead into questions about professors, about honors courses, etc. I would have to ask my good friend and director of the Writing Center, “Why are all the tutors white?” For now, I want to reserve for them a little bit of the myth—the myth that college is the great equalizer, that UNC-Greensboro is the most diverse university in the North Carolina system, which means its faculty, administration, and curricula are diverse too. I want my students to hold on to a portion of the myth; after all, they are first-year students I tell myself. So, I evade.

I am not immune to the appropriation of my students' literacy just as Writing Center consultants are not. Certainly, complete ownership of one's literacy is impossible, but I must be careful not to shape my students' racial literacy in such a way that they cannot develop critical awareness for themselves. It is a delicate balance, so I evade to avoid appropriation. My evasion also probably comes from fear of revealing too much of myself and the world to first-year students. Nevertheless, I do not have the last word nor the only truth about race, language, and power. I believe that the more people and environments students examine from a racial literacy perspective, the better chance students have of creating their own meaning of racial literacy, one in which a discursive system is part of the core of race.

Finally, my engagement with racial literacy in the Writing Center presented problems from a personal and professional perspective. Personally and professionally, I am good friends with the director. We have presented papers together about whiteness theory. We studied for comprehensive exams together. We wrestle with race and language theory together. So, my engagement is clouded by the desire to present a non-racist picture of the Writing Center, and by extension, a non-racist picture of my friend. But, what I reveal about personal relationships, institutional dynamics, race and language, and academic scholarship, constitutes my own racial literacy development. Similar to my students, I am on a racial literacy journey too.

I conclude this section by addressing questions I raised earlier. What role, if any, should the Writing Center play in racial literacy development? The Writing Center is not a race or racism neutral space. It is a part of the larger academic institution, a part of the larger society, and a part of the world where race and racism, in various forms and degrees, still shape the lives of individuals and influence the values and practices within institutions. That being said, if the Writing Center does not work against systems of racism via literacy, then it inadvertently works to maintain the system. Similar to my racial literacy seminar, the Writing Center can only do so much towards dismantling racism because it is a part of the academic institution. Nevertheless, Writing Centers must do something, just as rhetoric and composition studies must do something. Racial literacy is something that Writing Centers can do.

Writing Centers can actively recruit students of color, not to promote diversity on the surface or to pacify critical colleagues, but to disrupt a literacy system that privileges whiteness from birth to college and beyond, a system that deliberately under-prepares students of color for college, internships, and tutoring jobs. Writing Centers can integrate racial literacy into tutor training. The students who perceived their sessions being the most successful indicated that their consultants had some familiarity with racial literacy. One of my reasons for designing a racial literacy course was my frustration with talking around race and racism in multicultural curricula then springing such a volatile topic on students

with no time for them to prepare. What happens in classrooms—evasion, appropriation, anger, and denial—also happens in Writing Centers when directors do not prepare consultants. Certainly, directors cannot prepare consultants for every volatile topic or every newly developed course. Nevertheless, racial literacy training can help prepare consultants for students who want to be more critical in their writing about race.

Finally, does the Writing Center enable or disable a student's racial literacy development? How should a racial literacy instructor integrate Writing Center services into the classroom and still provide students with a critical learning experience? The primary instruction for racial literacy occurs in the racial literacy classroom. However, racial literacy cannot be developed within a vacuum. Racial literacy should not only be an individual enterprise but also an institutional enterprise. If racial literacy must expand outside of the rhetoric and composition classroom and into other academic spaces, then it should also expand outside of the academy. In this project, I address how racial changes in the nation can affect racial literacy in rhetoric and composition studies, thus affecting how we teach racial literacy.

## **Teaching Racial Literacy in the Age of Obama**

With the racial progress in the political arena this year and the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America, the racial literacy pedagogy thus far described gets more complicated. Our nation has entered a new age of racial politics that illustrates that ever-present messiness of teaching about race in America. As I write, President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama are overseas meeting with presidents of powerful nations and dining with the Queen of England. They are the new faces of America and of world power. As I look closely at the photographs from abroad, I notice that many of the other First Ladies and Presidents are people of color. Whiteness does not stand out, or dominate, at least not in the pictorial representation of world leaders. It is embedded and invisible, but still global and powerful. The African-American faces of the First Family of the United States of America present a delightful dilemma for me as an instructor—racial progress in the nation can be viewed from a racially liberal perspective or from a racially literate perspective. Just as race and racism transform with the times, so must racial literacy practice. What must racial literacy scholars consider now that the most powerful nation on earth has an African American as its leader? To conclude this chapter, I present a preliminary examination of the implications of Obama's election on racial literacy in the rhetoric and composition classroom, and I suggest where racial literacy can take not only the field of rhetoric and composition studies but also society as a whole.

*Racial Liberalism and the Election of 2008*

What does the election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States mean, in general, and to those of us who theorize and teach about race? This is the question that continues to shape racial discourse in the media and inevitably in classrooms around the world. One unfortunate consequence of the election of Barack Obama is that it can help sustain the already present racial liberalism in society and in the academy. Racial liberalism, as I defined, involves surface remedies to structural racism, such as multicultural and diversity initiatives, that sugarcoat or mask the hierarchy of white dominance in almost every major institution in our lives. Racial liberalism promotes tolerance for difference but does not critique how difference is structured and valued within institutions. Racial liberalism emphasizes individual tolerance and individual attitudes over the systemic and structural mechanics of racism. As a part of Charles Mills' *Racial Contract*, racial liberalism is a deliberately "race-evading and calculatedly amnesiac incarnation":

The atrocities of the past now being an embarrassment, they must be denied, minimized, or conceptually bypassed. A cultivated amnesia, a set of constructed deafnesses and blindnesses, characterizes racial liberalism: subjects one cannot raise, issues one cannot broach, topics one cannot explore. The contractarian ideal of social transparency about present and past would, if implemented, make it impossible to continue as before: one would see and know too much. (18)

Racially liberal discussions that prevail in the academy focus on everyone “getting along” or “politically-correct” language, not on the past or the present racial embarrassments of the nation. If society truly knows what went into sustaining the Racial Contract, then individuals would have to change because the knowledge would be too incriminating to continue as is. But, because racial liberalism is the evolution of the Racial Contract today, we focus on tolerable knowledge, such as how individuals treat one another. In other words, it is not right to treat someone differently because of skin color, at least not in public. Racial liberalism also promotes the individualistic bootstraps mentality, which claims that anyone, regardless of race or other social forces, can achieve the American dream through work hard. Racial liberalism might acknowledge discrimination of the past, but the present offers everyone the same opportunities. These are racially liberal sentiments that paper-over white dominance and privilege.

One of the most salient questions has been whether Obama’s rise to political prominence signaled the country’s move to a post-racial society. The reasoning goes something like this: if Barack Obama could make it to the White House without flaming the fire of civil rights racial justice rhetoric or if he could become president without being labeled “the black candidate,” then Obama and America have transcended race; Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream has been fulfilled. In other words, we beat it. We conquered race and racism. This notion of transcending race or

moving into a post-racial America is problematic for many reasons, three of which I address here.

First, one person cannot redeem a nation for hundreds of years of racial crimes. In this sense, the cure for racism is erroneously embodied in one person, the individual, and not in systems and institutions. On the surface, Barack Obama appears to be a classic example of the bootstraps mentality, tolerated “Other” who succeeded without playing the race card. Some people might say, “If Barack Obama could do it, then any black person can do it.” Barack Obama’s election is a monumental triumph in national and racial politics, but it should not be viewed as the end of racial inequity, racial injustice, or white dominance. Instructors must be careful not to fall into the individualism trap, that one person’s success (be it Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, or Barack Obama) represents the success of all African Americans or the end of racism. Furthermore, with Barack Obama as President, the nation can still have an unjust criminal justice system, racial and class biases in education, and so on. Second, to fulfill King’s dream of being judged by one’s character and not one’s color first requires that we understand that the reality of race and racism are not merely based on skin color, but in the linkage of skin color to character. So the choice is not color “or” character. Indeed, within a racialized society, color “equals” character. A post-racial society, then, means that the racial equation no longer exists and the byproducts of that equation (violence, discrimination, etc.) no longer impact our lives or our institutions.

Third, the unspoken part of this post-racial declaration suggests that we no longer need to talk about race or racism. Because we now have an African-American President of the United States, African Americans in particular, should move beyond racism as an “excuse” for limitations in their lives. African Americans should also move beyond the need for Black History Month, according to some public pundits. From *National Public Radio* (NPR) to individual blogs, the debate intensified about whether or not Obama’s election means American history has now been transformed into an inclusive narrative with African Americans. These questions are bound to arise and should promote critical public dialogue. However, there is a challenge for racial literacy instructors and people in general on their own racial literacy journey. The repetitiveness of these conversations about transcendence and post-racialism function in the same manner as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conversations about race and nature. Through the reiterative process of calling things into being, or speech acts, these conversations form a new racial discourse that shape public imagination. At some point, the public will begin to believe that we have transcended race or that we no longer need Black History Month. These beliefs lead to actions or inactions: if we have transcended race, then there is no need for deliberate analysis. Accordingly, if there is no need for Black History Month, then we can stop teaching about African-American history. If we stop teaching African-American history, then we can stop stocking the store shelves once a year with African-American cultural items. Left unexamined, racially liberal

significances of the election of Barack Obama influences not just the individual but also the institutional when it comes to how the public views race and racism in society.

Furthermore, public discourse about post-racialism is bound to make it into classroom discussions. In a rhetoric and composition course, racially liberal interpretations of the election might lead to essays about how race does not matter anymore. Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. functions in the public imagination as the iconic figure who was non-violent and a promoter of color-blindness, so too might Barack Obama. Keith Gilyard describes the pitfalls of racial liberalism in the classroom this way:

The case in most classrooms is that 'race' simply inscribes another othering discourse. It is an unproblematized marker of the nonwhite, the other. . . . Casting race analysis in conventional terms leads students to pedestrian interpretations and constructions inside a bankrupt race-relations model, thus leading to a sort of King to King solution, students dreaming and all getting along—rhetorically. (*Race* 48 -9)

The transference of iconic status from King to Obama, which symbolizes a nation's racial tolerance, is not that far-fetched when we consider the public discourse on the matter. As former President George W. Bush concluded the day of the election in the *Washington Times*: "This moment is especially uplifting for a generation of Americans who witnessed the struggle for civil rights with their own eyes, and four decades later see dream fulfilled." Newspapers and major media outlets around the country questioned or proclaimed that Barack Obama was the reality of King's

dream. Street peddlers sold t-shirts with King in the background and Obama in the forefront, under the caption, “The Dream is Real.” The continuous looping of these statements, whether conjecture or proclamation, can shape public imaginations, classroom conversations, and curricula in such a way that we never really get to understanding King’s dream, one that fought against poverty, class inequalities, war and violence, and racism.

To avoid what Gilyard calls a “bankrupt race-relations model” (48) in our classrooms, a model that I believe reacts to societal changes and public discourse about race, particularly as presented in mainstream media, rhetoric and composition studies should approach this new era of race and discourse from a racial literacy perspective, which presents myriad possibilities for decoding the “durable racial grammar” of our society, as Lani Guinier describes (“From Racial” 100).

### *Racial Literacy and the Election of 2008*

Barack Obama’s candidacy and election and the public discourse surrounding both lend themselves to racial literacy analysis that counters the racial liberalism at present. Racial literacy theory argues that race is part discursive construct and, therefore, needs to be analyzed from a critical language perspective. What are the possibilities, then, that racial literacy offers to understanding the significance of the

election of 2008? How might rhetoric and composition studies integrate this national moment of racial progress into an academic moment of racial progress? I offer preliminary thoughts on two ways of reading the national moment from a racial literacy perspective. First, the election of Barack Obama offers insight into how racial subjectivity is formed and floats in the United States, particularly in public. Second, Barack Obama's speech about race reveals the complicated and nuanced ways we must think about and respond to race in our literacy performances.

### *Racial Subjectivity*

Throughout this project I have privileged analysis over personal reflection within rhetoric and composition studies as it pertains to race because, as Gilyard, Catherine Prendergast, and others have argued, little critical race analysis has taken place within the field. Nevertheless, there is a place for examining racial subjectivity and personal identity within racial literacy praxis. As I showed in chapter 3, the racialized individual is a byproduct of the racial signification system, one that begins by structuring groups of people in a hierarchy and then moves to structuring institutions to privilege one group over all others. Individuals are a part of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call the "racial formation" process in so much that we are shaped by the process and we shape society through our participation in society (55). Sometimes we are aware of participation in racial formation, but most

of the times we are not. As discussed earlier, race has come to function at the level of common sense, and we live by the commonsensical, thus living by race.

Racial literacy calls us to an awareness of the commonsensical, naturalized, unstated, and universalized character of race. In particular, it calls us to recognize these qualities within the discursive realm. Racial literacy also calls us to recognize how language forms us as racialized beings. In a rhetoric and composition classroom, instructors can use Obama's racialized story, being a child of a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya, to discuss how a society classifies a person racially, how racial identity is fluid, and how a person chooses or performs race. Obama referred to his background incessantly as testament to his ability to cross divides and to hear the concerns of different groups of people. In his memoir, Obama also writes of embracing blackness as he recognized that society views and treats him like a black man. Racial subjectivity for Obama was in the forefront of his coming of age. His experience with race is not unique, however. There are numerous other memoirs, but few of these stories have the potential to capture the public's imagination and reshape their beliefs and behaviors when it comes to race.

After the 2004 Democratic National Convention, media pundits began to ask, *What do we call this guy? Is he black? African American? White?* Some even claimed, *He's too black. He's not black enough.* Journalists, politicians, and average citizens acknowledged and admired Obama's talent, charisma, and intelligence, but many of them could not make sense of his skin color alongside his political prominence.

Numerous magazine and newspaper articles compared and contrasted Obama to other African American leaders and politicians, most glaringly to Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. Obama was not stereotypically black; most importantly, he was not angry. Barack Obama, with his “mixed-parentage,” funny name, and Ivy League education, was “exotic” to some people, which also meant that he was “foreign” to others. The public discourse about race and Obama reveals the floating nature of race, what it means to be black and how people respond to a person based on those meanings.

Racial literacy and the election would also prompt analysis of public discourse, validity, and acceptability. As an instructor, I would turn to Michael Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics*. Warner explains that the sensibilities of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution held that the validity of ideas existed in direct proportion to their objectivity. That is, ideas should be expressed separate and apart from the particularities of one’s personhood. So as “the public” became increasingly disembodied, expressions of public discourse followed suit. The result became an amorphous, unidentifiable, invisible entity called “the public” that everyone was accountable to but no one could quantify or qualify. And the only way one could have his ideas included in “the public’s” discourse was to present them in such a way that his embodied particularity remained invisible. Thus, the more of what you say is attached to who you are, the less valid it is. “But, the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction,” according to Warner, “is both the utopian moment

of the public sphere and a major source of domination, for the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource” (165). Warner calls this rhetorical strategy “rhetorics of disincorporation,” and “the subject who could master this rhetoric in the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied. These traits could go unmarked, even grammatically, while other features of bodies could only be acknowledged in discourse as the humiliating positivity of the particular” (165):

The bourgeois public sphere claimed to have no relation to body image at all. Public issues were depersonalized so that, in theory, any person would have the ability to offer an opinion about them and submit that opinion to the impersonal test of public debate without personal hazard. Yet the bourgeois public sphere continued to rely on features of certain bodies. Access to the public came in the whiteness and maleness that were then denied as forms of positivity, since the white male *qua* public person was only abstract rather than white and male. (166)

The capacity for disembodiment or invisibility, then, is a source of power and access. If one has the option to present ideas apart from presenting one’s embodied location, then he has a part in shaping this powerful entity called the public.

Racial literacy, then, can reveal how Obama, the candidate, was able to float racially, avoiding race when necessary, which was most of the time, and employing racial cues at other more expedient times, like when he visited urban cities. Perhaps recognizing the nation’s discomfort and ignorance when talking about race, Barack Obama attempted to disembody while in the public sphere. His maleness and his literacy (articulateness coupled with his elite education) remained assets. But, his

race did not. He sought debates about the economy, healthcare, education, and the environment, not from a racial-justice standpoint but from a national standpoint. The campaign appeared to be going post-racial. Had Obama's campaign succeeded without much of a substantive mention of race at all, then racial liberalism's post-racial position might have an argument. And for several months during the campaign, such was the case. But then the controversial comments by Jeremiah Wright altogether captivated and dominated media coverage, and questions about Obama's views on race took center stage.

### *The Race Speech*

In addition to sparking critical dialogue about racial subjectivity, the national moment of Obama's election placed race, rhetoric, and courage on a world stage when Obama was forced to address the controversial remarks from his former pastor Jeremiah Wright. The field of rhetoric and composition studies, I believe, can learn from this moment of racial courage that, as much as we try, we cannot avoid race. We should not wait until a crisis emerges, but we should be proactive and face race head-on.

On March 18, 2008, Barack Obama confronted an issue he hoped would only have a minimal impact in the presidential campaign. Obama avoided overt race-talk, even though his public writings demonstrated his willingness to engage the issue. But when video clips of Pastor Wright's sermons surfaced, with Wright faulting

American foreign policy for the terrorist attacks on September 11 and suggesting that the U.S. government uses the AIDS virus to kill African Americans, many people in the country could not turn away from the twenty-four hour coverage of an angry black man proclaiming “God Damn America.” Obama was between race and a hard place, and the only way out was for him to use the power of language and rhetorical skill to highlight for the world the complicated and messy reality of race in American life.

What makes Obama’s race speech, which is formally entitled “A More Perfect Union,” applicable to racial literacy is that it highlights how race has impacted negatively African Americans and whites, primarily, but other groups as well. He claims that African Americans are justified in their anger given the nation’s history, and similarly, whites are justified in their resentment of social programs or civil rights laws that seek to redress past wrongs. The speech also demonstrates that language can be a tool in educating and inspiring people to deal with race in more humane and unifying ways. Obama presented the country with a choice:

We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as a spectacle—as we did in the O.J. trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright’s sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, or make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she’s playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies. (Olive 266)

The other choice, Obama concluded, is to talk about the systemic problems facing all people, regardless of color, such as failing schools, two international wars, corporate greed, and a broken healthcare system. To do so does not mean that Obama is avoiding race. In fact, he says that the country is in a “racial stalemate” because we have not been able “to move beyond our racial divisions” and “old racial wounds” (264). In short, everyone must be willing to see past the anger, the hurt, the resentment, and the fear, in order to form a more perfect union based in racial reconciliation and equality.

Admittedly, Obama’s race speech does not deconstruct race at its core, but it does move us closer to deconstructing how we have been dealing with race—in sound bytes, sensationalized media spectacles, and emotional outbursts. It also points to the fact that we all are implicated in the maintenance of this race circus, and if we keep doing what we are doing, then we will never make any progress.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION: RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION STUDIES,  
RACE(ING) TOWARD THE FUTURE

My argument in this project has been that rhetoric and composition studies is in a racial stalemate or a crisis when it comes to theorizing and teaching about race. This project has focused primarily on the discursive because this component of race has not been explored as it should be. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I would like the field to move beyond racial liberalism by focusing on racial literacy. In doing so, we address race head-on from a discursive standpoint. This does not mean that we view race as language *only*, as if we need to banish certain words from our vocabulary in order to rid society of racism. On the contrary, under racial liberalism *race* and *racism* operate as “devil terms,” as defined by Richard Weaver (212), and so we rarely talk about them with any critical clarity. The field has been focused more so on the social and psychological: how do students get along in the classroom, what racially inflammatory statement is in the media spotlight, or what tragedy prompts a quick and surface response to racism, thus, it has not fully interrogated the discursive. Precisely then, we do not need to banish words; we need to speak, read, write, and deconstruct them. To embrace a racial literacy paradigm in the field requires theorizing and teaching about race as a discursive

system, not as individual words people use or as individual attitudes or behaviors, although racial literacy does attend to how race and racism impact subject formation. To embrace racial literacy would mean the field would need to evaluate the knowledge it constructs about race in professional settings, in student textbooks, and in rhetoric and composition programs.

### **Grounding Racial Literacy in the Field**

My hope with this project is that it will spark additional scholarship and teaching about racial literacy in the field. More importantly, though, I believe the field should work towards grounding racial literacy praxis on a large scale, thus meeting the challenge to face race head-on by examining how it functions as a term, concept, and ideology and how the racial landscape of the field reveals adherence to racial liberalism. We can ground racial literacy in the field by 1) looking to critical race theory and scholars who are transforming theory and practice in the study of law; 2) re-orienting the field with linguistics; 3) producing student and scholarly texts attentive to racial literacy theory; and 4) confronting white fear.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory (CRT) is influencing disciplines outside of legal studies, and as a result, it is tempting for rhetoric and composition scholars to incorporate CRT into their theory and teaching given the lack of critical theory about race within

rhetoric and composition studies. I admit that I was drawn to CRT when I was searching for critical race analysis to use in the classroom. Critical race theory offers scholars its clearly defined tenets and the story of how CRT came to be.

Critical race theory begins the process of understanding racial formation in legal discourse and legal practice. In the late 1980s a group of Harvard Law students, dismayed with the conservative and liberal agendas that maintained the racial status quo, began reading, writing, and organizing about race, racism, and the law. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, legal scholars Richard Delgado and Jean make clear that CRT is an outgrowth and response to Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and civil rights rhetoric and “questions the very foundations of liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (3). Delgado and Stefancic list basic tenets of CRT. First, CRT subscribes to the belief that racism is “normal science”; in other words, it is an ordinary function of the day for most people of color in the United States. Second, CRT uses the terms “interest convergence” or “material determinism” to explain how “our system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, both psychic and material” (7). What this means is that certain groups benefit from racism, and as such, have little interest in dismantling a racist system. Third, CRT relies on the social construction thesis of race: “Not objective, inherent, or fixed, [race and races] correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (7).

Fourth, CRT addresses the phenomena of “differential racialization,” wherein “dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market” (8). The themes of “intersectionality” and “anti-essentialism” constitute the fifth tenet of CRT. In short, although no group (for example Latinos) can be bottled into a single, natural essence, persons with similar gender, class, and ethnic backgrounds may experience similar intersectional, overlapping oppressions. In the sixth and final tenet, CRT employs “legal storytelling” to disrupt the “law’s master narratives” with the unique voices and experiences of color. Delgado and Stefancic acknowledge that the “voice-of-color” thesis appears essentialistic. Nevertheless, given the collective nature of racism and various people’s experiences with oppression, voices of color have unique perspectives that should inform legal matters (6-9).

From these tenets, CRT scholars have begun to write and to practice law in such a way as to bring about change in legal discourse and the legal system. In analyzing the ways race and racism function in court cases, legal briefs, legal curricula, etc., they have begun to deconstruct the myth of a colorblind legal system and of liberal claims to incremental civil rights legislation. What is important is the fact that these scholars decided to push the field to acknowledge and to analyze how race and racism are a part of the fabric of legal discourse and practice.

Rhetoric and composition studies could analyze each tenet of CRT in such a way to make them relevant and practical to our field, and I believe they are

applicable. Nevertheless, a more sustainable approach to critical race analysis in the field would come through racial literacy because racial literacy, as I propose, emphasizes the field's foundations of language formation and production. Whereas CRT examines racism within legal discourse, racial literacy examines race and racism as discourse, which then leads to how the law constructs race. For example, the Naturalization Act of 1790 clearly stipulated that U.S. citizenship could only be granted to "free white persons" and of "good moral character," which began the process of forming race as a discourse, not only based on skin color and character but also on nationhood. Racial literacy requires that we understand how the terms *race* and *racism* named and categorized people and, subsequently, how terms such as *American* and *patriotic* also carry racial connotations that include and exclude people. To be clear, I do not promote racial literacy as an alternative to critical race theory but as an addition to it, specifically for the field of rhetoric and composition studies.

### *Linguistics*

To ground racial literacy within rhetoric and composition studies similar to the way CRT is grounded in legal studies, I recommend that the field re-orientate itself with linguistics, which will not only offer new insights into the structural power of language but also give instructors additional avenues for discussing grammar. Linguistics, as Sue Hum determines, became subordinated to the writing

process in the 1970s (31). The field began to talk more of the stages of writing development, the construction of knowledge through collaboration, and the importance of peer review. Many instructors found that grammar worksheets and drills did little to improve student writing or an understanding of grammar. As a result, linguistics, in the form of structural units at the sentence level, punctuation, and sentence combining, rested solely within the revision stage of the writing process (31-38). This approach to linguistics or grammar in the classroom was the one I was educated in, and, as a result, I employ it in my classrooms because I have found that student anxiety over grammar hinders their creativity and ability to generate writing, regardless of its attention to Standard English grammar rules. Nevertheless, there is a part of linguistics that the field should re-evaluate, and that deals with how language functions in society, otherwise known as sociolinguistics. I suggest beginning a scholarly dialogue about language, power, and societal institutions, such as the academy, which can provide an avenue into discussions about how institutions or systems are comprised of units just as essays, paragraphs, sentences, and words are comprised of units. To follow, we can examine how the word *race* functions within a larger linguistic system but also as a discursive system itself. This approach, I believe, has the potential to make studying grammar, language, and race more relevant to students' lives and more relevant to the field of rhetoric and composition studies.

### *Textbooks and Training*

Furthermore, rhetoric and composition studies must re-imagine what a student textbook looks like and what teacher training entails. This re-orientation to linguistics will certainly prompt the field to search for readings more closely tied to language and literacy issues. Editors will hopefully frame their arguments about the texts and readings within a racial literacy paradigm that problematizes racial liberalism. The shift to racial literacy also requires educating and training instructors in the new praxis. As a graduate teaching assistant, I had the opportunity to speak to incoming teaching assistants about my research and to provide strategies for them to teach the all-freshman read text *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons. What I realized as I outlined my argument for racial literacy and how to teach it in a freshman composition classroom was that many white instructors resort to racial liberalism because they feel uncomfortable teaching about race out of fear that something might go wrong in the class or that racism will be revealed. A white instructor asked me, "Who am I to talk about race, because I am this white guy?" I instructed the all-white crowd that whiteness has privileges, one of which is an assumed neutrality when it comes to racial issues. For the most part, white instructors can talk about race without the immediate assumption that a white person has ulterior motives or is playing the race card. Because whiteness is assumed to be the norm and objective, then white teachers can and should seize its

power, in this instance, to speak about the unspeakable and to teach about the unteachable.

I do not suggest that racial literacy will alleviate angst. What it does for me, however, as an African-American woman who does not carry the privilege to walk into a classroom with a presumed neutrality about race, is it gives me a place to begin the shifts to focus off individual students and, hopefully, off of me as the instructor, at least momentarily throughout the semester, so students can focus on language and the power race carries through race. This racial literacy awareness should be a part of teacher training.

### *White Fear*

Finally, the field must address white fear. Student resistance and disruptions in the classroom are understandable fears for instructors dealing with race issues. I, too, have been fearful of teaching about race. White fear is something different. Although individuals can have white fear, it is more powerful than the individual. It is institutional and systemic in society. It operates at a subconscious and ideological level just as white privilege and feelings of supremacy do. In *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege*, Robert Jensen outlines four White fears: learning that what one has is unearned; losing the material things one owns as societal systems become more just; being dominated by non-white people; and being seen as someone who actually believes in or practices racism (53-55).

What does it mean for rhetoric and composition studies and individual instructors to confront these white fears? It might mean producing scholarship and student textbooks that reveal the Racial Contract and deconstruct race at the discursive level. It might mean acknowledging that white scholars have unearned material benefits. It should mean making bold changes at the national and departmental levels when it comes to racial representation, scholarship, faculty jobs, grant money, etc. I conclude this section with an example that summarizes the fears and how racial liberalism can mask as racial literacy or critical race awareness. Gary Olson in “Working with Difference: Critical Race Studies and the Teaching of Composition,” argues that the field has yet to integrate critical race analysis into its theory and pedagogy.

As a preface to his analysis of critical race studies and its relevance to composition, Olson describes how the U.S. population is becoming more and more diverse, thus altering the predominantly white and middle class higher education population. “Even a cursory glance at composition scholarship, however, indicates that writing instructors and writing program directors are not well equipped to cope, both pedagogically and administratively, with the influx of students of color,” asserts Olson (209). Olson suggests composition scholars and instructors turn to critical race theory for advice. What Olson is saying is important, but I also want to focus on what he is not saying, what is in the background of his argument. He paints a picture of college classrooms, once filled with white middle-class students and

instructors, now changing as a result of “record numbers of minorities and international students enrolling in college” (209). As Olson goes on to describe the demographic changes, the problem becomes clearer. His argument for CRT is in reaction to an influx of students of color and is laced in white fear. Olson cites *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, to make his point:

For example, from 1980 to 1999 the number of African Americans enrolled in college in the U.S. rose by half, the number of Native Americans almost doubled, the number of international students almost doubled, the number of Hispanics almost tripled. In contrast, the number of whites enrolled in college barely changed. (209)

Similar to newspaper and magazine headlines and primetime news specials that promote fear of white annihilation or a takeover by people of color, Olson insinuates that whites will be the minority before we know it. They may even become “extinct,” to use my student’s characterization of the “problem.”

Olson also claims, as do I, that rhetoric and composition studies is not “well equipped to cope” with the “influx” (209). The irony of the word “cope” deserves attention. Whereas Olson speaks of pedagogical and administrative lackings, the background noise speaks of emotional, even psychic hindrances. White fear leaps off the page, even amidst Olson’s sincere call for anti-racist composition studies. My interpretation of Olson’s argument might seem unduly harsh. The point I am trying to make is not so much about Olson as it is about the power of race and language. Racism hides in language. White fear hides behind language. Racial liberalism masks

as racial literacy. That is why it is critical to those in the field who want to face race head-on to look more closely at how race and racism operate as a language and in language. Even in our honest scholarly attempts to be critical race practitioners, we can reify race and racism. This process of forging new ground in teaching and scholarship is messy and requires continual reflection and revision that often reveals limitations for all of us.

### **Limitations and Possibilities of Racial Literacy**

As with all theories and pedagogies, there are limitations. Here, I address the question of whether or not racial literacy is sufficient to deconstruct how race and other socially-constructed oppressive structures and identities collide and, by extension, what the road blocks are to such praxis in the field. As an African-American woman, I do not and cannot separate race from gender; as a result, my interpretations of the world, and even this dissertation project, is filtered from this raced-gendered perspective. It is also filtered through my middle-class, Christian upbringing. And so, all of these elements that impact who I am shape the knowledge that I construct. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's explanation of race as a metalanguage further illustrates the point I make: "Since [race] speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race," we must examine it beyond the limited confines of race (255). She claims:

[Race] makes hair 'good' or 'bad', speech patterns 'correct' or 'incorrect'. It is, in fact, the apparent overdeterminacy of race in Western culture, and particularly in the United States, that has permitted it to function as a metalanguage in its discursive representation and construction of social relations. Race not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops. It precludes unity with the same gender group but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes. Whether race is textually omitted or textually privileged, its totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender remains. (255)

What this means is that race, as I theorized in chapter 3, screens other aspects of our identity. Said differently, race, as a metalanguage, speaks or signifies over, on top of, and next to other social constructions like gender and class. It blurs, mystifies, and problematizes individual and collective subjectivity as well as institutional ideologies and practices. With this in mind, racial literacy should and can be implemented alongside gender literacy, sexual literacy, and the like. The question for future research becomes—not what does it mean to be literate in a racialized society—but what does it mean to be literate in an oppressive society? Even further we must ask, how does language operate not only to produce race and racism but also homophobia, classism, patriarchy, ableism, etc.? How do terms such as *gay* or *man* signify? How do they operate as speech acts? How are people's lives chances limited or broadened in society based on how words are used? These questions of language and power, about the grammar of oppression, I believe, should be an integral part of the future of rhetoric and composition studies.

I proposed three shifts in this project, beginning with shifting the rhetorical subject from the racialized individual to race as a discursive system. Shift number two requires transitioning from a theoretical paradigm of racial liberalism to one of racial literacy. Finally, shift three proposes a new racial literacy pedagogy that faces race head-on in the classroom. What all of these shifts require, however, is a field ready to tackle its complicity with white supremacy. This is another limitation. The field has to be ready to say it has signed the Racial Contract, as Charles Mills describes, a contract between whites to keep non-white bodies and knowledge about race and racism hidden (18). The field has to be ready to confront the fear that comes with saying there is more to race and racism than we previously acknowledged. As language specialists, we should be willing to explore how we use language and how language uses us to perpetuate racism.

The disheartening part about all of this is that many people in marginalized positions do not believe, including myself, that those in power will come to this revelation on their own because they have too much to lose. Racial liberalism is profitable, be it textbook production, academic faculty positions, funding for diversity and inclusion training, and so on. With this in mind, Jacqueline Jones Royster advises that merely constructing new knowledge (racial literacy knowledge, for example) is not enough to change a system that is profitable on many levels:

Merely constructing knowledge seems insufficient to change in systemic ways the social hierarchies that have shaped meaning and value. Interpretive communities have to be persuaded, not just to notice that there is something more or different to know, but actually to incorporate the knowledge in their thinking and use it meaningfully in sense-making enterprises. . . . We must look at knowledge-making as a process of persuasion. We must persuade people to believe the new knowledge. (164-65)

Royster's insistence on knowledge-making as persuasion increases the burden of racial literacy advocates within the field. Not only must we deal with the risks of producing "unsanctioned, counter-discourses, [and] alternative engagements" (150), (risks can include not getting published or not receiving tenure), but we must also persuade those who have used knowledge and power to exclude and to mask, now to include and to reveal. As an African-American instructor who tries to get my students to understand why such knowledge is hidden and neglected, why their stories are not told, or why we rarely have serious, critical discussions about the power of language and the power of race, I have come to the conclusion that what I am really saying to my students is that those neglected people, bodies, stories, and words, are not valuable enough to be knowledge. If, as Royster argues, we must be persuaded of new knowledge, then we also must be persuaded of another human's value. In other words, it is important to understand how the language of race was used to construct society, to privilege certain people, and to enslave, remove, and even kill other people. This new knowledge should be valuable because these people are valuable. Unfortunately, given the history of race and racism in the U.S., mere persuasion through language did not accomplish the systemic, institutionally-

sanctioned changes the country needed to begin the process of racial justice and valuing of human beings. As much as we are invested in Dr. Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolence and his brilliant oratory, King was not blind to the various uses of force or the variety of ways one could forcibly persuade those in power.

I remember hearing Barack Obama say on the campaign trail that "power concedes nothing" as he used language to persuade millions of Americans to organize for change. I also remember thinking that Obama, in alluding to Frederick Douglass speaking two centuries earlier, strategically omitted the latter end of the quotation. Douglass knew well that "power concedes nothing without demand. It never did. It never will" (Shapiro and Epstein 212), as he, too, mobilized for change. Before Obama could demand or put pressure on society to change he had to confront his own fears and had to face race head-on. His rise to the presidency and the strategic choices he made dealing with race and racism provide lessons for the field and for society as a whole in how to move beyond the racial status quo. He is not a perfect example of racial literacy, but he is an example of someone who decided to demand changes in how race and racism function systemically in society.

In the twenty-first century, those of us in rhetoric and composition studies who desire a change in the field's racial landscape must not only construct new knowledge and devise new pedagogies, but we also must mobilize to demand change: a change in textbook production, in the organizing bodies of the field, and in

the scholarship that is used to train instructors. Rhetoric and composition studies can join critical race theorists in their attempt to unmask race and racism in the academy, one discipline at a time. I suggest racial literacy is the way our field can contribute to this endeavor and support students' rights to study language in the rhetoric and composition classroom.

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