

into—then “whiteness” becomes, in some ways, a choice. We can choose to think differently, to enact a more relational mode of perception that acknowledges our interconnectedness. As Anzaldúa explains, “We live in each other’s pockets, occupy each other’s territories, live in close proximity and intimacy with each other at home, in school, at work. We’re mutually complicitous—us and them, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and other, oppressor and oppressed” (254).

To be sure, these tactics are not, in themselves, enough to divest ourselves or our students of “whiteness.” Yet they can offer useful points of departure, for they enable us to begin breaking down the “white” frame of reference and its hierarchical, racialized categories. Moreover, these tactics offer ways to expose “whiteness” without reinforcing essentialized notions of “whiteness” and “race”—notions that, in my opinion, impede us in our effort to create a more equitable society.

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Notes

1. Throughout this essay, I use quotation marks with “whiteness,” “white,” and “race” to underscore their artificial, historical, and constructed nature.

2. This interview is an expanded version of “Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric,” originally published in *JAC*.

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Kris, I Hear You

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When my kids were adolescents and didn’t want to hear anything I had to say about things that were important to them (I was too old-fashioned, a nerd, and worst of all an English teacher), I faced a real dilemma as a single parent. I wanted to continue sharing my stories with them, and my work on orality gave me an idea. Whenever I wanted them to hear something important, I’d phone a relative or a close friend for some good conversation. I ensured that my voice could be overheard easily by my kids (preferably without the distraction of television, video games, computers, or even my immediate bodily presence). In this way, I intended to position them as eavesdroppers so that they might learn by indirection (an important form of learning in oral traditions). They loved the idea of listening in on Mom who was, they thought, “unaware” of what was occurring. Young people effortlessly soak in conversations. Like other aspects of auralty, eavesdropping can be extremely seductive. Listeners gain a great deal of pleasure in listening from the “margins” or

on the “edge” of private conversations. However, while the act of eavesdropping promises great aural pleasure, it may not always yield the results that one might wish.

A few weeks ago, I found myself consoling a female, Puerto Rican student from Long Island who, like me, felt deeply disturbed by the jury’s verdict in the Amadou Diallo case. I encountered my student at a local supermarket near the university, and we hugged each other and stopped to talk in one of the shopping aisles. After a minute or two, I noticed that a young white man appeared to be eavesdropping on our conversation. Some nonwhite people, once they became aware of the uninvited listener, would have moved away to avoid disclosure and to protect their privacy and intimacy while discussing racial issues among themselves. Instead, we gave that young man an earful, rhetorically speaking. We talked about Bill Bradley’s comments on racial profiling (A wallet in the pocket of a white man is a wallet. A wallet in the pocket of a black man is a gun). I told her about the rich archival material about the case available online from New York City’s *Village Voice*. We talked about Johnnie Cochran’s brief but critical response to the case on the *Larry King Live* show. I expressed my anger at an execution (forty-one bullets) described as a tragic mistake, and my anger at the increase in “police-assisted homicide” in New York City during the Rudy Giuliani administration (see Olson).

I don’t know whether my eavesdropper was moved by what he heard, but he seemed to be committed to listening (he remained in the cookie aisle with us for at least twenty minutes). I would like to believe that through eavesdropping he was moved to think critically about difference, that he was “listening to learn,” which is a crucial feature of Kris Ratcliffe’s notion of tactical eavesdropping. Perhaps he was figuring out a way to actively protest the verdict himself, as many white people did in the streets of New York City. I hope that my rhetorical tactic worked, that he was eavesdropping on himself as well as on us, and that I didn’t simply indulge the whims of a cultural tourist.

I open this response to Kris Ratcliffe’s “Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic” with these two examples of eavesdropping because they also make you, my readers, metaphorical eavesdroppers listening in on my private, “intimate” conversations with others, which is the site of discourse that Kris admirably investigates. I’ll return later to the subject of rhetorical eavesdropping. Now I’d like to shift to Kris’ call “to factor whiteness into our theories and praxes” in rhetoric and composition studies.

Clearly at the center of Kris’ wide-ranging rhetorical interests in whiteness is Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream*, a book Kris cites repeatedly as “a *model* for how a resisting agency may challenge other agencies haunted by whiteness,” as “an admirable *model* for naming and critiquing whiteness,” and as an exemplary critique of the dysfunctions of whiteness (111, 98, 100-102; emphasis added). As Kris notes, Smith’s book has become a major reference for contemporary academic research on whiteness, especially on southern racial history. Peggy McIntosh describes Smith’s work as “unparalleled” in its effort to expose the silence that protects white privilege (295). Grace Elizabeth Hale, who focuses her historical research on the problem of the denial of white as a racial identity, argues that white Americans have typically “failed to see the ways they imaginatively ‘live’ in a metaphorical South, even as their relationship to the region has danced between the poles of attraction and revulsion” (283). Using Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind* and Smith’s writings, Hale develops a comparative analysis that exposes the effects of this cultural dance (259-68).

As a personal narrative, Smith’s book is an excellent historical reflection. Almost autoethnographic in its value as a cultural text (as, perhaps, Linda Brodkey might describe this kind of writing), Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* enables readers to tactically, rhetorically, and privately eavesdrop on themselves, circling through history in search of social constructions of whiteness. It is nonetheless a *model* of a particular kind in academic whiteness studies. Recently, Fred Hobson has called this model or genre a “*racial conversion narrative*”—that is, an example of southern writing that tells how the author comes to “see the light” about race. Clearly, Hobson’s use, in this context, of the rhetoric of religious conversion is intentional.

Yet, there are works that develop much stronger, more explicit and contemporary political arguments that are equally important models of work in academic whiteness studies and that speak strongly to the disciplinary interests of rhetoric and composition. (I repeat “academic” here to emphasize the recent interest in this scholarly activity by increasing numbers of white academics.) A critique of whiteness has existed as early as ex-slave narratives and in the work of many early black writers, as exemplified by David Roediger’s anthology *Black on White*, a text that Kris cites frequently. George Lipsitz’s often cited, eloquent argument in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, for example, examines issues of whiteness and the “revived racism of contemporary neoconservatism” (21). He focuses on issues such as the cash value associated with

whiteness and the intra-racist practices that have emerged in response to whiteness as property. Wahneema Lubiano's *The House That Race Built* is a contemporary response to the increasingly accepted myth that race does not matter (I'm eavesdropping on Kris' resisting readers here). Such beliefs are, as Lubiano says, "working to roll back real gains made in racial democracy in recent years" (ix). With strong legal and rhetorical interests, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical White Studies* offers a substantial range of essays intended primarily to support "a way for whites to talk about race and racial problems acceptably and nondefensively" (1). In *Race Traitor*, Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey seek to abolish the white race altogether. Academic whiteness studies also enjoys a very active life in cyberspace. Notable sites include student journals from classes on academic whiteness studies and an impressive bibliographic library resource (see "Whiteness" and "Unmasking").

A special note in any discussion of academic whiteness studies is the considerable body of work, both fiction and nonfiction, by Toni Morrison. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison gives us "the warrant" that opens possibilities for the work that we now see proliferating in many disciplines. The line from Morrison's lecture that is perhaps most often cited: "American means white." Through her writings and teachings, Morrison seeks to find ways "to talk about race," to move beyond name-calling and sharing "little anecdotes"; she seeks to find ways to face the hostility to race studies in the academy (qtd. in Streitfeld D01; "Home" 12). As I noted elsewhere, I challenge my students with this question: if we don't discuss race in our classes—where we have a safe space for such a discussion—then where will these discussions take place in any meaningful way? When Morrison recently examined the claim that President Clinton is "the first black president" (a description that resonated for many black men), she reiterated another important claim from *Playing in the Dark*—namely, that race as a metaphor has become more powerful "than biological 'race' ever was" ("Talk" 31; *Playing* 63).

Despite this power, an even more powerful color-blind rhetoric seriously constrains realizing how thoroughly race matters. Color-blind rhetoric—with its roots carefully nourished by the Reagan era of civil rights—works against noticing difference. This rhetoric effectively creates a sensual conflict between the eye and the ear. Like Morrison, Patricia Williams has observed the problem of verbal silence that results from color-blind rhetoric. She writes, "If race is something about which we dare not speak in polite social company, the same cannot be said of the

viewing of race" (17). This silence and denial fuels a visual obsession with race, a peculiar "pornographic seeing of race" and a racial voyeurism that characterized, for example, popular media responses to the O.J. Simpson case (20, 21). The influence of electronic media has made the problem of color-blind rhetoric a more urgent problem. Williams writes,

it is not merely the silence about racism that presents problems but its aesthetic *visual* power as well. Thus, I believe that racial representations in popular culture present a most urgent concern in a society as relentlessly bombarded with visual images as ours. Visual symbolism has begun to rival spoken or printed words as the medium by which our sense of cultural tradition is to be carried forward. (28)

Clearly, Kris' argument—that "we must stop hiding behind the ideal of color blindness"—constitutes a powerful call to those of us who teach rhetoric, cultural studies, and literacy. It should also move her readers to ask who benefits from a color-blind racial position. In "Recitatif," an experimental short story, and in her latest novel *Paradise*, Morrison encourages us to tactically eavesdrop on ourselves and critique the ways in which color-blind rhetoric influences our own personal discourses on race and whiteness. *Paradise* opens with the shooting of a white girl, and by the end of the novel we have not discovered who she is. "Recitatif" tells the story of two female characters for whom all racial codes have been removed but "for whom racial identity is crucial" to the telling of the story (*Playing* ix). In both texts, the idea of race as "stasis" does not work to construct meaning; yet race as an active process of encoding by the reader is frighteningly, alarmingly present and explicit. In the privacy of our readerly imaginations, we must face our own questions about why race matters.

Academic whiteness studies leads inevitably to arguments about white privilege, and Kris' reference to the strategic busing in the Milwaukee school system is not only an excellent example of how white privilege works, but it also emphasizes the far-ranging effects and invisibility of that privilege. The Milwaukee experiment of the 1970s is consistent with Hale's social history of segregation in the South between 1890 and 1940. Like so many others, Hale shows "the cost of the investment in whiteness has been borne overwhelmingly by African Americans" (10). In addition, Kris' use of Noel Ignatiev's work on the assimilation of Irish immigrants into U.S. culture supports Morrison's claim that *American* means *white*. David Roediger suggests that the

learning of immigrant racism (and whiteness) became a significant *topos* of black folk humor. Roediger reminds us that Malcolm X said the word *nigger* was the first word of English that every European immigrant learns upon arrival in the United States, an anecdote repeated by artists such as Richard Pryor. As Roediger says, “Toni Morrison counts *nigger* as the second word in the immigrant’s English vocabulary, with only ‘okay’ coming before it” (19).

A major characteristic of contemporary arguments about race and academic whiteness studies is that the concepts of race and whiteness are highly unstable, mutable, perpetually transformed, and “nonessential.” Thus, Kris’ play with language in her changing modes of historiography—“*the-then-that-is-now*,” “whiteness (in its desire for stasis),” and “whiteness-that-denies-language-play”—effectively refutes many long standing fallacies that structure a rhetoric of whiteness. “Whiteness (in its desire for stasis)” interrupts our ability to think about how “concepts of race are created and changed” (see Omi and Winant vii). For rhetorical theory, Kris observes how this desire works together with a traditional Western concept of ethos that relegates readers to secondary importance in the making of meaning (106). How might this rhetorical concept function in arguments about race and whiteness? Wendy Hesford’s work on feminist issues in composition nicely illustrates the problem of whiteness (its desire for stasis) that perpetuates invisible structures of racism in public policy. Her discussion implicitly highlights the hierarchical relationship between speaker ethos and audience in racialized discourse:

The politics of language and identity highlighted in my analysis of the fall 1993 events on the Oberlin campus yields a range of pedagogical discourses. The color-blind and power-concealing rhetoric that the president and self-gagged white male student adopted (e.g., “We are all the same blood”) translates into writing pedagogies and literacy projects that do not recognize power imbalances in communities and writing cultures. Pedagogies that conceptualize difference only as a matter of individual choice are based on the principles of cultural assimilation and personal responsibility, both of which are basic tenets of classical liberalism.

(147-48)

The invisibility of racial privilege and “power-concealing rhetoric” created a form of white blindness for the administration and perpetuated what Kris calls an illusion of “equal positioning” rather than the respectful exchange that she and, for example, Jackie Royster strongly advocate (109).

Yet, while Kris clearly recognizes and repeatedly states that any discussion of whiteness must include its multiple intersections with gender, class, age, and so forth, the rhetoric of race, cast in binary terms, is nevertheless quite forceful in this essay. The repetitive pattern of “white people” and “people of color” through which Kris structures her discussion (for example, “People of color have not always been alone in disclosing the meaning of whiteness”) reinforces a reductive binary of “white” and “Other”—as if white is not also a color (100). This rhetorical tactic, of course, reinforces a racialized rhetoric of difference (not to be confused with the interests of affirming diversity). Several scholars have faced this problem. British scholar Richard Dyer has convinced me to question my own persistent use of *black* as the politically correct term of choice in arguments about race and whiteness. On the problematic use of *black* and *people of color* in academic whiteness studies, Dyer writes:

where I need to see whiteness in relation to all peoples who are not white, “black” will not do. The other option would be “people of colour,” the preferred US term (though with little currency in Britain). While I have always appreciated this term’s generosity, including in it all those people that “black” excludes, it none the less reiterates the notion that some people have colour and others, whites, do not. We need to recognise white as a colour too, and just one among many, and we cannot do that if we keep using a term that reserves colour for anyone other than white people. Reluctantly, I am forced back on “non-white.” (11)

The implicit racial binary poses a problem for Kris’ arguments about “whiteness-that-denies-language-play” when she cites Ana Castillo and Leslie Marmon Silko for support. Both of these writers use racialized binary arguments to assert their anger and affirm their own cultural differences from English dominant speakers and western Europeans and Americans. According to Castillo, English dominant speakers are unimaginative listeners in the presence of cultural word-play. The problem of such a reductive, dualistic argument is obvious here—that is, it doesn’t work as a race and academic whiteness argument, though it does make an important cultural argument (as does Zora Neale Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression”) or even a class argument (as in Morrison’s use of the Dick and Jane primer in *The Bluest Eye*). The real problem lies with the white desire for stasis that encourages cultural segregation and a perception of difference. This is especially significant for arguments about language, literacy, and cultural discourse. Adopting the ideas of Ralph Ellison, Shelley Fisher Fishkin argues, “No one would attempt to

write a segregated history of American music, but the history of American literature has, for the most part, been a segregated enterprise: white writers come from white literary ancestors, black writers from black ones. It is time to acknowledge the very mixed literary bloodlines on both sides” (135).

Perhaps nowhere are these language issues more vigorously argued than in literary studies. For example, in *Was Huck Black?* Fishkin asks, “How will Americans respond to the news that the voice of Huck Finn, the beloved national symbol and cultural icon, was part black?” (144). The “fiction of ‘racial purity,’” she argues, continues to fuel segregation that is “alive and well among literary historians” (142). Fishkin observes that in “the thousands of books and articles written on *Huckleberry Finn* . . . the role of African-American oral traditions in shaping Twain’s achievement gets virtually no attention” (133). Fishkin’s work has stimulated new research on issues of whiteness and language play in Twain’s novel. She concludes, “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may be more subversive, ultimately, than we might have suspected” (144). Fishkin’s research has convinced Morrison to revise some of her earlier arguments about Twain’s novel (Morrison wrote an introduction for Fishkin’s Oxford edition of *Huckleberry Finn*).

Arguing about race and whiteness lends itself so well to misinterpretation, contradictions, anger, humiliation, strong political positions, and academic competitiveness. Some of these problems are linked to a slippery use of terms, especially interchangeable uses of *race*, *culture*, *ethnicity*, *diversity*, and even *class*. Most of these problems, however, are linked to the elusive, paradoxical nature of any argument about race and whiteness. On the paradox of whiteness, Dyer writes:

Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one’s corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal. (45)

Morrison addresses the problem of the paradox of race in the introduction to a collection on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*. Using Michael Rustin’s description of race as “both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization,” Morrison writes that “this paradox of a powerfully destructive emptiness can be used to illustrate the source of the confusion, the murk, the sense of helpless rage that accompanied the confirmation process” (ix).

How does one “stop taking whiteness”—this thing that is not a thing—“for granted”? As I read the introduction to Kris’ essay, I wondered if I too might have been privy to overhearing her white guy speak, or if the presence and viewing of my black body—together with politically correct posturing—would have inhibited such discourse altogether. I don’t know. I do know how much the *seeing* of difference inhibits discourse and encourages segregation among our students. Rhetorical eavesdropping offers much promise, and Kris’ insightful argument about circling through history is a crucial form of cultural critique and support for her rhetorical project on listening. Eavesdropping on ourselves is the best part, I think. As a tactical ethic, rhetorical eavesdropping helps us to move beyond simple issues of guilt and anger (which may reflect our initial responses to what we overhear), and it may lead to highly productive ways of not only engaging and affirming difference but also of saving democracy.

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Choice and the Contradictions of Identity Politics: A Reply to Pat McGann

Sue Hum

As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*

Despite feeling "stabbed and stuck" by my essay "'Yes, We Eat Dog Back Home': Contrasting Disciplinary Discourse and Praxis on Diversity" (*JAC* 19.4), Pat McGann chooses not to assume an agonistic, confrontational position, the most predictable of disciplining tactics.