

6-2019

## Racial Literacy Is Literacy: Locating Racial Literacy in the College Composition Classroom

Mara Lee Grayson  
*California State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Grayson, Mara Lee (2019) "Racial Literacy Is Literacy: Locating Racial Literacy in the College Composition Classroom," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 24 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl24s0de>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol24/iss1/4>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

## Racial Literacy *Is* Literacy: Locating Racial Literacy in the College Composition Classroom

Mara Lee Grayson

**Abstract:** *In order to develop pedagogies around racial literacy, we must first define the goals and bounds of racial literacy as praxis. In this paper, I synthesize the findings of a year-long teacher research project to explore the significance of racial literacy in the college composition classroom. Drawing from existing scholarship and my own research into racial literacy instruction, I offer four visions of racial literacy in the English classroom, the last of which is Racial Literacy as Literacy. I conclude by arguing that a racial literacy curriculum can teach students foundational concepts of textual analysis, audience awareness, authorial choice and positionality, and argumentation. In short, racial literacy is a culturally relevant, critical framework for literacy instruction.*

Race, class, ethnicity, gender, geography: these strands of subjectivity are woven into our educational infrastructure, simultaneously shaping our understanding of social, cultural, and intellectual concepts and being shaped by them. To attempt to extricate and explain the significance of one such factor in the sphere of American education and classroom interaction would be to simplify the complex dynamics at play within the network. However, because race is visible, both literally and as part of American discourse, it is both the easiest strand to locate, and also the one that, try as we might pull at it, never seems to come unraveled.

More than a decade ago, Allan Luke sought to reinvent the field of English education by drawing on linguistics, cultural studies, media studies, sociology, and other fields, to better respond to the “multilingual and multicultural, heteroglossic and multimediated world” of the twenty-first century (85). Literacy is not merely an academic skill, no matter how many standardized tests or other measurable assessments are applied to it; literacy is integral to understanding the ways in which language and texts (printed, media, or experiential) maintain or challenge social hierarchies and cultural hegemony. “English teaching and schooling,” Luke argues, are “political interventions, struggles over the formation of ideologies and beliefs, identities and capital” (86). While some might believe – erroneously – that composition has nothing to do with race, it is hard to deny that the *teaching* of composition (like the broader field of English education) is concerned with questions of race, racism, antiracism, and social justice.

*Racial literacy*, a framework that in 2004 emerged simultaneously from the fields of sociology and legal studies and quickly made its way into English education, figuring into matters from policy to pedagogy, does not attempt simplicity. Racial literacy is a collection of skills that “probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society” (Sealey-Ruiz 386). Researchers have studied racial literacy pedagogy in English and composition classrooms at all levels from early childhood education (Husband; Rogers and Mosley, “Racial Literacy”) and secondary English Language Arts (Vetter and Hungerford-Kres-

sor) to undergraduate composition classrooms on racially diverse campuses (Grayson; Sealey-Ruiz) and racially homogeneous ones (Winans). Racial literacy in teacher education (Rogers and Mosley, "A Critical Discourse;" Sealey-Ruiz and Greene; Skerrett) prepares new teachers to work in diverse environments and to interrogate how their understandings of race are influenced by broader societal inequities and media stereotypes.

Racial literacy is not only about understanding race – it is a multilayered conceptual framework designed to help us do so. Racial literacy instruction is neither singular nor uniform; as such, scholarship on racial literacy pedagogy often leaves us with more questions than answers: What does racial literacy look like in the English classroom? How do we know when our students are practicing racial literacy? How can we develop pedagogies that speak to that process? In this article, I draw upon existing research and an original teacher research project to offer provisional answers to these questions and to explore a vision of racial literacy as a paradigm for literacy instruction.

### **Racial Literacy: Conceptual Origins**

Though sociologist France Winddance Twine (2004) first employed the term *racial literacy* to categorize the practices White mothers of biracial children in the United Kingdom used to teach racial awareness and a positive Black identity to their children, the term has more widely been used to describe understanding of the role(s) race plays in all aspects of society, particularly in the United States of America. Twine's ethnographic study identified three practices that comprise racial literacy: the provision of conceptual and discursive practices with which to understand the function(s) of race, access to Black social networks, and exposure to Black-produced media and significant symbols of Black struggles. The first practice draws implicitly upon on the work of Paolo Freire and critical media literacy (Kellner and Share) while the second and third address, respectively, micro- and macro-identity.

Although Twine's initial conceptualization of racial literacy does not address the racialized experiences of non-Black people of color, legal scholar Lani Guinier contends that racial literacy must be contextual, responsive and interactive rather than static (114-15); must consider the "psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions" of race (115); and must interrogate "the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender, and other explanatory variables" (115). Racial inequities are therefore representative of societal injustices that also affect other minoritized populations.

Twine's subsequent expanded framework (2010) is broader and more concrete. This iteration identifies the criteria of racial literacy as follows:

1. recognition of racism as a contemporary rather than historical problem,
2. consideration of the ways in which race and racism are influenced by other factors such as class, gender, and sexuality,
3. understanding of the cultural value of whiteness,
4. belief in the constructedness and socialization of racial identity,
5. development of language practices through which to discuss race, racism, and antiracism, and
6. ability to decode race and racialism. (Twine 92)

Some researchers have used only Guinier's framework (Rogers and Mosley, "Racial Literacy;" Skerrett), but most have incorporated elements from both scholars' work (Sealey-Ruiz; Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor; Winans). I have argued elsewhere that a holistic perspective must consider both frameworks and identify racial literacy as a "layered conceptual framework from which matters of race can be viewed on the systemic and situational levels" (Grayson, "Race Talk" 150).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has influenced the framing of racial literacy (Rogers and Mosley, "Racial Literacy"), as has intersectionality (Nakagawa and Arzubigi), "an analytic disposition" through which scholars can conceive of demographic categories "as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power" (Cho et al. 795). Owing to its emphasis on analytical and discursive skills, racial literacy exemplifies one paradigm for engaging intersectionality in English education, English Language Arts, and composition studies (fields that are intrinsically intersectional, both due to their interdisciplinary roots and their marginalization within the contemporary neoliberal academy).

CRT scholars Delgado and Stefancic ask: "How can one talk back to the messages, scripts, and stereotypes that are embedded in the minds of one's fellow citizens and, indeed, the national psyche?" (33). My answer is through the discursive practices of racial literacy. I offer the following formulation as a means for understanding racial literacy: If CRT provides a theoretical framework for understanding race in American society and intersectionality provides the heuristic, then racial literacy is the praxis. In other words, *racial literacy* describes the activities necessary to understand race, racism, and antiracism.

To view this framework as an active practice, it is necessary to identify the particular skills and behaviors that enable individuals to practice racial literacy. While scholars have emphasized the "discursive" and "language" practices of, respectively, Twine's initial and expanded frameworks, few have delineated precisely what those practices are. Elsewhere I have identified four discursive practices students use to decode and respond to race and racism: personal sharing, labeling, interrogating stereotypes, and hedging (Grayson, "Race Talk" 150). These practices enable individuals to situate themselves in conversations about race and racism (through personal sharing), explore racialized discourse (through the assignment or interrogation of race labels), critique racialized representations in texts and media (through the recognition and counter-narrating of stereotypes), and acknowledge differences between their own positionality and that of their peers (through hedging and modifying statements). In student writing, these practices demonstrated increased awareness of rhetorical and compositional concepts such as authorial ethos, diction, textual representation, and audience (151).

The practices of racial literacy are not limited to one-time use; individuals continue to employ these strategies as they deepen their understanding. Racial literacy is not finite but ongoing: as Guinier explains, "it is about learning rather than knowing" (115).

What path(s) does this learning travel? What shape(s) does it assume?

## Researching Racial Literacy

Though pedagogies for racial literacy development vary, there are consistencies among the methodologies employed by researchers of racial literacy pedagogy, particularly those who employ the broad framework of teacher research. These consistencies include insider modes of observation (Husband; Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor), the collection and analysis of student-produced writing (Sealey-Ruiz; Winans), and discourse analysis methods of analyzing student conversation (Rogers and Mosely, "Critical," "Racial" ; Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor).

For one academic year (fall 2015 through spring 2016), I worked within the methodology of teacher research to explore the following: 1) How do students incorporate the discursive practices of racial literacy into their writing? and 2) How might the analytical and rhetorical skills students develop during the practice of racial literacy transfer to student writing? In other words, is it possible for the racial literacy curriculum to improve not only students' understanding of race, racism, and racialism, but also their critical writing skills?

### Research Site and Participants

This IRB-approved research was conducted at a private university in a major metropolitan area in the United States. Though situated in a bustling area close to the city's financial district, the university boasts many trappings of a residential campus: six residence halls, a dining hall, and a full-service health center for students enrolled in university insurance plans. Given the high cost of tuition, ninety-six percent of new students receive some form of financial aid. Nearly fifty percent of undergraduate students on this campus identify as White non-Hispanic; fourteen percent as Hispanic or Latino/a; ten percent as African-American; and nine percent as Asian or Pacific Islander. Approximately ten percent are international students.<sup>1</sup>

All students in the study were enrolled in one of two sections (of which I was the instructor) of English 120: Critical Writing, the second of two First Year Composition (FYC) courses required of undergraduates. Given that I had designed the "racial literacy curriculum" for use with my own students, I was both the teacher of this curriculum and the researcher of its efficacy, a practice that is common in teacher research. The term "teacher research" represents a diverse set of approaches to data collection and analysis that both draws upon established methods and develops new ones (Baumann et al. 39); because no two classrooms are the same, no singular methodology can sufficiently serve all classroom-based inquiry.

Unlike my previous research into the discursive practices of racial literacy (Grayson, "Race Talk"), I was less interested in *how many* students employed particular terminology and approaches to race talk than I was in *how, when, and where* students employed them. As such, I looked at classroom discourse and written work provided by seven individual students. As Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz did in her own classroom research, I used a

---

1. Demographic information is readily available through the university's official website. To protect the privacy of participants, I have chosen not to identify the institution by name.

multiple-case framework (Yin), viewing each student as a single case within the bounds of the classroom. Using this framing in conjunction with the methodologies of teacher research enabled me to explore each student's work over time within a particular setting.

Student participants provided informed consent during the first week of class. On these forms students provided their names, preferred pseudonyms (for confidentiality), their primary racial self-identification(s), and their ages (all of which were 18 or older). While it can be challenging for a teacher to conduct research in her own classroom due to the pressure students may feel to participate, students were informed that neither the course material nor grading procedures would be influenced by my research endeavors and that I would not analyze student-produced data until the conclusion of the semester, after final grades were submitted. As in Sealey-Ruiz's research, students could opt out by transferring to one of more than thirty other sections of Critical Writing offered that semester (though none did so). Approximately one-third of the students enrolled in these courses had taken a first-semester FYC course with me the previous semester.

I did not analyze data from every student in the class, focusing instead on the work of a representative sampling of the larger demographic makeup of the class. Figure 1 displays the relationship between the racial makeup of the classrooms and the racial makeup of study participants. The sample is closely but not exactly representative for two reasons: first, given the number of students, it would have been mathematically impossible to ensure exact representation among the sample group. Second, non-White students are (slightly) overrepresented: Because one's understanding of race and related linguistic practices are largely influenced by racial self-identification (Helms; Tatum; Sue), I thought it necessary to include work by at least one student who identified as each of the races represented in the broader participant pool.

Table 1: Racial Makeup of Students and Study Participants

<b>Primary Racial Identification*</b>	<b>Percentage (%) of Students Enrolled in Course (n=40)</b>	<b>Percentage (%) of Study Participants (n=7)‡</b>
White	67.5	58
Black/African-American	12.5	14
Asian/Asian-American	7.5	14
Native American		
Pacific Islander		
Latino/a / Hispanic†	12.5	14

\*As provided by students on consent forms.

†While not classified as a race on the U.S. Census, the university used "Hispanic or Latino/a" in demographic tracking of students.

‡Percentages are rounded to the nearest digit.

On written identity statements that were part of the racial literacy curriculum, students more fully self-identified as follows:

Table 2: Study Participants’ Specific Racial and Ethnic Self-Identification

Student*	Self-Identification
Cesar	Mexican
Colin	White, American
Dakota	Black, Hispanic, Puerto-Rican, Dominican
Kelly	Asian-American, Vietnamese
Lisa	White
Sam	White, Jewish, American
Zeke	White, American-Canadian

\*All names are pseudonyms, some of which were chosen by the students themselves.

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Primary data were collected in the form of student-produced written work: ungraded homework assignments, including reading responses and informal writing exercises employing rhetorical strategies discussed during class; identity statements; unofficial course evaluations submitted as part of an in-class activity at mid-semester; and final research papers submitted during the last week of the semester. Given my additional interest in classroom dialogue, I worked within the ethnographic tradition of participation observation. Based upon the content of the class session and the materials at my disposal, I alternated between the following modes of documentation: quick, informal jottings taken during class meetings (while students were doing group work or in-class writing, so as not to interrupt classroom proceedings); informal entries in my researcher journal immediately after class; and formal field notes or reflective journal entries recorded in my home office at the end of the workday.

As I analyzed student documents, I used a predetermined set of four prefigured codes (Crabtree and Miller) based upon the first four criteria set forth by Twine to identify students’ developing comprehension of race, racism, and anti-racism in American society: 1) recognizing race as a contemporary problem; 2) understanding race’s interaction with other factors, including gender, geography, and socioeconomic class; 3) acknowledging the cultural value of Whiteness; and 4) developing a belief in the social construction of racial identity. To better identify the fifth and sixth criteria of racial literacy (language practices and the ability to decode race and racism), I used the language practices of racial literacy I determined (“Race Talk”) as additional codes for analysis. Because prefigured codes can be limiting (Creswell 185), I allowed additional emergent codes (Crabtree and Miller 151) to arise in student speech and writing. I employed methods of discourse analysis to examine students’ language around matters of race and rac-

ism, looking at what students said and wrote as well as how they expressed themselves, to whom, and in what contexts. As a writing teacher, I additionally examined the stylistic and rhetorical elements of students' writing, including but not limited to syntax, pronoun use, and verb choice.

As a second level of analysis (see Table 4), I looked for the following literacy and rhetorical practices in student writing: positionality; audience awareness; language choice; and representation (Grayson, "Race Talk"). As additional practices arose in student papers, I reread all student work with those new codes in mind. My goal was to understand if and how students' composition skills might develop alongside the practice of racial literacy over the course of the semester.

When looking at a document, I followed this pattern of analysis:

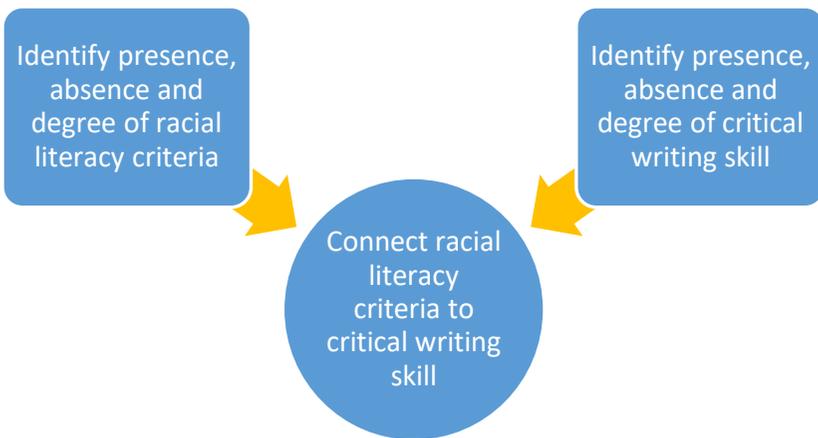


Figure 1: Analytical Considerations

To help explain how I identified racial literacy in student writing, the following table displays excerpts in which students demonstrated its characteristics.

Table 3: Racial Literacy in Student Writing

Student	Textual Evidence of Racial Literacy Characteristic*†‡			
	<i>Recognizing Racism as a Contemporary Problem</i>	<i>Acknowledging the Influence on Race of Other Demographic Factors</i>	<i>Understanding the Cultural Value of Whiteness</i>	<i>Belief in the Constructedness and Socialization of Racial Identity</i>
Cesar	“Every American should know that racism still exists in this country.”	“People of the same race... Irish-Americans have a different heritage from Italian-Americans.”		“I know that as soon as I say I am Mexican people think my family is either poor or part of a drug cartel.”
Colin	“...modern day issues in society including... racism.”	“Not everyone is affected by the same stereotypes...”	“White privilege is an upper hand in society that causes injustice on an unconscious level.”	“I am extremely against labels, categories, and stereotypes.”
Dakota	“The third component... is the belief that racism no longer exists.”	“...influenced not only by what they see but also by the neighborhood they live in.”	“...result of this country being founded by White men...”	“...we have had to label ourselves as black or white but never question why.”
Kelly	“Asians have also been a target of racism and discrimination; however, their injustices are not covered nearly as much...”	“Society takes the silence of the Asian community as a green light to make these racist remarks... part of Asian culture is “keeping face”... to maintain a good reputation.”	“White privilege... where some individuals get away with certain things because of their skin color.”	
Lisa	“These statistics clearly reflect	“My dad’s family live in south... they	“In order for racial oppression to	“...felt confused as a child growing up

	the inequality and oppression that still exists in America.”	would refer to people as ‘rednecks’.”	end, white privilege needs to be brought to attention.”	thinking I was one thing, and then finding out I was something else.”
Sam	“No progress leads to no eventual equality.”	“Identity is cultivated through numerous channels.”	“I cannot recall any instance where I was racially profiled or taken advantage of...”	
Zeke	“While I wish discrimination like this didn’t take place, I am not naïve enough to believe that it does not exist.”	“...one must contextualize...”	“...you never analyze the majority like that.”	“I hope to continue delving deeper into who I am and exploring race as a social construct...”

\* As identified by Twine (2010).

† I represent the fifth and sixth characteristics of racial literacy (language practices and the ability to decode, respectively) more fully in a separate table. (See Figure 3.)

‡ Students did not necessarily demonstrate every characteristic of racial literacy.

Despite my best attempts to be systematic enough about these coding procedures to ensure replicability for readers who may be interested in conducting similar research, as a teacher researcher one of my analytical tools was my knowledge of the students in my classrooms, which is not directly replicable. When a student used hedging language, for example, my knowledge of that student allowed me to identify whether or not hedging was unusual for that student. Some conclusions I have drawn, therefore, were informed not solely by raw data and replicable procedures of analysis but also by interpretation and intuition. To researchers who bristle at what they may see as a lax interpretation of data analysis, I argue that it is this familiarity with the classroom and its students that make teacher research a useful methodological framework for racial literacy inquiry. Regardless of the steps we set up, the final step of inductive thinking in the interpretation of empirical research is always the same: as anthropologist H. Russell Bernard has reminded us, “You think hard” (9).

Teacher research relies upon the teacher’s insider perspective. Not only does the teacher researcher have access to data that may be unavailable to a researcher working from outside the classroom, her presence in and familiarity with the research setting often enable a more nuanced understanding of progression of the research over time than does a non-present, unfamiliar perspective. My position required that I regularly reflect upon the complexity of my dual role and its influences upon my inquiry and instruction; as such, I also had to be inordinately aware of my individual positionality. (I will discuss positionality – and how it might have influenced classroom activity or my

interpretation thereof – in greater detail later in this essay.) Due to the contextual nature of race and racism, racial literacy research in particular demands a level of interpretation that an insider is in a strong position to identify. Therefore, I suggest that those interested in conducting similar research, rather than distancing themselves from the classrooms they study, embrace their emic positions and use their insider awareness to better explore the contextual practices of racial literacy.

To help readers understand my interpretive processes, I explain directly when my interpretation derives from my own knowledge of a student as well as from the data presented. I discuss additional coding and analytical procedures more thoroughly as I move through the rest of this essay.

## Curricular Design

At the institution where I conducted my research, there are few departmental guidelines for the Critical Writing curricula, though printed materials and faculty development meetings make clear that instructors should focus on argumentation, document-based or other qualitative research, and the recognition of the discursive patterns and conventions of various forms of academic writing. Thematically, I built the curriculum upon Guinier's conception of racial literacy as a multilevel consideration of the interaction between race and Twine's revised racial literacy framework. In my previous racial literacy research, I allowed race talk to emerge organically during in-class discussion (Grayson, "Race Talk"); however, if we want to explore the possibility for the practices of racial literacy to transfer to student writing, it is necessary to explicitly acknowledge and implement a racial literacy curriculum.

It may be tempting for readers, particularly those who do not readily employ the framework of teacher research, to argue that *of course* students would practice racial literacy in a curriculum on racial literacy! However, because of the complexity of race and racism, sometimes even when students believe they are successfully navigating a critical curriculum, their struggles are evident to the teacher researcher. The additional perspective of researcher may enable teachers to more clearly see where their curricula are successful and where they are not. As Irene Lietz notes, while a White student in her classroom seems to "cope with" the "race-themed course better than many of her peers, her resistance, even as benign as it might appear in her essay and in class discussion, signals a struggle with the concepts of the course" (104). Lietz's reflection highlights that the researcher role may lead teachers to make observations they might have otherwise missed. As such, I argue that as educators we have both a right and an obligation to continually investigate the efficacy of our curricula.

The predominance of White students in my classrooms necessitated that I did not limit the curriculum to the provision of a framework through which to interpret information. Telling White students about racism is not enough; the racial literacy journey must be embodied and emotionally driven (Winans). As such, I began the semester by inviting students to assess their own relationships to race and racial identity. On an ungraded Identity Essay, students were asked to consider how they self-identified, how they learned about race and racism, and how they felt about being asked to identify

themselves along racial, ethnic, national, and other demographic lines. The following are specific questions students were asked:

- How would you respond if someone asked “What are you?” How do you feel about that question?
- Have you ever been discriminated against? How so?
- Have you ever discriminated against someone else? How so? Why?
- When did you first learn about race?
- Was race talked about in your home?
- What does the word “culture” mean to you?
- Did you grow up near people who looked like you, spoke your language, or shared similar customs?
- Have you ever felt out of place because of your race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class (or some part of your “culture,” however you define that term)? (Grayson, “Teaching” 86)

I intentionally did *not* provide any background information on the theoretical framework of racial literacy prior to assigning this piece of writing. In my experience as an instructor, I have found that introducing students to theoretical material is most effective if they have already identified tangible applications or examples of that material in their own life experiences.

After students submitted the Identity Essay, we read excerpts from Twine’s and Guinier’s conceptualizations of racial literacy and discussed how those frameworks might help us to consider the functions of race in individual situations and more broadly in American society. Weekly readings thereafter considered the interaction of race with gender, socioeconomic class, and geography. As in other FYC racial literacy curricula, course texts were multimodal in nature (Sealey-Ruiz) to illuminate the numerous forms through which racial ideology is disseminated. We read scholarly essays and newspaper articles as well as short stories, song lyrics, and videos. Most materials addressed matters of race directly while others addressed race more obliquely.

Students wrote personal narratives and textual response essays; conducted research; engaged in small group and large class discussions; and shared their work with their classmates during informal presentations. Throughout the semester, students participated in Lead Discussant Groups, in which, once a week, two or three students led the rest of the class in a discussion or activity related to the readings that were due that day. Students did not choose their groups; instead they signed up for a group based upon the readings assigned for that week. Activities students led as lead discussants included small group discussions; surveys and questionnaires; and brief viewings of related film or viral clips. Students also participated in a Privilege Walk<sup>2</sup> and wrote “I Can / I Cannot” statements (McIntosh) to explore how their experiences, beliefs, and culture(s) contributed to their understanding of the world.

---

2. In a privilege walk, individuals line up in an open space. As a moderator reads a list of privileges, individuals take one step forward for each privilege they have experienced. In my classroom, students used pen and paper to ensure confidentiality.

## Four Visions of Racial Literacy

Over the course of the semester, the practice of racial literacy seemed to manifest quite differently for individual students. Here I proffer four curricular visions of racial literacy for the English classroom: 1) Identity Development; 2) Critical Whiteness; 3) Antiracism and Social Justice; and 4) Literacy.

### *Racial Literacy as Identity Development*

For many students, the path of racial literacy runs alongside the road to identity development. This makes sense given that individual racial identity is connected to the “larger cultural norms, social practices, and institutional systems related to race in the United States” (Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 6). In Twine’s work with families, racial literacy was an identity-building process by which biracial children raised by White mothers could develop a positive, antiracist Black identity.

Skerrett, Pruitt, and Warrington call racial literacy a type of “specialized knowledge that derives from the lived realities of racial and other forms of oppression,” adding that racial literacy acknowledges race as the “prevailing narrative in the lives of racially minoritized individuals and groups” (319). In this understanding, racial literacy is simultaneously developed through experience and intuitively held by those who are racially minoritized. CRT holds that people of color possess knowledge of race and racism unavailable to their White peers (Delgado and Stefancic). While some English educators have found that critical pedagogies may inadvertently marginalize White students (Hill), all individuals in the United States, including White people, are influenced by race and racism simply by virtue of living here (DiAngelo). On one hand, this makes racial literacy curricula even more beneficial for White students than for students of color: because many American Whites have little “regular, substantial contact with people of other races” (Trainor), they may emerge from segregated educational environments with a “sort of racial *ill*iteracy” (Winans 475, emphasis mine). On the other hand, because traditional classrooms tend to highlight White European ideologies and modes of discourse (Sue), critical pedagogies are necessary to address the experiences and needs of a diverse student population.

There is, however, a difference between the awareness an individual gains from lived experience and the critical consciousness that individual may develop to interpret and challenge racist acts and structures. In other words, by presuming that all students of color possess innate expertise on systemic racism, we risk conflating experiential knowledge with critical awareness; we also overlook the myriad ways in which systemic racism works on individuals, including and especially on people of color. Essentialism is the denial or flattening of distinctions between subgroups or individual members of racially defined groups in ways that, intentionally or inadvertently, create or maintain racial hierarchies (Omi and Winant 71-72). Individuals who experience racism do not necessarily experience or interpret racism in the same ways, regardless of a shared racial identification.

Dakota, who identified at different times as Black, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, Jamaican, and “human,” resisted the Black and White binary of American racial discourse and challenged the label of Blackness that, in his experience, others had readily assigned

him. Much of his writing explored the essentialism that influences social perspectives of Black men. Intriguingly, by the end of the semester, Dakota had begun to reaffirm his Black identity. Helms has found that there is a point in the lives of Black individuals when “it becomes impossible to deny the reality that they cannot become an accepted part of ‘the White world;’” for some people, like Dakota, this “encounter” may initiate the move toward a more positive Black racial identity (25).

While psychological perspectives on identity development typically emphasize an individual’s progression through a sequence of cognitive stages, the sociological approach of *symbolic interactionism* suggests that “individuals make meaning through microscale interactions with others” (Renn 17). Through this lens, we can explore how small social networks contribute to individuals’ symbolic understanding of race and identity over time, such as when one moves from a “racially homogeneous setting to one that is diverse, or vice versa” (17).

Dakota wrote that in his high school White people were the minority but that entering the private university changed the way he saw himself: “here I feel like the minority.” He attributed this feeling to more than skin color, however; having grown up with little money, he was frustrated by how “wasteful” his peers seemed to be. This observation represented a shift in micro-identity, while Dakota’s inquiries into the larger sociological contexts of race contributed to his macro-identification with historically-situated Black struggles. Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, and Wilson suggest that Black Identity Development theorists more fully address “the impact of *other* salient sociodemographic identities on racial identity development” (98). The racial literacy framework may provide the tools through which to expand one’s understanding of a complex, intersectional process of identity development. As my class and I examined the interaction of race with socioeconomic class, geography, gender, and other variables, Dakota began to explore what it means to be a Black man in the United States. His final paper was an exploration entitled “Why Are White People Afraid of Black Men?” The more disconnected he felt from his classmates, the more he began to align himself with the Black part of his racial identity.

While Dakota struggled to clarify his racial identity, Sam, a White-identifying student, struggled with understanding that he even *had* a racialized identity. In a personal narrative he wrote:

The unconscious and invisible fact of my race and ethnicity never really played a defined role within my life. I cannot recall any instance where I was racially profiled, or taken advantage of due to my race or religion. However, I know that such a problem is real, and such a problem needs to be changed... I have never really put much thought into the matter until I was asked to write this paper.

While Sam claims that race hadn’t played a role in his life, his language points to his awareness, albeit cursory, that race *has* influenced his life; he does not, however, yet understand the nature of that influence. His description of his race as “unconscious” and “invisible” hint at an early understanding of the privilege he was afforded by virtue of his skin color. He admits that he has never before considered this, but instead of reflecting upon his own experiences, he uses distancing language (“such a problem”) and emphasizes the cognitive (“I know”) rather than emotive or experiential components of

identity. Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor report a similar phenomenon: their students “argued that racial identities, in general, are learned... They did not recognize, however, that *their* racial identities are learned too” (92).

During Sam’s lead discussant activity, he and another student shared how their identities had shifted during their transition from high school to college and invited their peers to discuss how they had (or had not) changed since entering college. This activity showed me that Sam recognized identity not as static but instead as directly influenced by demographic and contextual factors. Like the students in Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor’s study who “appeared to be on the verge of viewing racism as an institutional and societal issue” but “did not take responsibility for it” (92), Sam was beginning to understand how racism worked, even if he could not yet articulate how it worked *on him*.

For students like Sam, it is important to emphasize the personal rather than conceptual components of the racial literacy curriculum. Because teacher research ultimately seeks “to promote the educational, social, and emotional well-being of the students we teach” (Baumann et al. 3), Sam’s struggles necessitated that I be dynamic and adaptable in both pedagogy and methodology. As such, I assigned positionality cluster maps (Grayson, “Teaching”) to help students plot the myriad social and cultural influences upon their self and social identities as well as the ways in which they view the world. Though individuals may enact multiple identities in the various discursive spaces they occupy, “people tend to think more holistically about identity”; the positionality map “can help students break down that holistic social identity into specific, identifiable components” such as race, ethnicity, language(s) spoken, and socioeconomic class, among other forms of social stratification. “Concrete examples also help students better understand concepts that might otherwise seem theoretical, such as intersectionality” (91).

On his final paper, Sam wrote about “governmental inefficiencies,” focusing on the United States postal service.<sup>3</sup> I was not surprised by his chosen topic, nor was I surprised when I read his first paragraph, which proposed the privatization of mail service. I was surprised, however, that during his final presentation, Sam explained that because he was raised in a politically conservative family, his upbringing had likely influenced his perspective on society. Though a simple statement made on the last day of the semester might sound like a minimal marker of progress in racial literacy development, I believe this moment to be significant. While Sam had not yet begun to establish positionality in his writing, he had for the first time begun to situate his intellectual understanding among the cultures and communities of which he was a part.

### *Racial Literacy as Critical Whiteness*

For many white students in my classroom, understanding white privilege was the lens through which they practiced racial literacy. As was the case with Sam, while all people are racialized, white people are often less aware than people of color of the role race plays in their lives (Helms). Not only do many American whites have little “regu-

---

3. I did not require that the formal research paper directly address race or racism; students were invited to pursue their own inquiries, provided they addressed the social and ideological implications of their findings. After all, race factors implicitly if not apparently into everyday life (Delgado and Stefancic; DiAngelo; Sue).

lar, substantial contact with people of other races” (Winans), the dominant discourses in segregated environments implicitly sustain and legitimize such segregation and contribute to the type of education conferred.

Colin initially struggled with assigning himself an identity label. On his identity essay, he wrote: “I simply want to identify as ‘Me.’ I am extremely against labels, categories, and stereotypes.” Building upon Helms’s model of white identity development, Beverly Tatum adds that whites who are aware of white racial privilege may resist the label in part because the models of whiteness in modern racial discourse are undesirable. Despite Colin’s desire to move away from a distinct racial identification, he seemed to understand that he could not escape being racialized as a member of American society; moreover, Colin recognized that most of the time, he benefited from that racialization: “Physically I am a skinny, white, above-average looking (I like to believe) male. In society’s case, I should be able to do anything I want. However, I am also gay.”

While Colin understood that white skin and male gender afforded him considerable privilege, he also knew his sexuality diluted that privilege. Additionally, the directness with which he contrasts his culturally dominant race and gender with his non-dominant sexuality – “I *should* be able... *However*, I am also gay” (emphases mine) – displays his acknowledgment of the role his homosexuality has played in determining how he makes sense of racism. Implicit in this statement is Colin’s acknowledgement that as a homosexual man in a heteronormative society, despite the privilege afforded him by the color of his skin, he has also been minoritized. It appears that this experience of being marginalized has led to his alignment with the oppressed rather than the oppressor. Identity development theorists have suggested that the steps toward a positive White identity begin when a person comes in “contact” (Helms) with non-Whites and begins to recognize the different lived experiences of Whites and people of color. Colin’s sexuality seemed to function as a sort of gateway – by coming into contact with differential treatment in his predominantly White community, he was encouraged to further critique both the sexual and racial normativity of American society.

Colin articulated the struggle of understanding Whiteness in his research paper, a project for which he had interviewed a racially diverse group of his peers to better understand how young people made sense of White privilege. Colin suggested that White people “focus on the smaller effects of the privilege” that they receive on a daily basis – such as “a free bus ride” or “cup of coffee,” two examples Colin identified from previous studies – in order to understand the White privilege and racism intrinsic to American society. The ability to see that individual incidences are indicative of systemic racism is an integral part of racial literacy.

Lisa also took on White privilege for her final research project. Understanding Whiteness was new for Lisa, and she began her written paper with a reflection on a recent experience that had made her aware of her own racialized identity as a White woman:

For the past 18 years I’ve lived in a small suburban upper class town in New Jersey. My town was primarily White and, for the most part, conservative. Living in New York City for the past eight months has exposed me to new situations. One afternoon, I was on the subway, minding my own business with my headphones in... I found a woman staring at me. I immediately looked away, but she started talking to me. She said, “You’re a privileged White girl.”

This was the first time in my life that my race was commented on and I didn't know how to react, so I just turned up my music and looked away. This stuck in my head all day and made me consider why she said what she did. I've come to the conclusion that in order for racial oppression to end, White privilege needs to be brought to attention.

Lisa's reflection echoes Winans's observation that for White people, racial literacy must be understood emotionally and through lived experience (476). What Lisa has omitted, however, is the essentialism in the stranger's comment. While she provides little information enough here, in other writings she shared that she and her family had very little money. Just as the lived experiences of racism differ, so too do the experiences of privilege; reducing oneself or another to "a privileged White girl" overlooks the complexity of what privilege means in a capitalist economic system. Speaking only about White privilege without discussion of other societal factors both side steps consideration of how socioeconomic class and racism influence the lived experiences of poor Whites and masks how White privilege really works – consider, for example, the racial achievement gaps that exist "among students within the *same* socioeconomic levels" (Singleton and Linton 4, emphasis mine).

For students who have not been aware of the effects of systemic racism on their daily lives, racial literacy may be about moving outside their own perspectives. Once White students recognize the differences between their lived experiences and those of their peers of color, they are able to develop a more critical perspective of what it means to be White in American society. That perspective is often accompanied by disillusionment (Helms), frustration, and guilt.

In my work on designing racial literacy curricula, I recall the story of "Andrew," a White identifying student who visited my office to confess that he was frustrated with the course. When asked why, he replied: "White people kind of suck!" (Grayson, "Teaching" 71). This sentiment is common among white people as they begin to recognize how deeply situated racism is, and that they have, by virtue of their skin color, somehow been complicit in the maintenance of White privilege. Particularly notable was that Andrew did not address this dissonance in the classroom among his peers but privately in his instructor's office. Irene Lietz noted similar behavior in "Roberta," the white student she interviewed about her experience in a race-themed writing class: "As a white student with a white teacher in the privacy of my office, Roberta felt safe enough to admit that she questioned her own sincerity and ability to live with integrity as a racially aware person" (106).

Andrew's and Roberta's experiences highlight how important it is for instructors – particularly those who identify or are identified as White – to consider their own positionality as they design and teach critical pedagogies. While some race talk facilitators remain impersonal during discussion, I feel strongly that, as a white woman who works with students of color, I must openly acknowledge my positionality, especially in the racial literacy classroom. Despite how important I believe racial literacy curricula to be, I acknowledge that race talk and self-reflection are not always easy or comfortable. If we invite students to engage with difficult subjects in the classroom, we must be willing to let ourselves be vulnerable. During her study of antiracist literature instruction, Carlin Borsheim-Black found that when a White teacher shared her experiences with racializa-

tion, students felt more comfortable sharing as well; during these discussions, Whiteness was made “more visible, less neutral” (416).

### *Racial Literacy as Antiracism*

Sealey-Ruiz laments that her students “did not move to action – the next preferred step in racial literacy development” (394). In fact, despite the body of literature on racial literacy pedagogies, I have found few studies conducted within the racial literacy framework that emphasize antiracist action beyond the classroom. Sealey-Ruiz suggests that the youth of traditionally-aged college students and the time limitations of a single semester may be contributing factors.

I posit two possible reasons for the lack of action: first, curricular limitations, and second, a vague definition of what antiracist action entails. To briefly address the former: instructors are limited by time, departmental requirements, and resources. One teacher who participated in Borsheim-Black’s study confessed that departmental requirements “limited the extent to which she felt she could implement an antiracist approach” (415). Regardless of the frameworks we employ, we must recognize that we cannot do everything in one semester. Additionally, activism today does not always look like the activism of the 1960s (Barnhardt). Given its influence and visibility, social media – rather than physical protests and rallies – has become a primary site of social action (Gerbaudo; Tatarchevskiy). Discourse and the reframing of problematic discourses can effect change (Fairclough; Rogers and Mosley, “A Critical Discourse”).

Racial literacy is an individualized practice and each student must progress at her own pace; as such, to force students into collective activist action can actually be seen as an act of imperialism. Given that critical pedagogues must “dance between challenging students to growth and learning and scaring them into retreat” (Lietz 100), pushing students too soon toward activism may cause them to retreat. Instead, instructors should focus initially on encouraging an antiracist stance through critical self-reflection.

Understanding and improving the self can be seen as a precursor to advocating for larger-scale social change. Until one can articulate the relationship between her own identity and the racial social hierarchy – and why that hierarchy is problematic – she may have neither the incentive nor the awareness to contemplate how that hierarchy might be dismantled. Ignoring one’s Whiteness, for example, is tantamount to embracing the privilege it affords (Helms; Tatum; Painter). Instructors can introduce assignments that provoke student engagement with the world beyond the classroom, such as analytical essays or participant action research projects that investigate inequity in the media, on the school campus, or in the local community.

### *Racial Literacy as Literacy*

Johnson argues that the fields of composition and rhetoric must embrace a framework of racial literacy to rethink the ways in which we theorize and teach about race; to do so “requires theorizing and teaching about race as a discursive system, not as individual words people use or as individual attitudes or behaviors” (160). However, it appears that in Johnson’s classrooms, as in the classrooms Sealey-Ruiz studied, students used

their writing to address race rather than using race or racial literacy as the paradigmatic discursive system she claims it is.

Table 4 demonstrates how students in the Critical Writing classroom I studied employed the literacy practices inspired by racial literacy in their writing:

Table 4: Discursive and Decoding Practices in Student Writing

Student	Textual Evidence of Discursive and Decoding Practices**†					
	Positionality	Audience Awareness	Diction	Authorial Choice	Critical Analysis of Media/Textual Representation	Drawing Conclusions from Individual Situations
Cesar	"As a Mexican..."	"My answer changed when I realized less than I out of 20 non-Mexicans know where Merida is."	"I don't have a word for it... but in Spanish I have a word for it."	"I wish I could copy and paste one of these articles here so that you can read how ridiculous it is but I'll try to summarize the advice it gives readers."		"...is only one of many similar situations Black and other minority communities are undergoing today."
Colin	"I am a white individual so it could appear that I may not have a clear understanding..."	"She spoke differently depending upon what she was focused on."	"To understand... we must agree on a definition."	"This research is supposed to... guide people like myself..."		"Small issues like a free bus ride... are the beginning results of white privilege existing on an unconscious level."
Dakota	"In high school the minority there were white people... here I feel like the minority."	"Viewers... may not get the inside of black community and most likely cannot relate."	"The suggestion isn't bad but the way he phrases it is."	"I guess I'll speak as a black person, then."	"Since most of the media is white, the media can only give a view of the black community from outside looking in."	"They would think of me as an African-American before anything else. I believe that is something that is internalized in Americans."

Kelly	“Coming from a diverse town... allowed me to have an open-minded mentality.”			“I primarily reached out to those of East Asian descent rather than including those of South Asian descent to narrow down my research.”	“...in movies, Asians are either praised or bullied for excelling in academics.”	“It could also be inferred that the parents who faced discrimination would want their kids to take advantage of the opportunities that they did not have access to.”
Lisa	“Growing up thinking that discrimination is ordinary was detrimental on my idea of society.”	“Who really owns words?”		“While race plays a large role in determining privilege, so does gender; however, I am only addressing the component of race.”	“The company has a celebrity representative... who is African-American, but previously did not sell cosmetics shades for darker skin tones.”	
Sam	“I have never really put much thought into the matter and it was not until I was asked to write this paper that I sat and reevaluated.”	“...the connection between him and his audience...”				
Zeke	“I believe it was this interest that led me to become an actor and actually emulate other characters’ lives.”			“...uses formal elements in unconventional ways in order to bring attention to these issues in urban communities.”	“Hip-hop music, rap videos, and fashion labels take on these entities and reflect them onto their audiences, predominantly African-Americans.”	“Conspicuous consumption... may change one’s inner reality and raise one psychologically to a higher social status, it does not change the overall reality of the society.”

\* Discursive and decoding practices, the fifth and sixth criteria identified by Twine, include findings from previous research (Grayson, 2017) as well as from new data collected in the Critical Writing classroom.

† Students did not necessarily demonstrate every skill represented here.

In the next section, I examine how a vision of racial literacy as literacy speaks both to the conceptual framework and the particular goals of the composition classroom.

## **Racial Literacy as Literacy: A Potential Paradigm for Critical Writing**

To explore racial literacy as a paradigm for literacy instruction in the college composition classroom, I discuss in the following subsections the literacy and rhetorical concepts students learn through racial literacy.

### *Establishing Authorial Positionality*

Through sharing their interpretations of texts and “real world” situations in the classroom and self-reflection in informal writing assignments, students began to identify their own positionality in relation to issues of race, racism, and racialization. They were then better able to establish their authorial positionality in their own essays on topics including but not limited to matters of race. Reflection upon personal experience in extended dialogue or individual memoir-writing might be especially useful in helping students recognize their own positionality. Individuals must identify the “assumptions that [they] take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by [their] own unique identity and experiences in the world” (Takacs 27).

In Colin’s final paper on White privilege, he included a “Researcher Positionality” statement. While such a statement could come off as forced or even an afterthought, Colin used this section to also state his objective and build a bridge between himself and his audience. While the language is a bit clunky, the intentions are clear:

I am a White individual, so it could appear that I may not have a clear understanding of how being neglected may feel because I will never be able to experience the injustice from the point of view of a non-White individual... This research is supposed to be able to guide people like myself who were or are unable to truly understand how it feels to be in a non-White individual’s shoes on a day-to-day basis.

If I am to be critical, I might say that one cannot “truly understand how it feels” to be in another’s shoes; that presumption is problematic and does not reflect an understanding of the “radically different experiences” of people of different races in the United States (Delgado and Stefancic 12). However, I am impressed with Colin’s acknowledgement that his perspective is racially and experientially situated and his attempt to use that perspective as a tool for communication with the reader rather than sidestepping the issue. Interestingly, after this statement, Colin steers the paper away from his own voice and highlights the perspectives and language of the people he interviewed as part of his research. Knowing when to relinquish authority and allow your participants’ voices to come through is a key component of writing qualitative research (Blakeslee et al.).

### *Considering Diction, Authorial Choice, and Audience*

Discussing word choice and representation with regards to race encouraged students to attend to the deliberateness and authorial choice behind a writer’s diction. There is a tendency to assume that good writing just happens, believing what some have called the “inspiration” myth (Smith) or the “notion of discovery” (Flower and Hayes). By making

clear the intentionality behind word choice, students begin to recognize the constructiveness of text, as well as the authorial intent and audience awareness that are necessarily part of crafting a written document.

During a lead discussant activity, Lisa and Kelly engaged the class in a word association game about the cultural value of words: “Who really owns words?” they asked. They asked students to qualify as positive or negative groups of words that may have similar dictionary denotations but in fact have different social usages and connotations. One such grouping was *Intelligent*, *Smart*, and *Clever*. After completing a handout, students discussed their reasoning; most, it seemed, had come up with the same labels. With more syllables, *intelligent* was voted to be the most complimentary of the three, though some students argued it was “cold” due to its academic association; *smart* was also seen as complimentary but more likely to be used in a non-academic setting; *clever*, students argued, could be used pejoratively and should not automatically be assumed to be a compliment.

Conversations about language, especially those that were racially charged, directly connected to conversations about audience. Zeke’s lead discussant group showed a clip from *Straight Outta Compton*, the 2015 biopic of rappers NWA, in which a Black LAPD officer harasses the protagonists, using epithets like “nigger” and “boy” and referring to their White manager as their “master.” While the lead discussants wanted to focus on how the Black officer’s behavior made him complicit in Black oppression, classroom conversation quickly turned to what students referred to as “the N-word” and its re-appropriation by Black youth and hip-hop culture. They also speculated as to why people talk around the term rather than quoting directly, which students suggested depended upon who was saying it, to whom, as well as the context in which it was uttered. They learned that it isn’t only words that matter, but who says them, with what intent, to whom, and how that audience might interpret them. Through discussion of racial slurs, students developed a critical awareness of how the components of a rhetorical situation work together to make meaning.

### *Critical Analysis of Media and Textual Representation*

Many students reflected upon the media’s role in disseminating essentialist portrayals of people of color, drawing connections between media representation and racist ideology. Students were especially critical of media coverage around police brutality and Black Lives Matter, suggesting that the networks’ interest in ratings outweighed their interest in social justice. This identification of how media messages are influenced by monetary profit is a core concept of critical media literacy (Kellner and Share 376).

Kelly, who identified racially as Asian-American and ethnically as Vietnamese, worked throughout the semester to explore the ways in which people of Asian descent are minoritized in American society. This is especially significant given that Asians and Asian-Americans are often excluded from discussions of racism (Sue). In one assignment, Kelly wrote about a studious television character who exemplified the model minority myth of Asian-Americans. In another, she explored the impact of cultural values on the academic performance of Asian-American students. She examined what she called the “forgotten” history of U.S. discrimination against Asian-Americans in order to contextualize stereotypes in the media; the model minority myth; and the academic

experiences of Asian-American students. Kelly conducted interviews and surveys among youth she knew yet acknowledged the limitations of the research:

These are typically the characteristics in which society has cast upon many Asian Americans: smart, good at math and science, and being overachievers. For some... these may be true; however, just like all other stereotypes, it's wrong to assume the same characteristics for a whole population... Interestingly, although in many cases people of Indian descent are also stereotyped as being math experts, there were not a lot of studies or scholarly articles that included those of South Asian descent.

Here Kelly points to a problem of the racial classifications we use – in racial discourse, Asian tends to be understood as *East* Asian; little research exists on the discrimination experienced by South Asian Americans (Kaduvetoor-Davidson and Inman). This essentialist construction of race, even within antiracist communities, can disenfranchise individuals whose identities are intersectional or whose interests, experiences, and attitudes differ from others in the same racial group (Delgado and Stefancic).

### *Performative Literacy*

Frustrations arose in the racial literacy classroom as students began to recognize the complex web of entangled strands of individual identity and social positionality that, woven together, factor into any story, be it a printed text, narrative song, observation, or lived experience. These lived tapestries are even more difficult to deconstruct when race, intrinsic to our social institutions and cultural ideologies, is involved. Because racial literacy considers race alongside socioeconomic class and geography, students in my classes were able to interrogate the situational factors that influence how race functions in society. The interrogation of those factors, however, did not necessarily guarantee students would come to a single interpretation or solution. Students learned to sit with the discomfort of unknowing and the recognition that learning is a continual process of participating without potential for perfect mastery (Lave and Wenger).

Sheridan Blau defines performative literacy as “knowledge that enables readers to activate and use all other forms of knowledge that are required for the exercise of anything like a critical or disciplined literacy” (19). Two of its components are the “willingness to suspend closure – to tolerate problems rather than avoid them” and a “tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty.” Strong readers accept limitations in their understanding; further, “the most productive readers will even sacrifice whatever comfort they may find in a coherent and apparently complete reading to notice discontinuities or possible contradictions in their understanding of a text” (19).

These behaviors are very similar to those employed by individuals as they practice racial literacy: they tolerate the discomfort that arises as they recognize the paradox between the systemic racism and professed post-racialism of American society; they sit with the ambiguity of their roles in that society; and they sacrifice their comfort as they begin to identify as racialized individuals.

To point, when a group of lead discussants broke the students into groups to identify the ways in which seemingly positive stereotypes are not as benign as they may seem,

Colin and Zeke were among the small group of students who been directed to identify positive stereotypes of white people. The group was mostly silent.

“This is difficult,” Colin said. “I can’t think of anything and I’m not sure why. I guess I don’t think white people should be talking about white people like this.”

Zeke added: “It’s like you never analyze the majority like that.” When final papers were assigned the following week, Colin told me immediately after class that he wanted to do research on white privilege so he could better understand his own.

### *Drawing Conclusions*

In writing and discussion, students in my study shared their experiences as racialized individuals. Some, like Dakota, criticized the nature of racial identification. Here is an excerpt from his Identity Essay:

I have many different nationalities that make me who I am but I know that if a person saw me on the street they would think of me as an African-American before anything else. I believe that it is something that is internalized in Americans. Since we are born we have had to label ourselves as Black or White but never question why.

While Dakota resisted the Black/White binary of American racial discourse, he seemed to understand the distinctions between self-identity and social identity. Dakota’s experiences have informed him of the societal tendency toward binary conceptualizations of race. He invokes having “had to label” himself – perhaps, one might speculate, on something akin to the demographic self-reporting forms new students (and faculty) at the university are given – to make a larger claim about American people. This instance of sharing and speculation points to Dakota’s development of an academic writing skill: By drawing connections between one’s personal experiences and others’ experiences, one begins to “pluralize,” thereby “generalizing” and moving away from purely personal narratives toward the content and style of academic writing (Moffett, “Bridges” 7).

## **Racial Literacy Is Literacy**

At mid-semester, during a class session for which no readings had been assigned, two students acting as lead discussants – with no input from me – invited their classmates to anonymously answer the following question: “What have you learned this semester?”

As I read the responses, I used five *in vivo* codes (codes that arise directly from the language of the data; see Miles et al.) that described what students said they had learned. These codes were: Racial literacy; Analyze texts; Focus/Main Idea; Skills and Techniques for Writing; and Critical Lenses. I added an additional code – Other – to label responses that did not fall into any of those categories. I consolidated those codes into larger, parent codes to identify the broader practice or field of knowledge to which those sub-codes belonged: Reading Skills; Writing Skills; and Race in Society. Figure 2 represents students’ responses.

Figure 2: What Students Learned from the Racial Literacy Curriculum



As a teacher researcher, I found these results heartening, in part because, more than once during the year in which I conducted this research, colleagues expressed concern that the explicit focus on race made my curriculum a better fit for a sociology class than a writing course. Halfway through the semester, however, students self-reported learning not only about the way race functions in society but also new reading and writing skills. Individual comments noted by students identified the following as some of the writing lessons they had learned:

- “how to analyze texts”
- “good ways to outline, format your piece”
- “stick to the main idea of your essay”
- “don’t make assumptions in your writing”
- “process of organizing my thoughts”

Students told me throughout the semester during in-class discussions and on informal and formal course evaluations that they were surprised and pleased by how comfortable they were with the focus on racial literacy: on the last day of class, one student remarked that it was “super-interesting how open everyone is about this.” On the mid-semester evaluation, a student wrote: “We can be completely open with our views. I like how even though they are very intense topics, I feel comfortable.”

“Where else do we get to talk about these things?” is one comment I have heard in support of the racial literacy focus of my composition classes. While I am a strong proponent of engaging students through classroom discussion, the lack of free conversation elsewhere cannot be our sole justification for the implementation of racial literacy curricula in the English classroom. As such, while Sealey-Ruiz has suggested that students

can use their writing to build racial literacy, I (Grayson, "Race Talk") have argued that racial literacy is particularly suited to FYC because students can use the racial literacy skills they practice to improve their writing.

Very broadly, being literate involves the abilities to decode, comprehend, interpret, critique, respond to, and communicate with various types of texts. The practice of racial literacy requires students to decode race and racism, comprehend the historical and contemporary structures of institutional racism, interpret individual examples of racism and racialism, critique inequity, respond to injustice, and communicate with classmates of similar and different experiences and understandings of the world. When students practice racial literacy, they demonstrate the literacy skills that have historically defined our field of instruction. By developing the discursive tools of racial literacy through critical reading, writing, and discussion, students learn to identify those practices and apply them to their work in academia.

In short, racial literacy *is* literacy.

As early as the second week of the semester, Zeke seemed to have a sense of how the practice of racial literacy gives language to concepts that are often understood more experientially than analytically. He wrote: "Twine's concept [of racial literacy], while technically foreign to me, I believe is something we all understand abstractly." I was impressed by this statement, not only because of the metacognition he refers to but also because of his recognition of the differences between the specialized language(s) of academia and the vernacular knowledge of the greater American public. Following Mofett's (*Teaching*) suggestion that rhetoric is innate, I contend that we teach rhetorical and literacy skills not because they are unfamiliar but so that students will be able to identify, refine, and expand upon what they already know and apply their skills in formal settings like academia. While some of the concepts and strategies learned and practiced in writing classes may be new to students, students enter the classroom with the experiential rhetorical knowledge that comes from a lifetime of interpersonal interaction and communication. This suggests that all students, regardless of their experiences or cultural identifications, raced as they are by virtue of living and attending school in the United States of America, have the potential to practice racial literacy.

### **Reflection: Limitations and Forward Steps**

In her study of a critical race curriculum, Lietz found that, while in an interview years later, her student "insisted that she had changed since [their] first-year class" (107), her statements and behavior spoke to the contrary. In kind, it is possible (as frustrating as it may be to me or like-minded readers) that, for example, Sam, the student who struggled to understand his own white privilege, forgot about the concept after he submitted his final paper. It is possible that, despite having emailed me a few months later to thank me "for helping [him] adjust to college," he has never again considered how his racial or socioeconomic privilege played a role in that adjustment. It is possible that Sam's whiteness has become again an "invisible fact" he rarely notices, let alone considers critically. Given these possibilities, must I concede that the racial literacy curriculum is not as effective as I have made it out to be?

I will answer plainly: No.

In the racial literacy classroom, rather than instilling in students a particular set of beliefs informed by our own positionalities, we must engage them in questioning the beliefs they already hold; rather than telling students who they ought to be, we must encourage them to reflect upon who they already are and how they came to be that way. Those processes take time and a student who struggles with the racial literacy curriculum may not be able to apply its practices immediately, especially to situations that occur outside of the classroom. The racial literacy educator provides tools students can use to view more critically and dimensionally the worlds they inhabit and their roles therein; after pointing them in the right direction, however, there comes a time when the instructor must step back, confident that she has provided enough for her students to continue down the road on their own and with each other.

Racial literacy is not a destination. It is a way of traveling. We depart from different points, embark upon unique journeys, travel at our own paces, and arrive in different destinations. Just as we cannot expect every student who enters the English classroom to emerge the next Faulkner (or Faulknerian scholar), we cannot assume that one semester of a racial literacy curriculum will enable every student to be as engaged with questions of equity and antiracism as we are. It is our hope, of course, that students will return to these practices, but we must recognize that progress via racial literacy may take time. After all, how long has it taken some of us scholars to come to understand these concepts?

My study was conducted with a small population of students in a particular context, factors that may inspire debate about the generalizability of these findings. While larger or more longitudinal studies would be useful to examine the broader efficacy of the racial literacy framework, I do not believe that the time frame or limited participant pool are necessarily limitations. If anything, that this curriculum was successful in these particular FYC classrooms demonstrates two broader truths about classroom research: first, that when it comes to students' understanding of potentially sensitive or controversial issues educators must create learning environments that make students feel safe *and* invite them to tread into uncomfortable but necessary waters (Arao and Clemens; Grayson and Wolfsdorf); and second, that this type of research requires the sensitivity and familiarity of a framework like teacher research.

A considerable body of literature attests to the benefits of teacher research: in addition to potentially improving classroom instruction, teacher research may also help teachers discover a sense of agency in a system that often undervalues their efforts. Lankshear and Knobel describe teacher research as a means through which teachers may make "sound autonomous professional judgements and decisions appropriate to their status as professionals" (5). This is especially significant in an otherwise top-down educational system that emphasizes standardization and assessment.

A student-responsive, teacher-as-agent orientation to research is even more consequential where matters of equity are concerned. Educators and administrators "typically worry about racial inequality rather than the very idea of racial classification" (Pollock 13). Because avoiding racial markers simply hides the ways racial inequities manifest themselves, Mica Pollock suggests that conversations about race be framed with "honest, critically conscious discussion of *race talk itself and its dilemmas*" (218). Racial literacy

will not, on its own, solve the inequities of our society or its educational institutions. But it may help us, and our students, name them.

## Works Cited

- Arao, Brian and Kristi Clemens, K. "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice." *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, edited by Lisa M. Landreman, Stylus, 2013, pp. 135-150.
- Barnhardt, Cassie L. "Campus Based Organizing: Tactical Repertoires of Contemporary Student Movements." *New Directions for Higher Education*, vol. 167, no. 1, 2014, pp. 43-48.
- Baumann, James F., Betty Shockley, and JoBeth Allen. "Methodology in Teacher Research: Three Cases." *Perspectives in Reading Research*, no. 10, 1996, pp. 1-45.
- Bernard, H. Russell. *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Altamira, 2006.
- Blakeslee, Ann M, Caroline M. Cole, and Theresa Conefrey. "Constructing Voices in Writing Research: Developing Participatory Approaches to Situated Inquiry." *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch, NCTE, 1996, pp. 134-154.
- Blau, Sheridan. "Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers." *Voices from the Middle*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2003, pp. 18-22.
- Borsheim-Black, Carlin. "'It's Pretty Much White': Challenges and Opportunities of an Antiracist Approach to Literature Instruction in a Multilayered White Context." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, pp. 407-429.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 785-810.
- Constantine, Madonna, Tina Q. Richardson, Eric M. Benjamin, and John W. Wilson. "An Overview of Black Racial Identity Theories: Limitations and Considerations for Future Theoretical Conceptualizations." *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 1998, pp. 95-99.
- Crabtree, Benjamin F. and William L. Miller. *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.
- Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed., Sage, 2013.
- Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York UP, 2012.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *What Does It Mean to be White?: Developing White Racial Literacy*. Peter Lang, 2016.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity, 1992.
- Flower, Linda and John R. Hayes. "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1980, pp. 21-32.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. Pluto, 2012.

- Grayson, Mara Lee. "Race Talk in the Composition Classroom: Narrative Song Lyrics as Texts for Racial Literacy." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2017, pp. 143-167.
- . *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.
- Grayson, Mara Lee and Adam Wolfsdorf. "Courageous Conversations in the Age of the Trigger Warning." *From Disagreement to Discourse*, edited by Rhonda Bryant and Beth Durodoye, Information Age Publishing, 2019.
- Guinier, Lani. "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2004, pp. 92-118.
- Helms, Janet E. "Toward a Model of White Racial Identity Development." *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Janet E. Helms, Praeger, 1990, pp. 49-66.
- Hill, Marc Lamont. *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. Teachers College Press, 2009.
- Husband, Terry. "Using Drama Pedagogy to Develop Critical Racial Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom." *Perspectives and Provocations*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp. 16-51.
- Johnson, Michelle T. *Race(ing) Around in Rhetoric and Composition Circles: Racial Literacy as the Way Out*. 2009. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, PhD dissertation.
- Kaduvetoor-Davidson, Anju and Arpana G. Inman. "South Asian Americans: Perceived Discrimination, Stress, and Well-Being." *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2012, pp. 155-165.
- Kellner, Douglas and Jeff Share. "Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core Concepts, Debates, Organizations, and Policy." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2005, pp. 369-86.
- Lankshear, Colin and Michele Knobel. *A Handbook for Teacher Research: From Design to Implementation*. Open UP, 2004.
- Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Lietz, Irene A. "'When Do I Cross the Street?' Roberta's Guilty Reflection." *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, vol. 21, 2015-2016, pp. 100-113.
- Luke, Allan. "The Trouble with English." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2004, pp. 85-95.
- McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, pp. 10-12.
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd ed, Sage, 2014.
- Moffett, James. "Bridges: From Personal Writing to the Formal Essay." *National Writing Project*, March 1989. <https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/704>.
- . *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.
- Nakagawa, Kathy and Angela E. Arzubiaga. "The Use of Social Media in Teaching Race." *Adult Learning*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2014, pp. 103-110.

- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 1994.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. "What is Whiteness?" *New York Times*, 21 Jun. 2015.
- Pollock, Mica. *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Renn, Kristen A. "Creating and Re-Creating Race: The Emergence of Racial Identity as a Critical Element in Psychological, Sociological, and Ecological Perspectives on Human Development." *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks*, edited by Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe and Bailey W. Jackson III, 2nd ed., New York UP, 2012, pp. 11-32.
- Rogers, Rebecca and Melissa Mosley. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Racial Literacy in Teacher Education." *Linguistics and Education: An International Research Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2008, pp. 107-131.
- . "Racial Literacy in a Second-Grade Classroom: Critical Race Theory, Whiteness Studies, and Literacy Research." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2006, pp. 462-495.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Yolanda. "Building Racial Literacy in First-Year Composition." *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2013, pp. 384-98.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Yolanda and Perry Greene. "Popular Visual Images and the (Mis)Reading of Black Male Youth: A Case for Racial Literacy in Urban Preservice Teacher Education." *Teaching Education*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, 55-76.
- Singleton, Glenn E. and Curtis Linton. *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Corwin, 2006.
- Skerrett, Allison. "English Teachers' Racial Literacy Knowledge and Practice." *Race Ethnicity and Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2011, pp. 313-330.
- Skerrett, Allison, Alina Adonyi Pruitt, and Amber S. Warrington. "Racial and Related Forms of Specialist Knowledge on English Education Blogs." *English Education*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2015, pp. 314-346.
- Smith, Michael. "Worshipping at the Altar: Creative Writing and the Myth of Inspiration." *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2011, pp. 65-70.
- Sue, Derald Wing. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Wiley, 2015.
- Takacs, David. "How Does Your Positionality Bias Your Epistemology?" *Thought and Action*, Summer 2003, pp. 27-38.
- Tatarchevskiy, Tatiana. "The 'Popular' Culture of Internet Activism." *New Media and Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 297-313.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-24.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Teaching White Students about Racism: The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope." *Teachers College Record*, vol. 95, no. 4, 1994, pp. 462-476.
- Trainor, Jennifer Siebel. "The Emotioned Power of Racism: An Ethnographic Portrait of an All-White High School." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2008, pp. 82-112.

- Twine, France Winddance. "A White Side of Black Britain: The Concept of Racial Literacy." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2004, pp. 878-907.
- . *A White Side of Black Britain: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Vetter, Amy and Holly Hungerford-Kressor. "'We Gotta Change First': Racial Literacy in a High School English Classroom." *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2014, pp. 82-99.
- Wijeyesinghe, Charmaine. L. and Bailey. W. Jackson, III. "Introduction." *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks*, edited by Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe, and Bailey W. Jackson, III, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York UP, 2012, pp. 1-10.
- Winans, Amy E. "Cultivating Racial Literacy in White, Segregated Settings: Emotions as Site of Ethical Engagement and Inquiry." *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2010, pp. 475-491.
- Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage, 2014.