"Racism is a misunderstanding": Rhetorically listening to white students' performances of race

Meagan Rodgers

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation
Rodgers, Meagan, "'Racism is a misunderstanding': Rhetorically listening to white students' performances of race" (2009). Doctoral Dissertations. 503.
https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/503
"RACISM IS A MISUNDERSTANDING": RHETORICALLY LISTENING TO WHITE STUDENTS’ PERFORMANCES OF RACE

BY

MEAGAN RODGERS

B.S., The Ohio State University, 1996
M.A., University of Akron, 2002

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
English

September, 2009
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dissertation Director, Dr. Thomas R. Newkirk
Professor of English

Dr. Jessica Enoch, Assistant Professor of English
University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Robin Hackett, Associate Professor of English

Dr. Gesa Kirsch, Professor of English
Bentley University

Dr. Paula M. Salvio, Professor of Education

July 13, 2009
Date
DEDICATION

In memory of my mother, Jan Rodgers. I still feel her quiet, constant support.

In honor of my father, Ted Rodgers, and my brother, Brian Rodgers. Thanks for the empathy and the laughter.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have had the distinct privilege of working with Tom Newkirk as my dissertation director. His enthusiasm for the project helped me believe in the work at times when I was less than confident. Tom pointed me toward several key resources that shaped my thinking during this research. Though Tom was consistently supportive, he has also been a hands-off director. The dissertation you hold in your hands is entirely the result of my own labor. I am proud of this accomplishment, and I thank Tom for his guidance.

I am also grateful to Jessica Enoch for her interest in this project and her generous feedback throughout. Though Jess moved to another university as I was beginning my dissertation research, she agreed to remain on my committee. I am grateful to her for staying on.

Thanks also to Robin Hackett, who I encountered late in my time at UNH. Our paths did not cross during my coursework, but she agreed to be a part of my committee after learning about my interests. Robin has always helped me re-envision my work by coming at it from an angle slightly different from my own.

I appreciate Gesa Kirsch’s willingness to sign on to my dissertation after I had already begun work on it. Gesa has been generous with her time, feedback, and support. Her input on research ethics has been particularly valuable.

I am also lucky to have had Paula Salvio on my committee. Paula was interested in this project from our first meeting. Her enthusiasm was infectious. She was a great
resource for brainstorming and trying on possibilities. I thank her for her time and attention.

I owe a debt of thanks to everyone who has been a part of the composition dissertation group at UNH. My conversations with Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, Kate Tirabassi, Abby Knoblauch and Mike Michaud at Telly’s helped me form my research questions and design my study. The feedback from Steve Simpson, Jeff Ringer, Mike Garcia, Mike DePalma, and Joleen Hanson over coffee in the MUB helped me continue to believe in the value of the project when writing became frustrating.

I would be remiss if I did not also recognize Katherine Gillen for the countless conversations over lunch at Young’s, coffee at Breaking New Grounds, and sandwiches at the Bagelry. Kate is a great big-picture thinker. I was able to talk through new ideas and try on different options through conversations with her. Leah Williams has also been a great source of support, popcorn, and red wine throughout this process. I am lucky to have Leah and Kate in my life.

Last, though certainly not least, I thank the students and teachers who gave me a few hours of their time to participate in this study. Though they must remain nameless, their willingness to be a part of my research is what made the project possible. I hope that I have represented their words fairly and accurately.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. iv

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 LITERATURE REVIEW, STUDY DESIGN, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK..............</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 The Present Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Research Questions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 How my study contributes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Positioning myself- theoretical considerations for a white researcher discussing race</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Summary of findings</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Situating the study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Background for Research Method</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 Research Method: the Present Study</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9.1 Text Selection</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 A Word about Race and Discrimination</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10.1 First voice</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Developing Intent/Effect ................................................................. 117
4.2 Revealing Intent/Effect ................................................................. 117
4.3 Conclusions .................................................................................. 134

5 Conclusions .................................................................................... 136

5.1 The Content of Racial Talk: Implications ........................................ 138
5.2 Racial Discussions as Performances: Implications ......................... 139
5.3 Intent/Effect: Implications ............................................................ 141
5.4 Contribution to Composition ........................................................ 141
5.5 Metacommentary: The Dissertation as a Performance of Whiteness 142

NOTES ............................................................................................. 143

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................... 145

APPENDIX ....................................................................................... 150
ABSTRACT

“RACISM IS A MISUNDERSTANDING”: RHETORICALLY LISTENING TO WHITE STUDENTS’ PERFORMANCES OF RACE

by

Meagan Rodgers

University of New Hampshire, September, 2009

This study describes white student talk about race in terms of performance. I show what white talk regarding race looked like in my study, thus inviting the reader to reflect on her own experiences in terms of performativity and common sense. Recognizing student talk as a complex performance enables us to introduce the practice of rhetorical listening into the classroom in order to encourage students with differing common senses to work toward mutual understanding.

The dissertation is based on an empirical multivocal study in which white first year writing students and teachers were asked to comment on a racial text, reflect on their commentary, and then discuss a video of a racial conversation among first year writing students. I argue that individuals draw on discourses when performing in order to demonstrate common sense while maintaining social relationships. White students’ common sense is underwritten by epistemological ignorance of structural white privilege. The inability to recognize and validate assertions of white privilege is a result of this ignorance. I suggest the intent/effect heuristic as a functional practice of rhetorical listening. This practice can disrupt the weight of authority of common sense in order to
reveal racial assumptions and privilege. I also reflect on this dissertation as my own performance of whiteness.
INTRODUCTION

As a white female growing up in a Midwestern suburb that was 96% white, I was largely unaware of race, except when it came to learning about or interacting with minorities. To my young mind, race was synonymous with black, Asian, or Native American. In other words, if a teacher had said “we’re going to talk about race today,” I’d assume we’d talk about anyone but whites. I don’t think this experience is at all uncommon—not to my high school peers in the class of 1992, and not to the students who populate first year composition classrooms today.

I hadn’t seen that my whiteness afforded me tangible benefits until I was 26 years old and in an M.A. program at a large Midwestern urban state university. In a conversation with Tanya, a fellow graduate student from Jamaica, I began to see that whiteness mattered. She had shown up late to a graduate student gathering at a local bar. “I wouldn’t have come in here,” she said, “if I hadn’t known that you guys would be here.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because—just—look around.”

My eyes followed the sweep of her hand across the crowded room. I saw what she meant—everyone in the room was white. We didn’t discuss it any further—the band started to play—but I kept thinking about it. There were no signs of racist intent on the part of the whites who occupied the bar. But Tanya proceeded cautiously nonetheless,
concerned about experiencing some negative effect based on race difference. I believed Tanya when she said she was uncomfortable entering a room full of white people. But I didn’t understand it.

**Overview of the dissertation**

In this study, I look at white student talk through the lens of performativity. I ask the reader to consider the ways that white students’ racial statements are *ad hoc* constructions pulled from their common sense and presented for particular contextual (i.e. social) reasons. I argue that teachers can practice rhetorical listening in order to better recognize and understand these performances. Further, teachers can encourage students to rhetorically listen to one another in order to have more productive discussions about race.

Because I am arguing that we should consider student talk performatively, I also address the ways in which the participants perform whiteness as they discuss race. I show how whiteness shifts according to context. Lastly, in the conclusion, I include a meditation on my own performance of whiteness. This dissertation is not only a piece of epistemological work, it is also a particular performance of whiteness—one in which I have chosen to use the words of our current African American president to frame my discussion. My use of Barack Obama’s “‘A More Perfect Union’” speech in a favorable light enables me to display my own intentions to be a well-meaning and –acting white scholar.

The dissertation is based on an empirical multivocal study in which white first year writing students and teachers were asked to comment on a racial text, reflect on their
commentary, and then discuss a video of a racial conversation among first year writing students.

In Chapter One, I explain my study and locate it within the CRT and WS work that has already been brought into composition, rhetoric, and education. I then describe the study design and the theoretical framework I used to analyze the data. I use the empirical data to move into a theoretical discussion of the ways that common sense can be highlighted to understand racial discourse.

In Chapter Two, I address the significance of common sense and popular culture in white students’ talk about race. I identify four themes that surfaced time and again in my study. These themes refine the existing scholarship on what white students say and write regarding race. Existing theorizations of how white students understand race have not addressed the ways in which these students turn to common sense and popular culture as tools to make abstract concepts concrete for themselves and others.

In Chapter Three, I shift from a focus on theorizing to a focus on local negotiations of performances of race. In working to theorize what white students think about race, the distinction between thought and performance is often collapsed. I revive the metaphor of performance (as explained by Erving Goffman) to consider white students’ talk about race. Though we cannot access thought, we can analyze discourse as performed by interlocutors. Considering the talk in my study performative, I invite the reader to consider white student talk about race as a sophisticated, context-sensitive negotiation. I compare student and teacher responses to racial performances to illuminate the reasons why students’ expectations often differ from teachers’ goals.
In Chapter Four, I offer a new interpretive heuristic to use to analyze racial discourse. By taking a close look at the ways in which my study participants explained their understandings of race, I noted that each idea could be located in one of two places: first, most of the participants seemed primarily sympathetic to the intent behind racially controversial topics. If no harm was intended by the actor (speaker, institution, etc.), then that actor cannot be seen as at fault. Second, in rarer instances, student participants showed sympathy to the effect of racially charged examples, regardless of the actor's conscious intent. In other words, students' whose words took this stance said that it didn't matter whether or not harm was intended; if people are experiencing a negative effect, then it should be remedied. By considering racial conversations through the lens of what I am calling intent/effect, teachers have a tool and a language for reflecting students' thinking back to them in a value-neutral way.

In Chapter Five, I discuss my conclusions and put forth implications for future research. I also reflect on this dissertation as my own performance of whiteness. I conclude by asserting that the practice of rhetorical listening (via the intent/effect heuristic) can disrupt white students' performances and common sense in order to reveal racial assumptions and privilege.
CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW, STUDY DESIGN, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. (Obama, "'A More Perfect Union"")

On March 18, 2008, then-Democratic Presidential Candidate Barack Obama delivered a speech in Philadelphia that addressed race, rhetoric, and personal associations in a more complex way than had been done in the past. In that speech, Obama reiterated his denouncement of some of the controversial sermons delivered by his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. In the weeks preceding March 18, television news programs repeatedly showed a particularly controversial video clip from a Wright sermon which included the phrase “God damn America!” This sound bite garnered criticism of Wright for anti-American views and of Obama for identifying Wright as a spiritual leader. The sound bite in context gives a fuller understanding of Wright’s meaning:

The government gives [African Americans] the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing God bless America? No, no, no. Not God bless America; God damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizen as less than human. God damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme! (qtd in Moyers)

This context shows that Wright was primarily criticizing the country’s systemic mistreatment of African Americans. In an attempt to recover political goodwill, Obama
distanced himself from Wright’s most inflammatory remarks while also asking all Americans to acknowledge the pressing social problems at the root of Wright’s anger:

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through—a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect.

In a rhetorically sophisticated move, Obama used the speech to declare his patriotism and his criticism of America, asserting that one can love his country and be critical of it. In his injunction that “we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories but we hold common hopes,” Obama carved out a discursive space where disagreement is not an evil to be eradicated but an irrevocable feature of American society.

This complexity and this call to look beyond our disagreements resonate with my findings in this study. I use Obama’s “‘A More Perfect Union’” speech as a partial framing device for the overall dissertation. Doing so not only allows me to integrate a politically topical moment into my discussion, but it also allows me to demonstrate some ways that this particular speech might be useful to teachers working with white students in discussing race. It is also, not incidentally, a part of my own performance of whiteness in this dissertation. I address this at length in the final chapter.

* * *

In this dissertation, I attempt to bridge the gap I see between the systemic operations of racism and the well-meaning white student in the composition classroom. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Whiteness Studies (WS) have demonstrated the ways in which whites continue to be privileged over nonwhites via our laws, language, and habits. We have not yet seen, however, productive ways for compositionists to integrate the
lessons of CRT and WS (and the attendant assumptions about audience and the writerly self) into the classroom. When I stand at the front of a first year writing class, I look at a predominantly white collection of twenty-four young adults who individually act, speak, and experience the world. Will these students be receptive to the message that they benefit from systemic white privilege? Experience and research tells me “no.”

I am convinced that composition teachers can work the lessons of CRT and WS into classes of all- or mostly-white students, but we need to know more in order to do so. We need to know what these students are already saying about race. We need to look at students as agents operating not only within but also in-between discourses. Finally, we need a way to frame racial discussions so that students feel respected and acknowledged. This dissertation provides information toward these goals.

The Present Study

Approximately 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), the site of my research. The vast majority of the student population identifies as white. The three largest minority groups on campus (Asian-Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic) combined comprise 5.7% of the student population (2.4%, 1.3%, and 3.0%, respectively) (“Ethnicity”).

After moving to the Northeast from a more racially diverse Midwestern city, I began to wonder how these white Northeasterners from mostly white towns at a mostly white university understood race. Having only recently begun to see my own whiteness as a facet of my identity, I wondered how other white students came to do the same. It seemed to me that their lack of opportunity for interactions with nonwhite folks would limit their opportunities to trigger self-reflection on race. I have since become aware of
the problematic assumption that whites need nonwhites to teach them about whiteness. It is unethical to lay the burden of white folks’ racial awareness at the feet of nonwhites. Early in my thinking about whiteness, however, I had little information to refer to beyond my personal experience, wherein my awareness of whiteness was triggered by a conversation with a person of color.

As I have continued teaching composition and researching identity issues, I have become increasingly convinced that the teaching of composition can benefit from an understanding of whiteness. This can serve both social justice and composition pedagogy goals. In this study, I explore how white students at UNH attempt to make sense of race. I build on the recent work of compositionists and race theorists to offer pedagogically useful ways to analyze white students’ talk about race.

**Research Questions**

- How do white students make sense of race in a first year writing context?
- How do teachers respond to racial performances by white students?

**How my study contributes**

My study offers some answers to these questions. In this project, I worked to meet students where they were in their racial awareness. I was interested in what first-year writing students at a predominantly white university knew about race. What discourses did they engage as they talked about race?

In this sense, this project was about information-gathering. I structured all discussion and interview questions to be open-ended. I encouraged the participants to speak freely about whatever came to mind regarding race. In my interactions with the volunteers, I remained relatively quiet—I did not interrupt conversations to inform or
correct. I did answer direct questions, though I deferred any questions about my own opinions until the end of the sessions. I worked to create a setting where the participants knew that I was keenly interested in what they had to say.

This study is descriptive. It illustrates white student talk about race in terms of performance. I show what white talk regarding race looked like in my study, thus inviting the reader to reflect on her own experiences in terms of performativity and common sense. Recognizing student talk as a complex performance enables us to introduce the practice of rhetorical listening into the classroom in order to encourage students with differing common senses to work toward mutual understanding.

**Positioning myself: theoretical considerations for a white researcher discussing race**

Issues of power inhere in any discussion of race. As a white researcher, I attempt to keep this in mind. It has been my aim throughout to be mindful of my own white privilege, even as I try to dismantle it, in however modest a way. I am inspired to respond to some of the calls in the literature for more work on whiteness. At the same time, I am aware of some of the challenges inherent in such responses.

In recent years, I have seen white female scholars Jennifer Seibel Trainor, Krista Ratcliffe, and Victoria Haviland work toward illuminating and dismantling the hegemonic invisibility of whiteness. Their projects can be collectively seen as responding to this call by literacy researchers Stuart Greene and Dawn Abt-Perkins:

[W]e need to engage more fully in the process of making race visible, both as a mark of difference and privilege, and ways that the institutions of schooling and society have placed minority students in poverty at distinct disadvantages in achieving access to quality education, health care, and employment. (3)
Not only do we need to better understand literate practices as impacted by markers of racial difference (i.e. nonwhiteness), we also need to reveal more of the relationship between literacy and privilege (historically in the U.S., privilege is marked by whiteness). Trainor, Ratcliffe, and Haviland have each elaborated on how whiteness both opens doors and builds barriers on the path to being critically literate.

The work in literacy studies and English studies toward seeing and understanding whiteness responds directly and indirectly to the work of the race theorists that have come before. For example, consider Toni Morrison’s modest (in scope thought not in impact) examination of what we can learn about white authors (such as Willa Cather and Herman Melville) by looking at how they use racially marked (i.e. nonwhite) characters in their texts. She explains her goal: “[m]y project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90). Subsequent examination of whiteness in sociology, literature, and education regularly cite Morrison’s project as a locus of their own work.

In 1990, feminist and cultural critic bell hooks interrogated the predominance of white scholars in the body of scholarship on raced Others. Hooks expresses a wish for more research on whiteness.

One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness. It would just be so interesting for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what’s going on with whiteness. *(Yearning 54)*

Like Morrison, hooks is asking the reader to shift the critical gaze from blacks to whites. I am also mindful of the possibility for whites—speaking with the hegemonic power of
white privilege—to co-opt the project of interrogating race, resulting in a *de facto* reinscription of white privilege. Hooks is also aware of this possibility when she asks this rhetorical question: “what does it mean when primarily white men and women are producing the discourse around Otherness?” (*Yearning* 53). I take this question as injunction that applies not only to my efforts on this dissertation project, but also to the body of work that comprises whiteness studies. My own approach is echoed in Krista Ratcliffe’s explanation of how she sees her work with gender, race, and identity fitting into larger society. She states:

> We can listen to other women’s and men’s stories—in books and, perhaps more importantly, in our daily lives—not so that these stories serve as the final word on gender and whiteness (or any other topic for that matter), but so that they engage in dialogue with our own experiences and observations. (8)

As I proceed through this dissertation, I attempt to be accountable for my own white privilege and how my actions and words are inflected by other discourses of race and privilege. I particularly focus on this in the conclusion. I am also convinced, however, that my personal and professional subject positioning affords me a particular—not universal—standpoint from which to speak on issues of whiteness and composition.

**Summary of findings**

Through analysis of the discussions I had with study participants, I have come to the conclusion that the students I saw were working from a common sensibility about the significance and meaning of race. I saw that the ways white students make sense of race in this context extends beyond the themes that other scholars have identified. I use the term “common sense” to refer to the set of attitudes and beliefs about race that were generally shared by the group. When talking with white students in a predominantly
white setting, I found that common sense (as opposed to personal experience or focused research) is usually the basis of their racial claims. By identifying these features and recognizing them as facets of performances, we are able to account for the discourses that perpetuate white privilege and the individual students’ sense of agency, which we cannot undermine if we want them to be receptive to the lessons of CRT and WS.

**Situating the study**

As scholarship in race, rhetoric, and composition has continued to thrive, whiteness studies has emerged as a significant influence in the field. This significance is perhaps most evident in the 2005 *Rhetoric Review* Symposium on Whiteness Studies. Therein, the editors (Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe) provide an introduction to the topic, including a brief history of the evolution of whiteness studies and its links to critical race studies and white trash studies. The editors offer four reasons why whiteness studies is relevant to rhetoric and composition.

- First, because all language is “racially inflected,” a critical lens is needed to “counte[r] the deeply rooted belief in popular culture that we live in a color blind society” (366).

- Second, the critical language of whiteness studies can help us turn the lens on the field of rhetoric and composition as a whole to understand why “despite rhet/comp’s [sic] clear commitment to racial diversity and antiracism, the majority of the faculty in the field are overwhelmingly white” (367).

- Third, whiteness studies as a discipline helps us historicize and theorize individual anecdotes and experiences regarding race.

- Fourth, the lens of whiteness studies allows us to see how whiteness is “reproduced as a neutral category—in other words, universal, invisible, normal, and unmarked” (367).

The editors supplement this argument with a collection of pieces that “contemplate” whiteness studies in different composition contexts. The contributors include Catherine Prendergast, Ira Shor, Thomas R. West, and Ellen Cushman, among others. In all, the
symposium on whiteness studies serves as a resource and *de facto* codification of this line of inquiry.

More recently, Jennifer Seibel Trainor’s work has advanced the project of whiteness and composition by asking for a nuanced understanding of white students in Freirian classrooms. In *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School*, Trainor introduces several students she met during year-long observations of two English classes at an all-white high school. Trainor explains the reason for observing all-white classrooms: “over time, groups of people come to accept a point of view as true. This was one of the reasons I sought an all-white environment for the research: it would allow me to investigate the public, collective nature of racist discourses” (34). Her year-long immersion in two classes gave her a wealth of discursive data with which to work. Further, she got to know the students well enough to hear their daily contributions in a longer-term context. This allowed her to comment on the situated discourse of the students in the classroom.

The synthesis of observations, interviews and previous scholarship led Trainor to conclusions that she divides into three parts. First, she offers a new way of looking at white students’ racial words in order to more accurately understand the beliefs that motivate the words. Second, Trainor offers an analysis of how teachers can unintentionally undermine their antiracist goals by sending mixed messages. Third, Trainor critiques existing scholarship on whiteness, suggesting that whiteness can be more accurately conceived of as a process, not a property.

In order to build a bridge between CRT/WS and composition, I will first review the race theory scholarship relevant to systemic white privilege. Scholars in education
have considered the moral and pedagogical implications of CRT and WS for pedagogy. I review those as well.

One of the most common and commonly vexing assertions of CRT/WS is that white privilege is systemic—it undergirds the habits and language of everyone in society. Because white privilege is systemic, one need not intentionally invoke his whiteness in order to benefit from white privilege.

What does it mean to say that white privilege is systemic? Generally, the terms "systemic white privilege" and "systemic racism" are used to draw attention to the macro-level ways in which oppression of nondominant groups is perpetuated. Because racism is systemic—it is built into the structure of American society, into our language, habits, and laws—an individual can profess genuine antiracist intent while acting in complicity with oppressive practices.

How did American society come to be so entwined with systemic racism? As sociologist Joe R. Feagin explains, European settlement in North America relied on the "theft of Native American lands" and the uncompensated "African American labor" to build white wealth (9). The oppression of nonwhite peoples was not merely an unfortunate chapter in the nation's history, it was an absolute necessity in order for whites to establish themselves and later thrive.

Feagin asserts that whites continue to benefit from the oppression of nonwhites today, even if the majority of whites no longer ascribe to the explanations of racial inferiority that formerly were used to justify the enslavement and oppression of nonwhite peoples. Today, whites continue to enjoy "unjust enrichment" of inherited privilege and wealth and nonwhites suffer under parallel "unjust impoverishment" (4).
Both CRT and WS movements have called for structures and discourses to be examined to reveal the ways in which whiteness is privileged and nonwhiteness is discounted. CRT grew out of the critical legal studies movement. Legal scholar Derrick Bell is one of the innovators of CRT inquiry. CRT asserts that by looking at populations through the lens of race, systems of inequity are revealed that are obscured under the current institutional structures. Though founded in legal circles, CRT has been picked up across the disciplines as an alternative to a liberal pluralism that advocates inclusion and tolerance but has not forged the social equity that many seek. Derrick Bell explains the problem with liberal pluralism:

This is not to say that critical race theory adherents automatically or uniformly ‘trash’ liberal ideology and method. Rather, they are highly suspicious of the liberal agenda, distrust its method, and want to retain what they see as a valuable strain of egalitarianism which may exist despite, and not because of, liberalism. (78-9)

The desire to work toward egalitarianism fostered the growth of CRT. Part of this growth focused particularly on whiteness. Such work was necessary in order to dislodge the invisible, normative nature of whiteness in U.S. society as called for in my introduction by Greene and Abt-Perkins (among others). Philosopher Charles W. Mills argues that Western society is written as a tacit social contract which privileges whiteness above all else. Mills states:

Both globally and within particular nations, then, white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in nonwhites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further. (40)
The Contract, as Mills explains it, benefits all whites, whether they consent to it or not. Further, because whites are the beneficiaries of this contractual system, whites generally do not see the system in operation. They suffer from what Mills terms “epistemological ignorance” (19) that makes it virtually impossible for whites to recognize white privilege. Historically, those who are oppressed by a system of power are far more readily able to see the machinations of the system than are those who benefit from the system.

The body of whiteness studies scholarship represents efforts to expose the systemic privileging of whiteness. Egalitarian in much the same way that CRT is, WS scholars offer analyses of the ways in which white privilege operates. One of the pivotal studies of whiteness is Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Race*. Her questions about whiteness grew out of her work with the feminist movement. Women of color critiqued the second-wave feminist movement, arguing that their concerns were not being included under the feminist banner. Frankenberg describes her reaction:

> As a white feminist, I knew that I had not previously known I was "being racist" and that I had never set out to "be racist." I also knew that these desires and intentions had little effect on outcomes. I, as a coauthor, in however modest a way, of feminist agendas and discourse, was at best failing to challenge racism and, at worst, aiding and abetting it. How had feminism, a movement that, to my knowledge, intended to support and benefit all women, turned out not to be doing so? (3)

Frankenberg conducted interviews with white women from a variety of backgrounds in order to create a rough map of the terrain of whiteness in the U.S. By describing this terrain, Frankenberg “displaces [whiteness] from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance” (6), thus making it more visible and thereby indirectly responding to Greene and Abt-Perkins’ call to make whiteness visible.
One of the central metaphors of WS posits whiteness as property. George Lipsitz argues that whites have a “possessive investment” in the difference in social status of whiteness and other races. The implications of this investment resonate today, in a society where whiteness is still privileged over nonwhiteness. Lipsitz explains this legacy of slavery:

Because [whites] are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive investment in whiteness—generated initially by slavery and segregation, immigrant exclusion, and Naïve American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented more recently by liberal and more conservative social policies as well—white Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. [...] It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes, while hiding the privileges of whiteness. It often attributes the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values, faith, and foresight—rather than to the favoritism they enjoy through their possessive investment in whiteness. (18)

As WS has flourished, those who are sympathetic to its goals no longer need to be convinced of the need to interrogate and dismantle white privilege. A sentiment has emerged that if white students can be taught about the oppressiveness of white privilege, then they will reject it and no longer hold any racist opinions.

Teaching white students about white privilege continues, however, to be an activity fraught with discontent. Instructors cannot get through to white students who are defensive and resistant. Compositionist Terrence Tucker describes one such classroom. “[M]y students are able to avoid ideas of systemic or subversive racism, to continue to privilege whiteness, and to present the common belief that high-profile instances of racism are simply unconnected isolated incidents committed by individuals” (136). Though Tucker is trying to get students to engage with whiteness as part of an
interrogation of their own subject positions, he seems to end up with students who fear or resent his goals.

Education scholar Barbara Applebaum goes even further, asserting that teaching whites about white privilege—making whiteness visible—is only a partial way to disrupt white privilege. She contests the assumption that teaching whites about white privilege will lead those whites to act in antiracist ways. In fact, Applebaum argues, helping white students discover and believe in the existence of white privilege can end up being the end of inquiry, rather than the beginning of a socially just consciousness. She explains:

This “aha” moment, in which what [white students] take for granted is uncovered, is often extremely exhilarating. My white students take pleasure in the belief that they have undergone a learning experience and have exposed the invisible. In fact, this type of visibility and exposure has a false, but powerful, emancipatory effect that may bring to a halt the necessity for ongoing learning. (“White Privilege” 9)

Although Applebaum is concerned about the evasion of accountability for white privilege, she also maintains that educators must not belittle white students’ desires to be moral citizens, even if such desires may manifest in problematic denials of racism. Even if such denials serve to evade responsibility for racism, these denials may also “reflect a deep desire to be a moral agent” (“Good” 411). Accordingly, teachers must find ways to engage this moral desire in the service of antiracism. Applebaum explains: “[i]f our goal […] is to reach, to influence, and to arouse those dominant group members with the potential to hear, to understand and to change, it may be important initially to consider, not dismiss, their professed intentions” (417).

Applebaum’s injunction seems to be an echo of Jennifer Seibel Trainor’s early work regarding white students and race. In “‘My Ancestors Didn’t Own Slaves’: Understanding White Talk About Race,” Trainor argues that we understand the white
student’s assertion that “my ancestors didn’t own slaves” (and phrases like it) not only as
an evasion of responsibility for the present-day effects of racism but also as an expression
of desire for an end to racial discord. Trainor found that white students are drawn to the
“sense of order” (159) that is implied when a student expresses desire for racial accord.
Trainor explains how the students received readings that illustrated the complexities of
race: “[t]exts that emphasized the complexity of race relations threatened [their] sense of
order, suggesting chaos and leading […] to a kind of agency-less paralysis” (159). The
need to foster a sense of agency for white students seems crucial.

Taken together, we have race theorists asserting the inescapability of systemic
white privilege and a set of white students who seek to act as nonracist individuals. To
assert the ubiquity of systemic racism to these individuals is to undermine their own
feelings of agency. This is not a condition in which education is likely to occur. John
Dewey captures this tension eloquently:

In order to know what a power really is we must know what its end, use,
or function is; and this we cannot know save as we conceive of the
individual as active in social relationships. But, on the other hand, the
only possible adjustment which we can give to the child under existing
conditions, is that which arises through putting him in complete
possession of all his powers. (qtd in Dworkin 21)

The theoretical framework I adopted for this study represents my attempt to acknowledge
both systemic racism and the individual as an agent “in possession of all his powers.”
Theoretical Framework

There are two concepts which guide the design and interpretation in this study: performance and rhetorical listening. I use the practice of rhetorical listening—a “stance of openness” (Ratcliffe 1) a listener takes—to access the common sense that underlies the performances of the study participants.

The work that goes on in the setting of composition classrooms can be productively thought of as performative. If a performance is executed by an actor, for an audience, with only the tools on-hand available, then it is not much of a stretch to consider a student contributing to a class discussion as a performer, or a piece of writing produced by a student as a type of performance. In The Performance of Self in Student Writing, Thomas Newkirk asserts that students doing personal writing are engaged in complex processes of writing, meaning-making, and performance. He asks compositionists to consider first year students’ writing in terms of how it creates meaning for them as they draw on themes valued in their non-academic worlds, if not academic culture. He explains the dilemma that composition teachers face when considering cliché in student writing:

We have been taught to be “vaguely nauseated” by the emblems of sentimentality that presuppose a corresponding emotional reaction on our part. [...] But to give in to this nausea also entails distancing ourselves from the ways emotion is expressed and expected in the wider culture that some students draw on. (36)

Newkirk builds on sociologist Erving Goffman’s notion of performativity to examine the complexity behind students’ work. Goffman posits that when speaking to others, an individual is presenting information in a way so as to “exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (35). Newkirk explains the implications of this for a composition
context: "[t]he key feature of these [student] presentations is their selectivity; every act of
self-presentation involves the withholding of information that might undermine the
idealized impression the performer wants to convey" (3). Newkirk uses this insight to
reassert the role of the personal in first year writing as a complex cultural performance
from those scholars who would deem it an exercise in solipsism.

Newkirk is not the only scholar to pick up Goffman’s performance metaphor. Sociologists Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin find performance a generative way to
consider how white undergraduates participate in racial discussions. When whites are in
corversation with their peers, they are executing a performance designed to reflect the
values of that group. Houts Picca and Feagin contend that while overt racist talk has
decreased over time, such talk has not disappeared (x). The researchers explain: “Much
of the overt expression of blatantly racist thought, emotions, interpretations, and
inclinations has gone backstage—that is, into private settings where whites find
themselves among other whites, especially friends and relatives” (emphasis in original x).
Here, the performance metaphor is extended onto the stage, which is divided into two
very different sections: frontstage and backstage. While it is generally socially
unacceptable to perform racist talk in public settings, it is far more common to find overt
racist talk in backstage scenes, which presumably operate under a different implicit code
of acceptable conduct.

Houts Picca’s and Feagin’s findings are based on a study in which they asked a
total of 626 white undergraduates across the U.S. to keep “racial-event diaries” (xv) in
which they recorded their experiences with “everyday events and conversations that deal
with racial issues, images, and understandings" (31). The researchers elaborate on their findings:

When whites recount racial events, [...] they reveal how they, their acquaintances, and their relatives do racial performances differently in spaces or places with diverse and multiracial populations (which we term *frontstage*), as compared with their racial performances in spaces or places where they are only with those who appear to be white (which we term *backstage*). (emphasis in original 16)

Houts Picca and Feagin found that whites can be adept at tailoring their performances to their perceived audiences in order to maintain positive group relations. Their work provides a valuable insight into the ways that racial performances by whites change based on context.

As a compositionist, I am particularly interested in what we can learn about white students’ performances on racial topics. Newkirk’s insistence that first year writing students are engaged in serious, situated work helps me to see white students talking about race in a similar vein. When white students in predominantly white classrooms are invited to discuss race, their responses are certainly performative (as is anyone’s—I do not mean to belittle “performance”).

Once recognizing classroom discussions as frontstage performances, it is possible to rhetorically listen to the content of these performances to better understand the complex negotiation in which students are engaged. Krista Ratcliffe offers rhetorical listening as a new way of thinking about communication between parties who disagree. She suggests that disagreements may arise because the communicators are operating under different cultural logics. With rhetorical listening, the point is not to identify and define a static set of characteristics for any particular cultural group, but instead to emphasize the need to be mindful that in cross-cultural communications, you may not be
understanding the issues in the same way as a member of a cultural group that holds a different cultural logic.

Rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe explains, is a "stance of openness" that a person can choose to take when encountering a new or uncomfortable opinion (1). When practicing rhetorical listening, an individual is consciously trying to listen not only to what the other person is saying, but also to the cultural values that might be influencing both the speaker and the self. Rhetorical listening can enable people to "foster conscious identifications" (emphasis in original 2) across cultural difference, which can, Ratcliffe suggests, lead to more thorough understandings, if not perfect agreements.

Throughout this project, I have attempted to rhetorically listen to the performances by the study participants. As a result, I have been able to propose a new set of tools for understanding white student talk about race.

**Background for Research Method**

When looking to reveal the culture-bound habits of language and practices, one option is to put different cultures under the same spotlight. One such study is *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States* by Joseph J. Tobin, David Y.H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson. This study looked at the assumptions about preschooling in three different cultures. By creating videos of typical preschool days in Japan, China, and the United States, the researchers were able to solicit commentary on a common set of texts from cultural insiders (teachers and administrators from the same culture as the one on video) and outsiders (teachers and administrators from other cultures). These sets of commentary allowed the researchers to identify some common assumptions within each culture. What are the prevailing understandings about preschooling? We get an
idea of what this tool can do by looking at the reaction of Tanaka-sensei, one of the
Japanese teachers, to the video of the American school.

I envy the way the American teachers, with such small classes and such
low student/teacher ratios, have time to play so affectionately with each
child. . . . That’s a good way for aunts and uncles and parents to play with
their children. But I don’t think that’s necessarily the best way for a
teacher to relate to children. Teaching is different from being a parent or
aunt or family friend to a child. . . . What I am trying to say is that a
teacher should relate to the class as a whole rather than to each student,
even if this is a little harder or even a little bit sad for the teacher
sometimes. (37)

While this teacher thinks the American teacher might be having more fun, Tanaka-sensei
also reveals a common sense notion that “teaching is different” from familial interactions.
Instead, the teacher should relate to the class as a whole. Combining Tanaka-sensei’s
words here with the information offered by other Japanese educators, the researchers
were able to form a working understanding of the Japanese view of preschooling. They
explain: “very small classes and low student/teacher ratios produce a classroom
atmosphere that emphasizes teacher-student over student-student interactions and fails to
provide children with adequate opportunities to learn to function as members of a group”
(37). Tobin, Wu, and Davidson were able to learn this aspect of Japanese beliefs about
preschooling by placing different cultures into conversation.

Though my interest in higher education leads me to look at a population much
different from that of the Preschool project, I became intrigued by the ways in which
their method brought to light the culture-bound nature of performances. Because I was
interested in teasing out the common sense underlying white students’ performances
regarding race, I chose to adapt Tobin et al.’s method to my own work. What follows,
then, is a detailed description of the *Preschool* study and then an elaboration on my study structure.

The researchers in the *Preschool* project selected one classroom in Japan, one in China, and one in the U.S. They attempted to enter classrooms that would be familiar to a wide population of educators. The researchers filmed each classroom for one day, remaining relatively unobtrusive. They generated enough raw video material to create a *visual ethnography*. A visual ethnography is a visual artifact that can provide insight into a culture. In this study, a 20-minute video of provocative moments became a research tool to stimulate further discussion within various relevant groups. Tobin et al. sought to generate discussion about preschooling, hoping that each discussion would reveal progressively more about the values and ideals of those who were watching the video.

In our filming and editing we looked for richness because with these visual ethnographies we were trying to begin a dialogue. Like a psychologist selecting pictures for projective tests, we selected images that were ambiguous, that we felt opened up rather than closed down possibilities for discussion and interpretation. (Tobin “Visual”, 179)

This visual artifact became the “first voice” (Tobin “Dialogical”, 47) in the multivocal ethnographic study.

The researchers returned to each classroom with each edited videotape in hand. As they prepared to present the video to the teachers, students, parents, and school administrators, the researchers again set up video cameras. These videos served a slightly different purpose than the first voice videos. Whereas the first voice video footage was used to create a study apparatus, the subsequent videos are records for reference purposes. The audience was asked to discuss the extent to which the video looked like a typical day at the school (“Dialogical”, 47). The results of this discussion
revealed what kinds of assertions could be made about that particular school.

The “third voice” in the multivocal ethnography came from parents and educators at similar schools in the same country. After showing the first voice video, the researchers asked the viewers to make "descriptive, evaluative, and explanatory statements" about what they saw in the film ("Visual" 182). Again, this interaction was videotaped. In his discussion of the Japanese preschool, Tobin explains the purpose of this third voice: “As Japanese teachers, parents, and administrators discussed how our primary research site was like and unlike other Japanese preschools, their voices brought out regional, social-class, and ideological differences in Japanese preschool philosophy and practice” ("Dialogical", 47). Each voice that came from this interaction became “one voice in the larger Japanese discourse on preschool and child-raising” that “reflect[s] some of the complexity and range of opinion to be found in each culture” (Tobin "Visual", 182). In this way, the Preschool project engages the notion of typicality without disproportionate reliance on outsider interpretations about what is or is not representative of larger populations. It does this by deviating from the traditional researcher-subject model. Tobin explains: "By showing a 20-minute videotape of one Japanese preschool to diverse audiences of Japanese informants and soliciting their reactions, we shifted the power and responsibility to evaluate our field site's typicality or representativeness from us, the outside ethnographers, to Japanese insiders" ("Dialogical", 56).

In the final step in the multivocal approach, Tobin et al. showed the 20-minute first voice videos to preschool educators in other cultures. (For instance, they showed the Chinese and U.S. videos to Japanese educators.) Again, the discussion was videotaped as
a piece of data.

This step produced the "fourth voice" in our text—the voice of the Japanese as outside observers of other cultures. Here, we asked our informants to play the role of ethnographer by analyzing other cultures' schools. This step also addressed the question of typicality, because it gave us the chance to hear Japanese talk about what they perceived to be important differences between what is typical of their culture's preschools and of preschools in China and the United States. (Tobin "Dialogical", 48)

Through the course of this discussion, the researchers were able to again make comparisons without merely wielding their own interpretive lenses.

Instead of conducting an ethnography, I created focus groups. This method is ideal in situations where the researcher is looking to generate more information on a subject about which there is relatively little existing information. While a number of compositionists are paying attention to the themes of race, whiteness, composition, and pedagogy, there is relatively little empirical data that focuses on how students invoke common sense to understand a multicultural composition text. In a focus group study, the researcher takes advantage of the small, discussion-driven scenario in order to generate a body of information with which to work. In her book on empirical writing research methodologies, Mary Sue MacNealy explains an underlying tenet of the methodology: "Focus group theory is based on the assumption that the interaction of members of a small group will facilitate the uncovering of ideas that probably wouldn't surface if individuals were asked separately about their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs" (177). Given that common sense exists and is expressed at both individual and group levels, the focus group encourages multiple manifestations of cultural common sense.

**Research Method: the Present Study**

As I have altered Tobin et al.'s ethnographic method to suit my research purposes,
I have created what I call a *multivocal focus group study*. In brief, my method is a four-step process that began (step 1) with a videotape of a focus group of white first year writing students discussing a multicultural composition text. In step 2, each student from the step 1 group met with me individually to reflect on the group discussion. For step 3, I showed an edited version of the videotape to two separate groups of students and invited their commentary. In the final step (step 4), I showed the video to a group of first year writing instructors and asked them to discuss the video as it compares to their own classroom experiences. A more detailed description of this process follows my explanation of text selection.

**Text Selection**

I started the focus group session by asking the four participants to read Brent Staples’s 1986 article “Black Men in Public Space,” a piece widely anthologized in composition textbooks and identified by Lynn Z. Bloom as one of the most frequently anthologized essays in composition (410). Its ongoing popularity is also evident from a quick scan through the contents of the textbooks on my office bookshelf, which reveals this article in five different current editions.

First published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1986, “Black Men in Public Space” is the author’s first-person account of his experience as a black man walking the streets of a big city at night. Staples describes various encounters that show a black man suspected of being a criminal because of his skin color. After explaining how a young white woman broke into a run upon seeing him behind her, Staples reflects:

> It was in the echo of that terrified woman’s footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I’d come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. [...] Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the
muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. (19)

The essay is a clear statement of the ways that a black man experiences stereotyping. He worries about how being “perceived as dangerous” (19) may actually put him in danger. He explains:

I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death. (19-20)

The caution born of this fear leads Staples to take on behaviors designed to put others at ease. He keeps his distance from people who appear “skittish.” He closes the essay by explaining his tactic to signal that he’s nontreating to those he encounters on his nighttime walks. He whistles familiar classical melodies. “Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn’t be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country” (20). This final sentence subtly emphasizes an important point. Staples as the hiker, the whistle a cowbell—the analogy shows that Staples is the one who is afraid. He foregrounds the black fear that results from being the object of white fear.

I chose to foreground a nonwhite race in the discussion group reading because I am interested in understanding these students where they currently are in their racial thinking. I approached the subject of race in a way that is likely to be familiar to them—by reading something directly about race, written by a person who is obviously (via textual declaration) not white. The familiar method of bringing up race can open up space for participants to join in a discussion that mimics those they’ve likely had before. This approach is familiar because current first-year composition students have grown up
within the multiculturalism movement. Inclusiveness, celebrations of diversity, and education in other cultures are parts of these students’ educational histories.

**A Word about Race and Discrimination**

As I have already stated, in this study, I am specifically interested in the ways in which white students make sense of race. Because I wanted to access these students’ common sense, it was important to construct focus groups that were comprised of white participants. My rationale for this echoes Trainor’s reason for choosing an all-white high school, to “investigate the public, collective nature of racist discourses” (34). Though I was seeking to create groups of white students for my discussions, I was also mindful that my method was necessarily discriminatory based on race. What would I do if nonwhite students volunteered? Given that my research is motivated in part by a desire for social justice, including an end to racial discrimination, I could not turn away nonwhites wishing to participate. But because I was interested in learning about white students’ performances in the context of an all-white educational setting, I did need to create an all-white setting to study. Accordingly, I prepared to conduct two iterations of each group meeting. One iteration would be comprised only of self-identifying whites, while the second iteration would include any self-identifying nonwhites.

This procedure was reviewed and approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. In gathering volunteers, no nonwhite individuals elected to participate. All student groups were comprised of all white students.

**First voice**

The first voice group was made up of four first-year writing students. Jocelyn, Michael, Elizabeth, and Seth were enrolled in one of two summer sessions of first year
writing. The participants and I met around a large table in a conference room in the campus library. Before beginning the discussion, I asked the participants to fill out a form with background information (including age, race, sexual orientation, economic class, and hometown) and presented them with letters of informed consent. I also reminded the participants that the session was being videotaped in order to be edited and shown to two groups of first year writing students and a group of teachers in a future semester. Then I asked the participants to read “Black Men in Public Space.” The discussion then followed a script of questions I had prepared beforehand. I followed the script roughly, allowing and encouraging bursts of conversation to continue until they came to a natural silence.

I edited the video to a 24 minute visual artifact. This became the “first voice” in my study. I selected moments in the discussion that seemed to either invoke or contradict my own perception of the common sense of young white undergraduates in New England.

**Second voice**

Each first voice participant met with me individually to view and discuss the edited video. Each of these meetings took place in one of the library’s small group study rooms. In these meetings, I encouraged each participant to reflect on her/his words in the video. I modeled part of this session on the procedure Thomas Newkirk used in his study of writing conferences. He met with each student in a one-on-one interview with two tape recorders in the room—one to play back the student’s conference with her teacher and one to record the current session. “By having participants comment specifically on parts of the tape, I hoped to provide a way for [the students] to uncover (or discover)
strategies and reactions that are tacit and intuitive” (198). During my second voice interviews, I played the edited videotape while audio taping the current discussion.

Newkirk explains an additional feature of this process. He allowed the interviewee to stop the audio playback at any time to offer commentary. More often, however, Newkirk explains that he was the one to stop the tape and invite further commentary.

Choosing the junctures to stop the tape was largely intuitive [...] In general, I tried to locate moments of discomfort, confusion, and hesitancy (on the part of both the teacher and the student) on the assumption that an analysis of these moments—when the conference ran off the idealized track—would lead to understanding the difficulties students were having assuming their role as student. (199)

Following this method, I encouraged each participant to stop the video to comment at any time. At the end of the video, I asked each participant to speak in an unguided way about her/his reactions. I chose to stop the tape at times when I wanted the participant to expand on what they said in the first voice session. I wanted additional information on situations when a participant said something either very typical of the racial discourse of white students or something very atypical. I also gathered information from earlier sessions to use in later ones. If interviewees one and two both commented on a provocative moment, I made sure to stop the video at that point in later interviews as well. I also posed the following questions:

1. What would you add to expand, clarify, or change what you said in the video?
2. What was your dominant impression of this experience? What seemed most important?
3. Are the attitudes/opinions/ideas expressed in the discussion common among you and your peers/friends?
4. What surprised you?
5. What has stuck with you about the experience?
6. What ideas or concepts relating to race do you wish you understood more fully?
During the second voice discussions, I created space for each participant to reflect on the group discussion. I indirectly addressed the question of the typicality of the ideas and opinions expressed in the video by asking each student to compare the videotaped discussion to other experiences she/he has had involving race.

**Third voice**

I solicited enough volunteers to conduct two separate third voice sessions. Both sessions were held in a classroom with video projection capabilities. The first third voice session was attended by Taylor, Ethan, Grace, Kaitlyn, and Brandon. The second third voice session included Morgan, Caleb, and Savannah. These participants provided background information and received an informed consent form. I asked the participants to read “Just Walk on By” at the beginning of the meeting. As I showed the video, I occasionally paused the recording and asked the participants to respond to something in the video.

By bringing in a third voice, I could begin to make assertions about the discussions that UNH students have and the common sense that undergirds those discussions. The members of a particular community are commenting on a conversation that happened among other members of their community. These individuals can offer an evaluation of the typicality of the conversation that cannot be replicated by an outside researcher.

**Fourth voice**

In this last step, I assembled a group of five first year writing instructors. This session was also held in a classroom with a video projector. Linda, Jason, Christine, Stacey, and Mary volunteered and expressed an interest in talking with their students
about race. I was specifically interested in working with instructors who are actively looking to engage topics of race in the classroom. I asked the teacher participants to provide background information (including age, race, sexual orientation, economic class, and hometown) in the same manner that I asked the student participants.

The participants read Staples' article at the beginning of the meeting. This session was audio taped and subsequently transcribed for data collection purposes. I stopped the videotape at the more provocative moments in the discussion—by that time, I had conducted the second and third voice discussions and had a sense of the moments that called for the most commentary. At the end of the video, I opened the floor to discussion. I expected that the teachers who volunteered to participate would welcome the opportunity to engage fellow teachers in a discussion about a multicultural composition text. I also posed the following questions:

1. Does the discussion in the video remind you of discussions that students have had in your classes?
2. What are the dominant impressions you take from this video?
3. Imagine the video discussion had occurred in your classroom. Please describe any thoughts and/or actions that would be part of your response.

Transcripts

At the end of this data collection process, I had hours of audio and stacks of written transcripts. After reading all of the transcripts a few times, I began coding segments of conversation according to what was being said (i.e. thematically) and how it was being said (i.e. performatively). I grouped and collapsed the thematic codes until I had a workable number of themes to analyze. This process led me to the themes I discuss in Chapter Two. When coding for performance, I made distinctions based on how the participants were interacting with each other and/or with the video. I wanted to draw
distinctions between moments of general agreement and moments of tension. I discuss moments of accord and discord in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER TWO

THEMES IN RACIAL CONVERSATIONS

"I can no more disown [Rev. Jeremiah Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother — a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. (Obama, "'A More Perfect Union'"))

Meagan: Do you think that race is something we should be talking about, or do you think it's something that ideally we shouldn't talk about?

Jocelyn: I think it’s something we can talk about.

In this chapter, I look at how white first year writing students are making sense of race. I see first year writing students as ultimately practical. Notice how, in the epigraph above, Jocelyn responds to me indirectly. I asked her if we should or should not need to discuss race in an ideal situation. She does not take up either stance, instead asserting that race is "something we can talk about." She did not need to take a stand in that moment, so she didn’t. Jocelyn and the other first year writing students in this study seemed to stick with what they know. This is unsurprising, given that they are at a formative moment in their personal and academic growth. They are surrounded by new people in a new place, and they are being asked by their instructors to not only learn about the world, but to ask questions about the whys and hows of their worlds. The
composition classroom is one location where students are asked to practice critical thinking about themselves and their assumptions. It is in this setting that researchers have found that students often turn to clichés and commonplaces in their discussions and writing.

If we think of these students as Thomas Newkirk suggests—as offering serious, situated performances in class and contributing to the discussion from the tools they have on-hand, then we get a view of the complexities of their contributions. When they offer truisms that have been adroitly dismantled in race theory scholarship (by scholars who “know better”), or stereotypes from popular entertainment, we can see that they’re tapping into their immediately accessible resources. Most of them do not consider themselves having personal experience with race, nor have they done any focused research on the topic. What are their tools? As I will show, they work with common sense.

**Common Sense**

I define common sense as the knowledge that is not based in direct personal experience or focused research. Common sense is what we figure to be true based on the received wisdom we have obtained over time. Common sense includes the values and assumptions we learn (and have not consciously rejected) from our families, friends, and other cultural inputs. This common sense is not taught explicitly but instead is learned in “kinship and friendship networks and from mass media, likely at an early age” (Houts Picca and Feagin 1). Common sense is built upon the knowledge and values that are generally accepted to be true. Underlying white folks’ common sense about race is what Charles W. Mills had termed “epistemological ignorance” (19). According to Mills,
whites in Western society are ignorant of the fact that white privilege exists and have a hard time comprehending the arguments that assert otherwise.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls common sense a “cultural system” that derives its authority from those who are convinced of “its value and validity” (76). Geertz is speaking of the possibility of empirical study of common sense, likening it to other topics of anthropological study, such as “myth, painting, [and] epistemology.” Like these “historically constructed” cultural artifacts, common sense can also be “subjected to historically defined standards of judgment” (76). If there are defined standards, then there is an opportunity for empirical study. The most fundamental characteristic of common sense, according to Geertz, is its ability to naturalize beliefs as truths. Geertz explains: “common sense represents matters—that is, certain matters and not others—as being what they are in the simple nature of the case” (85). He uses the example of intersexuality to illustrate how different cultures understand the “natural”-ness of possessing both male and female biological traits. Some cultures revere intersexed individuals. In America, however, common sense asserts that intersexuality is distinctly unnatural because it does not conform to the common sense gender binary of female/male. Geertz calls for further investigation into common sense as a cultural system that creates these kinds of understandings of natural-ness.

Sociologists in particular have taken on the task of studying common sense. In the 1960s, ethnomethodology emerged as a way of studying and describing what common sense is for a particular group and how it is learned and communicated. In other words,

Ethnomethodology is the analysis of the ordinary methods that ordinary people use to realize their ordinary actions. This lay “methodology”—
what we are going to call ethnomethods—is used by the members of a society or of a social group in a banal but ingenious way to live together; these ethnomethods constitute the corpus of ethnomethodological research. (Coulon 2)

Here, the term ethnomethodology is being used in two ways: first, it describes the ways in which members of a group learn and communicate common sense. When I join a new group, for instance, I pay attention to how the members interact to learn standards of politeness. I listen for keywords and patterns of speech that are commonly used so that I can communicate and be understood. (Compositionists might recognize this in terms of the Burkean parlor.) As a new participant, I become a practicing ethnomethodologist. This process is largely unrecognized, though, even by those who are actively undertaking it. In the second use of the term, ethnomethodology refers to the intentional study of common sense—what it is and how it is acquired and transmitted. This refers to the intentional practice of studying common sense. What are the ground rules in a particular community? How do the rules function? How are they learned, displayed, and communicated?

In the last forty years, ethnomethodology has proven to be a useful interdisciplinary bridge between sociology and subjects such as linguistics, phenomenology, and philosophy. Recent work by sociologist Celine-Marie Pascale combines the “broadly interpretive stance” (9-10) of ethnomethodology with poststructuralist discourse analysis to “situate meanings produced in a local context with a broader cultural context that is ontologically consistent, yet epistemologically distinct” (12). Pascale is interested in tying “commonsense” (Pascale treats the term as one word) to some of the media and popular culture inputs that contribute to a culture’s received knowledge. She explains:
The analytical focus of this book follows an ethnomethodological style of analysis that attends to the unspoken knowledge upon which interviewees and media reflexively rely in order to produce the appearance of an apparently objective social world. (emphasis in original)

To these ends, Pascale systematically conducted interviews, read newspaper articles, and viewed television shows to see how race, class, and gender were constructed. Pascale’s study illustrates the power of commonsense in human reasoning. “What sets commonsense knowledge apart from other forms of knowledge is its extraordinary power to eclipse competing accounts of reality; and, in this way, commonsense knowledge functions as a forceful vernacular morality” (4). Pascale finds that “systems of inequality” (2) pertaining to race, class, and/or gender, are upheld and perpetuated by the “vernacular morality” of commonsense. The vernacular commonsense of race, for instance, oversimplifies the complexity of race in order to create a concept that can be widely understood and shared. She explains: “[w]hile the production of race is always contextually dependent and therefore specific, commonsense knowledge about race, on which local productions rely, must remain more constant in order for the presence of race to remain broadly intelligible” (emphasis in original 24). A commonsense notion of race posits, for example, that there are distinct races to which people belong, that this identification can be made by looking at the color of a person’s skin, and that we can assume certain characteristics about individuals related to race.

In this discussion, I regard popular culture as a resource that informs and constructs individual common sense. Popular culture exists externally and internally as a part of common sense. As individuals, we can choose to consume pop culture or not (though its ubiquity certainly problematizes this “choice”). We can choose when to refer to it.
In this chapter, then, I will begin by reviewing on how scholars interested in language, education, and race have conceived of race. Specifically, I draw from recent research to describe the most current understandings of how whites, and specifically white undergraduates, act and speak regarding race. I use these sources to outline a baseline theory of how whites discursively negotiate race. I then turn to the results of my own study. In my research, I found many examples that support the existing body of knowledge. I also found examples that were not accounted for in the literature, indicating that we have not given enough attention to the extent to which pop culture is a resource for white students talking about race. I trace these examples as well, providing close readings of excerpts form conversations. These close readings allow me to illustrate some of the complex performances rooted in common sense and popular culture in which students are engaged, but are not accounted for by the models we have seen in scholarship to date. Existing theorizations of how white students understand race have not addressed the ways in which these students turn to common sense and popular culture as tools to make abstract concepts concrete for themselves and others.

During my data analysis, I identified several themes that surfaced repeatedly in the study. I describe the four most frequently invoked themes. One theme calls on the narrative of progress in which antiracist whites assert that circumstances today are better for nonwhites than in the past. This theme has been illustrated by race theorists in other contexts.

The other three themes I discuss show how white students rely on popular culture as a resource when making sense of race. At this time, these themes are underdeveloped in composition scholarship. By elaborating on all four of these themes, I illustrate how
students call on their on-hand resources to negotiate racial discussions. By understanding some of the ways in which the discourses of systemic racism are called on by white students, we can find ways to integrate socially just aims into our composition pedagogies.

**Whites on Race: A Review**

Several recent studies have sharpened our understanding of how whites speak and write about racism. What whites tend to say and tend to believe is a reflection of the common sense of the group. I use these studies to sketch a portrait of white undergraduate common sense about race. I begin with linguist Jane W. Hill’s 2008 study of the language of white racism in public discourse. Hill borrows the concept of folk theory from cognitive anthropology to refer to the “everyday understandings of the world, found in all societies, that are revealed by ethnographic analysis” (5). Hill explains that folk theories are a part of “everyday common sense” in which its believers are the primary stakeholders, both intellectually and emotionally. The folk theory can also be understood as the generally held common sense of the group at large. Hill identifies three tenets of white Americans’ folk theory of racism:

1. “[R]ace” is a basic category of human biological variation, and that each human being can be assigned to a race, or sometimes, to a mixture of races.

2. Racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions. In the folk theory, a racist is a person who believes that people of color are biologically inferior to Whites [and] that such people are anachronisms who are ignorant, vicious, and remote from the mainstream.

3. Prejudice is natural; people want to be with their own kind. (6-7)

What I take from Hill is an understanding of whites’ common sense about race: that race is biologically factual and meaningful (or “natural,” to use Geertz’s term), and that
according to the folk theory, racism exists only in the minds of ignorant individuals on society’s fringe. Hill illustrates how everyday language manifests whites’ folk theories about racism and ultimately sustains and perpetuates systems of racial inequality. We can also understand the folk theory as it is influenced by the “epistemology of ignorance” identified by Charles W. Mills. Because whites have “genuine cognitive difficulty” (93) recognizing systemic white privilege, whites have constructed a folk theory that similarly omits systemic racism.

Studies focused specifically on white undergraduates in predominantly white university settings allow me to narrow the scope of my analysis further. These students typically come to college with an existing common sense forged in racially separated backgrounds. According to Chesler et al., these students express beliefs about race that are characterized by: “ignorance, a sense of superiority, the mystification of racial relationships and the inability to see or understand themselves as ‘white’ or as enacting racist views and behaviors” (230). The researchers illustrate how these common sense attitudes are carried forward by students into their undergraduate lives. One manifestation of these attitudes in an undergraduate study comes from the Houts Picca and Feagin study I introduced earlier in this chapter. Their study of how white students perform regarding race demonstrates one result of white students’ common sense about race—a shifting of overtly racist talk from the frontstage and to the backstage.

While overtly racist discourse is infrequent in undergraduate coursework (a frontstage setting), there certainly exists evidence of white students’ frontstage common sense about what race does and should mean. Karyn McKinney’s 2005 study of the “racial awareness autobiographical narratives” of 193 white undergraduate students at
four different universities shows us some of the themes that emerge in this coursework. Her analysis of the papers revealed five common themes:

1. Whites sometimes recognize whiteness through turning points, or moments when they become conscious of being white. After these experiences, the research participants became more aware of differences between whites and people of color.

2. Whiteness as culturally empty and meaningless.

3. Whiteness makes them vulnerable to accusations of racism and denies them equal participation in ethnic events and practices.

4. Rather than understanding whiteness as a privileged status, my respondents state that being white causes economic disadvantage.

5. The students sometimes recognize whiteness as a privilege. (17-8)

Because of the broader scope and greater length of McKinney’s study, she presents us with common themes that go into more detail than what Chesler et al. were able to provide. I see these themes as reflections of common sense because, as autobiographical narratives, they necessarily exclude research. They may or may not incorporate accounts of personal experience. And, as McKinney shows, the majority of students do not have much experience with racial diversity.

Hill’s discussion of folk theory gives a foundational understanding of the central beliefs that whites hold about race. Houts Picca and Feagin demonstrate how whites (primarily undergraduates) behave when it comes to racist talk. And McKinney shows how these beliefs and behaviors show up in an academic context via formal written essays. By bringing these studies together under the heading of common sense, we are able to grasp the most current understanding of the racial common sense of white students draw on in performances of racial topics.
Popular Culture

Including television, movies, and music, popular culture provides a common experience that is circulated and recirculated throughout culture. It is this circulation that has compelled scholars such as Henry Giroux and bell hooks to consider the instructive force of film. Both critical cultural theorists have asked us to consider the ways in which film serves as public pedagogy—film instructs by communicating norms and values to the audience, generally in unacknowledged ways. "Movies were a source of shared joy, entertainment, and escape," Giroux explains of his own childhood. "Although we were too young to realize it at the time, they were a source of knowledge—a source of knowledge that, unlike what we were privy to in school, connected pleasure to meaning" (584). Bell hooks also reflects on the instructive force of film in her classroom experiences, arguing that her students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. (2)

The discourses of film are pleasurable and ubiquitous; they most certainly figure into the knowledge and values of their consumers.

While hooks and Giroux focus on the ways in which film becomes pedagogical to the viewing public, Bronwyn Williams has looked at television and its place in first year writing pedagogy. Like hooks, Williams also asserts that television programming creates a "common body of experience" (14) for viewers. Williams argues that when composition teachers ignore this experience, they are ignoring a powerful and omnipresent facet of their students' literate experience. Williams explains: "I contend
that we are missing vital information about our students' literacy backgrounds if we ignore their experiences and perceptions of the most pervasive form of communication in our culture, television” (13). By paying attention to the critical and analytical skills that are used by our students when in their roles as TV watchers, instructors can identify how these skills “converge” (14) with the rhetorical skills we hope to foster as students become better analytical writers and readers.

While hooks and Giroux look specifically at film and Williams looks specifically at television, I contend that in the years since these studies were published (1996, 2001, and 2002, respectively, and given that a few years usually pass between a study’s execution and publication), there is much less of a difference between the two modes of delivery and their roles within popular culture than there once was. This change is due to technological developments which have made accessing video content increasingly cheap and easy. Digital video recorders (DVRs) allow television subscribers to record programs to watch anytime later; Netflix and other services deliver DVDs of movies and television shows directly to the mailbox. Further, consider the increased presence of the Internet. There is a seemingly unending list of ways for individuals to access video content online, including legal and illegal routes. Major television networks make many of their television shows available to view online. Sites like YouTube.com allow savvy users to record clips of shows and share them online for free. The advent of bit torrent software (the current incarnation of peer-to-peer file sharing that Napster initially made popular) makes it possible for users to download video files for free. All of this access increases the sphere of influence of each video text, whether television or film. The
“shared experience” of viewing a particular show or movie is extended to an ever-broadening audience and can be repeatedly watched by the same individual.

In this study, I add to this general understanding of white students’ racial common sense with a more fine-grained analysis which incorporates popular culture. In many ways, the students I talked to reflected the common sense outlined above. There are interesting deviations, though—ones that are not consistent with what we’ve already seen.

**Themes in Racial Conversations**

As I listened, reread, and coded the transcripts from all of the different voices, four common themes emerged. Some echoed of the themes I outlined above, and others were somewhat new. I grouped these themes based on discursive similarities and gave each theme a general descriptive title. I pulled the titles for each theme from the text of the first voice transcripts. I did this to emphasize the fact that that I looked to the transcripts in the order in which the sessions were conducted in order to see the recurrence of themes and language in successive sessions.

1. “Racism is a misunderstanding”: it will decrease as ignorance decreases.
2. “If you make fun of somebody, make fun of everybody”: equal opportunity.
3. “Laughing at them” or “laughing at ourselves”: the (attempted) satire exception.
4. “That’s what’s happened to our brains”: the influence of the media.

I elaborate on each theme by giving examples and discussing how the themes compare to those already evident in scholarship.

As I reviewed the excerpts that are included below, I repeatedly reminded myself that I was reading and analyzing an artifact of a performance—spontaneous, unrehearsed
conversation. This reminder was necessary in order to accomplish my goal of examining their discursive tactics, not their beliefs. While each person's statements certainly reflect an aspect of her common sense, it is also the case that we talk our way through thinking in order to articulate and refine our opinions. I draw attention to this now for two reasons: first, it is my intent to respect the contributions of each participant in my study. I appreciated their willingness to speak about a topic that can be fraught with tensions. Second, I attempt to avoid characterizing students in simplistic ways. This goal is buttressed by calls from the literature, including the injunction by Jennifer Seibel Trainor that we avoid regarding students in simplistic ways. Trainor explains that such "characterizations contribute to static, stereotypic pictures of white, middle class students and their values and beliefs. In doing so, they violate Henry Giroux's injunction that critical teachers avoid 'good/bad,' 'innocent/racist' dichotomies in their dealings with students" ("Critical" 632).

In this chapter, I create a space to acknowledge the simultaneous existence of evasion and action when white students talk about race. This represents my attempt to honor the assertions by Dewey, Applebaum, and Trainor that I reviewed in Chapter One. In different ways, each of those scholars reminds us of the importance of respecting the individual intentions of the students. This need not result in an unconditional acceptance of their words, but it does attempt to capture the practical reality that students are more likely to learn in environments in which they feel respected.

"Racism is a misunderstanding": it will decrease as ignorance decreases

One of the most commonly expressed sentiments in my study was that racist acts are committed by individuals who lack the knowledge or understanding that all races are
equal. The most direct expression of the connection between ignorance and racism came from Michael:

Michael: Racism really is about being misinformed. It’s a misunderstanding of this idea that one race is superior to another race.

Meagan: Mm-hm

Michael: If you handle it with ignorance and the wrong facts and things like that, you tend to have generalization. Groups of people will get together and have that similar generalization and it’s based on fear.\textsuperscript{ix}

Michael demonstrates two facets of white common sense here. First, by saying that racism comes from “being misinformed,” he implicitly locates racism in an individual who is “misinformed.” Second, he attributes individual racist beliefs to “ignorance,” or a knowledge deficit. If only the person knew more, then she would not be racist. Both facets are consistent with the second tenet of the folk theory of racism as described by Hill, in that racism is attributed to ignorant individuals. Michael’s words are also consistent with the first theme McKinney identifies: the white conversion narrative. Presumably, a white person is racist until he experiences an enlightening event (thereby gaining knowledge and lessening ignorance) that refines his racial sensitivity.

A later exchange between Michael and Jocelyn reiterates the common sense belief that access to more information is the answer to the problem of the ignorance of racism.

Michael: That’s why I feel like as we become more advanced, as far as communications and being connected through technology and being connected as a planet, it becomes more and more imperative on how much we don’t really understand. The nineteen-sixties and –seventies, we had a lot of- if you had like an old kung fu movie people jumping around chopping wood things like that and nowadays it’s not so much that it’s—

Jocelyn: Oh yeah watch an old western, my god.
Michael: You know it's not just that it's politically incorrect. I feel like we realize that's not how it is anymore because now we have documentaries and things like that—

Jocelyn: yeah and—

Michael: journalists going overseas—

Jocelyn: And the stigmas that go with it. There's this thing Indians do--the whooping and all the woo-woo things? Because it was their battle cry. But I learned in my Issues and Ideology class that it's actually a religious thing where they're trying to do this chanting to calm themselves down. It's like how some Americans do yoga and stuff like that. That was part of their thing. It's actually to calm themselves because they're terrified. So it's the exact opposite now that we know that.

Michael: I think its getting better. Like I feel like if you’re talking about it, then you’re making progress you know?

In this excerpt, the narrative of progress though talking emerges. Michael states this directly, connecting the transfer of information via technology to an increase in knowledge and a consequent decrease in racist beliefs.

Jocelyn offers an example from her own experience. She mentions her Issues and Ideology class, where she learned about the purpose of a particular Native American ritual. Though her explanation contains problematic assertions, I am interested in the way it reflects Jocelyn’s investment in the notion of progress in racial awareness. Talking about racial issues, learning about other cultures through structured educational experiences: these kinds of experiences will reduce the misunderstanding that leads to individual racist beliefs and behaviors.

Michael repeated variations of this notion of progress five different times in our one-on-one second voice interview. The frequency of this repetition is evidence of Michael’s investment in the concept. It also shows the extent to which he is invested in
the white folk theory of racism as outlined by Hill, which locates racism in the individual who acts through ignorance.

Toward the end of my second voice interview with Jocelyn, she elaborated on her belief that racism is primarily attributable to a lack of knowledge. She explained that progress has been made, as evidenced by the fact that racism is something that is discussed publicly today, whereas in the past it was not. She explains:

It’s something we’re not afraid to talk about if we have to. If something racist, something racial occurs, we’re not afraid to address it nowadays. We’re not afraid to say “that was horrible. [For example,] those white men drug [dragged] a black man. That was a hate crime, blatantly; that was a horrible thing. We should take care of that kind of thing.” We can talk about it openly, so it’s something we can talk about, it’s not something we’re afraid to talk about. It’s not even that it’s a need to talk about it because we’re all aware of it, and the fact that we keep talking about it so normally instills in us and future generations that this is still an issue, it will always be an issue, so keep the wise. I think it’s being handled pretty well so far. So far it hopefully can only get better.x

In this excerpt, Jocelyn values the progress that has been made in public racial discourse. There is a significant difference between talking about racism and talking in a racist way. Jocelyn is referring to the public discourse about racism. Recall that Houts Picca and Feagin found that whites have moved racist talk to the backstage. Jocelyn attributed her own open-minded stance to her extensive experience traveling and living in various countries (her father was a private contractor for the U.S. military). Because her experience was so valuable to her, I wondered what she thought about the ability to be culturally open-minded without such a well-traveled background:

Meagan: Do you think it’s possible to have a knowledgeable opinion without having the experience?

Jocelyn: You don’t have to travel world wide to understand other races. [For example,] if you feel like you’re being very biased against a Middle Eastern, you don’t have to travel to the Middle East to learn their culture.

51
I think keeping an open mind is key. I don't think people should be so close-minded, so stubborn, so tunnel vision that about things they should really broaden their horizon. You don’t have to absorb things; you don’t have to want to, just be a little more considerate. Adapt more. This is the world around you. Accept it, don’t ignore it.

In her response, Jocelyn emphasizes open-mindedness and considerateness. These characteristics can lessen racism over time. Further, Jocelyn locates ignorance in the individual who can choose to learn more about a particular group.

As I discuss this theme, I do not mean to indicate that it is untrue that some racist behavior comes from ignorance and misunderstandings. Certainly there are individuals who, out of ignorance, believe in racial superiority. However, as CRT/WS has demonstrated, racism exerts an influence because it is embedded in the structures of our society. Successful dismantling of racism requires combating individual ignorance and dismantling the structures that reproduce racial privilege.

At best, the problem with “Racism is a misunderstanding” is that it fails to acknowledge systemic racism and allows each individual to deem herself “not racist,” and therefore not responsible for working toward the elimination of racial privilege. George Lipsitz takes a stronger stance against this theme, explaining that “[i]t is a mistake to posit a gradual and inevitable trajectory of evolutionary progress in race relations; on the contrary, our history shows that battles won at one moment can later be lost” (5). For example, although segregation has long been illegal, a 1993 study cited by Lipsitz found that 86 percent of suburban whites still lived in places with a black population below 1 percent” (7). More recently, the New York Times reported on segregated proms held in May 2009 in Montgomery County, Georgia (Corbett), where proms are organized privately, outside of school. The tradition of separate proms has
been in place there since 1971, when the schools were integrated. The existence of these separate but equal proms is clear proof that inroads against desegregation continue to be successful.

In the first third voice discussion, another student shows her belief that the ignorance of racism is decreasing over time. Midway through that discussion, the students were talking about racist language and behavior in the older generations of their families. I asked them if they felt there was a progression toward less racism in younger generations. Grace responded:

I feel like it's being brought more – becoming more aware of it. People are trying to talk about it. It's okay to talk about it. All the media is portraying things differently now. It's just our society – how it's progressing. I mean, again, you said almost 50 years ago there was segregation. That doesn't – you don't see that now – or, as much, now. It's kind of like even the times have changed socially. I feel like that's also helping.

This seems to echo Jocelyn’s earlier statement that “we’re not afraid to talk about” racism anymore. The agents of change in this progression Grace describes are people talking and media portrayals. The change seems almost to be happening to society over time, with little active, intentional involvement on the part of individuals.

This theme emerged in the second third voice group as well, though less directly this time. Early in the session, I had stopped the first voice video after those participants had expressed their reactions to the Staples essay. In that segment, Michael had used the term “less well informed” to refer to the white individuals who acted in racist ways toward Staples. In the third voice group, Morgan picked up on that term as she expressed her own opinion: “I feel the same way. It’s really sad that you [Staples] have to—the human—the guy even says he has to change his lifestyle to accommodate to others who
are less well informed.” The phrase “less well informed” originally came from Michael—this term was not used by Staples in his essay. This phrase functions euphemistically. A much harsher term could be substituted here—consider “ignorant,” for example—while maintaining the same general meaning. To use this phrase seems performative; it is a way to exhibit knowledge without sounding judgmental. One common sense understanding of race among this group, then, is that racism is attributable to the acts of ignorant individuals. The presence of such individuals will continue to decrease over time, through talking and sharing information.

I have shown how this theme coincides with Hill’s tenets of whites’ folk theory of racism. It also coincides with McKinney’s first theme: “whites sometimes recognize whiteness through turning points” (17). These turning points reduce the ignorance that causes racism.

“If you make fun of somebody, make fun of everybody”: equal opportunity

In each of the conversations I had with the participants, the equalizing force of “everybody” was mentioned. Television shows that make fun of everybody (i.e. every stereotypeable group) were acceptable because no one was spared the focus of derision. By this rationale, the fact that racism still exerts an influence in the United States is mitigated by the assertion that other countries are probably just as likely to stereotype whites as (white) Americans are to stereotype minorities here. As I provide examples of how “everybody” asserted influence in the various conversations, I contend that this is a manifestation of the American common sense value that everyone is equal. “All men are created equal” is at once revered as an American cultural ideal and decried as a mythical representation of a society that is deeply, inexorably stratified. While the latter critique
may be common among academic and cultural critics, the former pervades the common sense of first year composition students. It appears that if everyone is affected equally—with no regard to whether the effect is positive or negative—then there is no need to worry about racial implications.

In the first few minutes of the first voice conversation, Jocelyn points out a feature of the Staples article, emphasizing that even Staples recognizes that race is not the only difference across which violence is enacted. Jocelyn states:

It’s not even that it’s just straight down the line between black people and white people. He mentions that there’s gang wars. That’s not race specific; it happens amongst everybody, so he at least gets a whole bunch of perspectives on it.

It appears that Jocelyn is trying to mitigate the racial implications of Staples’s argument by listing other social conflicts that are not only about “black people and white people.” If everybody is being mocked, the racial significance is minimized. Returning to Staples’s piece, however, it is evident that Staples is not trying to talk about social difference or violence generally; he is commenting specifically on the fear he feels when around white people who fear him because of his skin color. He explains: “And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. [...] Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death” (19-20). Staples only mentions other types of violence (“gang warfare, street knifings, and murders”) as a part of the backdrop of his childhood in a small industrial town in Pennsylvania. Though this background is not a significant part of Staples’s argument, Jocelyn picked up on this as a way to argue that race is not the only focus of the article.
Jocelyn reiterated this sentiment in our second voice interview. In the middle of our conversation, Jocelyn was relating an experience she had in her first year writing class. A classmate had done a presentation on a chapter from bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress* entitled “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words.” One of the points in the chapter was an explanation of the ways in which African Americans have intentionally disrupted the conventions of standard English in their speech. Hooks explains:

> Enslaved black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language. [...] Using English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that white folks could often not understand black speech, made English into more than the oppressor’s language. (170)

This practice of reworking English was an intentional act of rebellion. In that chapter, hooks also briefly refers to hip-hop music, fashion, and culture as current sites of African American resistance. Jocelyn strongly disagreed with hooks’ argument, focusing particularly on clothing choices. I asked her to elaborate on that disagreement:

> Meagan: Although, in my sense of things, I think there are segments of the African American population that don’t want to be identified with the white population, with white America and whatever they define that to be in their own mind. I think there are people who might intentionally try and look different.

> Jocelyn: Yeah, well I think everybody wants to stand out; some people want to stand out different. There’s emo kids; there’s rock kids; there’s all these different styles of clothing and people will judge that and stereotype that no matter what color they are. It’s always people’s first impressions of somebody and the fact that he had to change himself was based on his color, not so much about his clothes, but his clothes helped that. I don’t think that, I’m sure people are doing it on purpose to, “I’m making a statement; I’m comfortable wearing these clothes, they make me happy. Wearing all black is making me cheerier than wearing all yellow.” I have nothing wrong with what people wear, but I think a lot of it is just circumstantial. If you’re going to a business meeting you’re not going to wear baggy pants that are showing your boxers; you’re going to wear a nice suit. It’s not so much about a white man’s world, it’s more like
corporate America, which is predominantly white. Still, I think it’s just the way the woman wrote the piece disturbed me a bit. I really liked the way Brent Staples did his piece, but when I listened to her piece, it was one of those hate things, anti-productive, counter-productive.

Jocelyn seems to agree with my suggestion that some African Americans might make their clothing choices based on a desire to look different, but she follows up by equating that choice to the decisions made by individuals who choose to dress “emo” or “rock.” (Both styles are adopted primarily by young whites.) By making this assertion, Jocelyn is deflecting the focus off of race (an externally imposed difference) to individual choice (an internally enacted difference). By that rationale, everybody makes these decisions, and it is inevitable that each person will be stereotyped according to those choices. Because everyone is affected, special attention related to race is unwarranted.

The importance of equal opportunity shows up differently later in the first voice discussion. In this excerpt, Jocelyn is talking about stereotypes used to “make fun” of someone— they should be applied to everyone: “If you’re gonna make fun of somebody, make fun of everybody. Just throw it out there, that way you cover all your bases and you’re not segregating somebody from who you can make fun of.” Jocelyn is asserting the importance of treating everyone equally. She augments her assertion by using the word “segregating,” which is a keyword in the history of racial politics in America. There’s a surprising assertion here, particular when paired with the word “segregating.” Jocelyn argues that by ruling a particular identity group off-limits to satire, that group is being segregated from the rest. This argument tips political correctness off balance by invoking a discursive tactic of antiracism in order to argue against political correctness (which is also ostensibly antiracist).
In my second voice interview with Elizabeth, she also highlights the importance of spreading around the satire equally. I asked her to talk more about her thoughts on *The Simpsons*, which had been a significant part of the first voice discussion.

Meagan: When you’re watching it, do you ever make connections to stereotypes or do you watch it in more of an entertainment frame of mind and not think about that?

Elizabeth: Definitely I think of it as entertainment and very clever and satirical entertainment. It understands the stereotypes; it understands the racism and it takes those and pokes fun at them but it takes everything. It’s made fun of everything, from the white middle class to foreign cultures to people like Apu.

Elizabeth expresses her admiration for the writers of *The Simpsons*. Those writers have created a show that makes fun of “everything” in a “clever and satirical” way. It is not only a mark of fairness; to make fun of “everything” is also a mark of sophistication.

Seth also contributes to this theme. In the second voice interview, I asked Seth to talk more about *The Simpsons* and stereotypes. He contended that making fun of stereotypes is part of the point of the show. He explains: “I don’t see why you should take offense to one group being stereotypes in *The Simpsons* when in reality everybody is. That’s the point of it: it’s a comedy.” In this statement, Seth combines two themes: first, he is commenting on the universality of mockery—everybody is being mocked, so no one should feel singled out for persecution. Second, *The Simpsons* is intended to be a comedy, so its point is to use stereotypes for comedic purposes. (I discuss this theme in more detail in the coming pages.)

The “make fun of everybody” argument was a persuasive part of both third group sessions. After watching the segment of the first voice video that introduced *The Simpsons*, both third voice groups added *South Park* as an example of a cartoon where
stereotypes are intentionally used. The first third voice group went into the most detail on *South Park*. Initially, Brandon brought up *Family Guy* and *South Park* as examples that were often more offensive in their use of stereotypes than *The Simpsons*. Grace chimed in with a recollection of a particularly memorable episode:

Grace: I remember there was an episode – the Tourette’s episode - of *South Park*. Everybody thought it was funny, but what about people who actually have Tourette’s? Do they find this funny? They push it a little bit too far.

Meagan: Should that be a gauge of whether or not something gets made fun of, or do you think that’s not a necessary requirement?

Grace: I don’t know. I think their whole point is - *South Park* makes fun of everyone. They find all sorts of stereotyping. I think that’s the whole point, it’s just like – making fun of – I don’t know – human rights, in general, because everyone looks down people for certain things – even if it’s subconsciously. They definitely go to kind of an extreme, but I think it’s maybe not too much of a bad thing because they make fun everyone. It’s not like they’re just making fun of one kind of person. All of their episodes they’re [unintelligible] from everyone, which I guess, will be taken offensively – I figure that’s – that they fit it into that kind of character but – I don’t know – I don’t think its too bad, even though some other people might disagree.

Ethan: Yeah, it does offend some people and it’s not really great for them, but people just gotta learn how to brush some things off their shoulders. Like, you can’t say Merry Christmas in the stores. Are you kidding me? That’s not offensive to anybody, it might be but - seriously, it’s not that big of a deal. Just brush it off your shoulders. It’s not like they’re doing it to be mean, they’re doing it because they want to be funny. They’re not trying to put them down; they’re just trying to make other people laugh.

Taylor: Well, that’s the point, too. I think you’re supposed to kind of go with it and realize that everyone else – everyone has a – kind of like a stereotype about them that can be negative. You’re supposed to learn to live with it and it’s supposed to make you laugh because everyone has something like that.

In this excerpt, the recurrence of false starts and “I don’t know”s indicates that Grace is talking her way through her thinking about *South Park*. In her false starts and fragments, I see evidence of uncertainty and perhaps ambivalence. There are seemingly
contradictory values and discourses at work in her language. She asserts that the show does go “too far” sometimes, but that content is applied to everyone, so everyone is being treated equally. Clearly, there are several noteworthy assertions in this excerpt. What stands out in my analysis is the power of “everybody” being treated equally to eclipse any hesitation that a viewer might have in laughing along with the show. Grace begins by saying that the cartoon went “too far” when it made fun of Tourette’s syndrome. As she talks her way through her thinking, though, she comes to an assessment that South Park isn’t “too bad,” in part because they make fun of everyone (later, the participants also mention an episode where Down’s syndrome is mocked).

Taylor concludes this excerpt by asserting that learning to laugh at yourself is a lesson everyone needs to “learn.” The implicit corollary seems to be that once you learn to laugh at yourself, it’s okay to laugh at others, because everyone is then treated equally. The importance of equal treatment is not something that has been accounted for in the scholarship I reviewed earlier in this chapter, but it is certainly a factor in white students’ common sense about race in popular entertainment.

I return to the first voice group for one more illustration of the thematic importance of equality. In this example, Michael compares American attitudes on race to those of other countries. Near the end of the session, Michael has acknowledged that there probably are “people walking around being racist without even realizing it.” He is quick to add that Americans are not the only ones with racial problems: “It’s not like Americans are the only ones being racist. People have plenty of wars and things going on overseas with that kind of thing. I think it’s an issue because human beings are such tight-knit groups to begin with that we close ourselves off from everything else.” In this
statement, Michael states that racial conflicts occur all around the world. Michael’s assertion functions somewhat differently from the equal treatment sentiment I discussed above. Michael compares America to other countries in order to place racial conflicts in a global context. The effect of this assertion is to minimize the extent to which we should judge ourselves (Americans) harshly because of our racial problems. Michael reasserts his belief in this in the second voice interview as well.

**“Laughing at them” or “laughing at ourselves”: the (attempted) satire exception**

Once one of the first voice participants brought up the television cartoon *The Simpsons* as a source of funny stereotypes, that show became a frequent reference point. Therefore, I will talk about satire specifically through the references to the show. Initially, I had identified this theme with the subtitle “the comedy exception.” I realized, however, that the humor to which the speakers referred was more specific than could be describe by the broad term “comedy.” I switched to “satire” to indicate a particular kind of humor in which people, events, or opinions are portrayed (often in caricatured ways) so as to invite scorn. I added “(attempted)” to indicate the subjective qualities of successful satire. It was not my goal to assess the effectiveness of racially-related satire, so I defer on that discussion in this dissertation.

Virtually every student that participated in this study voiced the opinion that humor is somehow exempt from the strictures of political correctness and politeness that govern social interactions. We have already seen this theme illustrated in minor ways in my discussion of the previous theme “If you make fun of somebody, make fun of everybody.” If it’s meant to be funny, then no one should be offended by it. Michael articulates this in the first voice discussion as the group was considering stereotypes on
The Simpsons. At the time of this session, The Simpsons Movie had just been released in theaters. In conjunction with the theatrical release, several 7-11 convenience stores across the country were temporarily converted to look like Kwik-E-Marts, the convenience store on The Simpsons. Kwik-E-Mart’s owner is Apu, a character from India. Some controversy had arisen over the fact that the temporary conversion of the 7-11s resulted in actual employees who happened to be of South Asian descent being literally cast into the role of Apu. Michael explains why this, and The Simpsons in general, is comedic and not offensive:

I think The Simpsons is a successful example of portraying stereotypes in a way that we can not only accept but kind of laugh at. I don’t think we’re laughing at them; I think we’re laughing at ourselves because that’s how we see the world. We go into a Kwik-E-Mart, it’s not just poking fun at The Simpsons. We’re poking fun at ourselves as a nation.

In this segment, Michael performs a sophisticated move. He acknowledges that the show uses stereotypes, but in such a way as to encourage the audience members to laugh at themselves. When he says “we’re laughing at ourselves because that’s how we see the world,” Michael seems to be speaking for Americans in general.

The topic of stereotypes in The Simpsons created the opportunity for each of the first voice participants to speak further on the relationship between satire and offensiveness when they met with me individually for second voice interviews. For instance, Elizabeth, Seth, and Jocelyn each explained that the fact that The Simpsons is a cartoon should inform the viewer that whatever they see is meant to be funny, and therefore no offense should be taken. Jocelyn elaborates on this position:

Probably because it’s the toony thing, you know you’re supposed to laugh at that. You’re not supposed to take toons seriously. You’re taught that as a child. It’s not real; it’s funny. If he gets hit in the head with a mallet, he’s not going to die, he’s going to bounce right back. In real life, you’re
going to die. When you see it in that cartoon form, you know that’s not real. Automatically. You know it’s fake.

Jocelyn posits that the visual cues from the cartoon should indicate to the viewer that he should interpret the satire in the spirit in which it was intended. During my second voice interviews with Elizabeth and Jocelyn, I had asked each of them to imagine *The Simpsons* as a show with human actors in real physical sets and environments. Both women thought the show would be offensive if the exact same scripts were followed by a human cast instead of an animated one. Again, I turn to Jocelyn’s words for elaboration:

Meagan: If there were the live action *Simpsons* actually with human people—

Jocelyn: That might be creepy.

Meagan: --I think it would be weird.

Jocelyn: That would bother me. Not just visually, but I think it would make it a little too serious. Not because of the live action, but because it would really put a face on that and you would really start thinking, oh god, that guy really looks like my friend who’s this [race/ethnicity]. It starts personalizing it and it would be too real. *The Simpsons* are an escape from reality. Though they’re making fun of everyday things, very exaggerated everyday things, things that normally wouldn’t happen. [For example, the episode] when Lisa’s a vegetarian and this barbecue fiasco. That wouldn’t happen in real life. Someone would switch to vegetarianism and your father would decide “this is the day I’m going to throw the biggest meat bash in the world.” It doesn’t quite always work out that way. The live action would really kill it. That’s a definite sever.

This comment seems to narrow the comedy exception to animation. A *Simpsons* cast with human actors would presumably still be trying to be funny, but it would be unsuccessful.

In the second voice interview with Elizabeth, she provides another reason why *The Simpsons* is an example of a successful engagement with stereotypes:
I think what I meant was [in] things like *The Simpsons* the satire comes from really getting American culture. That’s why it’s funny; that’s why it works. Sometimes in really badly written movies you see some black jokes or some Asian jokes that aren’t funny at all and some people think are very offensive and it’s really playing off stereotypes. There’s no affection, there’s no understanding. But satire should, it has to come from affection; it has to come from care of the culture […] There are different types of humors. There’s mocking; there’s a sort of gentle satirical thing which is what *The Simpsons* does.

The style of Elizabeth’s language stands out here. Words like “affection,” “care,” and “gentle,” indicate a nurturing, very well-meaning position. By this logic, intelligence leads to compassion. Intelligent, compassionate writers won’t write a racist show. Note too that this logic also echoes the logic of “Racism is a Misunderstanding,” which was prevalent in my study as well as in the work of Hill and McKinney. Knowledge combats ignorance and reduces racism.

Michael takes a somewhat different position in his second voice interview. Whereas Elizabeth indicates that *The Simpsons* does not contain racist elements because the writers are smart and compassionate, Michael asserts that there are racist themes in the show.

Michael: We see *The Simpsons* and we think it’s—I’m not sure—we see it as a TV show, we see it as funny, we laugh but we don’t really realize what we’re participating in.

Meagan: Okay?

Michael: I don’t see any difference between laughing at *The Simpsons* and laughing at a movie that’s meant to be serious but has typical racist themes in it. I think they’re one and the same. It’s just that we’ve been desensitized to *The Simpsons* over the years so we can laugh at it and say it’s harmless. It’s the same issue.

Meagan: Do you think it is harmless?

Michael: I think the whole notion itself is harmless, yes. I think you should be able to laugh at all of it. People take it too seriously at times, so
no, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with watching *The Simpsons* or watching anything like that and laughing at it. I think that I don’t understand why it’s okay to laugh at some things and not at others. I feel like you should be comfortable enough with yourself or your race where you realize that everyone gets made fun of at some point and you can’t take yourself too seriously.

There’s a complexity here that intrigues me. It is uncommon for a well-meaning white person to identify something as racist and harmless at the same time, but that is just what Michael does in this segment. He equates stereotypes in *The Simpsons* with “typical racist themes” that might be present in other shows or movies. And yet, Michael also asserts that any instance of a racist theme should be seen as harmless, because the individual viewer can choose whether or not to be offended.

*The Simpsons* continued to be a topic of discussion in the third voice discussions. Though I touched on some of these examples in my consideration of the theme “If you make fun of somebody, make fun of everybody,” I offer a more contextualized treatment here. Early in the first third voice group, I stopped the video and asked the group to give me their take on stereotypes in *The Simpsons*, specifically through the example of 7-11s/Kwik-E-Marts. I asked the group if they thought *The Simpsons* invoked stereotypes in an offensive or inoffensive way. Grace was the first to respond, saying that *The Simpsons* wasn’t the only cartoon that intentionally engaged stereotypes in service of comedy—*Family Guy* is another example. Brandon’s subsequent response complicates the notion that cartoons should get a free pass because we know they should be funny:

And because *Family Guy*, like *The Simpsons*, isn’t really, really offensive. I mean, you can get things that are really – that can be offensive, but *South Park*, I think, is the worst of them all because they target one thing and just go at it. They just take it to another level and make fun of stereotypes and [...] it’s not just race.
The other members of the group concur, giving their own examples of when they felt *South Park* might have “gone too far,” including episodes on Down’s syndrome and Tourette’s. The group members are implying that there is a limit to the leeway that a cartoon gets simply because it is a cartoon.

In the second third voice group, Caleb also asserts this difference:

I don’t think that it’s really destructive though. I mean, they’re not really portraying it in a negative way, where everyone’s going to be outraged. It’s purely, all comedic. Just as every character is at some point in *The Simpsons*, they poke fun at every character. A show on the flipside that is very controversial is *South Park*. Now that could just be because of the crude language. I think it’s just the creators are a little bit more abrasive in the way that they handle all of their characters. So if you had the same sort of character in *The Simpsons*, you have Apu who’s a funny character, if you put him into *South Park* episode, maybe, it’d be a little - I think that’s a little bit more aggressive in their take on stereotypes. So those are two shows that do the same sort of thing but *The Simpsons* is much more harmless about it.

Here, we have another example of a distinction made between the “purely” comedic stereotypes invoked on *The Simpsons* and the more “aggressive” ones on *South Park*.

Taken as a whole, the various references to satirical treatments of stereotypes (racial and otherwise) indicate an ambivalence that seems to be guided by a focus on the intent behind the portrayal. Satire is understood as an effort to be funny. According to my study participants, the creators of shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are not trying to offend; they are trying to entertain. Because their intentions are nonracist, their actions cannot justifiably be interpreted as racist.

"That’s what’s happened to our brains": the influence of the media

While *The Simpsons* and other popular satirical cartoons serve as a common comedic reference point for the participants, the media (broadly defined) was identified by participants as a force that had the power to shape public opinion in both positive and
negative ways. I am interested in the ways in which the participants talked directly about the media. Looking over all of the discussions I had with participants, I found a general consensus that the media is influential. There was less consistency, however, in describing the results of that influence.

As the first voice discussion transitioned from a focus on the Staples article to race in popular culture, I asked the group if they saw Staples’ point reflected in other places. Recall that Staples’ essay highlighted the ways in which he, as an African American, experienced fear because he did not know how whites who were afraid of him because he was black would react to him. Michael was the only one to respond to this question:

No it’s definitely not something that shows up in our media. I think a lot of stereotyping comes from, especially in this country, we’re very fixated on television, on movies. That’s where we get a lot of our judgments from. Unfortunately we’re not that informed when it comes to literature and things like that, but any TV show or movie we can give you the whole gist. Everyone’s seen it that, so when Hollywood plays up this idea you that all ethnic groups are the ones who rob banks and shoot people and do drive-bys and things like that, it’s always the white people that save the day. That’s where a lot of these stereotypes come from in the first place.

Michael explains that Hollywood produces and reproduces the conventional format where people of color are the criminals and white people are the ones that “save the day.” Michael’s closing statement locates the origin of these stereotypes in Hollywood and other media portrayals.

Later in the first voice discussion, Michael and Elizabeth engage in an exchange that reflects both of their beliefs in the power of the media to shape our impressions. This exchange took place toward the end of the discussion. I asked the group to respond to the question “What about racist acts committed by people who do not intend to be racist?”
With this question, I was attempting to introduce the concept of structural racism without the academic jargon. Elizabeth was the first to respond:

Elizabeth: Well, I liked your point about racism-- it’s not always inherently evil, sometimes it’s taught. It becomes inherent even if you area a really good, well intentioned person who doesn’t consider themselves racist. If I walk down the streets of New York and it’s night and there’s a group of black guys just huddled in a group, I’d be a little intimidated.

Michael: But like you’ve never been there, you know what I mean?

Elizabeth: Yeah

Michael: I mean you’ve never been in that situation and you know to be afraid so you gotta ask yourself, where did you learn that? You didn’t learn that by being in--

Elizabeth: Right

Michael: --situations where your life’s been threatened. You’ve learned it from television, from magazines, from TV.

Elizabeth: Because I’ve come to associate that group of people with violence.

Michael: Oh no absolutely. And even the fact that every single time we talked about it we always brought up New York--

Elizabeth: Mm-hm

Michael: --Nobody ever brought up another city.

Elizabeth: Yes ‘cause that’s what we’ve--


Elizabeth: Yeah ‘cause that’s what’s happened to our brains.

In this exchange, Michael and Elizabeth are using language to work together toward an understanding of how well-meaning white folks can act in racist ways. This is the same kind of fear that Obama attributed to his white grandmother (“who once confessed her
fear of black men who passed her by on the street”) in the epigraph to this chapter. Elizabeth imagines herself in the scenario that Staples uses to open his essay in which a young white woman comes across a black man on a city street at night. Her candor in acknowledging that she would probably be afraid prompts Michael to speculate about the root of that knowledge. How exactly did she come to know to be afraid? He attributes this to the media; to television and magazines. Elizabeth closes this exchange by disowning agency: “that’s what’s happened to our brains.”

While Michael and Elizabeth attribute a significant weight to the negative messages whites learn about blacks and other minorities from the media, Caleb (in the second third voice group) suggested that the media was a more positive influence. The excerpt below followed a discussion among the participants about racism in their families. The students shared examples of parents and grandparents who were at times quite racist in their language.

Meagan: So do you think that people are - white people are less racist as each generation progresses?

Savannah: I think we are, yeah. I think so, yeah.

Caleb: I also think that is also in part, too, due to the media because it’s getting the racists out there. We come from a white town, I see different races on TV. Even if some are stereotypes and some aren’t, I think that that’s— the media helps in that way, too. And it’s also a positive thing.

In this segment, Caleb points to the fact that the media distributes information about racists, so it serves to expose and reinforce the social lesson that racist behavior is socially unacceptable. Caleb also sees it as a positive that he can learn something about other races by seeing them on television, given that his past and current circumstances place him in predominantly white contexts.
Conclusion

As I have discussed these themes, it is clear that they overlap with each other and with the themes that I identified in scholarship earlier in this chapter. While the theme "Racism is a misunderstanding" is at times echoed in scholarship, the three other themes I identify are not echoes of existing understandings of how white students make sense of race. This finding is not meant to undermine the studies by Hill, Houts Picca and Feagin, and McKinney. Instead, I find that we as scholars and instructors need to continue to consider the ways in which white students in first year writing classrooms perform their understandings of race. We need to be mindful that when discussing race, white students from predominantly white backgrounds are enacting a performance that draws heavily, if not entirely, on common sense and popular culture.

The performative nature of classroom discussion means that students are drawing from their on-hand resources to explain themselves. The common sense themes identified in this chapter illustrate the tenuous nature of white students’ talk about race. We must respect student contributions as performative manifestations of thought so that we can continue to engage them in meaningful discussions of race. We can move in this direction by integrating pop culture resources in relevant, contextual ways. This entails teachers working with students to identify relevant and thought-provoking popular culture texts that will be familiar to students.
CHAPTER THREE

CLASSROOM PERFORMANCES OF RACIAL TOPICS

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

In this chapter, I look at the conversations regarding race through the lens of performance. Using this lens, I ask the reader to consider several conversational performances by student participants and the reactions to those performances by different groups. This chapter makes the most thorough use of my multivocal data collection method.

To extend the lens metaphor a bit further, I focus on performance in two ways. First, I look through the wide-angle lens at white talk about race. I suggest that considering this talk as performative can give us a new way to understand white talk in the classroom. Second, I zoom in on talk to make an argument about how whiteness is performed by students and teachers in the study. (I consider my own performance of whiteness in the final chapter.) I identify some characteristics of these performances and
suggest ways for teachers to make use of this knowledge to generate more productive classroom discussions.

Most of the responses that I share in this section come from the second, third, and fourth voice conversations. Recall that the second voice refers to the individual interviews I had with each of the participants in the first voice (videotaped discussion group). During the second voice interviews, each participant watched the video and offered commentary. I then shared the video with two third voice groups; these groups were comprised first year writing students who did not know the first voice participants. Last, in the fourth voice session, I shared the video with a group of first year writing instructors. This chorus of voices makes it possible for me to look at different reactions to the same performances and consider some of the reasons for those differences.

A notable feature of my multivocal method is that it opened up space for students and teachers to respond to the words of other students without having those peers present in the room. This created a unique situation where I, as the study author and video editor, was able to use the words of the first voice participants to present touchy subjects to the students and teachers.

As I proceed, I analyze several performances by Michael and the ways in which different groups responded to his performances. Students usually responded positively to his contributions, agreeing with him and integrating bits of his wording into their own statements. Teachers, on the other hand, generally reacted negatively to Michael’s performances. I contend that looking at student and teacher reactions to Michael’s performances can reveal some of the values and assumptions underlying both groups’ ideas about race. This, in turn, can help us construct tactics to enable teachers to more
productively engage white students in conversational performances that critically consider race. I’ll address my use of Michael’s words as a focusing line in the coming pages.

**Racial discourse and Racial Discourse**

Much attention has been paid to the racial discourse of whites in educational settings. Alice McIntyre’s 1997 study is one of the most widely recognized of these works. McIntyre looked at the racial discourse in the class of preservice teachers she taught, considering her own contributions in addition to those of the class members. McIntyre’s study was a participatory action research (PAR) project. In this type of project, the researcher works collaboratively with the research participants on points of study design. This move is intended to disrupt the power difference present in traditional projects conducted by a researcher on research subjects. Further, PAR projects are activist by design—they are structured to not only study current conditions but also to forward a particular agenda.

In McIntyre’s project, she worked with her students to interrogate the meanings of whiteness and improve their own critical awareness of whiteness. As McIntyre and her students proceeded through the course and the study, they found it meaningful to consider the ways in which they ended up discursively avoiding critical inquiries into whiteness, despite their stated commitment to do otherwise.

This kind of project is just what is called for by CRT and WS scholars who are interested in the ways in which systemic white privilege is sustained. As a result of the study, McIntyre coined the term “white talk” to refer to the “[i]nterruptions, silences, switching topics, tacitly accepting racist assumptions, talking over one another, joining in
collective laughter that served to ease the tension, hiding under the canopy of camaraderie—these maneuverings repelled critical conversations” (47). As a result of employing these tactics, whites avoid “examining their/our individual collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism” (45). By naming white talk in this way, McIntyre furthers our ability to recognize complicities with white privilege and ultimately disrupt and undermine them.

Victoria Haviland’s recent work with her own class of preservice teachers refines the notion of “white talk” into what she terms “white educational Discourse” (WED). Like McIntyre, Haviland studied her own class of undergraduate student teachers and the ways this all-white group discussed and attempted to make sense of race. Haviland’s work departs from McIntyre’s in that she uses the tools of discourse analysis to consider the ways in which discussions of racial privilege among whites generally deflect attention from personal complicities with white privilege. Specifically, Haviland argues that whites’ discourse regarding race might be productively understood as a part of an individual’s social identity. Haviland imports James Gee’s term “Discourse” in order to encompass facets of social identity that are represented both linguistically and nonlinguistically. In Gee’s terms, Discourse refers to “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects” (21) in order to show membership in a particular social group. The upper case “Discourse” is intended to draw attention to the difference between these ways of being, speaking, and believing in the world and “discourse,” which is the linguistic component of Discourse. Lower case “discourse” analysis can give us insight into how language produces and reproduces bits of knowledge. Upper
case Discourse analysis looks at language and other behaviors that constitute/signal group membership. It is most robust and useful when looking at a particular group for a long time.

Haviland’s study analyzed Discourse in an educational context. Given her long-term involvement with her research participants (between five months and two years), Haviland was able to capture and analyze linguistic and nonlinguistic data. As a result, she is able to offer a detailed description of WED, which she defines as the “cultural model of whiteness, […] through particular ways of talking, behaving, interacting, and thinking […] insulated the participating white teachers and their students from implication in societal injustice” (Haviland 113). Haviland’s work can be productively considered an extension of McIntyre’s. By documenting and describing the ways in which whites in educational settings talk, behave, and believe regarding race, we are able to identify the experiences we have and consider whether they might also be described by WED. This can help reveal the systemic ways in which whiteness usually goes undetected.

**Performance**

It is my goal in this chapter to build on the work of McIntyre and Haviland. Instead of adopting the analytical frame of discourse or Discourse as Haviland did, I have chosen to look at conversations as performances. By analyzing words in conversation in terms of performance, we capture discourse in personal context. In this type of analysis, spoken language is treated as reflections of personal thoughts and beliefs, but these reflections can only be understood as part of a performance in which an individual presents herself so as to maintain or enhance group membership.
While I find McIntyre’s PAR endeavor intriguing for its ability to disrupt the traditional power roles of research projects, I did decide that such a project was not appropriate for my research questions. Given my descriptive goal (“how do white students make sense of race?”), and the need to meet students where they are in order to capture the process of “making sense” of race, a more traditional research design.

I am drawing on the notion of performance as understood by sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman considers personal interactions as performances for an audience. An individual speaker (i.e. actor) can be understood as enacting a performance during which he not only conveys information but also works to demonstrate himself as a member of a particular group. Goffman explains: “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (4). These performances may be enacted consciously or unconsciously. By considering an individual’s performance in light of the context in which the performance occurs, we gain insight into the individual’s values and the values of the audience. This information is available because, as Goffman explains, individual’s performances “tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (35). In comparing this performance to Gee’s notion of Discourse, we can say that individuals enact Goffman’s performances in order to join or maintain memberships in particular Geean Discourse communities.

The lens of performance also invites us to consider particular performances and performers and how they impact larger groups. Performance is audience-aware, context-sensitive, and continually renegotiated. In group settings, actors (i.e. speakers,
performers) "contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored" (Goffman 9-10).

In Chapter Two, I took a cue from Thomas Newkirk's work to consider the themes present in white students' talk about race. Newkirk too was interested in the performativity of student work in composition. In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, he contended that the clichés and commonplaces in student writing that writing scholars and teachers often interpret as lazy or shortcuts can be more realistically considered as performances in which the student is attempting to negotiate personal beliefs and external expectations in the new environment of the university.

In his use of performance, Newkirk draws directly on Goffman and can also be understood through the work of literary theorist Judith Butler. Butler's work regarding the performative nature of gender has prompted myriad reconsiderations of the relationships between the social, the natural, and the self. While Butler acknowledges the physiology of the body, she rejects the heteronormative, patriarchal understanding of gender as a simple binary. Instead, Butler explains, gender is performative in that an individual creates a gender identity via the gendered performance in which she engages. Gender characteristics—consider the connotations in the West of growing facial hair or wearing a skirt—are not expressions of gender but actions that constitute gender (Butler ""Performative"" 279).

Butler's lasting impact relating to English studies has been to open up space for other considerations of the constituted nature of identity. In the case of Newkirk's work, we are asked to recognize students' use of clichés as not mere trappings of a show, but as
constitutive of the reality for those students at that time. In my case, the idea that gender is continually created and performed leads me to apply that same assertion to student talk about race. Talk can be easily understood as performative—there is no great leap in reasoning to make that connection. Given that parallel, it follows that the spoken performances regarding race constitute the meaning of race in that moment to that person or group. In making this assertion, though, it is equally important to emphasize that performance is ongoing and context-sensitive, and therefore always changing. What we can get, then, from considering student talk about race as performances on race is the opportunity to mine culturally and personally meaningful performances to see how white students are using language to simultaneously make and make sense of race.

**Performances on Race by First Year Writing Students**

In this section, I use Michael’s performances as the focal point to discuss the ways in which students and teachers compare when discussing race. As I move through this discussion, I want to emphasize that it is not my intent to set up Michael as a fall guy or a hero. Another benefit of looking at performances is that I am able to avoid judging Michael as either good or bad in terms of his racial awareness. Further, in my own reading of Michael’s words, I found him to characterize both clichés and complexities as he shared his thoughts on race.

I focus on Michael because his performances elicited the widest variety of reactions. Students generally liked Michael’s contributions. They frequently agreed with him and incorporated his words and phrases into their own performances. Teachers, on the other hand, were far less comfortable with what Michael said. I submit that this difference in reactions reflects two different understandings of the expectations of what a
performance on the topic of race should be. While young white students with a self-perceived lack of racial experience are drawn to the clarity and certainty of Michael’s performances, teachers do not see those characteristics as genuine or thoroughly considered.

Often, the excerpts I include in this chapter are relatively long and contain contributions by multiple participants. I have chosen to include long excerpts because this enables me to better able to render the performances in context. My interest in these performances as coconstructed and context-sensitive means that in order to explain my analyses of these words, I need to provide contextual information as well. I begin by considering the positive student responses.

Of the second voice interviewees, Elizabeth offered the strongest direct agreement with what Michael had to say. During the first voice discussion, Michael had reiterated in a few different ways the importance of being “comfortable” with one’s self so as not to be offended by apparently racist language or stereotypes. He first mentioned this opinion during the first voice discussion of the controversy over Native American sports mascots. I had asked the group to consider how to weigh the two views in the controversy—one view saying the mascots are offensive, the other saying that the mascots are not intended to be offensive (I discuss this example in more detail in Chapter Four). Michael responded:

I think the reason that there is no solution is that everybody has a different idea of what a solution should be. I think personally you need to be okay with yourself from the get-go. If you’re not comfortable with who you are in the first place, someone’s always gonna find a way to offend you, directly or indirectly.
Michael’s opinion appears to be a reflection of a strong allegiance to individual agency. This is hardly surprising, given the investment by American culture in individualism and personal achievement. In a way, too, his words are ultimately practical; if you cannot control that which offends you, you should learn to not be offended. The assertion that a person needs to be self-confident resonated with Elizabeth. She stopped playback of the video shortly after Michael’s words above to offer this insight:

What Michael was saying about how you have to be comfortable with yourself and that’s sort of the root of getting offended—I think that’s very true because if I visited the Middle East and people were talking about Americans, I’m sure that there would be some horrible misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Americans but I’d look at them and say, well, some of that is kind of true; our country does do this and our country is like that but I would never feel so much—I wouldn’t get personally offended. Yes, I’m American, but I’m not that American to take everything said against my country on a personal level. Offense is a personal attack and certainly—if there were very—and even when I’ve been to Europe, some people have never met Americans and they’ll say “oh, you’re so different than what I thought” or “isn’t everyone fat in your country?” I sort of laugh at that and say “well, there is a lot of obesity in America, a lot of Americans are lazy” but I wouldn’t take it as a personal insult. […] I’m not like that so I’m not going to get offended.

In this response, Elizabeth is attempting to put herself in the shoes of someone who is a part of a group that is negatively stereotyped. She sees herself as “comfortable” enough with herself that she would not personally be offended by the negative characterizations of Americans.

At the end of Elizabeth’s interview, I asked her if there was anything about the video that stood out as significant or insightful. After pausing for several seconds to think, she reiterated her appreciation for Michael’s comment about personal comfort:

I like what Michael said and where he was going with the "depends how comfortable you are with yourself" because I really agree with that. I think that’s so much the root of why we take offense. If someone was making fun of Americans, if you don’t think very well of yourself you
tend to identify more with something. But if you do have very high self esteem then you can look at things more objectively and say “yes, I agree with this, but I don’t agree with this,” so if someone is making fun of Americans you can say “well, I am American but they’re not making fun of me, so there’s no reason to be hurt by that.” Also, self esteem guides how we connect with things and how we identify with things. We’re more likely to be more open-minded toward other cultures and more understanding of their differences.

In addition to repeating her appreciation for the role of self esteem in interpersonal relations, she further invests that trait with the ability to enhance open-mindedness. In this performance—coconstructed by Michael and Elizabeth, the importance of self-esteem is central to personal comfort and to the ability to disregard potentially hurtful offenses.

In the first third voice group, I stopped the video after Michael makes the following comparison:

I think [the use of stereotypes on The Simpsons] is still racism but I think the point is that we have accepted the images and the icons so much that we’re not seeing it. We’re just like, “oh, it’s The Simpsons!” We’re so excited to see The Simpsons we’re not realizing what we’re taking part in.

I asked the group of students to respond to that statement. Taylor agreed: “I don’t really think people really think about it. I agree with him—we just go in a theater and see a movie because it’s funny. We’re not going to support anything racial or controversial. It’s just that it’s funny.” As Taylor agrees with Michael, she is also reflecting one of the themes I discussed in Chapter Two: “Laughing at them” or “laughing at ourselves.”

Later, I stopped the video to ask the group if they agreed with Michael’s assertion that the character Ned Flanders is successfully comedic “because there’s somebody, there’s a group of people out there like that.” Ethan begins his response by aligning himself with Michael, but seems to alter his position as he speaks:
I could understand what he’s saying. Obviously, stereotypes have to come from somewhere and that’s pretty much, I think, the point he’s trying to get at. So, there aren’t actually people like the stereotypes, but to actually be true - they’re not, obviously, true, but to be formed.

In the first two sentences, Ethan reflects the common view that there is a grain of truth in stereotypes and asserts that he sees that as Michael’s point. Ethan’s third sentence, however, is more complex. He states clearly that “there aren’t actually people like the stereotypes,” which seems to contradict the previous statement that “stereotypes have to come from somewhere.” Contrast the directness and clarity of this statement with the rest of the sentence, which is much less clear: “they’re not, obviously, true, but to be formed.” Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who has written extensively on issues of race and racism, would suggest that the “rhetorical incoherence (e.g. grammatical mistakes, lengthy pauses, or repetition)” (68) that Ethan demonstrates here is a key feature of how whites linguistically maneuver so as to profess essentially racist views while pronouncing one’s self as antiracist. Bonilla-Silva is interested in how racism exerts power systemically, not individually. As such, he calls his readers’ attention to rhetoric and discourse. He explains the reason for this focus: “I see the problem of racism as a problem of power [...]. Therefore, the intentions of individual actors are largely irrelevant to the explanation of social outcomes” (54). From a sociological perspective, this approach makes sense. As a researcher and teacher working with individual students in the classroom, however, the goals of each student are hardly “irrelevant.”

I see Ethan in the midst of an attempt at reconciling two incompatible discourses here. First, there’s the discourse that asserts that stereotypes have a basis in truth. Second, however, is a discourse that asserts that stereotypes are “obviously” untrue.
Moments like this draw attention to the ongoing negotiated performance of understanding race. If the concept of racial stereotypes at this moment is constituted by this particular performance, then racial stereotypes are, at best, a confusing mess.

These competing understandings of stereotypes can be regarded as ineluctably confusing, or they can be recognized as exactly the definition of stereotyping. Michael Pickering’s 2001 study of stereotyping argues that we see this confusing circumstance as the most complete way to define stereotypes. He explains:

> Emphasising its paradoxical features provides a means of getting a critical purchase on stereotyping. [...] The paradoxical features of stereotyping are the visible traces of the condition of dilemma it has attempted to make invisible, and this condition always connects back to the ways in which order and power interact. (4)

In other words, to most fully understand stereotyping, we must simultaneously acknowledge that stereotypes may come from fact only via a route which renders them inaccurate. By cutting off complexity and asserting simplicity, the stereotype masks indirectness and inaccuracy. Though it is unlikely that Ethan is aware of it, he has demonstrated the paradoxical definition of stereotyping in this comment.

Later, I stopped the video after the following statement by Michael:

> It always amazes me how quickly people drop the politically correct stuff and the manners the moment they get upset or angry. Suddenly it’s ‘this stupid person,’ ‘This blah blah blah,’ ‘This bad word’ and all that stuff.

The change in language that Michael refers to here relates to the movement of performance from the frontstage to the backstage. I wondered if any of the participants in the group had had an experience like that described by Michael. In the excerpt that follows, both Grace and Ethan offer examples of people they know whose speech changes based on context:
Grace: I have a friend who – he feels pretty comfortable saying whatever he wants in front of our group of friends just because he knows we’re not going to say anything to him like, “Hey, don’t say that.” We’re just gonna listen to him and be like, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.” But he’s comfortable making a racist statement – and I don’t look down on him, but at the same time, it’s not like I would agree with the statement he was making. I’m not going to say – I mean, people are kind of afraid to say something because they don’t want to get him mad.

Meagan: Would he talk the same way if –

Grace: No, not in front of other people. So, it’s interesting.

Meagan: Yeah. Thank you for sharing. Any other people want to give an example?

Ethan: I think this is true for everyone. You’re like – even if it’s not racist. Back where I come from, there’s just certain things you don’t say around people because they will get offended and they will most likely not be happy. But if you’re just with your friends – you’re just kickin’ it – you’re just chillin’, saying pretty much what you want and they’re not going to look down on you like you were – your friend [referring to Grace], for example. I’m not saying that it is – having a good time – that it’s wrong, but you don’t – seriously, you’re not seriously a racist, you’re just killin’ some time.

Grace: Yeah, I think – we think he seriously is –

Ethan: Oh.

Grace: – a racist. We don’t want to risk saying anything to upset him – and usually he does it if he’s been drinking or hanging out with us, and he’ll say things like that. Kind of like – we don’t really know what to say in that situation because we don’t think he’s kidding half the time so – I don’t know. It’s not – again, it’s not like we look down on him or say anything negatively towards him, it’s just that we keep in the back of our minds – like “I hope he doesn’t get into a situation where he runs his mouth and gets in trouble, because he says some things that he probably shouldn’t say.”

Ethan: Yeah. Yeah. My roommate, he’s racist, and he hates – he hates anyone that’s not white, and he also hates gay people.

Meagan: Okay.
Ethan: He actually told me – he was like – I always make fun of him because I’ll I start just rubbing his shoulders, just to be funny. Because he’s like, “If you’re actually gay, I’d probably [unintelligible].” I’m like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” But he – Oh my God - he’s gonna get himself killed one day doing stuff like that.

Grace: I kind of fear for him because it’s like - if they say something that’s going to get them in trouble. Because there’s just certain things you just don’t say because there’s people – I mean, when you’re with your friends and you’re comfortable and you know you trust them, you can joke around, but I don’t even think he’s joking sometimes. It’s kind of like –

Meagan: But there is something different going on. Like your roommate that really actively, like –

Ethan: Yeah. One day we were in the [dorm] lounge and we were having one of those group social meeting things, talking about stuff. One kid just – he’s talking about acceptance of everyone – talking about gay marriage. Oh, it doesn’t matter me, but back there, [my roommate] was like, “Yo, man, let’s go crazy,” and I was like, “What are you talking about? Chill.” He’s not like – I don’t know, it’s crazy. Act your age, but – [unintelligible]. He’s from Maine. That’s what I blame it on.

This excerpt is interesting for a number of reasons. First, I used Michael’s words to ask the students if they had any knowledge of people who speak in racist ways in some contexts but not others. Because the acknowledgement of this kind of event was introduced by Michael (a peer) instead of me (the older researcher), the students were not in the risky position of revealing something brand new to me. Instead, they were merely in the position of corroborating something that someone like them had asserted. Again, the ongoing construction of performance is evident. The presence of Michael’s performance to introduce the concept of context-sensitive speech makes the practice real to the students viewing the video.

Second, it is clear that neither Grace nor Ethan had any difficulty coming up with examples of friends whose racist talk altered according to context. They describe two different types of backstage racist talk. Grace’s friend is “really a racist,” whereas Ethan
refers to the kind of backstage talking that goes on among friends who are not racist, but merely “chillin’,” “kickin’ it,” or “killin’ some time.” As Ethan describes this type of instance, I imagine this is a scene in which he has taken part. It’s interesting that his language takes on a distinctive tone in this section, one which appears to be influenced by the dropped “g”s of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Here too I am interested in the complex nature of performance. Ethan adopts the linguistic feature of dropped “g”s to indicate a casual, carefree setting. To deliberate the true reason why Ethan does this is a speculative exercise at best. Analyzed as a performance constitutive of racial attitudes, however, this highlights the paradoxical situation in which a feature of AAVE is borrowed in order to explain the rationale behind the “good time” backstage racist (anti-African American) talk.

Ethan contrasts this “good time” backstage talk with his roommate who he identifies as both racist and homophobic. Ethan describes a way in which he makes fun of his roommate by “rubbing his shoulders” in an imitation of a homosexual come-on. Ethan distances himself from his roommate’s homophobic stance by saying “it’s crazy.” He concludes by attributing the friend’s attitudes to his home state: “He’s from Maine. That’s what I blame it on.” Initially, it seems paradoxical that Ethan defines his roommate by using a “Mainer” stereotype to account for that roommate’s homophobic and racist behavior. As Jennifer Beech has argued, however, whites often invoke “redneck” stereotypes in order to deflect attention from their own racism. Beech explains how the redneck stereotype functions: “mainstream portraits of rednecks or poor whites as racists allow middle-class and elite whites to ignore their own racism” (173).
Ethan spoke more often as the third voice session proceeded. When I asked the group to respond to Michael’s assertion that “the majority of people are racist to a minute level and don’t realize it,” Ethan agreed and invited the other participants to consider their own positions:

Ethan: Oh, yeah. I mean, would you all date outside your race if you given the opportunity? My roommate, [III] he’s a cool guy, he hangs around black people all the time, but he would never date outside his race. [...] I’m just throwing it over to you guys. Would you date outside your race? Would you feel comfortable bringing them home and stuff?

Kaitlyn: I don’t know. I think I would and — it’s kind of funny because my roommate is white and her boyfriend’s black and she’s wicked proud of it. She’s — not that there’s anything wrong with that — he’s awesome and I like him a lot.

Meagan: Is that weird that she’s proud of it?

Kaitlyn: Yeah. I don’t know — I just think it’s kind of —

Grace: I don’t think I would, to be honest — the way I was brought up in a home where — it’s not that they’re racist. I just grew up in a high school where there was maybe one or two black kids and they were just like us. It’s not like we were racist against them, but I didn’t really get much diversity. I wasn’t really brought up that way, and I feel like if I brought them home, I’d get a look or some joke or comment made by my dad. And, I feel like they would just deter me, all together, just not to hear it. It’s sad, but at the same time, that’s just, unfortunately, how I was brought up. I don’t have anything against interracial marriages or anything. One of my best friends is dating — he’s black, she’s white — they’re awesome together and I love them both, but at the same time, I don’t think I would.

Meagan: Okay.

Brandon: I don’t think I would have any problem with interracial dating. My parents wouldn’t mind if I brought home an African American girlfriend. It wouldn’t bother me or my parents who I dated.

In this exchange, Grace explains her rationale behind why it is unlikely she would date outside of her race. Her explanation is a careful but tenuous one. If we were looking at these words as a direct manifestation of her thoughts, then it would be a simple matter to
declare Grace a racist. She admits, after all, to discriminating against a group of people based on skin color.

Alternatively, if we were primarily interested in language as Bonilla-Silva is—in the “ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege” (9), then we would see Grace’s explanation as another example of a white person exercising the power of white privilege by both professing and denying racist beliefs.

Looking at her words as a performance that is sensitive to context, however, we can see Grace negotiating thought, belief, and social status. This does not negate the problematic nature of the discrimination to which Grace admits, but instead it captures an individual’s attempt to make sense of race based on her current thinking, past experience, and present context.

About halfway through the viewing session, both Morgan and Caleb moved beyond agreeing with what Michael said to also expressing an affinity for him. In the video, Michael, Jocelyn, Elizabeth, and Seth were continuing to use *The Simpsons* as a reference point in talking about race and stereotypes. They brought up Ned Flanders, the do-gooder evangelical Christian character on the show. Michael explained why Flanders is funny: “because you know he exists, because there’s somebody, there’s a group of people out there like that. That’s why we’re able to laugh at it, because it’s so close to home.” I paused the video immediately after this statement, prepared to ask the group to respond. Before I spoke, however, Morgan stated “I like Michael.” Caleb agreed, adding “I really like what Michael said there.” I’m interested in how these comments illustrate a strong appreciation for Michael and for his words. While it is not my intent to overstate the difference between liking an individual and liking what he says, I do think that in
order for Morgan or Caleb to express an affinity for Michael, they needed to feel a relatively strong, consistent appreciation for his opinions. Regarded in terms of performance, we can say that Michael has been successful in executing a performance that gains him sympathizers, if not friends. I am not attributing this intent to Michael; he never actually met the individuals who watched the video. However, if we consider the performance from a spectator’s point of view we can say that Michael has executed a socially successful performance—Morgan and Caleb not only agree with Michael, they also like him.

At this point in the first voice video, Michael asserts that it’s likely that most people are somewhat unintentionally racist. I wondered how other students would respond to this statement, so I stopped the video immediately after Michael’s words:

*Michael:* You’ve got this passive racism. I’m not meaning to be racist and yet I’m walking around being racist without even realizing it. I totally agree that that probably happens more often than the stereotypical run-around racist who’s standing on a soap box and telling everybody how superior they are. I think that the majority of people are racist to a minute level and don’t realize it.

*Meagan:* Do you agree with him there?

*Savannah:* Yeah.

*Morgan:* Yes.

*Caleb:* Yeah.

*Meagan:* How so or what makes you inclined to agree with him?

*Caleb:* Just being inherently racist and not even realizing it. Like, I know, like -

*Savannah:* I’d admit to it, I think.
This brief exchange merits consideration. The participants did not elaborate any further on their comments here, but even this short excerpt shows three well-meaning white undergraduates agreeing that “the majority of people are racist […] and don’t realize it.” In our classrooms and in scholarship, white students are typically portrayed as denying the existence of any large-scale racism. Recall Jane Hill’s description of whites’ folk theory of racism: one tenet of that theory is that whites generally believe that racism is confined to a small number of ignorant or malevolent individuals on society’s fringe. Michael asserts the opposite here, and all three students in the third voice group agree with him. Savannah goes a bit further, “admit[ting]” to being slightly racist. This is not a declaration she makes with pride or bravado; the “I think” indicates tentativeness or uncertainty. But in this particular setting, she did make a statement that is not expected or accounted for in the scholarship on white students and race.

In fact, Savannah’s admission stands in stark contrast to the white students recently described by Amy E. Winans. Winans found in her own classroom at a small, rural, predominantly white college, that white students were reluctant to talk about race at all. Winans quotes one student whose interest in maintaining general social acceptance outweighed her desire to contribute to class discussions on race. A female student explains “I would rather be known for having no opinion than [for] having a bad one” (brackets in original 260). Such reluctance is a move to preserve what Winans calls “social safety.” Given the desire to present a self that is not racist in order to preserve social safety, a comment such as Savannah’s appears to disrupt that “given.” Savannah may have felt comfortable making this confession despite the possibility of social risk for a few different reasons. First, the assertion that most people are slightly racist initially
comes from Michael (a peer), and not from a teacher (or other authority figure). Second, my study setting created a different social situation than a classroom. I repeatedly expressed my desire that they speak openly during the session; I was not their instructor; the participants did not know each other before the session; and the gathering was temporary. The stakes of social safety were lower than they would be in a traditional classroom.

Further, as the works of both Goffman and Butler assert, performance is constructed by, through, and from the context and the individual. Taken all together, Michael’s comments and the responses to it quoted above constitute a performance in which the group has moved together toward a mutual understanding of a concept (Goffman 9-10). Clearly, Michael’s performances in the video resonated with several other students. Their direct agreements and their indirect adoption of bits of his language attest to the influence of Michael’s statements over their performances.

Not all students agreed with Michael, however. The disagreements expressed by students varied from minor details to significant differences in philosophy. The multivocal structure of the study made room for these disagreements in a way that a one-time group conversation does not. As any teacher knows, the voices of particularly outspoken students can eclipse the voices of quieter students with differing opinions in groups. This was certainly the case in the first voice group, where Seth spoke very rarely. Though his body language was obviously hostile (crossed arms, head lowered, and hair obscuring his face), he only voiced his disagreements twice.

The process of watching the video served to put that performance and the performers at a figurative distance. This created an unusual performative event in which
the social stakes of voicing disagreement were relatively low. Not to say that Seth
desired social acceptance from Michael, Elizabeth, and Jocelyn—it is clear that that was
not the case. However, in a situation where you expect that your opinion will not be fully
heard or agreed with, it is hardly surprising that you might choose to remain silent. I
found that with the first voice performers at a distance, Seth was willing to voice his
opinions readily.

In my second voice interview with Seth, he elaborated on his differing views
several times. After Seth and I watched the video segment where he disagrees with the
group about the nature of Staples needing to make accommodations to put whites at ease,
I stopped the video and asked Seth a question:

Meagan: Do you feel like what you were saying came across in that
exchange in the way that they responded?

Seth: No I don’t think they really got it whatsoever what I was saying.
They seemed to be trivializing what I was saying. They were saying “oh,
well, he has to” or this and that. Or “it’s not that bad,” when in reality I
personally think that it is. I think it’s a lot more of an issue than just to
give in to everybody, when they’re saying “oh well, since he wears nice
clothes that goes along with the fact that he writes nicely too.” Why can’t
somebody wear street clothing or whatever and still be perceived as
intelligent or this or that? I think that they’re just going along with exactly
what I was saying without having to change everything to fit in—you have
to wear a suit to be taken as not a criminal black person or whatever—and
I think they’re just exactly agreeing with everybody else on that one.

My question was obviously leading Seth in a particular direction because I did not think
the other group members were hearing and considering what he said. This question was,
in part, designed to show Seth that I would be a receptive audience for any comments he
had. He responds by reiterating the point he made in the first voice discussion. Through
this contribution, it is clear that Seth has no trouble articulating his disagreement. As the
interview progressed, he disagreed several more times.
After this exchange, we resumed watching the video. Seth stopped playback on his own a total of six times—more than any of the other participants did in their second voice interviews. At each pause, Seth explained why he disagreed with what had just been said in the video. Five of those pauses were responses to Michael’s words. I present them below. For each instance, I include the segment of first voice dialogue to which Seth was responding in italics. Then I include Seth’s response. I present the five examples together without my interpretive language in between for two reasons. First, by presenting these examples back to back, I hope to give the reader an idea of the extent and frequency of Seth’s objections to Michael’s words. Seth disagrees frequently and at length with Michael in this setting, whereas when the two men were in the room together, Seth said very little. Second, the excerpts are relatively self-explanatory. I will include a discussion after the excerpts.

Excerpt A- Whites in Hollywood

Michael: *I think a lot of stereotyping comes from, especially in this country, we’re very fixated on television, on movies. That’s where we get a lot of our judgments from unfortunately. We’re not that informed when it comes to literature and things like that, but any TV show or movie we can give you the whole gist. Everyone’s seen it— that kind of thing. So when Hollywood plays up this idea that all ethnic groups are the ones who rob banks and shoot people and do drive-bys and things like that, it’s always the white people that save the day. That’s where a lot of these stereotypes come from in the first place.*

Seth: I’d just like to say that I have no idea what this guy is talking about because I’ve seen plenty of movies where it isn’t the white guy that saves the day, a lot of times where it’s the white guy that is the criminal, this and that. I think he’s just sticking to a really old reliable stereotype or perspective just for the sake of looking good on camera or just trying to sound friendly.

Meagan: So--
Seth: Not exclusively that but—I think he’s going with the classic “oh, black people are always portrayed negatively in the media,” when in reality I can’t think of a time on a television show that I’ve seen recently or a movie where you have the typical gangsta-gangsta rap sort of stuff. I think he’s—I don’t know what this guy is really talking about to be honest.

Excerpt B- Be Okay With Yourself

*Michael: [Responding to the controversy over Native American sports mascots] I think the reason that there is no solution is that everybody has a different idea of what a solution should is. I think personally you need to be okay with yourself from the get-go. If you’re not comfortable with who you are in the first place, someone’s always gonna find a way to offend you, directly or indirectly. You can’t go around--*

*Jocelyn: looking for the problems*

*Michael: looking for the problems or biting your tongue with everything you say, sensing everything you before you say it, tasting your words because--*

*Jocelyn: Then it consumes you it’s like all you think about and um then you’re not much better than somebody--*

Seth: Just to chime in on that: I really doubt that being okay with yourself has anything to do with a major thing like baseball representing your race in a comical and really racist manner. I really think that—when I heard that I was actually trying to hold back laughter when he first said that. What is this guy talking about? You have to be okay with yourself? Like if I feel okay about myself, I’m not going to be offended when someone makes fun of my race and all that? That’s a little- no—that’s BS I think, to be honest with you. It has nothing to do with yourself. You could be fine with yourself but if somebody still goes up to you—if you’re black and calls you a nigger or whatever—you have every right in the world to be upset by that. I think it’s stupid, what he just said.

Excerpt C- They Shouldn’t Be Offended

*M: I think we go overboard on telling people what they can’t say when I think from the beginning we should be educating people and being like “this is an Indian drawn by a bunch of stupid white guys.” If anyone should feel embarrassed, it should be us because we think this is what Indians are; we still call them “Indians” instead of “Native Americans” or whatever. If you put it in a context like that I feel like the Native
Americans shouldn’t be offended so I think it’s difficult to understand what it is they have a problem with.

Seth: [laughs] I’m sorry—people shouldn’t be offended because ignorant people make caricatures of them and market off it? That’s just completely ridiculous I think.

Excerpt D- Giving Credit to Stereotypes

Michael: When I think of like Ned Flanders or I think of religious people that’s what I think of.

Jocelyn: yeah [laughs]

Michael: And I feel like I feel like that’s because you know he exists, because there’s somebody and there’s a group of people out there like that.

Seth: I just want to chime in on what this guy just said. Using this exact same logic, that we have an Apu in there, he’s saying that there are a lot of people out there that are just like Apu then? So he’s giving credit to these racist stereotypes by saying that about Christians? That’s what I think.

Excerpt E- Admitting to Being Racist

Michael: [You haven’t been in] situations where your life’s been threatened. You’ve learned it from television, from magazines, from TV.

Elizabeth: Because I’ve come to associate that group of people with violence.

Michael: Oh no, absolutely. Even the fact that like every single time we talked about it we always brought up New York.

Seth: Just a quick question here: were they actually admitting to being slightly racist?

Meagan: Um--

Seth: Because they seemed to make it sound like, “oh, I’m not racist but I have these qualities that are” and this or that. It seems kind of like: “wait, what?” To me, at least.
After reading these excerpts together, Seth’s stance in relation to Michael becomes clear. Seth refers to statements by Michael as “stupid” and “ridiculous.” One gets the sense that Seth is quite surprised that Michael has the opinions he does. Seth’s dismissive laughter and incredulous rhetorical questions (e.g. “What is this guy talking about? You have to be okay with yourself?”) indicate more than straightforward disagreement. Seth seems frustrated by what Michael says. In the constructed performative space I designed for the second voice interviews, Seth readily offered his own explanations and reactions in ways that he did not in the group discussion.

At the end of Seth’s second voice interview, Seth comments on his reactions toward Michael:

I feel kind of weird for that, like I’m picking on him. It just seems like he has never really put a whole lot of thought into anything like this either. That he’s just saying “oh well it’s bad that this and that blah, blah” but, you know I feel like I’ve discredited or added a new perspective to a lot of things that he said. That there are a lot of flaws in the fundamental average liberal viewpoint on race and all that sort of stuff.

This comment invites further reflection on the audience-sensitive (i.e. context-sensitive) nature of performances. Though Michael is not present for this second voice interview, Seth does express some hesitation about “picking on” Michael. Clearly, Seth is aware that most of his responses are to Michael’s statements, but Seth disclaims any intent to specifically target Michael. This performance by Seth (for which I was the only audience member), seems to emphasize a disagreement with words, not a dislike of a person. To Seth, Michael’s comments are representative of the “average liberal viewpoint on race” – a viewpoint with flaws with which Seth disagreed. Seth does not necessarily indicate that Michael was wrong, but instead that Michael “has never really put a whole lot of thought” into the topic of race.
Seth was not the only one to diagnose a deficit of thinking. Michael said something similar about Seth when he and I met individually. Michael told me he wished Seth had “interacted” more with the full group. Based on the few contributions Seth did make, Michael formed this impression: “I felt like he seemed a little bit younger than the rest of us. I’m not sure. He seemed a little bit not-as-developed in the way he thought about things.” Michael elaborated on his reading of Seth and added a speculative response:

I immediately got the sense too that he could identify with that story [“Black Men in Public Space”]—that story we read. He could identify with being portrayed or stereotyped in a certain way. When he was saying “why can’t you just do what you want to do, be who you want to be?” I smiled a little bit. I agree with him: Why can’t you? But that’s not the way things are. Being angry about it- I hope that he figures out that you can only be angry for so long.

Michael and Seth each diagnose the other with a lack of intellectual maturity when it comes to racism. The move to diagnose appears to be a way to attribute disagreement to a lack rather than an error. We’ll see this move again when the teachers respond to the video.

In the third voice groups, most of the disagreements centered on the ways in which Michael attributed the prevalence of stereotypes to Hollywood and the media. I have already referred to one excerpt that illustrates this—see Excerpt A earlier in this chapter. There, Michael says that much stereotyping “comes from” television and movies. Grace disagreed with this, citing Will Smith as an example of a nonwhite action hero. Further, Grace disagreed with the implication that viewers learn from fiction-based shows and movies. She contends that she learns about people from fact-based shows, but not from ones that aren’t based in reality. She explains:

It’s more of the reality shows, as in the National Geographic ones when they go into prisons and stuff and you see all that. Or the murder files,
those case files. That stuff – it’s what has triggered me to be wary of certain groups of people. Whereas, it’s not really TV or just, in general, the media. It’s more like real things that are happening that are in the back of my mind when I’m in a city by myself.

As I explained in Chapter Two, Henry Giroux and bell hooks have argued otherwise, illustrating the instructive force of film as a form of public pedagogy. Whether or not Grace has learned from film and other forms of media, she does not see herself as learning from those that are non-documentary.

Caleb, a student in the second student viewing session, also disagreed with Michael’s assertion about Hollywood’s influence. Caleb does acknowledge that the media might “fuel” racial stereotypes, but the entertainment industry does not create the stereotypes. He explains:

I mean, Hollywood doesn’t create these stereotypes. As hard as it is to admit and realize, it is what happens in the real world. [In] the inner cities there are a lot black gangs and they do - there’s a disproportionate amount of black people that go to jail for gang related crimes and muggings and stuff like that.

[...]
And I think those stereotypes are unfortunately based off of real life [unintelligible]. It is kind of sad because Hollywood just makes it available to everyone. It kind of spreads these stereotypes. So I agree in that aspect that Hollywood does fuel the fire.

Caleb reflects the discourse that there is truth to stereotypes. He returns to this point in more detail later in response to Michael and Elizabeth’s discussion about her retreating from black men in city settings. I asked the group to respond to that segment of dialogue:

Meagan: I think Michael said something interesting here. If, as a white woman you’ve never been attacked by a group of black men in that city, but you learned to cross the street through some other way. And he’s saying she learned that through the media. Do you think that’s a description of how a lot of those stereotypes get moved on?
Caleb: I think that's very predominant, the media, but you have to understand, a lot of this is - the media isn't really -- I'm not trying to be racist by saying this, but the media isn't really making this up. If you look at the top crime cities, New York is up there and specifically I know in the past 30 years up until now Harlem has been a very crime-ridden town.

And now Harlem's actually in the past five years, they're going through a really improvement. They're seeing a lot of education but that is a predominantly black area and I know the media has - especially on rap in Los Angeles - Compton. You've probably all [heard of] "Straight Outta Compton" that was a predominantly black area and that was one of the most dangerous places in California.

It's just a fact that that was very - there's a lot of gang violence, a lot of muggings and it was predominantly black. Now I think it's predominantly Hispanic heritage. But there's also cities like Atlanta is predominantly black and it's very crime-ridden.

I mean, it's bad that these situations happen and that it is-- don't get me wrong, there's a lot of white people committing crime-- but on the inner city violence with predominantly blacks does happen a lot and that's where the media does get all these assumptions that they portray. It makes it mainstream to us living in New Hampshire where we don't come into contact with it.

But I know it does exist. I've been to New York. I haven't really - never walked around Harlem, but I know it's a bad area and I don't really want to and I do know it's predominantly black.

So it draws these conclusions in my mind that, "Well, predominantly black, inner city, there's gonna be violence." I'm not saying everyone that lives there, obviously not everyone or it wouldn't exist if everyone was committing crimes.

But it draws these conclusions that do have a true background to them. So it is unfortunate but in the end if you pick up your pace because, you know, a black person's behind you in the inner city, there are statistics to back that up, that fear, but the fear is unwarranted because not every - it's a stereotype still.

This excerpt shows Caleb speaking cautiously but at length about what he sees as an unfortunate reality—that blacks in urban settings are more violent than other racial groups. In both of these excerpts, Caleb is getting at an explanation of stereotyping. If
stereotypes exist, there must be some reason. This explanation relies on the assertion that the stereotypes are sometimes true. In both of these lengthy statements from Caleb, we see some ambivalence regarding stereotypes like that shown by Ethan earlier. Caleb is adamant that there is truth behind stereotypes. No everyone is violent, but some are.

Pickering’s discussion of stereotyping is again relevant. Caleb’s assertion is coming from an imprecise move to categorize a group of people. To borrow Pickering’s words, the stereotype functions in this way:

> It tries to create a tight knot of attitudinal thought by attaching a rigidly fixed definition to a social category. Stereotyping exploits the mismatches between different categories and category systems in order to make existing symbolic boundaries seem more absolute, more tightly set in place. (204)

A rehearsal of the critiquing of stereotypes is beyond my scope here. It is worth noting, however, how thoroughly persuasive this concept is for Caleb.

**Performances of Whiteness by Students**

In this study, white student talk about race was consistent with the rhetorical and semantic moves identified by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. As part of his analysis of color-blind racism in the U.S., Bonilla-Silva found that whites consistently deploy certain rhetorical moves when talking about race. These include declarations such as “I am not a racist, but...,” “Some of my best friends are ______,” and “I am not black, but...” He also identified statements that simultaneously assert contradicting ideas (“Yes and no”) and assertions that attribute difference to “Anything but race” (70) were also common.

A quick look at the long excerpt immediately above (an exchange between Caleb and me) illustrates two of Bonilla-Silva’s rhetorical moves. After I asked the group if they agreed with Michael’s contention that Hollywood perpetuates racist stereotypes,
Caleb responded with a “yes and no” statement: “I think that’s very predominant, the media, but you have to understand, [...] the media isn’t really making this up.”

In the second paragraph of Caleb’s quote, he indirectly asserts “I’m not a racist, but...” when he points to recent improvements to education and reductions of violence in the predominantly minority communities of Harlem (New York City) and Compton (Los Angeles). By acknowledging the positive changes in these minority areas, Caleb shows that he is not a racist, because he knows that black areas can improve.

As Bonilla-Silva and I have shown, one common move in the performance of whiteness is the assertion (either directly or indirectly) that “I am not a racist, but...” This performance is certainly problematic, but it can be read optimistically. I take a cue from Jennifer Seibel Trainor and Barbara Applebaum who both argue that we must recognize and respect the desire on the part of the student to be antiracist. “I am not a racist” may be an expression of that desire.

Given that so much white discursive effort is directed to antiracist declarations—see Lawrence Blum’s “I’m Not a Racist, But...”: The Moral Quandary of Race,” as another example—I suggest that a direct, explicit acknowledgement of that desire should be a part of any classroom discussion about race. A teacher can bring this up at the outset and facilitate a discussion of what such declarations sound like and why they occur. By naming these declarations as performative moves with particular goals, they can become an assumed part of the conversation. This eliminates or reduces the need for “I’m not a racist” to be declared, which in turn frees up discussion time which can be used to further consider racial topics.
Teachers’ Reactions to Students’ Performances

The final step in my data collection process—the fourth voice—was to share the video with a group of current first year writing instructors. Five teachers volunteered to participate: Stacey, Linda, Jason, Mary, and Christine. Four of the teachers were graduate teaching assistants with one to three years of composition teaching experience, and the fifth, Linda, was a full-time lecturer with over 15 years experience teaching introductory composition. These teachers were colleagues of mine at the time of the study. I routinely passed them in hallways and traded stories of successes and frustrations. This relationship becomes evident in the fourth voice session. Though I did not dominate the conversation, I was clearly regarded by the teachers as one of their own, a position I did not attempt to disrupt. They were familiar with my dissertation project and volunteered to participate because they were interested in becoming more facile in negotiating racial topics in their own classrooms.

In general, the five instructors responded negatively to Michael’s performances. I will elaborate on how they attempted to make sense of Michael’s statements and the focus of their strongest negative reactions. I plan to compare the teachers’ negative reactions to the students’ positive ones in order to show how the expectations for performance differ. While students were drawn to the relative clarity and certainty of Michael’s performances, it is exactly these traits that the teachers found most problematic.

In the excerpt below, I had just paused playback to ask the teachers what stood out to them and what they might respond to if these students were present in their own
classrooms. I had also provided the teachers with a hard copy of the transcript for reference purposes. Jason was first to respond by pointing to the transcript:

Jason: [quoting Michael] “Racism is really about being misinformed.”

Linda: Yeah. I would definitely go there. That obviously jumped out at me.

Meagan: Well, what stands out about that for you?

Mary: I would ask them what they would think if he didn’t come across as intelligent as this writer does. They keep bringing up the fact that he’s so intelligent and calm and articulate.

Linda: Like, what if he was angry?

Stacey: Yeah, what would they say? I think I would ask that. So if somebody wrote an essay saying how angry they are about the way -

Linda: You get one, get an angry one.

Stacey: Yeah, and see how they would react or maybe ask them, “Now if somebody was racist towards you, if this was you, how would you react? Would you be calm or would you be angry and what does that mean and what do you think others would think about that? I think that he’s looking at it from a-- they’re thinking, “Oh, it’s so good that he’s so above it and being able to stay calm and stuff” and that that makes him [unintelligible]. I think it’s a good idea to get an essay where somebody’s angry- but I think that might -

Linda: I was just listening to NPR the other day. I heard this great thing about how Obama – which I, I mean I like him, and they were saying that one reason that he has great potential to mop it all up is that he will get the guilt ridden white male vote. So he makes you feel good about yourself as a white man with some intrinsic form of guilt that you can vote for him and feel good about that. “I’m a white guy voting for a black guy and that makes you feel good” was their premise. And I think that relative to this that’s a lie. Okay, so we like calm essays about race because it doesn’t antagonize or make it into a conflicted issue. We can talk about the articulate nature of the writing and the, maybe lack of passion that jumps out at you but I think maybe if you had them sit down and think about a way maybe that they had considered themselves in some way discriminated against or at least marked in some way as a woman or maybe as a person with a handicap or in any way that they could go there.
Obviously nobody can to the extent that the essay makes clear. But try to bring them into that a little bit.

Jason: Well, they just said it's so - well, no, it's just like scoffing it off it's really just - “Oh, sorry I'm confused about this whole thing.” You just educate people they're never racist again. It’s sort of like 500 years of history were just a misunderstanding.

Linda: Right.

[...]

Jason: You know and slavery, oops, that was just a misunderstanding. You know, we just got that wrong a little bit, too. And it just sort of negates the importance of it in America, in our history. And it just, saying it's really not a big deal if people just, like, got over this confusion.

The teachers respond in several different ways. They are clearly uncomfortable with the assertion that racism comes from being “misinformed” or from a “misunderstanding.” They talk through different tactics they might bring into the classroom to solicit responses they regard as more complex than those given my Michael.

Linda and Stacey were frustrated by the students' sanguine reactions to Staples’ essay. They considered pairing the “calm” Staples essay with an “angry” piece that might trigger different reactions from students.

As the fourth voice session progressed, the teachers became increasingly frustrated with Michael. After Michael explained in the video how we learn racial stereotypes from television and movies (see earlier in this chapter for the direct quote), I asked the teachers to respond. Linda was first, saying “I find him so condescending now.” She speculates a bit further on Michael’s assertion: “I think he heard that somewhere and it sounded like maybe something worth saying. [...] It doesn’t seem like anything that he’s really—it’s just rhetoric, he’s spouting. I don’t sense any real
conviction in what he’s saying.” Linda’s frustration is evident. What also stands out is the extent to which Linda’s diagnosis of Michael as lacking conviction mimics the ways that Michael and Seth each diagnosed the other with a lack of careful thought about the issues surrounding race.

This diagnosis is a move that teachers (and other interlocutors) make in the ordinary course of teaching. Particularly in the context of first year college composition, teachers do not usually know much about the students beyond what they present in class. For teachers interested in meeting students where they are in their thinking and skills, this lack of background information requires attempts at teacherly empathy. Instead of diagnosing Michael as simply “wrong,” Linda diagnoses him as lacking full belief in what he is saying (though she is clearly also judging him negatively here). By showing that Michael (or any student) is lacking some knowledge, a teacher creates a specific task for herself—to help bring the student and the knowledge together.

The next exchange involves more of the teachers and their responses to Michael. I have included the dialogue that came up immediately before I stopped the video. This dialogue is italicized.

Michael: I feel like that’s because know he exists, because there’s somebody and there’s a group of people out there like that. That’s why we’re able to laugh at it, because it’s so close to home.

Linda: I don’t even know what he said.

Jason: He’ll make an excellent politician some day. “I think the reason that there is no solution is that everybody has a different idea of what a solution is.” It’s like a campaign stump speech.

[...]
Stacey: Yeah, I just think they’ve really never had a situation where they’ve had to even think of, deal with that so they just think that - yeah, being tolerant is the solution.

Linda: That’s a very good point. This is very abstract to them. Yeah, I hadn’t really thought of it that way before you’re - I think you probably nailed it. They don’t get it because I don’t know if it’s because they’re 18 or because of where they come from or their own personal stories. I don’t if that even matters but you would have an entirely different--You would have an entirely different conversation with a different group of students from a different area.

The early reactions in this excerpt come from Linda and Jason. They both express frustration with Michael’s words. Underlying both reactions seems to be a distinction between truth and elegant but empty rhetoric. Linda does not “even know” what Michael said, and Jason likens Michael to a politician—presumably one that is skilled in telling people what they want to hear.

Next, Stacey joins in, performing another teacherly move, speculating about the reasons why Michael and the other participants think the way they do. Linda names the problem as one of abstract versus concrete. I describe this move also as teacherly because it is an attempt to understand why the student is thinking the way he is. Teachers call on this tactic regularly because it is easier to help a student move forward in her thinking if one has a sense of where the student is coming from.

About ten minutes before the end of the session, Linda got up to leave early. As she gathered her things, she said she enjoyed the video and thought it would be interesting to see the unedited version. The conversation that followed merits consideration.

Linda: I would love to hear Seth more. I know there wasn’t more but I would love to hear that dynamic between him and the others. I think that’s where you would get into something interesting if they would all -generate that.
Jason: I think that’s an idea. You’re in a classroom, you would start cold calling Seth right there -

Linda: Right.

Jason: - and make him talk.

Linda: Yeah.

Meagan: So [in] his follow-up interview he’s not as-- he doesn’t have as many “correct” opinions as you want him to. Or as I wanted him to. He very much believes we shouldn’t even pay attention to race, acknowledge race. He really believes in that sort of color blind system. [He said] “I don’t know why we even bring it up.”

Stacey: He thinks it’s a non-issue.

Meagan: Right, right.

Linda: Like how [he] was representing the other piece of this in my mind then maybe he doesn’t.

Meagan: But that’s totally a tendency, it’s something I have to fight in my own mind. These characters sort of embody certain things and I keep trying to not let that -

Stacey: Yeah, you want Michael to be this bad guy.

Jason: Well, you get them into a dichotomy, too. Like there’s a right and a wrong answer, there’s no gray area, too, and Seth will come to the rescue with, you know, redeeming -

Meagan: Right.

Jason: - you know, answers. So -

Stacey: In his mind he’s really thinking these great things.

I am interested in this moment because of the self-reflection in which the teachers and I engage. As Linda begins, she states that she wishes Seth had spoken up more often. For Linda and Jason in particular, Seth had become a particular kind of student voice—the one that could bring up the points that you as the teacher want to make, or at least want to
see represented. As I explained when I spoke in this excerpt, I had done something similar in my own mind. In the days between the first voice session and the individual interview with Seth, I became very excited to hear Seth speak further. In a small way, I had cast him into a particular role in my mind: he would be the liberal student who saw issues in complex ways and would offer viewpoints that challenged the assertions that were dominant in the first voice session. I had come to expect a particular performance from him. The teachers engaged in this as well.

As I showed earlier, Seth certainly did challenge the other group members during the second voice session. His challenges were not as much based in an acknowledgement of the complexity of race, however, as they seemed to be rooted in his own personal counter-culture, nonconformist identity.

Jason neatly explained one of the troubles that comes from the teacherly tendency to try to know more about a student than what has been directly disclosed ("you get them into a dichotomy"). Teachers can begin to see students in oversimplified ways, as having either the "right" or the "wrong" answer.

The existence of this particular set of teacher expectations is further evident in the teacher conversation that came at the end of the video. By this point, there is less agreement among the teachers about Michael.

**Michael:** Once you realize "okay, maybe I am taking part in this" and give a little humility there and then you try to work though it. It's not just people saying "oh, I'm not racist" going around being racist.

**Meagan:** All right. Anything stand out to you?

**Stacey:** I think Michael kind of at the end redeems himself. I mean, at least he's saying-- [pause]

**Meagan:** Well, what caught your attention?
Stacey: The last line, like, “Once you realize, ‘Okay, maybe I am taking part in this,’ and give a little humility there and then you try to work through it and not just people saying, ‘Oh, I’m not racist’ going around being racist.” So that maybe he realizes, maybe he’s never really thought of himself - he probably never thought he was probably being racist or saying - or, I don’t know, that maybe [unintelligible].

Jason: I don’t know about putting any self-reflection on him at all. I don’t know if he’s looking inward at all about this, too. I think it might come back to his argument that racism is a form of ignorance and just being misinformed about how, you know? I don’t know, I’m just not totally sure he’s looking at himself in this conversation.

While Stacey sees Michael in a more positive light because she sees him engaging in some self-reflection, Jason is not similarly persuaded. Jason is not sure that Michael is including himself in the “you” who “realize[s]” personal participation in racism. From my own reading of Michael’s words, it is not clear whether or not he means to include himself in this reflection or not.

Jason elaborates on his skepticism about Michael’s stance. Again, we see the teacherly move of attempting to fill in the student’s back-story in order to meet him where he is. Jason explains how he sees Michael’s underlying rationale:

Jason: Well, Michael’s got this notion of progress about how he views history in a sense, too. That we’re on one ascending plane and then eventually we’ll reach this sort of utopian attitude towards all people. And you see that throughout, too. The fact that education’s the magic bullet with this, too, that technology and communications are really - along with education are gonna remedy all of our problems.

And he sees this as all external factors that can work on individual people in that I think it comes back to sort of how the media plays into this, too. It’s another attempt to [unintelligible] in on people’s attitudes.

And I think it’s probably a pretty pervasive attitude about racism and probably gender, sexuality and everything, too. It’s not internal, it’s an external thing that we’re recipients of-- these attitudes-- and we have to eventually lose them through education.
Meagan: Yeah, I feel like the - somehow that time will cure it; somehow [it] can be a way to remove any responsibility that you would have to do anything about it.

Jason: Right, “It’ll get better in my children’s generation.”

Meagan: Right, right.

Mary: It comes with a fairy tale ending on the whole conversation, like, pushing it off away from them.

Jason: Well, think about how they’re taught history in the classroom, too. We had a problem and we’ve overcome it. We had slavery and we overcame that, too. We had segregation and we overcame this, too.

It’s a notion of progress which is how we construct the idea of America, too, as one where it was the land of forests and Indians and then we took care of that, we got a Constitution, we got away from the King, then we got out of slavery, we got out of racism and now we’re sort of ascending to this higher plane it’s how we tell the story of America, in a sense too.

And I think he is, you know, communicating that sort of belief system through his argument.

Mary: Like everything that’s bad will eventually remedy.

Jason: Right.

In both of Jason’s lengthier statements, he identifies the oversimplified notion of history that he sees Michael (and many first year writing students) drawing on. Again, we see the teacherly move of attempting to contextualize a student’s performance in relation to the unspoken body of knowledge and beliefs that inform the performance.

**Teachers as Performers of Whiteness**

The performances of whiteness by the teachers in this study looked somewhat different from the students’ performances. Most notably, the teacher discussion lacked the specific declarations of antiracist intent (“I’m not a racist, but…”) that were part of the student conversations. I speculate that this is because the teachers presumed a
common antiracist stance and sensibility, therefore it did not need to be declared. The lack of such a declaration is part of the performance of whiteness in this context. The fact that the antiracist stance can go unstated is a feature of a successful performance in this context.

Another feature of the teachers’ performances of whiteness can be found in their reactions to Michael and Seth. Recall that the group of teachers repeatedly expressed their annoyance with the statements made by Michael, accusing him of being more concerned with sounding confident than with actually considering the complexities of racial issues. The teachers’ unified stance against Michael’s assertions is another facet of their performance of whiteness. As well-meaning, white, liberal college writing instructors, the teachers were invested in breaking down racial stereotypes by encouraging students to think critically about race. As the teachers assess Michael’s performance as deficient, they give voice to that assessment and at the same time demonstrate to one another (and to me) their own antiracist stance.

The teachers’ reactions to Seth’s statements can also be seen as performances of whiteness. Earlier, I explained how the teachers and I came to think of Seth positively, projecting our own expectations onto him. (“I would love to hear Seth more [...] that’s where you would get something interesting.”) Our unified appreciation of his attempt to challenge the rest of the group on Staples’s choice to alter his behavior and clothing is another performance of whiteness. Again, as well-meaning white educators, we unify in our reaction to the point of view that most closely resembles our own. In this way, we ended up mutually affirming our good, antiracist intentions to one another.
Conclusions

In this chapter, I have looked at racial discussions through the lens of performance. In doing so, I have highlighted the finding that students and teachers have different expectations of what a student’s performance on race should be. Students seem to want the right answer. They want to express their knowledge in a way that will be heard by their audience. When students hear a particularly elegantly presented performance, they may integrate features of it into their own performances.

Teachers, on the other hand, seek something different. The teachers in this study reacted most negatively to Michael’s short and straightforward performances. Only when they saw Michael expressing some ambivalence did some of the teachers come to a deeper appreciation of his position. In order to engage white students, including those like Michael, in critically meaningful considerations of race, these disparate expectations must be bridged.

The construction of such a bridge involves two pedagogical tactics. First, teachers must encourage racial inquiry within the context of a classroom where students can maintain what Amy Winans calls “social safety” (260). Such a space will vary based on local context. For Amy Winans, this entailed crafting a “local pedagogy” in which she asked students to “explore contradictions in their experiences of race, contradictions that often inform narratives of colorblindness […] it is important to challenge essentialized notions of identity that are often caught in the dichotomy of innocence and guilt” (258). By asking students to critically examine their own experiences of race, teachers are constructing a pedagogy that meets students where they are.
Second, I suggest that we expand the resources to which teachers turn in order to get students thinking about race. In addition to the familiar essays by authors such as Brent Staples and movies such as *Crash*, we need to incorporate peer voices. As I explained in this chapter, my use of video enabled me to present racially sensitive topics through the words of Michael, a peer student. While my video is not available for public distribution, there are other resources. In particular, I suggest two books. *Being White* by Karyn McKinney contains many excerpts of “racial awareness autobiographical narratives” written by white undergraduate students in race and ethnicity courses. These narratives are examples of Winans’s “local pedagogy,” in that white students were asked to reflect on their experience of coming to an awareness of whiteness. Teachers can also find excerpts of writing by white students in *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage* by Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin. In that text, the authors share samples of writing from racial event diaries kept by white undergraduates. Over time, teachers may be able to build their own locally contextual libraries of white undergraduates engaging in the messy discussions that attempt to make sense of race.
CHAPTER 4

INTENT AND EFFECT

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed" (Obama, "'A More Perfect Union’").

In the previous chapters, I have considered the racial discourse of white students thematically and performatively. In this chapter, I make explicit connections between the discursive tactics employed by students, scholars, and public interlocutors. The students in our classrooms today will be participants in public discourse in the future. A hope for social change lies in this generation’s capacity to recognize systemic white privilege and work to dismantle it. This hope for the future is echoed in this injunction by John Dewey:

Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends. (22)

In an effort to recognize this relationship between education and public participation, in this chapter I link academic instances of white talk (by my study participants and in published scholarship) to instances in the public sphere. In each arena, interlocutors
demonstrate a practice of splitting intent from effect so that the person can discursively show her antiracist stance while professing a seemingly racist opinion.

I illustrate what the distinctions between intent and effect mean and how this split is enacted in the contexts of student talk, composition scholarship, and public discourse. Understanding intent/effect in this way will help us recognize it as it is used in various contexts. Further, I suggest intent/effect not only as terminology to describe discursive tactics, but also as a heuristic that teachers can deploy in the classroom to make racial discussions more effective.

As I analyzed the data for this study, I was initially frustrated by what I perceived as a lack of consistency in the racial thinking of some of the study participants. By saying this, though, I do not mean to condemn white students as ignorant of the complexities of race. There are very few people (if any) who have and constantly enact fully articulated and consistent theories of race. Thomas West says as much in his 1997 article “The Racist Other.” He asserts that we cannot adequately question how racism affects our society without acknowledging our own complicities. “[H]ow can we begin to examine the effects that hegemonic forces such as racism have on us while we are looking at others and constructing them in unified and noncontradictory ways—as, say, racists?” (217). It does no good, West explains, to point the finger at others as “racists” while simultaneously identifying ourselves as unified non-racists. Or, to ask a more pointed question: “Why is it that so many compositionists insist on the rhetorically complex composition of ‘selves’ until it involves critical and emotional issues like racism?” (216). My goal throughout the project became to find a way to analyze the
conversations while making room for the “rhetorically complex” stances of the participants.

Jennifer Seibel Trainor, whose work I introduced in previous chapters, also recognizes this complexity in students. In looking at the ways white students grapple with understanding whiteness in classroom discussions, Trainor responds to a segment of scholarly literature which seems to cast white students in critical classrooms as simple, unthinking racists. She reminds us that in the pursuit of socially just classrooms, we must not regard our students as ignorant “others.”

Familiar though these characterizations of students in critical classrooms may have become, they are incomplete in a variety of ways. Characterizations contribute to static, stereotypic pictures of white, middle class students and their values and beliefs. In doing so, they violate Henry Giroux’s injunction that critical teachers avoid ‘good/bad,’ ‘innocent/racist’ dichotomies in their dealings with students. ("Critical" 632)

To categorize students within these dichotomies, Trainor suggests, is to demonize them in just the ways that critical pedagogy tries to break down. Recognizing that students are rhetorically complex on matters of race can open up possibilities for instructors to engage otherwise reluctant students in discussions. Intent/effect represents one such rhetorical complexity.

While I will proceed in this chapter to illustrate the complexities I saw in the ways white students discussed race, I do not mean to speak from a moral high ground on which I am enlightened and the participants are not. As the anecdote that opens the dissertation suggests, my own racial awareness is an ongoing process of tensions and revisions. Clearly, however, it is likely that my awareness of whiteness is more developed than it is for the study participants. This only means that I am in a position to look at the
discussions and mine them for ways to more fully recognize the complexity of how white first year writing students make sense of race.

**Developing Intent/Effect**

During the discussions that were a part of my research, when controversial racial topics arose, students seemed to take one of two positions: either they were more sympathetic to the intent behind the controversial action or they were more strongly allied to the effect of that action. During the conversations, several instances occurred in which the participants expressed frustration that people were offended by something that was not intended to be offensive. On the other hand, there were also instances in which participants allied themselves with those who said they too were offended, asserting that the effect was egregious enough to merit anger, regardless of the intent behind the action. Once this difference in personal stances became evident to me, I began to think of the students’ words in terms of intent and effect. As I reread transcripts for evidence of intent and effect, I found these concepts prevalent in a variety of discussions on race. Further, I saw intent and effect invoked directly and indirectly in academic scholarship and in public discourse regarding race. I developed the term intent/effect, then, to refer to the various tactics deployed by policymakers, scholars, students, and public interlocutors as they assert a split in between the two in order to discursively make sense of race. The tactics of intent/effect can be used to uphold racism and to reveal it.

**Revealing Intent/Effect**

By looking at conversations on race and considering the intent of each speaker and the effect of each spoken unit, we invite interpretations that are rhetorically and
discursively complex. This can help us avoid characterizing students in the ways that West, Trainor, and Giroux have criticized.

With intent/effect, though I am drawing a distinction between the intent behind an action executed by an agent and the effect of that action on an object individual or group, I do not imagine these categories as static or stable, nor do I mean to suggest that a person is solely or consistently an agent with intent or an object experiencing an effect. To further explain the difference between intent and effect as I am using these terms (and to introduce an example that I will return to later in discussing the focus group), consider the Cleveland Indians, a major league baseball team, and their mascot, Chief Wahoo. The team took on the name “Indians” in 1915, shortly after the death of Louis Sockalexis, one of the first Native Americans to play baseball professionally (Steinhaus). Though illustrations of Chief Wahoo have changed since that time, the team name has remained the same. Native American activists object to the offensiveness of the team name and its mascot, calling representations like Chief Wahoo “the last racist icons” of American sports (Bean). Baseball officials, on the other hand, assert that the intent is not to offend, calling the “Indians” name “more of a tribute than a racial slur” (Bean).

Activists are not the only ones to take a stance opposing mascots like Chief Wahoo. In 2001, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights issued a statement calling for the elimination of all Native American team names and representations (unless used by Native schools). The language of the USCCR statement invokes the intent/effect split, which I highlight by inserting two sets of bracketed words:

The Commission assumes that when Indian imagery was first adopted for sports mascots, it was not [intended] to offend Native Americans. However, the use of the imagery and traditions, no matter how popular, should end when they are offensive [in effect].
I use the brackets to show how intent/effect is present in the discourse of the USCCR. Here, the USCCR is using intent/effect to acknowledge the reality of intentions while also advocating for accountability for negative effects. This example illustrates the difference between the intent behind an action (in the case of the Cleveland Indians, the honoring of Native Americans via the creation and continued use of the “Indians” and Chief Wahoo) and the effect of that action (in this case, the oppression felt by those offended by the name and mascot).\textsuperscript{xvi}

Krista Ratcliffe’s recent work on rhetorical listening, which I introduced in Chapter One, has helped me see the usefulness of considering racial topics (including controversial Native American mascots) in terms of intent/effect. The act of rhetorical listening asks the practitioner to recognize that different parties may be seeing things differently. In my example, the owners of the Cleveland Indians might try to understand the history, values, and priorities of those who object to the use of Native American terms by sports teams. The protestors, on the other hand, might try to understand the complex political and financial reasons why the owners are not convinced of the need to change.\textsuperscript{xvii} Ratcliffe herself illustrates the need for rhetorical listening by recounting a conversation with a white female graduate student who was rattled by an interaction with a black classmate:


“Well,” she explained, “the woman is black, and she was insulted when I asked her what it feels like to be black.”

The graduate student is a highly ethical woman, and she honestly felt her classmate could give her insight into racism in our culture. Her classmate probably could have, but that is not the issue. I suggested to the graduate student that perhaps she should do her own race work—that is, not put the
burden on her classmate to explain, not seemingly objectify her classmate as a representative of all blacks, and not make curiosity about race the basis for a friendship.

“That’s not what I intended,” she said.

“But,” I suggested, “perhaps that was the effect.” (emphasis added 89)

Had the white graduate student considered the position of her black peer, along with the likelihood of her peer’s difficult history conversing with whites about race, the white graduate student may have approached her question differently, or not at all. In such situations, two individuals may have equally well-considered positions, but their differing beliefs and experiences lead them to differing conclusions. Here, Ratcliffe uses intent/effect to help her student see a distinction that had not been evident before. Both Ratcliffe and the USCCR invoke intent/effect to validate the past intent and to bring to the fore the subsequent effect.

In addition to inhabiting the statements of public policy and scholarship, intent/effect themes also saturate the language of white first year composition students. I saw intent/effect several times in my empirical research project. Brent Staples’s article was the starting point for a discussion that expanded to include examples of television shows and movies that dealt with race and stereotyping. It is in the responses to Staples’ text and in these popular culture references that I see most clearly the possibilities for the intent/effect concept to shape our understanding of discourses on race.

First, consider Seth’s responses after reading “Black Men and Public Space.” Through the early part of the first voice session, Seth had remained silent. The other three participants (Elizabeth, Michael, and Jocelyn) had explained their own reactions to the article, agreeing that although it is unfortunate that Staples has to change his habits in
order to accommodate others, they saw Staples as a “smart guy” because he recognized
that the white people who reacted with fear did not intend to direct any racially-motivated
hostility toward him. About fifteen minutes into the conversation, I checked in with Seth
to see if he wanted to add to the discussion:

Seth: I do have something. We’re still talking about this article, right?

Meagan: Yeah.

Seth: Ok good. It seems that he actually gave in to everybody being racist
anyway at the end. How he said that he wears nicer clothing now and
gives everybody their space and all that-- he’s being put at a disadvantage
because of them being crybabies, really. Why should he have to change
his clothing? Why should he have to wear nice ones compared to
something that’s say more comfortable or whatever just because of a few
people being afraid? I dunno; I just think that it seems kinda weird to me.
[…]

Seth: It’s unfair to him to have to wear nicer clothings in order not to be
thought of as a criminal. xviii

By using intent/effect to examine Seth’s comments, I am able to assert that he is
sympathizing more strongly with the effect than with the intent. “Why should he have to
change his clothing?” Seth asks. In this response, Seth is discursively allying himself
with Staples by implying that Staples should not have to make any changes to
accommodate others. By reading for intent/effect, it becomes evident that Seth is not
interested in the intentions of those whites who reacted negatively to Staples. Further, the
process of reading for intent/effect gives us a language to speculate about Seth’s logic
without conferring a value judgment. Whether or not I agree with Seth, I can deploy this
tactic to say “I see Seth is sympathizing with the effects that Staples experiences.” I can
then reflect his thinking back to him or to others by framing his words in this way.
Next, I look at several statements by Michael. By examining a few different excerpts, I show how his racial statements seem to contradict each other and how analyzing his words through the lens of intent/effect reveals possibilities that can explain such inconsistencies. This first excerpt comes shortly after the group conversation turned to the ways that race is represented in popular culture. The participants brought up *The Simpsons* as a site where racial stereotypes (among others) are used in an entertaining way. I used this turn in conversation as an opportunity to bring up a then-current topic: real-life Kwik-E-Marts. In conjunction with the release of *The Simpsons Movie* in 2007, several 7-11 convenience stores across the U.S. were temporarily converted into Kwik-E-Marts, the convenience store on *The Simpsons* (complete with *Simpsons* products and employees dressed in Kwik-E-Mart uniforms). One result of this marketing tactic was that several individuals of South Asian descent were quite literally cast into the role of Apu, the South Asian character who runs the store. I asked the group for their thoughts on this. Michael responded:

I think *The Simpsons* is a successful example of portraying stereotypes in a way that we can not only accept but kind of laugh at. I don’t think we’re laughing at them; I think we’re laughing at ourselves because that’s how we see the world. […] It’s not just poking fun at *The Simpsons*, we’re poking fun at ourselves as a nation.

Michael asserts that Apu (and other characters on *The Simpsons*) are invoking stereotypes, but the intent is not to mock the groups that are being stereotyped. Instead, his argument suggests that the absurdity of the stereotypes is so extreme that the viewers are laughing at themselves. The intent is not to offend South Asians, but to make fun of “ourselves.” Michael does not engage the potential effect of the stereotype of South
Asians as convenience store employees. The split between intent and effect enables this to happen.

In the next excerpt, Michael is responding to a question I asked the group about Chief Wahoo. I explained the issue in much the same way I did earlier in this chapter, stating at the end that I wasn’t sure how we should balance the two sides of the debate.

Michael was first to speak:

I think we go overboard on telling people what they can’t say when I think from the beginning we should be educating people and being like: this is an Indian drawn by a bunch of stupid white guys. If anyone should feel embarrassed, it should be us because we think this is what Indians are, you know? We still call them “Indians” instead of “Native Americans” or whatever. If you put it in a context like that, I feel like the Native Americans shouldn’t be offended. I think it’s difficult to understand what it is they have a problem with because the only people who believe Native Americans really look and act like that are people who are ignorant.

In this segment, Michael says that Native Americans activists should not bother being upset about the team name and logo because the intent behind the baseball mascot is not to present an accurate portrayal of Native Americans; only “ignorant” people would believe it was. The implication is that in the absence of malicious intent, there is no traction to the activists’ objections. Consequently, those who are upset should not be; there should be no effect. By rereading Michael’s words for intent/effect, we see that his sympathies seem to lie with the team owners and their stated desire not to honor, not offend.

Based on my conversations with Michael, it is reasonable to assert that he does not hold overtly prejudiced attitudes toward Native Americans. However, his stance that Native Americans shouldn’t “have a problem” with Chief Wahoo can be interpreted as racist. Looking for evidence of intent/effect tactics prompts me to make room for
multiple interpretive possibilities. This reminder leads me back to Trainor’s assertion about the emotional appeal of racism’s claims:

> The student who asserts that his ancestors were innocent of racism is not only forwarding a racial politics that exonerates Whites from responsibility, but also expressing a host of desires for racial understanding and healing; “My ancestors didn’t own slaves” taps these feelings and expresses them in a concise, powerful, and thus, persuasive way. (“My Ancestors” 147)

Taking that argument into consideration, when I revisit Michael’s statement, “I feel like the Native Americans shouldn’t be offended,” I note that he is not saying that being offended doesn’t matter, but instead that being offended should not be an effect of this situation. He explains that “if anyone should be offended, it should be us.” In other words, he is not attempting to belittle the response of being offended.

Instead, he is suggesting that an entirely different response is more appropriate. Michael proposes an alternative effect: “I think personally you need to be okay with yourself from the get-go. If you’re not comfortable with who you are the in the first place, someone’s always going to find a way to offend you, directly or indirectly.” Presumably, if a person who claimed to be offended by Chief Wahoo became more “comfortable” with herself, then she would no longer experience any negative effects. Ultimately, Michael does express a desire to eliminate conflict, but his statement becomes problematic when we see that the effect his logic has is to “exonerat[e] whites from [the] responsibility” of taking the claims of racism into account. By reading his words for intent/effect, we arrive at an interpretation of Michael’s words that allows for rhetorical subjectivity.

Later in the group discussion, one of the other participants brought up another cartoon figure: Ned Flanders, the do-gooder evangelical Christian character on The
Though the discussion moved away from racial stereotypes and into religious ones at this point, I find it useful to include this example for two reasons. First, though white students often do not think they have any experience understanding the effects of racial stereotyping, they do sometimes see themselves as stereotyped along other facets of their identity, including religion. Second, as I’ll show in this example, intent/effect tactics are present in discussions of identity well beyond race.

For participant Michael, Ned Flanders presents an incredibly accurate Christian stereotype, and it is because of that accuracy that the character works: “That’s because you know he exists, because there’s somebody, there’s a group of people out there like that. That’s why we’re able to laugh at it because it’s so close to home.” To Michael, Flanders is a truthful (and comedically effective) portrayal of a population; the stereotype doesn’t need to be reconsidered because it is based in truth. Contrast Michael’s position on Ned Flanders with his earlier statements on Chief Wahoo. Recall that Michael deemed the mascot an obviously inaccurate portrayal of a population. The only people who believe Chief Wahoo accurately portrays Native Americans are “ignorant.” That stereotype does not need to be reevaluated precisely because it has no basis in truth and because everyone knows (or should know) that.

In these two examples, I am trying to show that the split between intent and effect enables Michael to hold seemingly inconsistent positions (i.e. accurate or inaccurate, neither stereotype merits reexamination) in order to uphold a higher goal of “desir[ing] racial understanding and healing” (Trainor, “My Ancestors” 147) without the need for those who generate content (who hold the power) to change. Using this logic, the present intent of Chief Wahoo is not to offend Native Americans and their allies, nor is the
present intent of Ned Flanders to offend white, evangelical Christians. Because there is no intent to offend, Michael might say, nothing calls for reconsideration.

Toward the end of the group discussion, I have identified another inconsistency in Michael’s words. I took the last few minutes of the session to explain my research interests and to invite the participants to ask me questions. In this explanation to the group, I am indirectly presenting the intent/effect concept:

Meagan: That’s one of the things I’m most interested in— the way that people can be harmed by things that they feel are racist, that are committed by people who don’t mean to be racist.

Michael: Right, it’s kind of— you’ve got this passive racism. I’m not meaning to be racist and yet I’m walking around being racist without even realizing it. I totally agree that that probably happens more often than the stereotypical run-around racist who’s standing on a soap box and telling everybody how superior they are. I think that the majority of people are racist to a minute level and don’t realize it. That just comes from being not informed but I’m sure if you went to any other country in the world, you know, they’d have just as many stereotypes as America.

I’m interested in Michael’s use of the term “passive racism.” This wasn’t a term that I used at any point in the conversation, nor have I encountered it in the literature on race. In this use of the term, being passively racist seems to refer to actions that were not intended to be racist but that can be construed as such. Discursively, this creates a category in which those with good (i.e. non-racist) intentions and those who experience ill effects (in the form of racial discrimination) can coexist.

I tried to get a better understanding of “passive racism” when I met with Michael two weeks later. In this follow-up interview, we watched an edited video of the group discussion. I stopped playback at the end of Michael’s statement that is excerpted directly above. I asked him to talk more about passive racism in the context of our discussion of Apu and The Simpsons:
Meagan: I wanted to understand that. I thought the whole conversation about *The Simpsons* was pretty interesting. When you said there “we’re not realizing what we’re taking part in,” what were you getting at?

Michael: I wish I could think of another example because I was thinking of that as I was watching this again. It’s blatant racism, and yet because everybody agrees on it, we’re ok with it.

Meagan: Ok?

Michael: Do you know what I mean? When I say “everybody” I mean the majority class/group. The majority thinks there’s nothing wrong with it, so we get away with it. We see *The Simpsons* and we think it’s—I’m not sure—we see it as a TV show, we see it as funny, we laugh but we don’t really realize what we’re participating in.

Meagan: Ok-

Michael: I don’t see any difference between laughing at *The Simpsons* and laughing at a movie that’s meant to be serious but has typical racist themes in it. I think they’re one and the same. It’s just that we’ve been desensitized to *The Simpsons* over the years so we can laugh at it and say it’s harmless. It’s the same issue.

Meagan: Do you think it is harmless?

Michael: I think the whole notion itself is harmless, yes. I think you should be able to laugh at all of it. People take it too seriously at times, so no, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with watching *The Simpsons* or watching anything like that and laughing at it. I think that I don’t understand why it’s okay to laugh at some things and not at others. I feel like you should be comfortable enough with yourself or your race where you realize that everyone gets made fun of at some point and you can’t take yourself too seriously.

Here, Michael is acknowledging a non-active racism, one that can exist without the motivation of hateful intent (“we don’t really realize what we’re participating in”). At the same time, however, Michael states that viewers should be able to laugh at any sort of racist themes that appear on television or in movies. Being “comfortable” with yourself makes it possible for you to laugh at racist themes, regardless of the group being mocked.
or the egregiousness of the mockery. Further, being “comfortable” means that you do not experience any negative effects that could come from potentially offensive sources.

In the above excerpt, Michael also echoes his earlier assessment of Native American activists who were upset over the Indians and Chief Wahoo (“I feel like the Native Americans shouldn’t be offended”). If indeed they were “comfortable enough” with themselves and “realize[d] that everyone gets made fun of” sometimes, then in fact they wouldn’t be upset by Chief Wahoo and the Indians. Again, because there is no intent to do harm, there is no cause for concern. Michael calls on this tactic multiple times.

The recurrence of this allegiance to intent indicates that although Michael is able to examine racial statements by considering both intent and effect, for him, the intent trumps the effect, to the extent that varying (perhaps contradictory) logics will be employed in order to maintain this dominant discourse. The intent/effect split allows for discursive flexibility that partially accounts for its prevalence. Intent/effect can enable simultaneous acknowledgement of and complicity with racist structures. And indeed, the fact that the Cleveland Indians remain the “Cleveland Indians” and Chief Wahoo remains the mascot attests to the rhetorical effectiveness of maintaining the intent/effect split.

At this point, I turn to public discourse to discuss intent/effect. By doing this, I hope to show two things: first, the examples of intent/effect in public conversations strengthen my contention regarding the prevalence and power of intent/effect across a variety of discursive situations. Second, my tour of intent/effect in public discourse will equip teachers with additional tools to incorporate into their own classroom discussions of race.
In the epigraph to this chapter, I included a quote from Barack Obama’s “‘A More Perfect Union’” speech. In that speech, Obama drew attention to the need to address social problems affecting blacks in America. “[T]he path to a more perfect union,” Obama states, “means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people.” In this statement Obama is asking listeners to practice rhetorical listening—to recognize that the effects of racial discrimination are still being felt by many African Americans, even if de jure racial discrimination is no longer common. In other words, our government may not intend to discriminate against African Americans, but there remain problems related to governmental structures that still discriminate against blacks.

A second example of the contrast between intent and effect also relates to President Obama. On Tuesday, February 18th, 2009, the New York Post published a political cartoon depicting two police officers in a discussion after shooting a chimp. The text read: “[t]hey’ll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill” (Delonas). The cartoon combines two current events: one, the federal economic stimulus bill championed by Obama, and two, an incident in Connecticut on February 17th where officers shot and killed a chimp that had attacked a woman and a police cruiser.

Many readers responded immediately, condemning the Post for implying that Obama—as the champion of the bill—was a chimp. This recalls one of the uglier themes in American racial history—equating African Americans with primates such as monkeys and chimpanzees.

On February 19th, the Post printed a statement clarifying the intent behind the cartoon.
It was meant to mock an ineptly written federal stimulus bill.

Period.

But it has been taken as something else—as a depiction of President Obama, as a thinly veiled expression of racism.

This most certainly was not its intent; to those who were offended by the image, we apologize. ("That Cartoon")

The *New York Post* clearly contends that there was no racist intent behind the cartoon.

While the newspaper clarified the intent of the cartoon, critics remained concerned about the implications of the image. The Rev. Al Sharpton called the cartoon "troubling at best given the historic racist attacks of African Americans as being synonymous with monkeys" (Stein). Sharpton (among others) was concerned with how the cartoon could be interpreted. In other words, he was concerned about the effect of the statement, which in this case is a revival of an anti-black sentiment that stretches well into the nation’s past. This incident allows me to illustrate the intent/effect split in another way and it allows me to emphasize just how important an individual’s stance is when it comes to intent. In the *Post*’s follow-up comment, the paper denies racist intent and then apologizes to “those who were offended.” If the *Post* is denying any wrongdoing, then what is the paper apologizing for?

This is the type of question that philosopher Nick Smith takes up in his 2008 examination of the meanings of apologies. In this detailed treatment of apologies, Smith considers the apology and its meaning(s) for givers and receivers. Smith identifies the denial of intent to do wrong as one of the most common moves in which an apology-giver evades culpability for the action for which she is apologizing. Smith explains:

Many offenders attempt to deny intentionality in order to mitigate blame, for example by claiming that they ‘didn’t mean to’ cause the harm. If I
did not intend the harm, then it seems like an accident for which I am not morally responsible. (50)

Such apologies serve a variety of functions in public discourse. In the case of the *New York Post*, it seems likely that the paper did not seek to offend its readers, but neither does it seek to admit to any harmful intent.

Another example will further illustrate the importance of intent (or lack of intent) with regards to racial controversies in public discourse. Consider the 2002 controversy over remarks made by Senator Trent Lott at the 100th birthday celebration for Senator Strom Thurmond. Both Smith and linguist Jane H. Hill (whose work I refer to in detail in Chapter Two) also use this example to show how intentions relate to apologies.

In a speech honoring Thurmond, Lott referred to the elder senator’s 1948 presidential campaign as a Dixiecrat, a party which endorsed racial segregation to maintain “racial integrity” (Mercurio). Lott remarked that if Thurmond had won that election, “we wouldn’t have had all of these problems over all these years.” Though Lott left “these problems” unspecified, his comments generated strong criticisms from colleagues and in the media. Lott issued an apology, saying “a poor choice of words conveyed to some the impression that I embraced the discarded policies of the past […] Nothing could be further from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement” (Mercurio). In this statement, the senator is linguistically removed as the agent who uttered the words. Instead, the “poor choice of words” led some individuals to a particular impression. Lott apologizes to “anyone who was offended” but he circumvents a direct apology for anything.

Smith categorizes this apology along with some other examples on the recent political stage as separating culpability (i.e. intent) from harm (i.e. effect). He explains:
When apologies include statements like “that wasn’t me” or “I don’t know what got into me,” they imply that the apologizer, speaking from her “good self,” did not actually commit the act. She is a new person, and the old person caused the harm. Fracturing moral agency in this way drifts toward offering an excuse for the act or understanding it as a sort of interpersonal accident. (63)

This fracture is a key feature of this type of public apology. In Lott’s case, it is too politically risky to admit to any racially discriminatory intent, regardless of how long ago the opinions were held. At the same time, the public attention in cases like this is too weighty to ignore. As a result, an apology is issued in which intent is tactically obscure and effect is validated, so as to appease those who experienced harm without accepting any culpability on the self.

A final example will illustrate how intent/effect can operate in the context of a racial conversation on a college campus. On March 2, 2009, Dartmouth College announced that Harvard professor Dr. Jim Yong Kim would be the college’s next president. The next day’s “Generic Good Morning Message” (GGMM), an informal daily listserv written by students, contained the following:

Yesterday came the announcement that President of the College James Wright will be replaced by Chinaman Kim Jim Yong. And a little bit of me died inside.

It was a complete supplies [sic].

On July 1, yet another hard-working American’s job will be taken by an immigrant willing to work in substandard conditions at near-subsistence wage, saving half his money and sending the rest home to his village in the form of traveler’s checks. Unless “Jim Yong Kim” means “I love Freedom” in Chinese, I don’t want anything to do with him. Dartmouth is America, not Panda Garden Rice Village Restaurant.

Y’all get ready for an Asianification under the guise of diversity under the actual Malaysian-invasion leadership instituted under the guise of diversity. It’s a slippery slope we are on. I for one want Democracy and
apple pie, not Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen. I know I sure as shit won’t ever be eating my Hop dubs bubs with chopsticks. I like to use my own two American hands. (Estes)

Political blogs such as Resist Racism, Angry Asian Man, and Racialicious are just a few of the public voices that immediately reported this incident. The GGMM organization issued an apology and the student who penned the message, Tommy Brothers, also delivered a public written apology. In his apology, Brothers identifies the distinction between intent and effect.

I hope you can all understand that my intent was never one of malice against the Asian community, but an extremely crass attempt at hyperbolic satire. I was initially trying to criticize what I perceived to be surprise among many at the naming of an Asian-American President-Elect, Dr. Kim. I then tried to broaden my attack to encompass all of the reactionary, xenophobic, neo-Patriotism that exists in our post 9/11 America. I tried to create a narrator that would be viewed as ignorant, and I hoped that by removing any semblance of subtlety, this voice would not be taken seriously. I realize now that somewhere in that transformation, the specific target of my satire was lost, and all that remained on the page were my extremely racist words.

That being said, I now know that I can’t hide behind my “intent.” Intent and execution are two entirely different things. I know I hurt many people personally, and damaged the reputation of the College publicly. I deeply regret my actions and the harm I have caused. I had no right to spread a message that alienated and belittled one ethic group, particularly one to which I do not belong. (Brothers)

Brothers begins by explaining that his intent was to be satirical, not offensive. In this regard, Brothers’ and Lott’s apologies are similar. This apology is significantly different, however, from that delivered by Lott. Brothers proceeds to acknowledge that there is a difference between “intent and execution.” In doing this, he accepts responsibility for effects that he did not anticipate or intend. Lott’s apology, on the other hand, does not make this move.
In terms of public discourse, then, the apology is a ripe ground for the flourishing of intent and effect.

Conclusions

Based on conversations with colleagues about my research project, the views expressed by Michael are not uncommon. If we imagine some of Michael’s more problematic statements coming from a student in one of our classrooms, we might find ourselves unable to satisfactorily engage the claims made. To stand in front of a student and directly declare this set of assertions as “inconsistent” is a conspicuously adversarial classroom tactic. Trainor is similarly uncomfortable with confrontation in her classroom: “I do not consider direct confrontation or argument to be a useful classroom strategy, but I am haunted by the idea that such [racist] sentiments go unchallenged and by my desire to teach more effectively against them” (“My Ancestors” 144). I offer the intent/effect heuristic as an option.

Consider the possibility of reflecting such thinking back to the student in terms of intent/effect. For example, to understand the intent behind the cartoon character Ned Flanders is to recognize the desire to entertain as the primary purpose. On the other hand, to understand the effect of this portrayal of an evangelical Christian man is to see that certain individuals or groups may perceive that a core part of their identity is fodder for comedy. Framed in this way, the language of intent and effect sets the stage for the practice of rhetorical listening across difference.

By using the terms intent and effect to frame racial discussions in first-year composition classes, a teacher offers a new way for students to engage in critical discussion. By using intent/effect to frame our analyses of written texts, we invite
multifaceted interpretations. Through the examples in this chapter, I have tried to show how the intent/effect heuristic can be used to analyze language and teach against racially problematic discourses. It is a modest shift in thinking, but a potentially dynamic one. Keeping intent/effect in mind as a way to listen and respond to the racial claims by white students can help us avoid the pitfall of creating “static, stereotypic pictures of white middle class students” (Trainor “Critical” 632) as we try to understand our students’ thinking. Further empirical research in classrooms where instructors attempt to employ intent/effect will broaden our understanding of how intent/effect themes and analyses operate.

Though our personal beliefs might sway us to relate more to Seth’s point of view than Michael’s (or vice versa), the intent/effect heuristic gives us a language to discuss students’ racial claims that is not dependent on our own sympathies. The terms intent and effect are simple enough to be used in conversation with students, but powerful in the way they allow compositionists to re-see their students and the discourses in which they participate.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change has already made history in this election. (Obama, "'A More Perfect Union"")

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the practice of rhetorical listening can disrupt white students' performances that draw on common sense and are underwritten by an epistemological ignorance of systemic white privilege.

I have taken it as a given the arguments from CRT and WS that assert that whites continue to benefit from racial privilege, even though they may not see it or consciously wish to do so. As influential as this realization has been to my own thinking, I wondered about how to best incorporate this into my own teaching. There are two factors motivating me to consider this question: first, I am interested in contributing to the project of creating a more socially just society. Dismantling white privilege is a necessary part of that goal. Second, I see critical race inquiry as complementary to composition pedagogy. Specifically, I am convinced that the messages of CRT/WS can be used by teachers to foster rhetorical analysis and awareness.

I see the first year writing class as a space where undergraduates become more rhetorically aware and agile. The methods of rhetorical analysis will continue to be valuable as students progress beyond first year writing. Rhetorical analysis entails
thinking not only about the content of the text but also about the audience. What can we assume about the readers of this piece? If it’s a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper, then we can assume that campus-specific lingo (e.g. “lunch at the MUB,” “get a slice at DHOP”) will be understood by our readers.

My own education in CRT/WS has shed light on some of the unseen assumptions I made about what “normal” is and how race helps determine which groups of people are represented by “normal” and which ones become “Others.”

The students I have worked with at UNH have usually been bright, interested classroom participants. Almost all of them have been white. They assume (just as I once did) that their experiences of the world are, for the most part, “normal.” CRT and WS demonstrate persuasively, though, that “normal” in today’s America is generally coded as white. This means that the middle- and upper-class whites who hold most of the wealth and positions of power determine which issues matter (to “normal” folks) and which budgetary requests get funded. It is absolutely within the scope of first year writing to help students see some of the hidden assumptions that they are making about themselves and their audiences.

Though I am persuaded that CRT/WS can productively inform composition pedagogy, I am also concerned about the potential problems. First and foremost, I have in mind my own 18-year-old self: a well-meaning white kid from a middle-class, mostly white suburb. I believed that racism was wrong, that all people should be treated equally. If a teacher had tried to tell me that I was benefitting from being white, however, I would have written off that teacher as a kooky liberal. I would then proceed to say whatever I needed to in order to get past the assignment with a good grade. Like the students in this
study, I was an ultimately practical student, good at the game of school but not particularly interested in critical self-reflection.

I am constantly aware of that skeptical stance as I research and teach today. I think that my stance then is reflected by many students today from the same kind of background. My research and this dissertation project represent my efforts to get such skeptical students to do a little more than nod, acquiesce, and move along without any deeper engagement.

The best way to approach this goal was to get a more thorough understanding of how current first year writing students make sense of race within composition contexts. (Though this project could readily be expanded along lines of sociological or educational inquiry, I retain a focus on the composition context. This dissertation has been my attempt to make some of the scholarship from sociology and education more accessible to a composition audience.)

As a result of the work described in this study, I have offered new thoughts on the content of racial talk (i.e. themes) and the methods (i.e. performance). I have outlined a new framework for examining racial discourse in composition settings and beyond. By sharing the details of my findings, I have invited the reader to reflect on her own classroom and research experiences.

**The Content of Racial Talk: Implications**

In Chapter Two, I showed that the thematic territory of white student talk about race has not been adequately mapped at the point where popular culture and common sense meet. For the participants, common sense carried a significant weight of authority. This is hardly surprising, given the prevailing societal investment in the value of common
sense and also give the fact that the students in this study had only been alive 18 years or so. They have not had a lot of time to have their own personal experiences with topics like race. Specifically, I found that the students referred to various pop culture resources as reflections of common sense when discursively making sense of race. I assert that this connection has thus far been under-examined. There are plenty of analyses of whiteness in popular culture: for example, Richard Dyer’s *White* considers whiteness as it is represented in the cultural texts of Western culture, including pop culture. The connections between composition instruction and pop culture are explored throughout the field, particularly in textbooks like *The World is a Text* and *Everything is an Argument*. My attempts to uncover resources that deal specifically with using popular culture to integrate *race* in to the composition classroom yielded only one result: the 2007 issue of *College English* devoted specifically to the movie *Crash*. Clearly, we could use more. If we as teachers can gain some insight into how our own students might be using popular culture to make sense of race, we can expand the tools we use in class to introduce and discuss racial topics. The set of examples in this dissertation that refer to *The Simpsons* provides a place for teachers to start. As a result of my study, I am also convinced that future research using *Family Guy* and *South Park* could yield meaningful results.

**Racial Discussions as Performances: Implications**

As teachers and scholars, we can take two distinct lessons away from my consideration of student talk as performance. The first lesson is pedagogical; the second is methodological. First, reminding ourselves of the complexity that lies behind students’ words about race can help us avoid reductively characterizing student opinions. We can do this by consciously adapting rhetorical listening techniques into our teacher practice.
This, in turn, can give us the time and the opportunity to think about alternative ways to engage the problematic assertions made by students. In what ways are they problematic? What are students' goals as they discuss race? By rhetorically listening to white students' performances, I found that students are drawn to confident and clear statements regarding race—it was this interest that led many of the participants to respond so positively to many of Michael's assertions. This finding emphasizes the weight of authority that common sense carries and the potential for creating new kinds of discussions by disrupting that authority.

Further, as teachers we should examine our own expectations for white students' racial performances. What do we hope for from students? As Jennifer Seibel Trainor has asked, "What do we hope White students will gain from multicultural texts? What kinds of responses do we hope such texts will elicit?" ("My Ancestors" 162). The teachers in this study did not articulate their specific reasons for bringing race into their composition teaching. This does not mean that these teachers do not have specific reasons, but it does mean that in order to understand students in terms of their performances, teachers need to articulate their expectations to themselves. Then, teachers should ask how expectations filter interpretations? How do our expectations of student performances differ from their expectations? All of these questions require attention to the local context. They also require self-reflection.

The second lesson regarding performance pertains to the ways in which teachers and researchers present racial topics to white students. As I showed in Chapter Three, my *multivocal focus group* methodology created an atypical format for introducing sensitive topics into the classroom discussion. By using the video medium to have a peer
present racial topics, I created a situation in which the risks to social safety were relatively low. For example, consider the implications of a teacher/researcher stating that everyone is racist “to a minute level” (to quote Michael)—the power and authority held by the teacher/researcher alter the stakes of the conversation and influence the student responses. My multivocal elicited uncommon assertions and admissions about racism—the kind of assertions that can trigger further discussion and self-reflection in a conducive classroom environment. This method can be replicated or approximated by incorporating other forms of white undergraduate student writing into the class.

**Intent/Effect: Implications**

As I argue in Chapter Four, the intent/effect heuristic is present across a variety of discourses. I illustrated how disagreements over racial issues can often be explained by the fact that some sympathize with intent and others with effect. I discussed the intent/effect split in terms of academic discourse, student talk, and public rhetoric. Obviously, the concept is persuasive to all kinds of interlocutors. Specifically, by showing the presence of intent/effect in public discourse, I have given teachers a method and some examples to incorporate into discussions with their white undergraduates. As teachers and researchers continue to consider intent/effect, I can see it expand beyond race and into a variety of personal and political disagreements.

**Contribution to Composition**

Taken as a whole, this dissertation expands our understanding of white student talk about race. It equips teachers and researchers with tools designed to engage white students in racial discussions in ways that help reveal hidden assumptions. As first year writing students become more aware of the assumptions they make about themselves and
their audiences, they become more rhetorically aware and adept. This helps them become better writers. I am optimistic that this work can be a small but meaningful step forward toward the goal of a socially just society. I find this hope in interactions with my own students and in the words of the speech I used to frame this dissertation—"it is where we start" (Obama).

**Metacommentary: The Dissertation as a Performance of Whiteness**

At the risk of indulging in a bit of academic naval-gazing, I also want to take a moment to reflect on this dissertation as my own performance of whiteness. This is not merely solipsistic—it is a part of the ongoing process of making whiteness visible (Greene and Abt-Perkins). As I mentioned in the introduction, my use of Barack Obama's "'A More Perfect Union'" speech functions on multiple levels. It helps me frame my discussion and show the thematic relevance of my findings. It exists as a set of samples that teachers might integrate into their own antiracist teaching. It also enables me to perform my own antiracist white identity. I did not need to refer to Obama's speech in this dissertation. Because I chose to do so, I am implicitly (and now explicitly) asking the reader to see me as a white scholar who attempts to enact her antiracist goals.

This demonstration is not merely a surface feature; my antiracist interests led me to ask the questions that undergird this project. My findings confirm my belief that the practice of rhetorical listening (via the intent/effect heuristic) can disrupt the common sense and performances of white students discussing race. This disruption can help us as teachers lead white students to identify and critique their own racial assumptions.
NOTES

i I use the term “white” (and later in this paper, “nonwhite”) to indicate my focus on the power that attends whiteness. As Robert Jensen has explained, using the terms white/nonwhite “more clearly marks the political nature of the struggle” (3) experience by people of color who are unified in their “experience of oppression.”

ii Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

iii In this article, I am referring to whites who would describe themselves as well-meaning (or non-racist). While overt, intentional racism continues to exert itself in ways that need to be addressed, it is also necessary to consider how racism may be persistent among individuals who are sincere in their desire to not be racist.

iv Though the term “folks” is uncommon in composition scholarship, it is a regular feature in race studies work. Bell hooks is one scholar who makes frequent use of the term. Though some readers may regard “folks” as too informal for academic writing, I continue to integrate it in this dissertation as a way to enhance language variety and readability.

v Ratcliffe builds her use of the term “cultural logics” on the concept of “cross-cultural boundaries” offered by Jacqueline Jones Royster. See Royster 30-1.

vi This essay is also anthologized under the title “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space”. It is Staples’s first-person account of his experiences walking in big cities at night. He describes several encounters in which he is assumed to be dangerous because of his skin color. The version I used in the study is a reprint from Harper’s Weekly in 1986.

vii I did not select instructors who are currently teaching the classes in which my first voice participants are enrolled.

viii Chesler et al. are careful to note that this description does not apply to all white students. The researchers did encounter white students with racially progressive and activist attitudes, but such examples were infrequent.

ix See the Appendix for an explanation of the choices I made in rendering transcribed language.

x Jocelyn tended to speak very quickly with stops and restarts. As a result, her excerpts are at times more difficult to follow than are those from the other participants. I have
chosen to only minimally edit the transcriptions (see the Appendix), so as to preserve as reasonably as possible the participants’ words.

Though Jocelyn did not recall the author or title of this reading, I was able to contact her instructor who was able to supply reference information.

A complete list of the pop culture references made by the study participants is included in the Appendix for informational purposes.

Presumably, this roommate is different from the one Ethan mentioned earlier who was racist and homophobic.

“Straight Outta Compton” is the title track of the 1988 album by N.W.A ("Niggaz With Attitude"). The album is an early example of gangsta rap. The track “Fuck tha Police” was a focal point of controversy when the album was released.

See the March 2007 issue of College English for a symposium dedicated to meditations on using Crash in the classroom.

Though I have my own opinion on this issue, I have chosen not to foreground that stance. The point of this tactic is not to evade the issue but to emphasize the flexibility of intent/effect themes.

See note #1.

In order to avoid the use of “[sic]” to indicate nonconventional words or wording throughout this article, I have reviewed the transcription several times to ensure its accuracy. Any uncommon spelling or wording does represent what was said by the participant.

I have my own opinion on the ways in which Ned Flanders relies on stereotypes to achieve comedic effects. I refrain from foregrounding that opinion in order to instead highlight the usefulness of the intent/effect heuristic in analyzing discourse.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX
Transcription Notes

In the interest of enhanced readability, I made minor alterations to the excerpts of conversation that are included in the dissertation. I used the following guidelines when editing conversation for inclusion in the text.

- Removed repeated words and phrases unless the repetition was done by the speaker in order to emphasize a point.
- Removed filler words unless they were integral to meaning. The following words/phrases were considered filler: you know, like, ‘cuz (‘cause), um, ah, kind of, I don’t know, so.
- Italics were used sparingly and only in cases where the speaker gave significant emphasis to a particular word or phrase.
- I use “[unintelligible]” to indicate moments that I was unable to reconstruct from the audiotape.

Pop Culture and Media Sources

Through the course of my data collection, I asked all the student participants to mention any shows, movies, or other media sources that came to mind when thinking about race. I worded the question in an open-ended way because I did not want to direct them to ward particularly successful or controversial sources. I mentioned a few of these in the text of the dissertation, but I wanted to include the full list here. The length and variety of sources indicates to me that there is a wealth of racial information available to students through the media.

Television Shows

The Simpsons
South Park
The Boondocks
Chappelle’s Show (starring comedian Dave Chappelle)
Carlos Mencia (stand-up comedian)
**Fresh Prince of Bel Air**
**The Cosby Show**
**Law & Order**
**Shaolin Showdown**
**Family Guy**
**Veronica Mars**
**Futurama**
**Lost**
**The Office** (UK version)
**On the Lot** (reality show on cable)

**Movies**

**Die Hard**
Kung-fu movies
Old Westerns
Apu - movie star in India
Michael Moore (director of *Bowling for Columbine*)
**Blazing Saddles**
**Godzilla**
**Finding Nemo**
James Bond
**Freedom Writers**
**American History X**
**Remember the Titans**

**Other Media**

Hot Pockets ads (Asian stereotypes)
Wendy’s commercial (redheads)
18-Apr-2007

Rodgers, Meagan S
English, Hamilton Smith Hall
18 Coe Dr. Apt 1
Durham, NH 03824

IRB #: 3950
Study: Analyzing White Educational Discourse in a First Year Writing Context
Approval Date: 17-Apr-2007

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 110.

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period, you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
    Newkirk, Thomas