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ABSTRACT

When teachers work to create empathy that transfers or translates the experience of the other into an experience an individual has had, they promote a kind of egotism that dismisses the other or that reduces the other to the category of the self. The key problem with empathy of this sort is that the focus is not on the other, but on the self. The task that "whiteness studies" undertakes is to shift this focus from ME to US. Whiteness studies is about reopening the dialogue with the other under new terms. With this in mind, an educator has designed a composition class that focuses on race relationships and on keeping the focus on US, not on the other, but on the interconnections. The course's purpose is to teach students how to write about literature and how to do researched writing. The educator tries to get students to move away from a reader-response critical approach to literature in which the reader gains a position of privilege by completing the story toward a post-colonial critical response, in which the student examines the political positions of the author, the characters, and themselves as readers. This paper talks more about the dangers of empathy and about how whiteness studies move readers and writers beyond that to a new political sense of their responsibility in the classroom and the community. The paper describes the main assignments for the course (the second semester of a 2-semester freshman composition sequence) in which the pedagogy of whiteness studies is applied to facilitate the development of an empathy of responsibility in the students. Lists 6 works cited. (NKA)

Rewriting Racism: Whiteness Studies in the Composition Classroom

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (54th, New York, NY, March 19-22, 2003)

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Title:
Rewriting Racism: Whiteness Studies in the Composition Classroom

How do we, as teachers, evoke and realize transforming possibilities in our students' ideas about race? One way we've often sought these transformations is through empathy. But, empathy as a classroom tool is fraught with problems. When we work to create empathy that transfers or translates the experience of the other into an experience we've had or when we make the other's story similar to our story, we promote a kind of egotism that dismisses the other or that reduces the other to the category of the self. As Peter Kerry Powers observes, this transference of another's story into your own story "makes it difficult to distinguish between acts of creative appropriation and imaginative imperialism" (xv).

The key problem with empathy of this sort is that the focus is not on the other, but on the self. The task that whiteness studies undertakes is to shift this focus from ME to US. While it may seem from its label that whiteness studies is preoccupied with the white ME, its goal is to ensure that whites are aware of the ways in which their continuing and "invisible" assumption of privilege has injured and continues to wound the other. Whiteness studies is about reopening the dialogue with the other under new terms. It's about realigning the relationship between ME and the other after I have examined my behavior and taken responsibility for it.

With this in mind, I've designed a composition class that focuses on race relationships and on keeping the focus on US, not on me or on the other, but on our interconnections. The purpose of the course in our curriculum is to teach students how to write about literature and how to do researched writing. I try to get students to move away from a reader-response critical

approach to literature in which the reader gains a position of privilege by completing the story toward a post-colonial critical response, in which the student examines the political positions of the author, the characters and themselves as readers.

It's easy for an educated feminist to understand the claim that the personal is the political, but not so easy for first year college students to make that same connection. My students don't always identify racist acts as racist. For example, when they see a white man spitting at a black mother and her child as they wait for the bus, they understand that something bad has happened, but they attribute it to personal hatred or stupidity, rather than to embedded historical, political or institutional racism. Whiteness studies is an excellent springboard for raising and maintaining the awareness of the political nature of our personal actions and beliefs, of the ways we are inculcated in a system that needs to be challenged. In my presentation today I'd like to talk more about the dangers of empathy and about how whiteness studies moves readers and writers beyond that to a new political sense of their responsibility in the classroom and the community.

I'm not saying that empathy is bad or that we can't effectively use empathy as a tool in our classrooms. I'm only advocating that we be careful not to transfer the focus of the discussion away from the suffering of the oppressed and the injustice of the oppression by transforming it into a discussion of an experience that the oppressor "understands" or can "relate to" or has "experienced" herself. Privileged white students can get the wrong idea out of an assignment that asks them to think about how something in their experience is like the experience of the racial other. If they think that they can understand the experience of being discriminated against because of a somewhat similar isolated individual event that happened to them, then they miss the systemic, enduring quality of racism that is at the root of discrimination and racial inequality in our society today.

In *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles,* Paula M. L. Moya details the ways in which Cheri Moraga has developed a practice of empathy that avoids these pitfalls. The key is to examine your own experience without losing sight of the differences

between you and the other to which you are comparing yourself. Moraga's own exclusion from the feminist movement because she was Hispanic and lesbian led her to examine her mother's exclusion from mainstream U.S. culture because she was dark skinned and poor. Her own experience wasn't enough to help her understand her mother's oppression, but adding her own experience to her intellectual examination of racial, sexual, and class discrimination aided her in developing a sense of what I want to call an "empathy of responsibility." Moraga became aware that her own light complexion and her college education made it possible for her to deny her Hispanic roots and to act as an oppressor of her mother and her mother's community. She came to both feel the pain her mother felt through her own experiences and understand her responsibility for creating it through her theoretical and intellectual development. Moya writes that Moraga's example "illustrates the point that however dependent empathetic identification is on personal experience, the simple fact of experiencing oppression is not sufficient for understanding someone else's oppressive situation"(54). Supported by Linda Alcoff who claims that "'[e]xperience is epistemically indispensable but never epistemically sufficient' for arriving at a more objective understanding of a situation," Moya concludes that we shouldn't argue that experience is rendered epistemically unreliable because it is theoretically mediated, as postmodern feminists do, but instead that "we should address ourselves to the adequacy of the theoretical mediation that informs the different interpretations we give to our knowledge generating experiences" (54-55).

The key to utilizing empathy in the classroom is, always, to put it in context. Our experiences by themselves will not help us to understand what others experience. Moya claims that we need to "exam[ine] our own location within the relations of domination" (56). Never draw conclusions about others based on your own experiences without thinking also of your relationship with others. Always think not only of similarities, but also of differences. This is risky because when we focus on relationships, on give and take, we should come to realize that we must give up, according to Moraga, "whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of

this society by virtue of our gender, race, class or sexuality" (56). The trick in the classroom is to help students to make these connections between self and other without becoming defensive. This is the danger of promoting an empathy of responsibility. People are "afraid to admit that we have benefited from the oppression of others" and we will fight making that admission because "[we fear] the immobilization threatened by [our] own incipient guilt. . .", the possibility that we may have to change, and "the hatred, anger and vengeance of those [we have] hurt." (Moraga qtd in Moya 56).

Now, I'd like to describe the main assignments for the composition course in which I apply the pedagogy of whiteness studies to facilitate the development of an empathy of responsibility in my students. The course is the second semester of our two-semester sequence of Freshman Composition. The first semester of the course focuses on developing basic writing and thinking skills, such as summarizing, developing and organizing ideas, presenting ideas clearly and concisely. The second semester's focus is on learning to write about literature and learning to write a research paper. I divide the course into two halves – in the first we focus on literature, in the second on the research. We start with a reading of *The Tempest.* I use the Bedford/St. Martins critical edition of the text. The play is followed by a series of essays focusing on two of the main critical controversies about the play. The first interpretation the editors discuss is one which focuses on the play as reinforcing Renaissance ideas about the necessity of the proper order and the disturbances caused in the social realm by a disruption in the Great Chain of Being. This interpretation supports the notion that civilization (order) is superior to nature (chaos), an issue that was important to Shakespeare and contemporaries, an idea that was the source of debate for many writers and thinkers of the time. The second interpretation explored in this section is a postcolonial one, which asks political questions about usurpations, uses and abuses of power in a colonial/postcolonial context. In the course of their discussion of the debate between these two positions, the editors focus on the idea of our responsibility as readers. To whom are we responsible? Shakespeare? Or, ourselves and our contemporaries? They ask the following

question: On what grounds should we deliberately limit the relevance of literature by denying its uses for our contemporary political debates? Since the politics of colonialism are very much with us in the late 20th century, why not see how Shakespeare treated these politics in his play?

While we are reading the text we have several in class discussions about the characterization of Caliban. We look at several different representations of the character on film. We read another section from the text on sources and context for the play which includes discussions by Shakespeare's contemporaries about the "nature of savages" and we read Ronald Takaki's revisionist historical essay "The Tempest in the Wilderness" which connects Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban to the new world's creation of the myths of the savage and of manifest destiny. We talk about power relationships in the play, especially about Prospero's relationships to his "servants" Caliban and Ariel. We also focus our attention on the ending of the play and Caliban's fate. The editors of the text, in laying out the postcolonial critical interpretation ask these questions about the ending: Why do we readers have to accept Caliban's capitulation to Prospero's punishment? "Whose story [should] we readers and viewers of the play. . . identify with: Prospero's or Caliban's? The winner's or the loser's? . . . Does either story quite get the last word?" (94). These questions allow us to respond empathetically to the characters, to decide with whom we most identify, while at the same time challenging us to explore the reasons for our empathy, the cultural and historical factors that refine our empathetic response.

The assignment that follows the reading and in-class discussion does not ask the students for a head on discussion of racism in the text, instead it asks the students to take up a position concerning the responsibilities of the reader toward the text, utilizing Shakespeare's play as their sample text. I ask the following questions for them to consider: What issues do we foreground as readers – our own or the issues of the writer and her times? How do we use a text – to understand the past or to understand the present? Should a text be a catalyst for action, a prompt for meditation, a source of information, or a source of entertainment?

I share a possible plan with the students for developing a position paper: setting up the problem, stating your position, supporting your statement with evidence, considering objections to your position and answering them, restating your position and reaffirming its validity. Then I ask them to consider their position and to share it with the class. We spend a day discussing different possible positions and working on formulating thesis statements. The value of this exercise in terms of developing an empathy of responsibility is that in order to complete the assignment successfully, students must consider carefully, and spend some time discussing seriously, not only which characters they like or empathize with, but also what their responsibilities are as readers. They must place their own experiences in the context of their cultural and political surroundings. They begin to see reading as active, not passive, as personally and politically significant. They are empowered by the idea that they are in control of the interpretation of the text. The way they choose to read, to see, to interpret acts and texts makes a difference in the world a round them. Interpretation is a force, it is important, it sustains or rejects, it upholds or challenges. It's not a game; it's action. The political nature of all we do becomes more apparent through this discussion of the politics and responsibilities of reading.

The second text we read for the course is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Again, I select a critical edition of the text, this time the Norton. As we read we discuss Conrad's portrayal of whites and blacks. Where is he sympathetic? Where is he cruel? What seem like stereotypical images of both races? Where is he ironic? How do you recognize irony? Where not? Where and how does he set up oppositions between the races? What ideas, symbols and words does he repeat in his construction of racial images? What's the effect of this repetition on the reader? We do a little biographical research. What experiences did Conrad have in Africa? What does he say about these experiences? What were the attitudes of other whites of his day towards Africa and Africans? How is his fiction different from his non-fictional comments on this topic? (The Norton supplies us with excerpts from his letters and journals.)

Then we read a couple of essays supplied by the editor: Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Frances B. Singh's "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness,* and C. P. Sarvan's "Racism and *The Heart of Darkness."* Achebe's essay asserts that Conrad is a racist and that his novel dehumanizes Africans. His question is "whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization. . . can be called a great work of art" (257). His answer is no. Singh and Sarvan attempt to counter Achebe and redeem Conrad by claiming that though certain parts of the text contain racist material, overall the text condemns the white thinking that the characters exhibit. We spend time in class re-reading parts of the essays and discussing them, formulating opinions and discussing the strengths and weaknesses or their arguments based on evidence from Conrad's novel. We also ask who the critics are and how their own racial/cultural positions might have influenced their arguments. We look at how the three critics set up their arguments, how they use Conrad for support, how they reference other critics in their texts, how they answer arguments that they know will arise, how they sum up their assertions.

In terms of developing an empathy of responsibility as regards whiteness studies, this assignment encourages students to be racially conscious readers. They may empathize with Kurtz, or with Marlow, or with the African people dying in the bush or carrying the loads of the whites across the continent, or with the Intended, or with the narrator, but they must see their empathy through the lenses of their own cultural and political positions. Why do they empathize with a particular character? How is their empathy a reflection of their own racial, gender, class background? What does the author do to build that connection? What kind of political statement is implicit in the author's choices?

The assignment that follows up on this discussion asks the students to read Nadine Gordimer's short story "Comrades" and to decide if it is or is not a racist text. We make a list on the board of questions a writer would ask of the text to determine if it is racist. We look at point of view, at stereotypes presented, at the narrator's attitude toward those stereotypes, we spend

some time discussing Gordimer's life, about South African apartheid and politics, finding out a little bit about her other writings and her political opinions. As we did before, we spend one day discussing thesis statements and workshopping them. We spend another day in groups discussing ways to strengthen the arguments students develop in their first drafts.

The final assignment for the course is a research paper. In order to allow the students to write about something that is interesting to them, something they can empathize with, we begin by selecting essays we're interested in reading from Ishmael Reed's *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace.* Students are asked to select one essay from the collection and present a summary of it to the class. Reed has selected essays on all sorts of topics dealing with race – some of the subtitles of the sections of his book are "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being," Friction: Inter-Ethnic, Internecine, Fratricidal," "Image Distortion Disorder," including discussion of topics as diverse as the icing of Italian American Culture to sexism in Asian America to the criminalization of Black men to the border patrol state. The breadth of the essays foregrounds the incredible varieties of racial issues in our society, exploding students' notions that race is a black/white thing or that American is a colorblind nation or that racism is mostly a personal issue, instead of a systemic one.

After they've read and summarized one article from Reed's book for the class, I ask them to find a topic in their article, or in an article they heard about from a classmate, that they are interested in studying. As they are doing their research, we talk about the different kinds of research papers – papers that present information and papers that utilize information to make suggestions or to solve problems. I ask them to bring in a list of questions about the topic they've been reading about that might lead to the second type of paper. So, a student who is studying the way the U.S. border with Mexico is patrolled, might bring in questions about the ethics of U.S. policies, about how Mexican migrant workers support families in Mexico, about U.S. tax money spent on Medicare and Medicade for immigrants, about the Southwest as a dual language community. We explore the possibilities for organizing their information (surveying the

literature, posing the problem, identifying some solutions or making a case for a position, addressing counterarguments, concluding). Then we begin thesis workshops, conferences and small group work.

This assignment expands the students' awareness of the issues of racism in our culture. The broad range of Reed's selected essays opens up the field of discussion. Students can select issues that interest them, for which they have some empathy to spend time exploring, but they begin to see these issues as related to one another, not as isolated incidents. The idea of racism as systemic and imbedded, as inherent in our culture becomes obvious because of the way all their research on various topics touches, inevitably, on the same issues of historical and political dis/advantage and [lack of] privilege . Their essays foreground the idea of responsibility by asking them to take a stand or solve a problem about one of the various aspects of racial discrimination in our culture today.

We can use the composition classroom effectively to rewrite racism in our society. It's our responsibility to do so.

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