It has always been my experience when reading Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words* that I have to exert a little extra effort to keep straight which of the focal communities Heath studies—Roadville or Trackton—is the working-class black town and which is the working-class white town; I find myself often flipping back to the introduction where this racial distinction is initially made and then almost immediately dismissed as irrelevant. I have come to think of this extra effort I have to go through to locate race in the first part of *Ways With Words* as emblematic of my experience reading much of the scholarship in composition studies where race seems to function as an absent presence. For while it is often called upon as a category to delineate cultural groups that will be the focal subjects of research studies, the relationship of race to the composing process is seldom fully explored. Instead race becomes subsumed into the powerful tropes of “basic writer,” “stranger” to the academy, or the trope of the generalized, marginalized “other.”

But if race has been an absent presence, racism has been an absent absence. Even when the subject of a study is identified by race or ethnicity, the legacy of racism in this country which participates in sculpting all identities—white included—is more often than not absent from the analysis of that writer’s linguistic capabilities or strategies. Discussions of racism in composition are confined to determining how to handle individual, aberrant flare-ups in the classroom without exploring racism as institutionalized, normal and pervasive. As Keith Gilyard has observed, race remains undertheorized, unproblematic, and underinvestigated in composition research leaving us with no means to confront the racialized atmosphere of the university and no way to account for the impact of the persistence of prejudice on writers and texts.

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What follows rests largely on Ruth Frankenberg’s assertion that “race, like gender, is ‘real’ in the sense that it has real, though changing, effects in the world and real, tangible, and complex impact on individuals’ sense of self, experiences, and life changes” (11). Unfortunately, despite (and in many respects because of) the inroads of multiculturalism, what Frankenberg calls “color- and power-evasive paradigms” (14) for thinking about race still dominate in public discourse. I would argue that they also dominate in composition studies. Victor Villanueva suggests a move away from such paradigms when he calls for an investigation of what he terms a colonial sensibility within both the national and composition communities: “I want us to consider the possibility that a colonial sensibility remains for us in the United States—in America—and that America’s people of color are most affected by that sensibility” (184). We need to investigate the enduring and ingrained nature of this colonial sensibility and its effects on discourse if the absent presence of race is to be confronted and the absent absence of racism revealed. But identifying an ingrained sensibility, Deborah Brandt has observed, is no easy matter. In exploring the limits of ethnomethodology, she asks, “How do we study the social structures of practices so ingrained as to be unconscious—so extremely scenic as to go unnamed and unnoticed?” (348). It is one thing to say that racism is one of those scenic unconscious practices; it is another thing to identify and expose it as not an aberration, but as business as usual in the United States. This is what critical race theory sets as its project.

Critical race theory is a movement of legal scholarship which investigates how racial (and other) inequities are sustained through legal discourses. I am preceded in my interest in intersections of critical race theory and literacy by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate. Sensing a lack of theorization about race in schools of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate look to critical race theory because the theme that unites its diverse texts is that race matters—has mattered and continues to matter in all aspects of American culture. Drawing on the work of Derrick Bell, Ladson-Billings and Tate argue that “the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity” (48).

But Ladson-Billings and Tate’s analysis of school inequity foregrounds resources rather than discourses and so the implications of critical race theory for writing and writing research are not immediately evident. Much of the critical race theory literature, however, confronts, investigates, and plays with issues of audience, genre, voice, and canonization—in short, with issues of discourse and rhetoric. Critical race theorists have often been noted (and often faulted) not so much for their arguments—what they are saying—as for their departures from standard legal dis-
course—how they are saying—no doubt because what they are saying is, in part, that the atmosphere of the university and the courts remains racialized. Given a prevailing colonial sensibility, this message reaches ears which will register only dissonance and unintelligibility. And yet the deliberately dissonant rhetorical stance that critical race theorists adopt is itself part of the message and itself a response to the racialized atmosphere in which they work and compose. In other words, the generic distortions that critical race theorists create and embrace are themselves mechanisms to bring the issue of race and racism back into legal discourse, and by extension into public discourse. I believe study of these mechanisms can therefore be one avenue toward foregrounding race in composition’s discursive space.

I focus my analysis on the textual practices of Patricia Williams and Derrick Bell for a number of reasons. First, they are two of the most visible and textually radical critical race theorists. Second, because Williams and Bell call attention to themselves as raced subjects and as “outsiders,” even though they are allegedly writing as “insiders,” they are anomalies as subjects in composition research where the outsider or the raced subject is almost always presumed to be in a position of deficit in relation to a disciplinary discourse. Third, the fact that both Bell and Williams deliberately distort, embellish, and evade the discourse of their discipline in order to address the subject of racism begs a reassessment of one of the composition community’s historic missions; specifically, their textual practices serve as a means for continued problematizing of assimilationist teaching by putting flesh on Villaneuva’s assertion that a colonial sensibility always validates a limited assimilation, and also as a means of confronting and uncovering composition’s colonial sensibilities so that we might begin to read both our students’ texts and our own as artifacts of that sensibility.

“Reckoning with Unconscious Racism”: Origins of Critical Race Theory

Richard Delgado (Rodrigo) and Patricia Williams (personal interview) have both suggested that the legal profession is presently in a state of crisis, facing the challenge of multiple consciousnesses. Since many of these “multiple consciousnesses” have been working in the field of civil rights for some time, it is important to understand why this crisis did not occur earlier. Starting in the 1970s, critical race theorists like Alan Freeman began expressing dismay as they watched many of the gains of the earlier civil rights movement being rolled back. As Delgado describes the situation: “Old approaches—filing amicus briefs, marching, coining new litigation strategies, writing articles in legal and popular journals exhorting our fellow citizens to exercise moral leadership in the search for racial justice—were
yielding smaller and smaller returns” (Critical xiii). Having seen through their experience as civil rights advocates that discrimination does not disappear when whites and blacks are afforded the same formal rights and processes, many critical race theorists began to argue against the ideologies of color-blindness and incremental change that characterize liberalism.1

In 1984, Delgado’s “The Imperial Scholar: Reflections on a Review of Civil Rights Literature” appeared in the University of Pennsylvania Law Review. Described by Derrick Bell as “an intellectual hand grenade, tossed over the wall of the establishment as a form of academic protest” (Wiener 246), “The Imperial Scholar” employs citation analysis to argue that a number of mainstream, white, male civil rights scholars ignored work by scholars of color, leading to a marginalization of such work in civil rights discourse. Delgado further argues that because white scholars have not had the experience of domination, they have neither the information nor the motivation to interrupt the cycle of racial exploitation. “The Imperial Scholar” announces two theses that underlie much of critical race theory: (1) voices of color have been wrongfully excluded from the literature on civil rights, and (2) these voices are distinctly valuable because they arise from the experience of domination. These theses are most often explicated in terms of “consciousness” by critical race theorists: exclusion (and this expands to mean exclusion in general—not simply from the civil rights literature) is attributed to unconscious racism on the part of the culture as a whole; the insight that only people of color possess is attributed to double-consciousness—a term first used by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the experience of domination and exclusion within a society which professes equality and integration. According to Du Bois, double-consciousness is a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others…. One ever feels his twoness” (3). Using double-consciousness to expose unconscious racism motivates critical race theorists’ departure in their publications from the genre of standard legal argumentation. They are, in a sense, crafting a rhetoric of double-consciousness that focuses on juxtapositions of valued and devalued rhetorics.

Charles Lawrence, for instance, introduces his landmark Stanford Law Review article, “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism,” with an autobiographical anecdote from childhood which describes the first moment he felt himself to be different from his white classmates. He concludes that since so much of racism in this society is unconscious—the norm rather than a deviation from the norm—there is no language with which to expose and punish it given a legal system that demands proof of conscious intent. Acquiring legitimate means by which to describe the experience of routine discrimination is therefore a common concern of critical race theorists. Too often the words just aren’t
there, or they haven’t been heard yet (there is no precedent), or they aren’t permissible (or, they are “off-register”). Furthermore, as Delgado and Jean Stefancic point out, the structure of legal discourse, the rhetorical conventions through which arguments are made, makes it difficult to question the status quo: “The search for authority, precedent and hierarchy in cases and statutes can create the false impression that law is exact and deterministic—a science—with only one correct answer to a legal question” (209). The more hermeneutic, narrative approach of critical race theorists can be read as an attempt to move away from a model of law as a science where the permissible is that which builds upon the previously established, toward a model of law which recognizes the ambiguous and often contradictory positions occupied by members of historically disenfranchised groups, as well as the fallibility of those who serve as the mouthpieces of the law and designators of admissibility. It is, in short, an attempt to shift the locus of the authoritative voice in law.

But, as Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch have observed, “resistance requires authority” (561). In moving away from the authority granted to arguments built upon legal precedent, critical race theorists have to locate the authority for stories of experience elsewhere. They find it in a formulation of voice. In “Looking to the Bottom,” Mari Matsuda echoes Delgado in claiming that “those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice” (324). This formulation of voice should be distinguished from essentialist notions of black voice; it is not tied to a posited “oral” culture of people of color, nor to the assertion of any existence of a separate black English with its own linguistic codes (cf. Labov). Voice here is not some pure expression of the individual. It is not even necessarily a single voice, tied to a coherent and unified consciousness. This voice is the expression of double-consciousness; significantly, it embodies contradiction, ambiguity, and even irrationality as it reflects the experience of discrimination in a society which professes to be colorblind. What makes this voice so powerful and yet problematic as a tool of critique and transformation is that it functions as an illegal currency in relation to legal discourse. It arises from “folk law” and so retains a fluidity that resists formalization; normative proposals cannot easily be generated from it (Austin 301). It is, in these senses then, irrational, culturally unintelligible within mainstream legal circles, a voice which refuses to be completely socialized. And yet it is the intersection of this voice with legal discourse, or the voice of the disciplinary community, that some critical race theorists argue will be the mechanism through which racism can be acknowledged in the courts. The next section examines how this voice, as it is manifested, interpreted, and proliferated through the textual practices of Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams, supports a rhetoric which exhibits double-consciousness and irrationality
to counteract the rhetorics which have obscured rather than revealed unconscious racism and its effects.

Textualizing Double-Consciousness

Derrick Bell, the first black law professor hired by the Harvard Law School, is perhaps best known for voting with his feet when Harvard failed to tenure a woman of color. He is also known for couching his arguments in the form of fantastic stories. In Bell’s books, *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, aliens descend, islands rise out of the sea and sink again, and characters travel through time. In introducing both books, Bell maintains that his use of fantasy is perhaps even more essential to the construction of his critique of racial inequities than the use of logical argumentation; the persistence of prejudice cannot be accounted for nor halted by rational appeals. He writes in *Saved*: “In order to appraise the contradictions and inconsistencies that pervade the all too real world of racial oppression, I have chosen in this book the tools not only of reason but of unreason, of fantasy” (5). He has elsewhere observed that stories have the added benefit of creating a comfortable distance between the writer, the reader, and the material—a kind of safety zone in which to approach a charged topic like racism (Address).

To further remove himself from his most radical critiques of liberalism, Bell places many of them in the mouth someone else, most often the fictional and fantastic Geneva Crenshaw, a six-foot-tall, female African-American lawyer who becomes the “author” of Bell’s stories. The stories in both *Faces* and *Saved* are punctuated with dialogue between the first-person narrator—a black male lawyer with the traditional, integrationist civil rights approach—and Geneva Crenshaw. In these dialogues, the narrator (whom Bell refers to as himself) serves as a foil: “In many stories, I’m the traditional, integration-oriented civil rights lawyer and she’s the one who’s prodding me to get with it” (Goldberg 57). Bell acknowledges that the use of Geneva Crenshaw is meant to add more legitimacy to his insights; his choice of a black female lawyer as the author of the stories reflects his stated belief that black women possess special insight into the realities of racism (Goldberg 58). Even more than Bell, in other words, Geneva Crenshaw is supposed to embody double-consciousness, outsider status, and their attendant critical power.

Bell’s departures from argumentation based upon case precedent have not always been appreciated by the mainstream legal scholarship. One reader of *Faces* suggested that storytelling “relieves Bell of the necessity of making logical arguments sustained by evidence” (Thernstrom 59). In fact, Bell’s books are neither all story nor all argument. Bell suggests that the
fact that *Faces* wasn’t this and wasn’t that on a number of levels led to a demi-erasure of the book:

*Faces* fell in the cracks of media coverage. It was not a black conservative book, in which case, you know, it would have shot to the top of the best seller list…. The reviewers weren’t sure what to do with it…. Nor was it a black pathology book ‘ooh, I started off as the child of a fifteen year old drug-ridden mother who prostituted herself even the day after I was born’….It didn’t fit into that category. And it wasn’t a black militant book ‘I hate all white people.’ That also sells very well. (Address)

Bell here suggests that there are acceptable and unacceptable genres for black authors to approach the topic of racism, just as there are generic conventions of disciplinary discourse. Black authors speaking or writing *within* one of those genres are perceived to have more authority; should a work fall between genres, it hazards the charge of unintelligibility. Richard Delgado explains this phenomenon as not merely a matter of genre. He notes that “agona tales” (tales of black pathology) are very popular, but tales that actually critique the mainstream in a way that is difficult to dismiss—and he cites Bell’s work as an example—tend to receive the most resistance from mainstream readers and are not absorbed into the literature (*Rodrigo* 207). Delgado and Bell suggest that the problem isn’t that they’re telling stories, but that they are telling different stories.

Patricia Williams has fared no better for her stories in the mainstream legal press. It has been suggested by critics of Williams’ work that her inclusion of “personal irrelevancies” invites readers to dismiss her (Jost 97). Williams has been accused of self-indulgence and paranoia and—perhaps worse—“methodological nonchalance” and “principled genre-blurring” (Rieder 41). “Genre-bashing, is more like it,” Williams asserted when I asked her for her reaction to these charges (interview). Ironically, the very conflation of the academic and the personal that seems to de-authorize Williams’ voice in legal circles has worked to authorize her voice in composition circles (see, for example, Diamondstone; Flower; Goldblatt; Mahala and Swilky). Race appears or disappears in these articles, depending upon the company in which Patricia Williams is placed. In Judith Diamondstone’s analysis, for example, the relationships between genre, authority and race are probed as the author notices similarities between Williams’ techniques and those of Thurgood Marshall. Daniel Mahala and Jodi Swilky, however, compare Williams’ work to that of Jane Tompkins to argue that social theories of writing which reinforce polar senses of “personal” and “academic” risk compromising their aim of empowering students. Unfortunately, none of this literature has
examined Williams’ textual practices within the context of critical race theory, and so has done little to examine racism as pervasive, normal, and institutionalized.

Williams’ textual practices are meant to counteract the denial of the irrational which, Charles Lawrence has observed, is key to the legal system’s denial of racism (329). In textualizing this irrationality, however, Williams borrows devices from fiction but doesn’t completely fictionalize. She remarks, “I use my own dreams, hallucinations and fantasies, as a way of empowering less authoritative ways of speaking” (Wiener 246). Henry Louis Gates explains that given the role that representatives of the law are traditionally supposed to maintain, Williams’ approach is a particularly unsettling one: “The first person has always been troublesome in the language of law. Judicial authority is to be sharply distinguished from the authority of actual judges…. If they are well trained…we hardly notice their lips move. Williams, spoilsport that she is…moves her lips and makes sure you notice” (Gates 768). Unlike Bell’s use of fiction and obvious use of persona—both of which insert a comforting distance between the author, the material and the reader—the infusion of the personal into the legal Williams employs collapses those distances. Rather than rely on the authority granted by legal discourse and rather than invent a fictional black woman with what would be (to her experience as she relates it) a fictionalized authority to ventriloquize through, Williams concentrates on establishing her voice’s lack of authority. She does this in *Alchemy* by reporting repeatedly the distortions and erasures her voice is subject to as it collides with more authoritative discourses. Explaining her hesitance to write a law review article about being misquoted in the newspaper, for example, she writes: “The problem, of course, will be that in the hierarchy of law-review citation, the article in the newspaper will have more authoritative weight about me, as a so-called ‘primary resource,’ than I will have; it will take precedence over my own citation of the unverifiable testimony of my speech” (50).

Indeed Williams, like other critical race theorists, takes aim at polarities and enacts double-consciousness in her texts, but unlike Bell, who exteriorizes it through dialogue, the double-consciousness in *Alchemy* is more often contained within the first-person narration and the narrator, herself—in a lineage which involves the rape of a young female slave by her white slave master (a lawyer), and finally in the playful image of “ursine ennui,” the recurrent specter of two “polar” bears pacing back and forth. The split subjectivity Williams often portrays to the reader is therefore largely a reflection of the in-between positions she finds herself occupying. The polar bear hallucination accompanies her, for example, as she attends both the Modern Language Association and the Association of American Law
Schools conventions in quick succession—a trip in which she recalls seeing herself with her mind’s eye for the first time as “not white.”

This story is not insignificantly similar to Charles Lawrence’s anecdote about seeing himself as “not white” for the first time. Williams is often careful to point out that there is nothing really special about her experiences. Her technique is not simply to relate her life, but to make an allegory of her life. In “a carefully crafted paraphrased composite of rejection after rejection after rejection,” Williams parodies everylawrevieweditors reaction to her genre-bashing account of the polar bear hallucination: “As it is, this piece is far too personal for any legal publication, and furthermore, if you don’t mind our saying so, its publication anywhere will risk your being perceived as quite unstable in the public eye” (Alchemy 214). The object of satire here is the notion that the cure for insanity (or the perception of insanity) is to slot oneself safely into a genre. This notion re-emerges in reviews of Alchemy itself; it has been suggested that either Williams is unhinged (Jost, Rieder) or playing at being unhinged, and that either way her style is at odds with her credibility (Rieder). Williams has suggested that such criticisms result from reviewers having taken the book too literally: “He has no sense of allegory,” she said of Rieder when I interviewed her. While it cannot always be said, then, whether Williams is representing herself in her work, or representing perceptions of herself, it is interesting that the possibility that she is doing both as well as something completely different is not generally considered by critics of her approach, partially because they read it as strictly an autobiographical approach in an attempt to rid the voice of ambiguity and irony, and thus of its power as social critique.

Williams’ creation of allegories is then, like other textualizations of double-consciousness, a way to confront other allegories—specifically, those collective cultural myths that place black women into certain readily resonant archetypal positions. One of these myths, the myth of the black woman as liar, witch and monster is specifically the target of Williams’ satirical, genre-blurring, pseudo-ethnography of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings entitled “A Rare Case Study of Muleheadedness and Men, or How to Try an Unruly Black Witch, with Excerpts from the Heretical Testimony of Four Women, Known to Be Hysteric. Speaking in Their Own Voices, as Translated for This Publication by Brothers Hatch, Simpson, DeConcini and Specter.” One of the meanings of the Latin root of the word “satire,” satira, is “medley.” “Muleheadedness” is certainly both a medley and a satire, containing echoes of the language of a court hearing, a diary entry, select pieces of literature, anthropological field notes, and a multiple choice test. All these discourses are orchestrated to make the Senators, Clarence Thomas, and the hearing itself the objects of ridicule. The thrust
of the article as a whole is to turn what was popularly mythologized as a “high-tech lynching” into what from a different perspective seems more like a witch hunt.

Williams’ technique in “Muleheadedness” is again a kind of rhetorical jujitsu whereby she embraces all the cultural stereotypes of black women (particularly black professional women) in a multi-generic cloak of irony and parody, using the language in which these myths are disseminated against itself. But *cloak* is perhaps the wrong word here—as Williams puts the Senators into the position of ultimate authorship not so much to hide, but rather to dramatize the distortions unauthoritative voices undergo when ventriloquized through those in positions of power. In dramatizing these distortions Williams is able to carry both the myths about black women and the language that sustains them to their illogical extreme in order to undo them. Exhibit C, for example, is the witch’s “confession.” It is here that Williams most forcefully employs irony and downright sarcasm to suggest that being a black female law professor is in itself to be a monster in the eyes of the larger culture: “I’m a witch. Now I know this may be a little hard to comprehend, but I can prove it. First of all, I’m a black law professor, a status so miraculous that that alone should convince you of my powers. The statistical probability of such a creature existing is about the same as that for mermaids and the Loch Ness monster, with the Loch Ness monster having a slight edge” (165). Continuing in the mock confessional vein, Williams pokes fun at stereotypes of black women in general by listing her specific “powers”: “If I have a baby, I tend to have a population explosion; if I move into a neighborhood, I come as the forward phalanx of an invading army; if I have an opinion, it is attributed to ‘you people.’ So you can see I have powers” (167).

Williams conducts a more standard kind of field research to tell every-blackwomanlawyer’s story in “Notes from a Small World.” After getting in touch with the nine other black women in her graduating class at Harvard Law School, Williams finds that they have all endured similar experiences: a sense of isolation while in law school followed by hyper-attention in some circumstances and absolute dismissal in others—race, in particular, being one characteristic prone to appear and disappear. As one of her colleagues remarks, “I was anointed, no doubt about it, but always in a way that attributed my accomplishments to me as a woman but not to my race. So in fact what you do well will reflect well on you, but only as an individual. And what you do poorly—well that’s when what you do will be dumped on the whole race” (“Notes” 90). It is thus that successful women of color, Williams observes, are regarded as isolated abnormalities, rather than as part of the larger cultural picture. Paradoxically, at other times, black women seen specifically as black women tend not to be seen as individuals at all. One of the
major “finds,” then, of Williams’ archaelogical digs at the collective myths of the culture is that black women have never needed to do anything to be perceived of as lying, crazy, hysterical, or even monstrous—short of opening their mouths, and sometimes not even that. The problem Williams unearths is not that she is telling stories or even that she is telling different stories, but that she—a black woman—is the teller.

Ways With Double-Consciousness

It has become a commonplace by now in composition studies to recognize certain textual acts, such as parody, as “arts of the contact zone” after Mary Louise Pratt called attention to the potentiality of such acts in the classroom. What is less often noted is that Pratt’s notion of the textual acts of the contact zone derives from a study of a colonized people. I point this out because I want to suggest that double-consciousness has a history and should not be manufactured in the composition classroom. Were we to convey to our students that authority is a matter of mimicking the textual practices of Patricia Williams or of displaying double-consciousness (as Mahala and Swilky suggest), we would be encouraging the kind of proliferation of difference that plagues what Ladson-Billings and Tate identify as one of the newest inheritors of the traditions of liberalism, “the ever-expanding multicultural paradigm” (62), enacting a pedagogy that constrains and erases the very (irrational) expressions it hopes to hear. Rather than look to these textual acts as new models for writing pedagogy, then, we might think of them as signals to look where our colonizing impulses lie—to track, as Patricia Williams does, the places where race appears and disappears, where it is invoked as an accounting practice and where suppressed, and identify the metaphors and tropes for raced subjects that lie in the collective unconscious of composition.

Mina Shaughnessy’s Errors and Expectations serves as a good starting point for such an investigation because it helped launch the field of basic writing studies and because, as Patricia Laurence argues, it has been canonized to the extent that its peer texts of the period have been eclipsed. One of the things Errors and Expectations eclipses, however, is a focus on race. Min-Zhan Lu shows in her critique of Errors and Expectations that the students Shaughnessy studies are raced subjects, but only identified as such in the introduction where they are labeled as coming from New York’s “ethnic and racial enclaves” (3). Lu also locates a moment in Errors where the concerns about race and racism brought up by a student in an essay are overlooked by Shaughnessy—who instead describes a stylist “improvement” which coincidentally involves the erasure of race (Lu 34; Shaughnessy 278). Yet Lu’s identification of erasure of race at certain
points in *Errors and Expectations* stops short of engaging with the text’s colonial sensibilities. Where I think the greatest erasure of race occurs in the text is not in individual instances, but in Shaughnessy’s formulation of school as a place with its own codes, rules and rituals which are “foreign” to the incoming students. To stress the disjuncture between the habits and language of school and those of the new population of students, Shaughnessy offers a powerful analogy, describing the students as writing “as if they had come, you might say, from a different country” (2). This formulation of students as strangers and foreigners was significantly reinforced throughout the 1980s through the design of initiation studies (see, for instance, Berkenkotter; Huckin and Ackerman; McCarthy) but even more so through error analysis, the method that adapts the approach of ESL teachers to analyze the errors of native speakers (see Bartholomae).

While both initiation studies and error analysis have done much to bring composition studies away from a debilitating concept of remediation, much thought should be given at this point to whether or not it might be an “error” that natives of this country are continually inscribed through the ethnographic gaze and the taxonomy of error analysis as always “just getting here.” Perhaps student writers are not simply engaging formal strategies to deal with an unfamiliar task, language, or rhetoric, but are also employing textual strategies (such as “very much here” critical race theorists Bell and Williams do) to deal with the all too familiar color-and power-evasive discourses that the academy requires. In other words, much might be gained by regarding the linguistic strategies put forth by many of our students not as evidence of lack of socialization, but as evidence of successful socialization into a colonial sensibility.

To demonstrate how discussion of internalized colonial sensibilities might be congruent with a discussion of linguistic strategies, I would like to return to Heath’s *Ways With Words*, examining it for the way race appears and disappears in other tropes, while racism doesn’t enter into the symbolic level of the text at all. Heath chronicles how both working-class black and white students’ sense-making practices learned at home conflict with the sense-making practices validated at school. But while race figures prominently in her delineation of two communities economically dependent upon the nearby mill, Heath discourages the reader from focusing on race as an explanation for the groups’ linguistic behaviors. She does this first, as I mentioned earlier, by referring to the two communities by the neutral designations “Roadville” and “Trackton.” She points out in the prologue that the middle-class townspeople, regardless of their race, have more in common with each other than with the citizens of either Roadville or Trackton. “Therefore, any reader who tries to explain the community contrasts in this book on the basis of race will miss the central point of
the focus on culture as learned behavior and on language habits as part of that shared learning” (11, my emphasis).

I find it interesting that in this comment of Heath’s, race is positioned as being in excess of culture, and indeed, almost in opposition to it. This opposition obscures the way race and other aspects of “culture” (for example, class) are mutually co-constructing; in Heath’s analysis class ends up being more congruent with “culture” than race. Despite her attempts in the prologue to arrive at a conception of culture purified from conceptions of race, however, race and racism keep intruding into Heath’s text. Introduced as one of many examples of Roadville’s citizens’ “mixed” feelings about the mill, the presence of a multi-generational racism is an undeniable part of one man’s construction of his unsatisfactory economic situation. As he tells Heath:

When the niggers (pause) uh, the blacks, you know, started comin’ in, I knew that wasn’t for me. I wasn’t ever gonna work for no nigger—my granddaddy’d roll over in his grave if I did. Blacks takin’ up the jobs now, ain’t no chance for whites to move up, and I gotta have me a feelin’ I can be my own boss for some things. I began lookin’ for me a way out, and that’s when this friend tol’ me ‘bout the tech school in Alberta. (39)

I consider this speaker’s mention of his grandfather significant because it calls into question Heath’s formulation in the prologue of the two communities as historically separate communities defined by their own culture. Given that this man is willing to leave the area rather than face the threat of working with blacks, it seems that much of his culture is defined by and through opposition to a racialized “other.” Fascinatingly, racism is the very impetus driving him toward greater literate and professional development, out of the mill and toward the technical school. That the very presence of racialized others in his workplace is a sign to him that he belongs elsewhere throws into question Heath’s naturalizing of the linguistic and racial border between the towns.

What might be gained in terms of understanding linguistic strategies by reconceiving Roadville and Trackton as cultures that are and always have been in contact? Keeping in mind critical race theory’s conception of racism as ingrained and normal, instead of regarding the Trackton children as simply engaging in strategies to survive in the community of Trackton and as ignorant of linguistic practices outside their community, we may regard them as always already socialized into the discourse of racism. Strategies for dealing with the basic inconsistencies and inherent contradictions that critical race theorists identify as the experience of double-consciousness can be seen as part of the Trackton way of life. Heath notes again and
again that Trackton children are adept at adapting to the “shifting sands of reality”: “Across sets of situations and actors, children learn the domains of applications of a particular word, phrase, or set of actions and the meanings conveyed across these are often neither literal nor predictable” (84). One Trackton mother suggests that learning is learning to cope with this unpredictability: “He see one thing one place on time, he know how it go, see sump’n like it again, maybe it be the same, maybe it won’t” (105). This approach seems reasonable given Mari Matsuda’s analysis of the position of people of color in the United States—a position, Matsuda argues, in which people of color have to believe simultaneously that they have a right to participate equally in society and that rights are whatever people in power say they are (339).

“...A Limited Assimilation”

Numerous composition scholars have argued for the writing classroom as a place where students need to be instilled with authority through genre knowledge. Accordingly, much investigation in composition studies has been devoted to determining how individuals attempt to position themselves rhetorically as “insiders” in relation to a disciplinary discourse by appealing to community conventions (see, for example, Berkenkotter and Huckin). Such work has usefully established that within a given discipline or community there are discourses that are more dominant than others, and that membership in a discipline or community is in some way contingent upon aligning one’s voice with the dominant discourse. Critical race theory most obviously asks us to question links that have been drawn in composition studies between possession of genre knowledge and disciplinary authority. The textual practices examined above collectively suggest that the value of discursive socialization is contingent (on factors such as race) rather than universal. They further suggest the importance of seeing students as already socialized into discourses of race and power relations.

It is at this point that articles dealing with composition generally incline toward some pedagogical imperative: “teach this way” or “model this approach.” I am not going to do so but will instead devote my concluding remarks toward an explication of the dangers of models. It is worth observing that critical race theorists, even though they are teachers themselves, do not articulate pedagogical imperatives in their works. Continually, even as they embark on deconstructions of legal discourse, they are mindful that their positions as tenured professors have allowed them this opportunity. Patricia Williams acknowledges that, in her own teaching, she always recognizes that students have to pass the bar (interview). Richard Delgado’s fictional law professor in *The Rodrigo Chronicles* is continually
counseling the hot-headed student Rodrigo to hold off on his embrace of narrative until he achieves tenure. Critical race theorists generally acknowledge that one has to get into that position of being a respected jurist before one’s pronouncements and justifications for departing from the rule of law can themselves become law, and that position is one that not many people of color—particularly not many women of color—occupy.

However, the limits of professional position given the impact of race are documented in the critical race theory literature as well. Patricia Williams remarks that no matter how professional she becomes, she is marked by being a black female (Alchemy 147). Derrick Bell, too, notes that his attempts to conform were not sufficient to negate a history of discrimination: “I soon discovered that, whatever my willingness to conform, my tenured status did not entitle me to admission to the Law School’s inner circles” (Confronting 38). While many critical race theorists have argued that whenever there is the presence of others, of those who had previously been excluded, the system changes, they also recognize that just including the presence of others may not be enough. Even affirmative action is devoid of its moral weight, Delgado (Rodrigo) and Russell have both argued, when deployed without the concept of reparations, without a sense of a history. Matsuda et. al conclude that “the interests of all people of color necessarily require not just adjustments within the established hierarchies, but a challenge to hierarchy itself” (7).

Lani Guinier et al.’s study of socialization in law school, Becoming Gentlemen, similarly concludes that because the law school’s model of the ideal lawyer has been based on the role and technique of lawyering when there were no women or people of color in the profession, it will not be simply enough to add women and people of color and stir (67). Without significant changes to the profession and pedagogy, women and people of color will continue to wind up on the bottom. Guinier et. al’s finding that people of color and women have increasingly socialized attitudes during their years at law school, but still wind up with poorer grades than their white male counterparts, suggests that not only is an agenda of socialization insufficient for enfranchisement but that it might be detrimental to enfranchisement.

For more evidence of this, we need look no further than Heath’s own research. The children of Roadville and Trackton are described as equally unprepared going into the school system. In documenting their fate years later, however, she notes that while the children of Roadville have left the Piedmont and have for the most part gone on to higher forms of education, the Trackton children have not experienced such mobility; instead many of them have been forced to go on public assistance as the jobs at the mill evaporated. (“Madness(es)” 257). In this postscript Heath continues to assert a level playing field between the two communities commenting,
"the point here is that while some get ahead, others fall behind" (261). She notes only of those "others" that Trackton residents were hardest hit by the mill closing as they were last hired and therefore first fired, ignoring that the historic circumstances that led to their being last hired and therefore first fired have everything to do with race.

Just as critical race theorists ask us to consider the importance of rights as well as their limitations, their work—as well as how they and their work is received—asks us to consider the nature of enfranchisement and inclusion, and the limits of the kind of inclusion liberalism promises. The idea that socialization will of itself create a level-playing field is inherited from liberalism, and like liberalism itself, it has become a casualty of the post-civil-rights-era backlash. What composition studies can take from critical race theory is an awareness that if we are to understand the mechanisms (like racism) that prevent some students from being heard, we need to recognize that our rhetoric is one which continually inscribes our students as foreigners. We might observe, for example that Asian-American students don’t exist in composition studies—they are either ESL students or unnamed (white). The discrimination that Asian-Americans face (in some cases through their positioning as “model minority”) is culturally unintelligible within composition’s discursive space. Meanwhile our white students are not portrayed as “having race” at all. The present challenge for compositionists is to develop theorizations of race that do not reinscribe people of color as either foreign or invisible, nor leave whiteness uninvestigated; only through such work can composition begin to counteract the denial of racism that is part of the classroom, the courts, and a shared colonial inheritance.

It is not that we are all that rare in time—it is that over time our accomplishments have been coopted and have disappeared; the issue is when we can stop being perceived as ‘firsts.’…. ‘If only there were more of you!’ I hear a lot. The truth is, there are lots more of me, and better of me, and always have been…. [We] are, after all, part of Western Civilization. (Williams, Alchemy 113)

Notes

1. While critical race theory arose in greatest part out of the disillusionment that accompanied the setback in racial justice that followed the civil rights era, it gained momentum by distinguishing itself from the more general critical approach to law known as critical legal studies. Critical legal studies coalesced in 1976 when scholars with diverse intellectual projects met at the University of Wisconsin Law School for The Conference on Critical Legal Studies with the purpose of investigating how the law and legal theory work to perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality in society as a whole (Minda 106). In some cases, critical legal studies involved a critique of legal discourse via the use of deliberately non-legalistic language—a similar move made in critical race theory (see Gabel and Kennedy). Yet because critical legal scholars rejected rights discourse (one of
the founders of the movement, Peter Gabel, in particular maintained that rights and the state were both hallucinations, [Gabel and Kennedy 34–35]) the politics of the movement fell far short of concerns that would be the priority of critical race theorists.

2. Richard Delgado uses a similar technique in The Rodrigo Chronicles in which the first person narrator is the more traditional law professor and Geneva’s half-brother Rodrigo is the mouthpiece for Delgado’s more radical assertions.

3. I am indebted to my colleague David Charbonneau for the use of this phrase.

Works Cited


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