

FINDING ROOM FOR “WHATEVER”: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO ANTIRACIST COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

Lucy Marrero
University of Illinois–Springfield

Whatever. That’s what I thought about the assignment when it was assigned and the paper that resulted. It was difficult for me to transform thoughtful research, extensive contemplation of the texts I had read, and attempts at forming a thesis into an actual, final paper suitable for turning in. It wasn’t until I read Jeff Rice’s article “The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition” that I was even able to write a paragraph—this paragraph, in fact.

Whatever. This word can be seen as “an indifferent or oppositional student reaction to course demand” (Rice 457) that stems from cognitive dissonance. In my case, the cognitive dissonance was located in the gap between the assignment (a discussion of how “race and ethnicity have influenced the teaching of writing today” [Ottery 2007]) and the scholarship that had grabbed my attention, both in the class-assigned texts and in my own research. It was the cognitive dissonance caused by my experience as the only person of color in a class about race and rhetoric. And it’s the cognitive dissonance (*whatever*) that Rice suggests can be used as the site of “invention strategy for research-based argumentative writing” (453).

Whatever. It’s a “popular, everyday term used heavily by youth culture when an experience or reaction can’t be named” (Rice 455). An experience, perhaps, like a student of color feeling ostracized in a class full of white students but unable to put her finger on exactly what it is they “did” to make her feel excluded. Edited American English, or “standard” English, seems to lack the language to discuss race and expressions of covert racism. We struggle to describe our experiences as marginalized people in an oppressive institution when we try to use socially sanctioned language—language that is linear, binary, abstract. Perhaps this is why Victor Villanueva posits that it’s in “generalizing personal events” (Okawa, “Removing Masks” 126) that racism can be spoken of and ultimately combated. Perhaps this is why Patricia Hill Collins, Malea Powell, and other feminists and womanists of color believe in the power of storytelling as a synecdochal description of hegemonic oppression.

Racism is so often expressed in covert ways. Legally we are all the same—no three-fifths law, “protection” from racism in the workplace—yet the victims of oppression continually shout that the supposed equality we possess is not the reality we face daily. Catherine Prendergast talks about this *whatever*—this racism that lacks language to properly describe it—in a legal context: “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” (39). A student of color can’t point to a classmate and say, “He hit me!” or “She called me a name!” She struggles for the words to describe the pervasive feeling of exclusion, the subtle discouragement from too-lofty goals, the silencing of her contribution to the class discussion. “Too often,” Prendergast writes, “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’)” (39–40).

Whatever. The student can’t describe her experiences in the rhetorical strategies offered in the

traditional composition classroom because it is precisely those strategies that are in place to keep *her* in place. If only the “narrow, limited scope” of Edited American English (Lovejoy 98) is permissible, students of color are denied, as Gail Y. Okawa puts it, the “opportunity to express ourselves, our lives, and the lives of our communities more fully” (“Resurfacing Roots” 126). Censoring students of color by severely restricting their ability to develop a comfortable and authentic writing voice only reifies a racist hegemony. And in the absence of any factors that might nurture a student of color’s burgeoning writing voice—no “safe” environment for expression, no validation of a marginalized person’s experiences and identity/ies, no space to write in an authentic voice, and a severely restrictive composition pedagogy—wouldn’t you throw up your hands and say “Whatever”?

It’s at this critical moment, the student’s frustrated or ostensibly indifferent reaction to cognitive dissonance, that Rice asks us to view “whatever” not as a “lack of response” but as an expression of something “indefinable, obscure, or out of reach” (455). Maybe this “whatever” response can be a warning flag for professors: “You’re losing me. . . . You just don’t get it.” This critical moment is an opportunity, Rice argues, to “confront the *whatever* in order to overcome its classroom presence” (457).

My Own Lived “Whatever”: Using “Off-Register Words”

I encountered many “whatever” moments in the class (Race and Rhetoric, the class in which I first produced a version of this paper). These moments were the result of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between my experience with the assigned texts and the way in which the class discussions unfolded. The texts we read for the class, many of which I reference in this paper, provided such rich insight into the ways language reflects and reifies a racist hegemony. The brilliance of the scholarship resonated with my lived experiences, inspiring new insights as I built on their ideas with my own. I continued the dialogue that began between me and the authors of the assigned texts by engaging with others outside the classroom who share my passion for social justice and language, and we found inspiration and a renewed energy for our sustained activism.

Yet this affirmative, energizing conversation seemed impossible within the actual class discussion, which took place in both a literal classroom and an online discussion forum. The geographical distance between me, an online student in California who did not set foot on campus until my commencement ceremony, and the “on ground” students in a physical classroom in Illinois was compounded by the social, political, and academic distance I experienced as the solitary person of color in the class (save the professor). There was a disconnect that even now I struggle to describe. *Whatever*, I think as I write this. *They won’t understand anyway unless they’ve been in the same sort of situation.*

Perhaps the difficulty was that for me “race and rhetoric” was a deeply personal subject that provided insight into my own experiences and relationships, while for the other (white) students, this was all theory: interesting in the same way that Lacanian theory or considering *Frankenstein* through a feminist lens is interesting. When I encountered the texts, I found myself *within* them: they were authored by folks with similar struggles who had found inspiring ways to make sense of theirs. They documented the struggles of people of color to fully express themselves within the restrictions of standard, academic language. They demonstrated a history of rhetorical resistance by people of color, and (sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly) located themselves as authors and scholars within that history. Some even articulated their struggles with language as

they wrote the very texts I was reading, and in doing so, helped me articulate my own struggles both in academic writing and in communicating about race with my white classmates. Most importantly, the texts reflected so eerily the actual dynamics of the class discussion that I was experiencing . . . but I was the only one who seemed to make that connection between the texts' astute descriptions of the struggles that students of color face in the academy and the *very struggles that I was facing in that very same academic setting*. As I read Malea Powell's metaphor of invisible dead bodies at a dinner party ("Blood and Scholarship") that no one else seemed to see, I was jumping up and down, saying, "Yes! This! This is it exactly! Why can't my classmates understand that I am seeing dead bodies and they are not?!"

Meanwhile, my white classmates theorized about language and race with a mostly detached scholarly curiosity, becoming emotionally involved only when directly confronted . . . by *me*, the only student with lived experiences of racism.

And here again as I write this, I think, *whatever*. I want to throw my hands up and give up on this paper, on these rewrites, because I don't really know what to say about my personal experiences or how to say it. Because I know that this is the real heart of what I want to express in this paper, but it is personal and it involves the personal interactions I had in that class. Because I don't have any other language than this informal, "off-register" language full of "poorly constructed" sentences to talk about it because my nice, detached, scholarly tone flat out doesn't work. And most of all, because I am painfully aware that in talking about the personal part of my class experience, I will really turn off a lot of readers—which, ironically, is exactly what turned off my white classmates. They found my statements and the tone I used—and by extension, *me*—combative and unpleasant. They sometimes ignored what I had to say, and sometimes minimized it. Sometimes they did a sort of cursory acknowledgement of my contributions to the conversation only to immediately revert back to the conversation they were having about things I had no concept of—such as never meeting a black person 'til college or their astonishment that wow, racism exists, and oh my *gosh*, now we have to *solve it right now*, this *brand-new problem*? (Because it just simply did not exist before they discovered it!) I was gossiped about as a "discontent" person within my own hearing; the insinuation was that my anger came from a personality defect, not as a valid response to the racism I encountered from my classmates.

It was a personally hurtful experience to be in that class. I spent hours with friends who "talked me down" from a rage or cried with me in frustration and helplessness. I spent too many hours wondering if somehow it really was a personality defect or trying to figure out just the right way to say something so that they would stop being defensive and just understand what I meant. And really, it's only this paper that "saved" the experience for me and turned it into something in the least bit positive. And everything in my personal story illustrates exactly the "whatever" experience that students of color so frequently face. The "whatever" experience that's so difficult to actually *name* can appear to be more of a "personal problem" than an example of covert racism to those who don't understand why I—or other people of color—am "so angry." Or, more specifically for this paper, why we can't just be scholarly, detached academics when it comes to race.

"Whatever" Pedagogy in the Classroom

"Whatever" pedagogy allows students to tell their stories in a way that reflects their identities and experiences and in language that is their own, to draw from the strength of personal, lived experience. It provides them a methodology for composition that makes sense to students well-

versed in technology and used to composing all kinds of rhetoric—from emails to persuasive essays to music—and doing so based on the results of Google searches, email exchanges, and “whatever” from all over the Internet. The result of all this cutting and pasting of thoughts and sounds and words is something new—something unique—that belongs to the rhetor/student/composer/sampler. Rice writes: “Sampling is the hip-hop process of saving snippets of . . . *whatever* you find and us[ing] it . . . any sound at all. Through the complex juxtaposition of these isolated sounds, samplers construct new forms of meaning” (454).

Composition professors help students of color to decide what samples to use, and what language(s) to use in their composition and when. Such marginalized students, in finding ways to fully tell their stories, find empowerment through self-definition, which resists the “hegemonic domain of power” as it “shapes consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols and ideologies” (Collins, *Fighting Words* 285).

Making Samples into Music: How I Write

Rice’s theory of hip-hop pedagogy engaged me primarily because I found my own composition process within his. When reading of Rice’s metaphoric “sample” gathering and the emergence of patterns between seemingly disparate samples to create a new musical masterpiece, I realized my own cobbled-together means of gathering research and formulating a thesis actually reflects a legitimate composition process. Over the many years I wrote research papers in my undergraduate English program, I developed my own process for writing: compiling passages of research, contemplating how they might complement each other, freewriting, and organizing the citations within the narrative that emerged.

When in the research stage, I mark passages that I feel seem to address a particular theme that engages me. For instance, when writing the original incarnation of this paper, I was working with a loose theme that I termed “hegemony and agency.” I used this particular phrasing to make sense of an idea that I felt would continue to crystallize into an original thesis, finding that it helped me in discovering new sources for useful scholarship. I keep a “research document” of possible sources, expanding it as I continue, with retyped passages that I might use as citations in the final paper (along with appropriate information for the final Works Cited page).

An essential, yet hard-to-describe, piece of my process is what I call “thinking below the surface.” This is what happens as I drive, walk, try to sleep, and talk to friends—semiconscious “thinking” in which I attempt to draw connections between the different sources I plan to use. This is what Rice might call searching for patterns in the samples:

The student writer looks at the various distinct moments she has collected and figures out how these moments together produce knowledge. Just as DJs often search for breaks and cuts in the music that reveal patterns, so, too, does the student writer look for a pattern as a way to unite these moments into a new alternative argument and critique. (465)

Somewhere during this process, enough of a “new alternative argument and critique” emerges for me to begin writing.

While there is a definite argument for outlines and other forms of structured freewriting, what I find most natural is to simply begin to write what I have been thinking (and often talking) about and see where it leads. I use my research document as I write, copying and pasting passages where I feel they fit. As thoughts begin to crystallize and organize into a more cohesive whole, I note in the document any gaps that exist in the rhythm of the paper. This sometimes leads to what I find

to be hilarious commentary, especially later, as I encounter my own notes in all caps such as “WHAT AM I SAYING HERE?” and “IS THIS MY THESIS?” Yet this commentary functions as a prompt for each subsequent revision, helping me to further hone my paper until the rhythm is just right.

It is toward the end of the actual writing that I find my vaguely worded thesis (“hegemony and agency”) emerges as a specific, well-formed thesis: “‘Whatever’ pedagogy allows students to tell their stories in a way that reflects their identities and experiences and in language that is their own, to draw from the strength of personal, lived experience. It provides them a methodology for composition that makes sense to students well-versed in technology and used to composing all kinds of rhetoric—from emails to persuasive essays to music—and doing so based on the results of Google searches, email exchanges, and ‘whatever’ from all over the Internet.”

I describe my own writing process not as some sort of model of a “proper” process, but as an example of how hip-hop pedagogy looks in a particular application. Other students’ processes will necessarily differ from my particular one, yet perhaps mine can illuminate applied hip-hop pedagogy in one possible form.

Language, Racism’s Henchman

The issue of “standard” English vs. nonstandard might not seem to be relevant to a discussion of racism at first glance; however, as linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf argue in their theory of linguistic relativity, “The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir 210). In other words, the differences between my classmates and me were both our different and “distinct worlds,” and the different and distinct language we used to talk about our worlds. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins uses Black English to illustrate the racial component of language:

You cannot “translate” instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive into Black English. . . . Rather you must first change those Standard English sentences, themselves, into ideas consistent with the person-centered assumptions of Black English. (“Black Feminist Thought”)

In “Fighting Back by *Writing Black: Beyond Racially Reductive Composition Theory*,” David G. Holmes writes of a time that June Jordan took her class through an exercise in attempting to translate Alice Walker’s black dialect into Edited American English. Jordan’s class discovered that Black English and Edited American English were not interchangeable. “Our process of translation exploded with hilarity and even hysterical, shocked laughter. The Black writer, Alice Walker, knew what she was doing! . . . Walker had written, perfectly” (63).

Culture and language cannot be divorced: language is informed by culture and its norms and values. What is important to an ethnic group is reflected in its language’s vocabulary; the way in which an ethnic group thinks is reflected in the structure of its language (Sapir). And if culture and language cannot be divorced, then neither can race and language. Precisely because of this relationship between language and race (and racism), Geneva Smitherman writes, “changing language attitudes is tantamount to changing a worldview” (33).

Professors or Oppressors? Opportunities for Activism

The importance of race and language creates an opportunity for significant activism on the part of English professors—and, since writing is an essential part of most scholarly work, by extension all professors. Kim Brian Lovejoy suggests in “Practical Pedagogy for Composition” that “teachers will need to rethink their pedagogy and become reflective practitioners, learning to take risks in responsible, productive ways” (96). These risks Lovejoy references are essential if the classroom is to become a place where “students feel comfortable sharing their ideas and observations about language,” much less begin to risk sharing their own stories and perspectives (97). Inclusivity is not merely a matter of the emotional health of students of color (although that is extraordinarily important); it is also a matter of reading and writing proficiency, and, by extension, success in school and later in life.¹

In addition to validating the languages that students of color employ to communicate and helping them navigate successfully between standard and nonstandard languages, the strategies that English professors can employ to encourage the participation of students of color and foster confidence and proficiency in reading and writing include: examining assumptions and biases; exposing students to literature by authors of color; and offering opportunities for reflection about race and racism in students’ personal experiences.

Examining Assumptions and Biases

Unexamined biases are the foundations of hegemonic exclusion of people of color and their languages in academia, and bringing to light the relationship between hegemony and language (and its censorship) is a way that composition professors can contribute to a more inclusive academic experience for students of color. One way of bringing to light this relationship is to “reflect on how gender and whiteness (the most unspoken of all racial categories) inform theories and praxes” and to ask students to do the same (Ratcliffe 135). Bringing the unspoken category of whiteness to the surface must be done in order to include a racial analysis of assigned reading in the classroom and to encourage students to perform literary criticism from a racially conscious viewpoint instead of a colorblind one. Literary reflection with a racial analysis is the foundation for writing about race and including race in writings not specifically focused on race.

English professors are in a position of power relative to students, and this power differential takes on an added dimension when considering how professors risk tampering with the stories that students of color share by conveying narrow ideas about “proper” English, by censoring their primary, nonstandard languages, and by modeling dismissive attitudes about language that does not fall within that “narrow, limited scope” of Edited American English (Lovejoy 98).

Exposure to Literature by Authors of Color and a Note about Multiculturalism

While a move toward multiculturalism in the classroom is encouraging, it is not enough to merely include literature from authors of color in the English classroom. While the inclusion of noncanonical literature by people of color is critical, it can be regarded as a basic step toward inclusivity, not a complete strategy. Per Danny Weil in *Towards a Critical Multicultural Literacy*, “One rarely gains a knowledge of others through exposure alone. It requires an examination of the logic of the points of view advanced” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 135). Opportunities for examination of present-ed views and reflection create opportunities for counter-rhetorics—“actively challeng[ing] . . . and

deconstruct[ing]” constructed ideas about the rhetor that seek to limit, misrepresent, or otherwise oppress him/her (112).

Creating Space for Racial Analysis of Literature

Professors can assist students of color beyond creating a supportive environment in which to contribute to academic discourse by understanding, and helping students of color to understand, how their “*relationship with* oppressive discourses . . . opens a space of possibility” for authentic composition and for thorough literary criticism (Powell 9). By developing an awareness of the “outsider-within” (Collins, *Fighting Words* 5) status that the students find themselves in and the “substantial personal cost” of occupying that place “critically, using their outsider-within perspectives as a source of insights and ideas” (Collins, “Black Feminist Thought”), professors can provide powerful validation of students’ outsider-within standpoint. And that validation is a critical starting point for creating an environment that nurtures students of color’s voices instead of silencing them.

My Race and Rhetoric professor played a crucial role both in my success in his class and in encouraging me to develop my ideas and later to publish them. It is because of my professor’s willingness to allow me to engage with the subject in a somewhat untraditional manner—both by allowing me to continue to expand and evolve one paper instead of completing three separate essays and by allowing me to approach the subject matter from the specificity of my experiences with his class—that I was able to contribute this article. My situation helps illustrate how crucial English professors can be in helping students of color present their stories and perspectives and contribute original and much-needed scholarship.

Professors as Agents of Systemic Change

As more professors embrace a true shift away from racist hegemony and its language and move toward inclusivity of so-called “nonstandard” language and worldviews, change is affected on an institutional level. As Patricia Hill Collins states: “People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions” (“Black Feminist Thought”).

As agents of a racist institution, professors have a responsibility to their students to advocate for conditions that foster their growth, not hinder their success. English professors have the opportunity, should they choose to embrace it, to affect change not only on an individual level, by providing individual students with the tools to tell their stories and change the worldviews of white students, but on a systemic level as well.

The issue of English professors’ impact on the stories of students of color can perhaps be illuminated further by examining and briefly contextualizing the slave narrative of Louisa Picquet, written in 1861, which illustrates how the existence of hegemonic racism exerts its force on people of color but does not preclude resistance to it.

Our Stories in Our Words: The Struggle for Rhetorical Sovereignty

In the slave narrative *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861), freedwoman Louisa Picquet relates her story orally to her amanuensis Reverend Mattison, who transcribes—and edits—it for the book. In the following excerpt, Picquet demonstrates remarkable

agency in telling her story, despite the Reverend Mattison's clear attempts to direct the story elsewhere for his own purposes.

Q.—“Well, how did he whip you?”

A.—“With the cowhide.”

Q.—“Around your shoulders, or how?”

A.—“That day he did.”

Q.—“How were you dressed—with thin clothes, or how?”

A.—“Oh, very thin; with low-neck'd dress. In the summertime we never wore but two pieces—only the one under, and the blue homespun over. It is a striped cloth they make in Georgia just for the colored people.” (qtd. in Moody 20)

In the dialogue with Reverend Mattison, Picquet skillfully deflects the amanuensis's voyeuristic interest in the details of her beating. She refuses to indulge his apparent titillation, instead diverting the conversation to a discussion of clothing. Picquet, an illiterate slave woman who is reliant on a white, literate man to tell her story, nonetheless finds a way to exert agency in the telling of her story. Picquet's resistance is not an isolated historical event; people of color have historically resisted rhetorically, both orally and in writing, and continue to do so today.

The way Picquet responds to Reverend Mattison provides powerful insight into her “rejection of the victimization status Mattison would ascribe to her” (Fulton 24). She does not use the word “whip” to describe her abuse, instead referring to the beatings as “fighting,” which DoVeanna S. Fulton describes as implying “two or more persons in active combat.” Additionally, Picquet “dismisses [the slave master] Cook's threatening image with her description of him as ‘real funny.’ Instead of fear and terror, Cook inspires Picquet's disdain and contempt.” Kendall R. Phillips writes of rhetorical resistance such as Picquet's that “the same power relations that impose a position and form on the subject also provide the space from which an altered subject form can be articulated and, thus, the power relations of subjectivation are, at least momentarily, reversed” (317). Picquet, an illiterate black woman enslaved most of her life, who is at the relative mercy of a racist and sexist white amanuensis to tell her story, employs resistant rhetorical strategies that result in a powerful display of her “integrity and strength” that far outshines “either [the slave master's] menace or Mattison's literary intrusion.”

Louisa Picquet is simultaneously at the mercy of Mattison's translation and resistant to his attempted depiction of her as a helpless victim. She refuses to be cast as powerless, instead exerting agency by crafting deflective responses to Mattison's guided questions and maneuvering skillfully out of disclosing information she doesn't care to share. She uses the space created by Mattison's questions, questions that he himself cannot answer; only Picquet holds the “answers,” as only Picquet has experienced the oppression Mattison seeks to document. She is, briefly, in a position of authority—of rhetorical sovereignty—and Mattison must grapple with the not-knowing and the attendant feelings of inferiority as Picquet uses the space between question and answer to resist rhetorically by “addressing and then undoing” the narrative Mattison seeks to create (Enoch 26).

Picquet's subversive resistance, however, clearly does not override the power that Mattison holds in his literacy, standard English language, and race. Nor does it single-handedly overcome the ultimate obstacle: a racist hegemony.

Students of color facing a racist hegemony from within their academic careers experience obstacles to full agency when attempting to contribute to academic discourse. In “Coming to Voice:

‘Anger Disguised and Complex, Not Anger Simple and Open,’” Brad Peters recounts his experiences with a former student, “Tia,” the only African American woman in a class of white students. “Tia rarely chatted with [white classmate] Ellen or anyone else, remaining quietly observant instead. Once everyone in class began the activity of keeping a course journal, however, it was clear that Tia had plenty to say” (106). From Peters’s description here and elsewhere in the essay, it is clear that Tia is capable of meaningful participation in the classroom, and she is not at a loss for contributions to the discourse. Yet it takes an amazing amount of work, as evidenced in her journal, to become comfortable enough to contribute in the classroom. It is through the “critical tool” (112) of counter-rhetorics that Tia begins finding her voice and contributing to the discourse. When she writes and speaks from a perspective other than that of the “marginalized ‘other,’ Tia [begins] to develop a rhetorical sovereignty through a shift in her perspective from the marginalized ‘other,’ as she centers her experiences and perspectives in her own writing, strategically using counter-rhetorics as a way to shuttle between the margins and the center” (115).

Tia’s experiences mirror my own, especially in my Race and Rhetoric class. I relate to her hesitance to become involved in the discourse about race and to her coming to voice through journaling, which was, for me, a critical tool for developing the language to address difficult-to-name instances of marginalization within the classroom. Through the writing I did both outside of the class in my online journal and for my essay assignments, I developed a strategy to resist the rhetorical arguments that my classmates employed to marginalize and silence me: namely, I developed a somewhat involved post to the class through our online discussion board and I wrote this paper, which is now being published in a peer-reviewed, academically validated journal.

Subjective Representation in the Composition Classroom

Lousia Picquet, by diverting Mattison’s eager attempts to elicit the gory details of her abuse, “wrests narrative agency from the amanuensis and creates a subjective representation” (Fulton 40), and it is this subjective representation that is crucial in addressing race and racism in the composition classroom. As Gail Y. Okawa states, “The process of . . . confronting issues—including identity, language, race, and racism—in ‘minority’ discourses had to be more than intellectual and metaphorical. . . . It would need to be a lived experience rather than simply a fancy post-modern title” (“Removing Masks” 126). Stated differently, textbook generalities about racism can fall short of engaging students on a personal level. In Victor Villanueva’s words,

[Understanding] begins with private, lived experience. These experiences are generalized.

In generalizing personal events, students find that nothing is value-free, that all is in one way or another political, is always affected by and affecting their conduct as citizens of the various communities they travel within and through. (qtd. in Okawa 126)

Encountering the lived experiences of people of color can recenter the discussion by forcing students to consider their own location within a racist hegemony and its implications for their relationships, including those in the classroom. Racism is explored in a context of intimacy—intimacy between author and reader in literature that addresses racism located in personal narrative, and intimacy in the classroom when space is created for students of color to voice their own lived experiences and for the resulting conversations within the classroom and/or in written assignments.

Recentering the classroom to integrate personal narrative is essential to combating the racist hegemony that works to marginalize students of color. Lorraine Hansberry explains her belief in the importance of the “specific,” which I interpret in this case as the importance of personal narra-

tive: “I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from the truthful identity of what is” (qtd. in Collins, “Black Feminist Thought”).

It’s this “specific” that is too often denied people of color. The privilege of storytelling is extended to only a select group: those who have learned to navigate literacy through the filter of a white male perspective. The linear, the “objective,” the dichotomous—these are the traits valued in Western society. They are also white values, and those who would share their stories orally or in nonstandard English—where storytelling is circular and subjective, highly personal, with room for contradictions and ambiguities—are left with narrow choices. People of color are marginalized in the general discourse and in storytelling. The racist hegemony dictates that people of color must translate their stories into an acceptable format for white consumption, forcing people of color to play the roles of both slave and amanuensis. But as Kendall Phillips expressed, this imposition also “provide[s] the space” for the power to be at least temporarily reversed (317), and English professors can work to widen that space by crafting an environment of trust and imparting much-needed skills for their students of color to positively exploit that space.

Handing Over the Mic: Cultivating Students of Color’s Voices

Teaching composition from a dominant paradigm is inherently alienating to people of color: people of color’s identities, experiences, and ways of communicating are often outside the very restricted language and the very limited representations of people like them in the stories they read. Kim Brian Lovejoy uses a diagram in his teaching to “illustrat[e] the narrow, limited scope of our teaching about language in the classroom and the expansive territory left virtually unexplored” (98). It is in this “expansive,” “unexplored” territory that people of color often find themselves and their ways of communicating. In order to make the classroom a nurturing instead of hostile environment for students of color and to create a space where race and racism are part of the discourse about language, we must venture into this unexplored territory, “invit[ing] and explor[ing] language as it is used by our students and in the world around us” (95).

Yet as Louisa Picquet, Patricia Hill Collins, Tia, and even I demonstrate, people of color continually find the spaces in which to craft the language of the oppressor into authentic stories, and in the education system, the English classroom provides a fertile ground for assisting students of color in telling their stories authentically. The English classroom, however, is a fertile ground for marginalized people’s stories and perspectives only *if* English professors are willing to examine their position of relative power and how they may act as amanuenses.

Professors could choose to play the role of Reverend Mattison, whether because of ignorance or apathy, and continue the tradition of censorship and judgment that people of color are so familiar with. Or professors can choose to examine how power differentials in the classroom affect students of color’s learning and challenge themselves to find new ways of instruction that metaphorically hand over the pen and paper (or microphone) to those who would tell their stories, foregrounding the students’ voices and backgrounding their own.

Conclusion

It may be challenging for professors to confront their own biases and assumptions about language, about whiteness, and about people of color and the ways in which they use language. Additionally, it may seem impossible to find ways to combat the dynamics that emerge within the

classroom that conspire to silence students of color. Yet as participants in a racist institution that persistently invalidates the identities and language of students of color and silences “whatever” they have to say, professors cannot sidestep their responsibility to create room for that “whatever.” By treating the “whatever” moments that students of color encounter in the composition classroom as opportunities to bravely confront the oppressive conditions within academia, professors foster an environment of trust that engenders significant, creative, and much-needed contributions to academia.

My sincerest appreciation goes to Dr. James Ottery for providing the opportunity to do this research and the support in submitting this for publication, to Dr. Amy Robillard for inspiring me to dig deeper into the personal and create something much fuller and richer, to my community of brilliant minds and constant supporters who were essential to my research, writing, and editing, and to my ancestors. Maferefun Eggun!

Notes

¹While there are many other factors in students of color’s success in English, those are outside the scope of this paper. Stanford’s linguistics scholar John R. Rickford does an excellent job addressing the topic of teaching English to students of color and the factors that contribute to their success or “failure” in his presentation “Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard.” Rickford dramatically illustrates how the educational system has failed students of color, citing several different studies. One of these studies revealed that “on a 500-point scale, African American students at the age of 9 are an average of 29 points behind the scores of their White counterparts; by the age of 13 they are 31 points behind; and by the age of 17, they are 37 points behind.”

Works Cited

- Collins, Patricia Hill. “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination.” *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990. 221–38. 5 Oct. 2007
<<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html>>.
- . *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.
- Enoch, Jessica. “‘Semblances of Civilization’: Zitkala Sa’s Resistance to White Education.” *Rhetoric and Ethnicity*. Ed. Keith Gilyard and Norris Nunley. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004. 24–36.
- Fulton, DoVeanna S. *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery*. New York: State U of New York P, 2006. 7 Oct. 2007
<<http://books.google.com/books?id=2ZwUcQ4YusIC&dq=%22speak+sister+speaking+oral+empowerment+in%22>>.
- Holmes, David G. “Fighting Back by Writing Black: Beyond Racially Reductive Composition Theory.” *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Ed. Keith Gilyard. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 53–66.
- Lovejoy, Kim Brian. “Practical Pedagogy for Composition.” *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. Ed. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. 89–108.
- Moody, Joycelyn K. “Enslaved Women as Autobiographical Narrators: The Case of Louisa Picquet.” *Race and Ethnicity*. Ed. Keith Gilyard. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 15–23.
- Okawa, Gail Y. “Removing Masks: Confronting Graceful Evasion and Bad Habits in a Graduate English Class.” *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Ed. Keith Gilyard. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 124–44.
- . “‘Resurfacing Roots’: Developing a Pedagogy of Language Awareness from Two Views.” *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. Ed. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. 109–33.
- Ottery, Jim. Assignment for Race and Rhetoric, University of Illinois–Springfield. Nov. 2007.
- Peters, Brad. “Coming to Voice: ‘Anger Disguised and Complex, Not Anger Simple and Open.’” *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Ed. Keith Gilyard. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 104–23.
- Phillips, Kendall R. “Rhetorical Maneuvers: Subjectivity, Power, and Resistance.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39.4 (2006): 310–32.
- Powell, Malea. “Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood’s Story.” *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Ed. Keith Gilyard. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999. 1–16.
- Prendergast, Catherine. “Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies.” *College Composition and Communication* 50.1 (1998): 36–53. 3 Dec. 2007
<<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-096X%28199809%2950%3A1%3C36%3ARTAPIC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>>.

- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005.
- Rice, Jeff. "The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 54.3 (2003): 353–471. 4 Dec. 2007
 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010096X%28200302%2954%3A3%3C453%3AT1HMHP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>>.
- Rickford, John R. "Using the Vernacular to Teach the Standard." Keynote speech, California State University, Long Beach. 6 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/VernacularToTeachStandard.html>>.
- Sapir, Edward. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science." *Language* 4.4 (1929): 207–14. 17 July 2008
 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/409588>>.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "The Historic Struggle for Language Rights in CCCC." *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. Ed. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. 3–15.