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INTERROGATING "WHITENESS," (DE)CONSTRUCTING "RACE"

AnnLouise Keating

Race is a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence. It must be read with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons*

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words—words that evoke structures of oppression, exploitation, and brute physical threat—can break souls.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Conservation of 'Race.'"

My title reflects several trends in contemporary cultural and literary studies. Because these trends involve exposing the hidden assumptions we make concerning racialized identities, they have far-reaching theoretical and pedagogical implications. The first phrase, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,'" refers to the recent demand for an analysis of "white" as a racialized category. Toni Morrison, for example, calls for an examination of "whiteness" in canonical U.S. literature. What, she asks, are the implications of "literary whiteness"? How does it function in the construction of an "American" identity? Arguing that a "criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12), she urges literary scholars to examine the hidden racial discourse in U.S. literature. Similarly, some educators have begun emphasizing the importance of developing critical pedagogies that examine how "whiteness" has (mis)shaped knowledge production in U.S. culture. According to Henry Giroux and Peter L. McLaren, the traditional western view "of learning as a neutral or transparent process" is inaccu-

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rate and prevents us from recognizing the highly political, racialized nature of all pedagogical methods. They maintain that

Teachers need critical categories that probe the factual status of white, Western, androcentric epistemologies that will enable schools to be interrogated as sites engaged in producing and transmitting social practices that reproduce the linear, profit-motivated imperatives of the dominant culture, with its attendant institutional dehumanization. (160)

bell hooks takes this demand for an interrogation of the relationship between “whiteness” and cultural dominance even further in her discussion of “white” theorists’ exclusive analysis of the racial *Other*. According to hooks, “Many scholars, critics, and writers preface their work by stating that they are ‘white,’ as though mere acknowledgment of this fact were sufficient, as though it conveyed all we need to know of standpoint, motivation, [and] direction.” Because she believes that this unquestioned acceptance of “whiteness” distorts contemporary cultural studies, she challenges “white” theorists to incorporate an analysis of their own racialized identities into their work:

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

These calls for an interrogation of “whiteness” cannot be dismissed as the latest scholarly fad in academia’s “publish or perish” game. As Kobena Mercer and other contemporary theorists have argued, “whiteness” and its “violent denial of difference” serve a vital function in masking social and economic inequalities in contemporary western cultures (206). By negating those people—whatever the color of their skin—who do not measure up to “white” standards, “whiteness” has played a central role in maintaining and naturalizing a hierarchical social system and a dominant/subordinate worldview.

However, as I began exploring recent definitions of “whiteness” and incorporating this analysis into my literature and composition courses I encountered a number of unexpected difficulties, and this is where the second part of my title, “(De)Constructing ‘Race,’” comes in. The word “(De)Constructing”—with the prefix in parentheses—reflects my assessment of the dangers in recent interrogations of “whiteness” and other racialized identities. More specifically, it refers to the ways theorists who attempt to deconstruct “race” often inadvertently reconstruct it by reinforcing the belief in permanent, separate racial categories. Although they emphasize the artificial, politically and economically motivated nature of all racial classifications, their continual analysis of racialized identities undercuts their belief that “race” is a constantly changing sociohistorical concept, not a biological fact.

In what follows, I first summarize recent theorists' explorations of "whiteness" and discuss what I see as the difficulties that can occur when we attempt to incorporate these analyses into classroom lectures and discussions. I then offer tentative suggestions for alternative approaches that investigate "whiteness" while deconstructing "race." Before I begin, however, I want briefly to describe my own pedagogy. Whenever possible, I try to integrate my scholarship with my classroom instruction. I believe that both areas can be enriched by this interchange. The classroom functions as a laboratory where the theory I read and write takes on concrete form as I attempt to translate dense theoretical perspectives into accessible, practical terms. Students benefit from this process; they are introduced to a variety of theoretical perspectives and become critical readers, capable of recognizing how literary canons are shaped by personal and cultural issues.

This twofold approach has played an important role in shaping the ways I began incorporating analyses of "whiteness" into my U.S. literature and composition courses. For the past several years both my scholarship and my teaching had been informed by a critical analysis of how "race," gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, but until reading Morrison's call for an interrogation of "whiteness" I had never considered including an analysis of "white" in my explorations of racialized meanings in literary texts. Yet it only made sense to do so; after all, we examine "black," Chicano/a, Native American, and Asian American literary traditions, should we not also look at "white" literary traditions? And so, shortly after reading Morrison and several other theorists, I began including explorations of "whiteness" in the courses I teach, which have ranged from surveys of U.S. literature to introductory composition to an upper-level/graduate elective course on "Race," Gender, and Literature. While approximately three-fourths of the students in my classes identify as "white," the remaining fourth—some of whom can easily pass as "white"—identify as "Hispanic," "Native American," and "black." But however they identify, the majority are first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds. They are motivated by their own versions of the "American Dream," the belief that hard work and an education will enable *anyone*—regardless of "race," gender, or economic status—to succeed. My comments in the following pages are based on these students' reactions.

Although students are often startled by the notion that language is racialized and literature can be examined for its hidden and overt racial meanings, they find it much easier to explore the racialized subtexts in works by non-"white" writers than to explore racialized meanings in writings by "whites." When I taught Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, or Paula Gunn Allen, for example, I described their perspectives on contemporary Native American literary and cultural conventions and asked students to consider the ways in which their poetry and prose simultaneously reflected and shaped these conventions. After an initial period of questioning, they arrived at important observations. Similarly, when I taught Nella

Larsen and Paul Laurence Dunbar, I discussed W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of the "color line," described the status of African Americans in the early 1900s, and asked students to consider how their "race" might have influenced their work. Again, they arrived at insightful comments.

However, when I suggested that "white"—like "Native American" or "African American"—is a *racialized* identity, continually reinforced and reinvented in literature, students were startled: People with pale skin are often referred to as "whites," and of course there are ethnic groups whose members have "white" skin—Italian Americans, Polish Americans, many U.S. Jews, and so on—but a white "race"? Although I discussed Morrison's call for an interrogation of literary "whiteness" at great length, when I asked students to speculate on the contributions Joanna Russ, John Updike, and other contemporary "white" writers have made to a "white" literary tradition, they were troubled and unable to reply. Nor could they discuss Ralph Waldo Emerson's "whiteness," or analyze how Henry David Thoreau's "race" shaped *Walden*. Clearly, they had no idea what this "whiteness" entailed.

My students were not alone in their inability to comprehend "whiteness"; as Kobena Mercer states, "One of the signs of the times is that we really don't know what 'white' is." Thus he asserts that "the real challenge in the new cultural politics of difference is to make 'whiteness' visible for the first time, as a culturally constructed ethnic identity historically contingent upon the disavowal and violent denial of difference" (205–6). In short, "whiteness" has functioned as a pseudo-universal category that hides its specific values, epistemology, and other attributes under the guise of a nonracialized, supposedly colorless, "human nature."

Yet the hidden dimensions of this unmarked "white" culture are slowly becoming more visible as theorists in literature, cultural studies, and pedagogy embark on the first stages of an interrogation of "whiteness." Not surprisingly, though, the most commonly mentioned attribute of "whiteness" seems to be its pervasive nonpresence, its invisibility. A number of scholars associate this ubiquitous hidden "whiteness" with an unmarked superiority. As Richard Dyer suggests in his groundbreaking analysis of representations of "whiteness" in mainstream U.S. and British film, "white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (44). Drawing on scientific studies of chromatics, he explains that whereas black—because it is always marked as a color—refers to particular objects and qualities, white does not: It "is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours" (142). In literary and cultural studies this "colourless multicolouredness" gives "whiteness" an omnipresence quite difficult to analyze:

It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just "people") in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyse their representation, whereas white people—not there as a category and everywhere everything as a fact—are difficult, if not impossible, to analyze *qua* white. (143)

This invisible omnipresence gives "whiteness" a rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power. As Henry Giroux suggests, "whiteness," domination, and invisibility are intimately related. He asserts that although "'whiteness' functions as a historical and social construction," the dominant culture's inability or reluctance to see it as such is the source of its hidden authority; "whiteness" is an unrecognized and unacknowledged racial category "that secures its power by refusing to identify" itself (15). Morrison makes a similar point in her analysis of canonical U.S. literature when she maintains that this unacknowledged "whiteness" has created a literary "language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering'" (x-xi).

By thus erasing its presence, "whiteness" operates as the unacknowledged standard or norm against which all so-called "minorities" are measured. Consider, for example, the implications of "minority and ethnic studies" in U.S. literature. Although scholars generally conceptualize the Harlem Renaissance as a "*black*" literary movement (I suppose because those identified as "Harlem Renaissance writers" were people of African descent), they do not conceptualize Transcendentalism as a "*white*" movement, even though—to the best of my knowledge—the transcendentalists were all people of European descent. In our "multicultural" era, we have studies of "*Chicano*" narrative, "*Asian American*" novels, "*Native American*" poetry, and so on. But imagine a course or a book devoted exclusively to white-skinned writers (as so many courses and books still are) that acknowledged this fact in its title: Say, "Classics of the *White* Western World," "The *White* American Experience," or "*White* Regional Writers." In this schema, "minority" writings become deviations from the unmarked ("white") norm. As Dyer explains,

Looking, with such passion and single-mindedness, at non-dominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human. (141)

This invisible, omnipresent, naturalized "white" norm has led to a highly paradoxical situation in literary and cultural studies: On the one hand, it is vital that we begin exploring the roles "whiteness" has played in shaping U.S. culture; on the other hand, its pervasive nonpresence makes it difficult—if not impossible—to analyze "whiteness" as "whiteness." As Dyer asserts, "if the invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms—class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on—it also masks whiteness as itself a category" (143). Consequently, theorists of all colors have been compelled to adopt a relational approach, where "whiteness" is examined in the context of "blackness" or other non-"white" racialized categories. In "White Woman Feminist," for example, Marilyn Frye draws on African Americans' discussions of "white" people to explore what she calls "whiteness"—or "white" ways of thinking and acting. Dyer centers his analysis of

“whiteness” in mainstream cinema on instances where the narratives “are marked by the fact of ethnic difference” (144). Morrison takes a similar approach in *Playing in the Dark*, where she maintains that “blackness”—or what she terms “Africanisms”—are central to any investigation of literary “whiteness.” She begins with the hypothesis that “it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness’ ” (9). Like Dyer, she restricts her analysis to textual moments where “black” and “white” people interact, and throughout *Playing in the Dark* she explores literary “whiteness” by examining how “notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability” influenced “white” writers “who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions” (11). For instance, in her discussion of Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—which depicts the interactions between Sapphira, a “white” slave mistress, and her female slaves—Morrison examines the ways “white” womanhood acquires its identity, as well as its power, privilege, and prestige, at the expense of “black” womanhood. And in her examination of *Huckleberry Finn* she demonstrates that the notions of independence and freedom in this novel rely on the presence of the unfree Jim.

Similarly, Aldon Lynn Nielsen focuses his analysis of literary “whiteness” on the ways “white” writers depict “blackness.” In *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, he associates “whiteness” with a racist symbolic system deeply embedded in U.S. thinking and explores how “white” identity has been constructed through racist stereotyping of the “black” other. More specifically, he examines what he terms “frozen metaphors,” or stereotypes of “blacks” that reinforce “an essentially racist mode of thought,” privileging people of European descent while relegating people of African descent to an inferior position (3). In the numerous racist stereotypes he describes, representations of “blackness” take a variety of sometimes contradictory forms yet have one thing in common: in each instance, they exist to affirm the validity and power of “whiteness.” By depicting people of African descent as lazy, carefree, unsophisticated, and primitive, he argues, Hart Crane, e. e. cummings, T. S. Eliot, and many other twentieth-century “white” writers locate “blackness” outside western cultural traditions. He emphasizes that this racist stereotyping serves an important role by reinforcing already existing beliefs in the superiority of “white” aesthetics.

As Nielsen’s investigation implies, this invisible, naturalized “white” norm also seems to encompass an authoritative, hierarchical, restrictive mode of thought. Frye, for example, associates “whiteness” with the desire for personal and collective power by asserting that “Authority seems to be central to whiteness, as you might expect from a people who are raised to run things” (156). She describes “whitely” people as “judges” and “preachers” who—because they assume that their “ethics of forms, procedures and due processes” represent the only correct standard of conduct—attempt to impose their beliefs on all others (155). Dyer makes a related point in his discussion of *Simba*, a colonial adventure film depicting the con-

flict between British colonizers and the Mau Mau in Kenya, in which "white" is coded as orderliness, rationality, and control, while "black" is coded as chaos, irrational violence, and total loss of control (146–48). Morrison notes a similar pattern of restrictive "white" thinking which she associates with an insistence on purity, self-containment, and impenetrable borders. According to Morrison, "white" literary representations establish "fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal." For instance, metaphoric references to "the purity of blood" have enabled writers to construct a rigid, inflexible division between "white" civilization and "black" savagery (68). This division plays itself out in many works of U.S. literature, where false differences based on blood are used to empower "white" characters.

A number of theorists have associated "whiteness" with mystery, absence, and death. Morrison, for example, explains that although representations of "blackness" serve a variety of symbolic functions in U.S. literature, "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable" (59). Dyer, in his exploration of mainstream cinema, finds that on the infrequent occasions "when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death" (141). In *Night of the Living Dead*, for instance, all "white" people are closely associated with death: "Living and dead whites are indistinguishable, and the zombies' sole *raison d'être*, to attack and eat the living, has resonances with the behaviour of the living whites" (157). According to hooks, these literary and filmic representations of "whiteness" as mystery and death reflect a common belief in African American communities; during her own upbringing, she explains, "black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing. White people were regarded as terrorists" (*Black Looks* 170).

This shift from "whiteness" to "white *people*" concerns me, for it draws on false generalizations and implies that all human beings classified as "white" *automatically* exhibit the traits associated with "whiteness": They are, by *nature*, insidious, superior, empty, terrible, terrifying, and so on. Now, I know white folk who aren't like this, and while I would definitely agree that "white" skin and at least some of these "white" traits are often found together, I would argue that the relation between them is conditional. As Marilyn Frye suggests, "the connection between whiteness and light-colored skin is a *contingent* connection: this character could be manifested by persons who are *not* white; it can be absent in persons who are" (151–52; her emphasis). In other words, the fact that a person is born with "white" skin does not necessarily mean that s/he will think, act, and write in the "white" ways I've described. Nor does the fact that a person has "brown" or "black" skin automatically guarantee that s/he will *not* think, act, and write in "white" ways. Leslie Marmon Silko beautifully illustrates this contingent nature of "whiteness" and skin color in *Ceremony*, where full-blood Native characters such as Emo, Harley, and Rocky

think and act in “white” ways. Although she too demonizes “whiteness”—in *Ceremony* “whiteness” is associated with greed, restrictive boundaries, destruction, emptiness, absence, and death—Silko does not automatically associate “whiteness” with all “white” people. Indeed, it is the light-skinned mixed-blood protagonist, Tayo, who learns to recognize and resist this evil “whiteness.”

However, it’s difficult *not* to equate the word “whiteness”—and, by extension, the negative qualities it seems to imply—with “white” people. In fact, when I first began reading about “whiteness,” it became difficult for me not to make automatic assumptions about everyone who looked “white.” I felt uncomfortable and distrustful around people I classified as “white”; and at this early stage in my own interrogation of “whiteness” I was tempted to draw on my African ancestry, disavow my “white” education, and entirely separate myself (intellectually, if not physically) from the so-called “white race.” Interrogations of “whiteness” have had a similar but far more extreme impact on my students. Despite my repeated attempts to distinguish between literary representations of “whiteness” and real-life people classified as “white,” students of all colors found it extremely difficult (and at times impossible) not to blur the boundaries between them. Some became obsessed with highly negative explorations of “white” people.

Class discussion of “School Days of an Indian Girl,” an autobiographical narrative by early twentieth-century mixed-blood writer Zitkala-Sä, illustrates this transition from “whiteness” to “white” people. Although they could analyze the ways Zitkala-Sä depicted her early life in Sioux culture and her entrance into the “white” world of missionary school, students seemed reluctant to take this analysis further by speculating on what these depictions might tell us about representations of literary and cultural “whiteness.” Instead, they focused their attention on the representations of “white” human beings, who, they believed, were portrayed in a highly negative light: “Whites” were emotionally and spiritually cold, overly concerned with rules and order, rude, and entirely dismissive of indigenous American cultures, peoples, and beliefs. Given the historical context of Zitkala-Sä’s narrative—the U.S. government’s repeated attempts to forcibly remove, assimilate, reeducate, sterilize, and Christianize Native peoples—my students’ desire to demonize Zitkala-Sä’s textual representations of “whiteness” is not surprising. Yet they made almost no distinction between literary “whiteness” and “white” people. Instead, they created simplistic binary oppositions between “good Indians” and “bad whites.”

Classroom interrogations of “whiteness” can become even more confusing when analyzing texts by “white” writers, especially when these texts include almost no explicit references to “race.” Take, for example, an analysis of “whiteness” in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.” Do we assume that, because Emerson was “white” his writings give us insight into literary “whiteness” and should be placed in a canon of “white” U.S. literature? After all, this practice of categorizing literature according to the author’s “race” has played a pivotal role in constructing African American,

Native American, and other ethnic-specific canons. But this approach has problematic consequences. Should we code key themes in "Self-Reliance"—such as the desire for independence, a sense of self-confidence, a feeling of spiritual connection with nature and the divine, or a belief in the importance of creating one's own community—as "white"? To do so leads to additional problems when we encounter these "white" themes in texts by writers of color. If, for example, the quest for independence and self-trust is coded as "white," should we suggest that in his *Narrative* Frederick Douglass becomes or acts "white" when he asserts his intellectual independence from Covey, or when he resolves to "trust no one"? To my mind, such assumptions do not facilitate understanding of the literature we read.

These attempts to interrogate "whiteness" lead to other problems as well. How, for example, do we separate "whiteness" from masculinity and other forms of privilege? Is it "whiteness," masculinity, "white" masculinity, or some other combination that enables Emerson, Douglass, and Thoreau to attain remarkable levels of confidence and self-assertiveness in their prose? In class discussions of Emerson and Thoreau, several students assumed that both writers came from wealthy backgrounds and suggested that it was class privilege, rather than "whiteness," which enabled them to achieve self-reliance. Given the financial hardships both writers experienced at various points in their lives, this suggestion, while plausible, seems too simplistic.

My brief discussion of Zitkala-Sä, Emerson, Douglass, and Thoreau illustrates a few of the difficulties that can occur in classroom interrogations of "whiteness." To begin with, "whiteness" often becomes demonized and viewed as almost entirely evil and morally bankrupt, thus creating another binary between the good non-"whites" and the bad "whites." However, like all binary oppositions this dualism oversimplifies and conflates literary representations of "whiteness" and "white" people with real-life human beings classified as "white." Perhaps most importantly for my argument in the following pages, interrogations of "whiteness" and other racialized categories seem to confirm static concepts of identity which reinforce the already existing belief in entirely separate "races."

What I discovered from these classroom investigations of "whiteness" is that students' comments are generally based on the assumption that "race" is a permanent characteristic of U.S. life. In many ways, this perspective on "race" seems like common sense. After all, in the United States categorizing people by "race" has become an accepted way of comprehending and explaining ourselves and our world. Surveys, census forms, birth certificates, and job applications often ask us to identify ourselves according to our "race." Generally, we assume that physiological differences (in skin color, hair texture, and facial features, for instance) between various so-called "races" indicate distinct underlying biological-genetic differences, differences implying permanent, "natural" divisions between disparate groups of people.

But this commonly accepted view of “race” is far less accurate than most people realize. To begin with, the belief that each person belongs to only one “race” ignores the many “biracial” and “multiracial” people living in this country. Indeed, the implicit belief in discrete, entirely separate “races” implies a false sense of racial purity, for we could all be described as multiracial. As Michael Thornton points out, “there are no such things as pure races” (322). Spaniards, for example, are a mixture “of Black Africans, Gypsies (from India), and Semites (Jews, Arabs, and Phoenicians), as well as Romans, Celts, Germans, Greeks, Berbers, Basques, and probably more” (Fernández 143). Furthermore, the suggestion that we can automatically identify ourselves and others according to “race” assumes that we are fully cognizant of our ancestry. However, as one of the characters in Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* asserts,

It is an incontrovertible truth that there is no such thing as an unmixed black on the American continent. Just bear in mind that we cannot tell by a person’s complexion whether he be dark or light in blood. . . . I will venture to say that out of a hundred apparently pure black men not one will be able to trace an unmixed flow of African blood since landing upon these shores! (151)

Similar comments can be made about people identified as “Latina,” “Native American,” or as members of any other so-called “race.” Appearances can be extremely deceptive, and not one of us is “unmixed.” Perhaps most importantly, this mythical perspective on discrete, biologically separate “races” relies on nineteenth-century pseudoscientific theories. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes, “What most people in most cultures ordinarily believe about the significance of ‘racial’ difference” is not supported by scientific evidence. While biologists can interpret the data in various ways, they cannot demonstrate the existence of genetically distinct “races,” for “human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Europe or Asia is not much greater than that within those populations” (“The Uncompleted Argument” 21).

“Race” is an ambiguous, constantly changing concept that has little—if anything—to do with scientific descriptions; as Michael Omi and Howard Winant persuasively demonstrate, “The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed” (61). Yet we often proceed in our interrogations of “whiteness” and other racialized categories as if these “races” were permanent, unchanging categories of meaning. To return to the second half of my title, although theorists of “whiteness” attempt to deconstruct “race,” all too often they inadvertently reconstruct it by reinforcing fixed categories of racialized meanings. Theorists find it difficult not to conflate literary or cultural representations of “whiteness” with “white” people, and this perpetual reconstruction of separate “races” can be even more difficult to avoid in the classroom, where “whiteness”—generally played out in the context of racial-

ized "black," "Indian," and other "colored" bodies—is associated only with "white" people.

Yet even a brief look at a few of the many ways racial groups have been redefined in this country illustrates how *unstable* and *artificial* racialized identities are. For instance, throughout the nineteenth century many U.S. state and federal agencies recognized only three "races," which they labeled "White," "Negro," and "Indian." Given the extremely diverse mixture of people living in the United States, this three-part classification was, to say the least, confusing. How were U.S. Americans of Mexican or Chinese descent to be described? Were they "White"? "Negro"? or "Indian"? The state of California handled this dilemma in a curious way: Rather than expand the number of "races," the government retained the existing categories and classified Mexican Americans as a "white" population and Chinese Americans as "Indian." According to Omi and Winant, this decision had little to do with outward appearance; it was motivated by socioeconomic and political concerns, for it allowed the state to deny the latter group the rights accorded to people classified as "white" (82).

Since then, both groups have been redefined numerous times. U.S. Americans of Chinese descent have been classified as "Orientals," "Asians," "Asian Americans," "Pan Asians," and "Asian Pacific Americans." Yet these terms are inadequate and erroneously imply a homogeneity unwarranted by the many nationalities, geographical origins, languages, dialects, and cultural traditions supposedly contained within these politically motivated categories. As Yehudi Webster notes, these monolithic labels indicate the U.S. government's attempt to group "heterogeneous populations into one category on the basis of apparent similarities in skin color, hair type, and eye shape" (132–33). Efforts to classify U.S. Americans of Mexican ancestry have been equally unsuccessful. Even in the last forty years, they have been redefined several times: In the 1950s and 1960s the government included them in an ethnic category labeled "Persons of Spanish Mother Tongue"; in the 1970s, they were redefined as "Persons of Both Spanish Surname and Spanish Mother Tongue"; and in the 1980s, the "Hispanic" category was created. This most recent government invention is especially confusing, for many so-called "Hispanics" reject the term's association with Spanish ancestry and thus its "white" Eurocentric implications, as well as its erasure of their cultural specificity, and name themselves "Chicano/a," "Latino/a," "Cuban-American," "Mexican American," and so on. Indeed, in the 1990 census over 96 percent of the 9.8 million people who refused to identify themselves according to a particular race would have been classified by the government as "Hispanic" (Fernández 143). As Omi and Winant observe, such changes "suggest the state's inability to 'racialize' a particular group—to institutionalize it in a politically organized racial system" (82).

The status of so-called "blacks" and "whites" is, perhaps, even more problematic. To begin with, the terms themselves are almost entirely inaccurate. "White"

is the color of this paper, not the color of anyone's skin. And people referred to as "black" would be more accurately described as they are in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* as "taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white" or even "pastry white" (59). Furthermore, although many "Hispanics," Native Americans, and "Asian Americans" have lighter skin than some so-called "whites," they are not classified as such unless they are passing.

Though we generally think of "white" and "black" as permanent, transhistorical racial markers indicating distinct groups of people, they are not. In fact, the Puritans and other early European colonizers didn't consider themselves "white"; they identified as "Christian," "English," or "free," for at that time the word "white" didn't represent a racial category. Again, racialization was economically and politically motivated. It was not until around 1680, with the racialization of slavery, that the term was used to describe a specific group of people. As Yehudi Webster explains, "The idea of a homogeneous white race was adopted as a means of generating cohesion among explorers, migrants, and settlers in eighteenth-century America. Its opposite was the black race, whose nature was said to be radically different from that of the white race" (9).

Significantly, then, the "white race" evolved in opposition to but simultaneously with the "black race." As peoples whose specific ethnic identities were Yoruban, Ashanti, Fon, and Dahomean were forcibly removed from their homes in Africa and taken to the North American colonies, the English adopted the terms "white" and "black"—with their already existing implications of purity and evil—and developed the concept of a superior "white race" and an inferior "black race" to justify slavery. It's important to note that the Europeans did not originally label the people who lived in Africa "black"; nor did they see them as evil savages. As Abdul JanMohamed explains, "Africans were perceived in a more or less neutral and benign manner before the slave trade developed; however, once the triangular trade became established, Africans were newly characterized as the epitome of evil and barbarity" (80).

The meanings of "black" and "white" are no more stable in the twentieth century than they were in the past. "Colored," "Negro," "black," "Afro-American," "African-American" (hyphenated), and "African American" (unhyphenated) all describe U.S. Americans of African descent. But these terms are not synonymous; each indicates a different racial identity with specific sociopolitical and cultural implications (Gates, *Loose Canons* 131–51). Although the term "white"—which has been used since the late seventeenth century to designate an elite group of people—seems more stable, its meaning has undergone equally significant changes. Many people today considered "white"—southern Europeans, light-skinned Jews, the Irish, and Catholics of European descent, for example—were most definitely *not* "white" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since the late 1960s, with the rise of what Stephen Steinberg calls "ethnic fever" (3), the "white race" has under-

gone additional changes. Once again, the redefinition of "white" corresponded to shifts in the meaning of "black." As the Black Power movement developed an oppositional ideology to challenge existing definitions of "Negro," "white" ethnics began (re)claiming their European cultural "roots." Recently, conservative self-identified "whites" have attempted to redefine themselves as the new oppressed group. As Omi and Winant explain, the far right attempts "to develop a new white identity, to reassert the very meaning of *whiteness* which has been rendered unstable and unclear by the minority challenges of the 1960s" (120). This rearticulation of racialized identities continues today, in essays like hooks's "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance" (in her *Black Looks*) and in recent demands for an interrogation of "whiteness."

I have misgivings about this increased emphasis on "whiteness" and other racialized identities. Literary theorists who discuss representations of "race" rarely acknowledge the fluidity and the historical changes in U.S. discourse on "race." Instead, they refer to "white," "black," "Indian," and other supposedly separate "races" as though these categories are permanent unchanging facts. What are the effects of continually reinforcing these fictionalized identities? Whose interests does this uphold? Whose does it harm? To be sure, increased racial discourse has served an extremely important purpose by enabling people of color to gain a sense of historical and sociopolitical agency. Thus Houston Baker describes "race" as "a recently emergent, unifying, and forceful sign of difference *in the service* of the 'Other.' " He explains that for people of color racial identities function as "an inverse discourse—talk designed to take a bad joke of 'race'. . . and turn it into a unifying discourse" (386; his emphasis). Although Baker acknowledges the destructive, fictionalized aspects of "race" (it is, after all, a "bad joke"), he maintains that African Americans and other so-called "minority" groups can reverse its negative implications and use racial discourse in affirmative ways. For example, by aligning themselves with other people of African descent, self-identified African Americans attempt to challenge oppressive definitions of the so-called "black race."

Yet such oppositional tactics are problematic, for they cannot challenge the assumptions underlying *all* references to "race." Even highly affirmative talk of a black, or Chicano/a, or Native American racial identity reinforces already existing conceptions of "race," conceptions that have functioned historically to create hierarchical divisions based on false generalizations concerning physical appearance and other arbitrary characteristics. By thus reinforcing fictionalized identities, contemporary racialized discourse creates further divisions between people. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out,

The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term "race" has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between "racial

character” and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably biased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences. (“Race” 5)

This naturalized use of “race” is especially insidious, for it reifies the destructive stereotypes already circulating in U.S. culture. Despite the many historic and contemporary changes in racial categories, people generally treat “race” as an unchanging biological fact. Often, they make simplistic judgments and gross over-generalizations based primarily on outer appearance. You know the stereotypes: “Blacks are more athletic, and boy can they dance”; “All whites are bigots”; “All Hispanics are hot-blooded.” Indeed, even social scientists (who should know better) acknowledge the politically, economically motivated nature of racial formation yet discuss “the black race,” “the Hispanic race,” “the white race,” and so on as if these supposed “races” were God-given facts. In so doing, they reinforce oppressive social systems and erect permanent barriers between supposedly separate groups of people. One of the most striking examples I’ve encountered can be found in the 1992 best-seller, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Unequal*. In his introduction Andrew Hacker describes “race” as “a human creation,” not a fixed biological fact, and acknowledges that because people use the word in numerous ways, clear-cut definitions are impossible (4). Yet throughout the book he continually refers to the “black race” and the “white race” without complicating the terms. Indeed, I would argue that by downplaying the economic, cultural, and ethnic diversity found within each of these two “races,” Hacker heightens and reifies the tensions between them. Moreover, by focusing almost entirely on the “black”/“white” binary, Hacker reinforces the myth of racial purity and ignores the incredible diversity found in this country.

This simplistic binary between fixed definitions of “blackness” and “whiteness” occurs in literary interrogations of “whiteness” as well. Take, for example, Nielsen’s exploration of “whiteness” in *Reading Race*. Unlike Morrison—who begins blurring the artificial boundaries between “blackness” and “whiteness” by exploring what “white” representations of “blackness” tell us about literary “whiteness”—Nielsen focuses almost entirely on “white” poets’ racist stereotypes of “blacks.” Although he acknowledges the fictional, contradictory nature of these “white” representations of “blackness,” his constant focus on the stereotypes themselves inadvertently reifies the racist imagery he tries to undercut. This approach seems especially dangerous in the classroom where, as Sharon Stockton points out, students tend to think in terms of stereotyped binary oppositions. In classroom interrogations of “whiteness,” Nielsen’s method leads to overly generalized discussions of racist, bigoted “whites” and lazy, ignorant, inferior “blacks.” Moreover, by continually emphasizing racism, we risk giving students the pessimistic belief that racism is inevitable and racialized barriers will never be overcome. As Omi and Winant argue in their discussion of 1960s theories of institutionalized racism, “An

overly comprehensive view of racism . . . potentially served as a self-fulfilling prophecy" (70).

Let me emphasize: I am not saying that we should adopt a "color blind" approach and ignore the roles racist thinking has played in constructing "whiteness." To do so simply reinforces the increasingly popular but very false belief that "race" no longer matters in twentieth-century U.S. culture. Racism is deeply embedded in U.S. society, and students of all colors must be aware of its systemic nature. Nor can we analyze racialized dimensions of texts by writers of color without also examining "whiteness," for this partial analysis reinforces the longstanding belief in "white" invisibility. However, instructors must be aware of the impact interrogations of "whiteness" can have on our students. Although self-identified students of color find it satisfying to see the "white" gaze which has marked them as "Other" turned back on itself, I question the long-term effectiveness of this reversal. As I have argued, such reversals inadvertently support existing stereotypes. Moreover, these reversals trigger a variety of unwelcome reactions in self-identified "white" students, reactions ranging from guilt to anger to withdrawal and despair. Instructors must be prepared to deal with these responses. The point is not to encourage feelings of personal responsibility for the slavery, decimation of indigenous peoples, land theft, and so on that occurred in the past. It is, rather, to enable students of all colors more fully to comprehend how these oppressive systems that began in the historical past continue misshaping contemporary conditions. Guilt-tripping plays no role in this process. Indeed, guilt functions as a useless, debilitating state of consciousness that reinforces the boundaries between apparently separate "races." When self-identified "white" students feel guilty, they become paralyzed, deny any sense of agency, and assume that their privileged positions in contemporary U.S. culture automatically compel them to act as "the oppressor."

The compromise I've arrived at—admittedly temporary and always open to further revision—entails a twofold approach where we explore the artificial, constantly changing nature of "black," "white," and other racialized identities without ignoring their concrete material effects. I select texts by Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, where students can clearly see these racialized identities in transitional states. In the stories collected in Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*, for instance, we see "black" people reconstructing themselves as "white," self-identified "blacks" who act exactly like "whites," and "white" people who act just like "blacks." These stories, as well as other textual representations of passing, destabilize students' "common-sense" beliefs in racial purity and ahistorical, fixed "races." Another tactic I've employed is the concept of cultural *mestizaje*. I borrow this term from Cuban literary and political movements where its usage indicates a profound challenge to existing racial categories. As Nancy Morejón explains, *mestizaje* transculturation defies static notions of cultural purity by emphasizing

the constant interaction, the transmutation between two or more cultural components with the unconscious goal of creating a third cultural entity . . . that is new and independent even though rooted in the preceding elements. Reciprocal influence is the determining factor here, for no single element superimposes itself on another; on the contrary, each one changes into the other so that both can be transformed into a third. Nothing seems immutable. (qtd. Lionnet 15–16)

This idea of constant transformation and change provides an important alternative to the well-known stereotype of the “American” melting pot. Unlike the melting pot, which works to assimilate culturally specific groups with distinct traditions into indistinguishable “whites,” *mestizaje* emphasizes the mutually constituted and constantly changing nature of all racialized identities.

Yet these tactics are only temporary measures. I’m still searching for more effective ways of incorporating interrogations of “whiteness” into classroom discussions. Ironically, what began as an interrogation of “whiteness” has turned into an interrogation of “race,” and I have even *more* questions than I had when I began. On the one hand, I agree with Mercer and others who call for an examination of the ways “whiteness” has been socially constructed. Because “whiteness”—*whatever* it is, and I would argue that at this point no one really knows—has functioned as an oppressive, mythical norm that negates peoples (whatever their skin color) who do not conform to its standard—we need to understand and deconstruct it. On the other hand, I worry that this analysis simply reifies already existing hegemonic conceptions of “race.” As Gates explains, “we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage or redress it” (“Race” 5; his emphasis).

As I see it, the problems with discussing “whiteness” and other racial categories without historicizing the terms and demonstrating the relational nature of all racialized identities include (but aren’t limited to) the following. First, our conceptions of “race” are scientifically and historically inaccurate; they transform arbitrary distinctions between people into immutable, “natural,” God-given facts. Second, constant references to “race” perpetuate the belief in separate peoples, monolithic identities, and stereotypes. Third, in this country racial discourse quickly degenerates into a “black”/“white” polarization that overlooks other so-called “races” and ignores the incredible diversity among people. And fourth, racial categories are not—and never have been—benign. Racial divisions were developed to create a hierarchy that grants privilege and power to specific groups of people while simultaneously oppressing and excluding others. If, as Gates implies in the first epigraph to my paper, “race” is a text that everyone in this country unthinkingly “reads,” I want to suggest that we need to begin reading—and rewriting—this text in new ways. At the very least, we should complicate existing conceptions of “race”—both

by exploring the many changes that have occurred in all apparently fixed racial categories and by informing students of the political, economic, and historical factors shaping the continual reinvention of "race."

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