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Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric

Krista Ratcliffe

Man is a broken creature. . . . It is his nature as a human being to be so; but it is also his nature to create relationships that can span the brokenness. This is his first responsibility; when he fails, he is inevitably destroyed.

—Lillian Smith

At a cocktail party at the CCCC convention in 1997, I overheard a male voice say, “I guess it’s hip to be a white guy again, huh?” I immediately wondered, “How did whiteness become a hip topic at cocktail parties? And does he think it’s hip to be a white ‘gal’ too?” After returning home, I continued to wonder about what his words implied. How does history function so as to make such comments possible? What exactly does it mean to be “a white guy”? And how do history and whiteness (and the history of whiteness) inform rhetoric and composition studies? This comment, the fortuitous moment of overhearing it, and my subsequent questions have haunted me ever since, ultimately compelling me to write this article, which proposes eavesdropping as a rhetorical tactic and then employs it to investigate intersections of history, whiteness, and rhetoric.

In the United States, scholarly discussions of history and rhetoric have rarely included whiteness as a principal object of analysis. Instead, when rhetoric was first recovered for composition studies, rhetorical theories were presented as ahistorical structures that could be lifted from, say, fourth-century BCE Greece and dropped into, say, twentieth-century U.S. politics in an effort to persuade, say, Southern Democrats to vote for Richard Nixon (circa 1968) and George W. (circa 2000). The idea was that rhetorical theories are timeless; the applications, time-bound. This idea has been challenged by scholars, such as James Berlin, who have argued that rhetorical theories are not timeless but are always grounded in the sites of their origins (115). This idea has also been challenged by scholars—again, such as James Berlin—who have argued that rhetorical

theories are always grounded in their sites of usage in ways that remake the theories and make it impossible simply to transport those theories unchanged from one site to another (116). Often such transformation is posited as a potentially positive move. And rightly so. Note Susan Jarratt's feminist transformations of sophistic rhetorical theory in *Rereading the Sophists* and Cheryl Glenn's feminist transformations of classical rhetorical theory in *Rhetoric Retold*. But what happens when change is not a positive move, when it is what John Poulakos calls "dysfunctional" (90)? In other words, what happens when a transformation in a rhetorical theory denies the influence of cultural categories, such as whiteness? One answer is that such transformations circumscribe the possibilities of rhetorical theories and rhetorical usages.¹

To avoid such circumscription, we must begin to factor whiteness into our theories and praxes; but given the absence of whiteness in many of our disciplinary conversations, we may first need to define the term. In the past decade, whiteness studies has emerged as an academic enterprise attempting to articulate such a definition by critiquing how whiteness functions both productively and dysfunctionally.² Despite the popularity of whiteness studies, feminist and ethnicity scholars have questioned whether it is really a forum for laying all our cultural cards on the table *or* just a forum for rechanneling money and attention to white folks, particularly the boys (Talbot 118). At its best, whiteness studies questions the dominant culture's tendency to define race in binary terms of black/white while only articulating blackness. Scholars working in this field acknowledge that whiteness speaks as does the slash mark. And they typically argue that because whiteness is impossible to understand apart from its intersections with gender, class, age, and so on, whiteness functions differently not just for people of color and for whites but also for particular people whose lives may be shaped differently by each of these categories of experience (Thompson 94).

Despite the recent emergence of whiteness studies, whiteness is hardly a new topic. By necessity, people of color have been quite savvy throughout U.S. history in articulating its power, privilege, and violence. Most whites have refused to see it, let alone critique its dysfunctions. But not all. In the 1940s, Lillian Smith named and critiqued whiteness in *Killers of the Dream*, her autobiography of growing up white and female in the South, and thereby kissed a writerly reputation goodbye—at least for that particular moment. In the 1960s, *Killers* was embraced by the Civil Rights Movement and reprinted; in the 1970s it was celebrated by the white feminist movement; and, in the midst of the explosion of interest

in whiteness in the 1990s (largely due to whiteness studies), it has been reissued once again. What accounts for these different receptions? Not Smith's "rhetorical stance" (Booth 111), not the "rhetorical situation" of her audiences (Bitzer 6), not even their respective "discourse communities" (J. Harris 101-02). The difference lies in the circling of time—that is, when bodies, tropes and cultures converge to make possible moments of rhetorical usage. Only in these moments of convergence, when bodies are troped and tropes are embodied, may personal and cultural change be effected.

As I listen to echoes of the comment I overheard at the cocktail party, it strikes me that one way to make possible these moments of convergence is by what I will call *rhetorical eavesdropping*. More specifically, I make four moves in this article: first, I redefine eavesdropping as an ethical rhetorical tactic and posit it as a means for investigating history, whiteness, and rhetoric; second, I offer a mode of historiography, or thinking about history, that shifts emphasis from origins to usage, foregrounding how we may circle through history even as history circles through us; third, I trace the trope of whiteness in the United States, not to provide a comprehensive definition but to expose its dysfunctions; and, fourth, I circle through history to argue that, within the United States, the dysfunctions of whiteness have remade rhetorical theory in ways that circumscribe available agencies.

The Rhetorical Tactic of Eavesdropping, Eavesdropping as Tactical Ethic

As Lynn Worsham remarked in her response to an earlier draft of this article, differences exist between accidental overhearing and purposeful eavesdropping. Her remarks prompted these thoughts: if overhearing the comment at the cocktail party was accidental yet productive, perhaps such productivity could be more systematically tapped if purposeful overhearing, or eavesdropping, were imagined as a rhetorical tactic. But given the negative connotations associated with eavesdropping, such a claim, at the very least, raises questions of definition, justification, ethics, and pragmatics. In this section, I explore these questions in order to demonstrate that eavesdropping may be employed effectively not only as a rhetorical tactic but also as an ethical choice and thus a tactical ethic.

To define eavesdropping for rhetoric and composition studies, I want to borrow one aspect of Mary Daly's method of "gynocentric writing"—namely, uncovering potentialities in words by studying their dictionary definitions, reworking those definitions, and excavating their etymolo-

gies. The goal of Daly's method is to expose the gendered dismissal of words and to mine their "obsolete" meanings (24). A common dictionary definition of *eavesdrop* is "to listen secretly to the private conversation of others" (*Webster's New*). This term has acquired a gendered connotation that has associated *eavesdropping* with feminine busybodiness. Gladys Kravitz, the nosy neighbor on *Bewitched*, is the perfect example of the busybody and habitual eavesdropper. But a second hearing of the possibilities still contained within this term opens it up to the kind of redefinition that Daly calls for. Old English etymologies of *eaves*, for example, suggest "edge" and "margin" and "border" (*Webster's New; Oxford*); an archaic definition of *eavesdrop* suggests "to learn or overhear" (*Webster's Third*); and a Middle English definition of *eavesdropper* suggests "one who stands on the *eavesdrop* [the spot where water drops from the eaves] in order to listen to conversations inside the house" (*Random*). Together, these lexical threads weave a composite definition of *eavesdropping* that may offer an effective rhetorical tactic: standing outside, in an uncomfortable spot, on the border of knowing and not knowing, granting others the inside position, listening to learn. Through such a composite definition, eavesdropping becomes not a gendered busybodiness but a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one's own knowing so as to overhear and learn from others and, I would add, from oneself.

Such a tactic is needed because in our daily exchanges we are too often positioned like viewers of *Bewitched*: we are seduced into identifying with the main characters of cultural discourses just as viewers are charmed into identifying with Samantha and Darren. In *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, Gemma Corradi Fiumara contends that the "bewitchment of these authoritative voices appears to persist as long as they address us directly" (58). But what if we position ourselves so that these "authoritative voices" are not addressing us directly? What if we position ourselves as eavesdroppers? In other words, what if we align ourselves with Gladys Kravitz, granting her the presumption of truth instead of laughing at her? (She was usually right, you know.) When we choose to position ourselves in such a way, we hear differently; and the results may just be worthwhile. According to Fiumara, "listening creates a minimal but fertile logical passage which will then allow our minds to move with greater freedom and envisage still further ways of approaching reality." Moreover, Fiumara claims, "the more one listens the more one is absorbed by an awareness of the fragility of our [own] doctrines" (161, 191). In other words, rhetorical eavesdropping may be a tactic for listening to the discourses of others, for hearing over the edges of our own

knowing, for thinking what is commonly unthinkable within our own logics.

In “Rhetorical Listening,” I describe a process for listening to the discourses of others that, first, acknowledges the existence of these discourses; second, it listens for the (un)conscious presences, absences, unknowns; and third, it consciously integrates this information into our world views and decision-making (206). Rhetorical listening, as I define it, must be considered alongside rhetorical eavesdropping because eavesdropping, as one kind of rhetorical listening, more sharply tunes listeners into the “private conversation of others,” conversations in which eavesdroppers are not directly addressed (*Webster’s New*).

Eavesdropping as a rhetorical tactic raises questions about ethics because it demands a consideration of how the self and other find a way of being together in the world. The first ethical issue to consider is the belief that eavesdropping is an invasion of privacy. The so-called common definition validates this belief; however, my reworked definition makes this claim groundless, since rhetorical eavesdropping entails positioning oneself to overhear both oneself and others, listening to learn, and being careful (that is, full of care) not to overstep another’s boundaries or interrupt the agency of another’s discourse. The second ethical issue to consider is the danger of romanticizing the outsider’s position. Rhetorical eavesdropping is not the rhetorical version of “slumming,” which merely reinscribes existing cultural positions. Rather, rhetorical eavesdropping does not deny the very real power differentials of existing cultural positions, but assumes that *all* cultural positions possess an inside and an outside. The trick for eavesdroppers is to find an outside position where they are not directly addressed. The third ethical issue to consider is one’s own willingness not just to eavesdrop but to *hear*. As Fiumara asserts, “in our basic logic it is only possible to advocate an ethical attitude with regard to something or someone who can *say something to us*, someone who can make himself heard. And yet the point at issue is whether we are capable of hearing a message and whether we select or predetermine what we hear” (61-62). Fiumara’s claim warrants further reflection from all of us.

One path of reflection is pragmatic: how does rhetorical eavesdropping play itself out in daily life? A person may eavesdrop on him- or herself, on other people’s conversations, on written texts, on TV advertisements. The possibilities are endless. For example, when I talk to my daughter in my mother’s voice (double meaning intended), perhaps I should mentally shift my rhetorical positioning and eavesdrop on myself

from my daughter's point of hearing. When my students talk before class about one of our readings (when they know I am in the room and can hear them even though they are not directly addressing me), perhaps I should eavesdrop and use their questions, concerns, applications as a way into class discussion. When I read a scholarly text on an unfamiliar subject, perhaps I should approach the text by trying to weave the edges of my knowledge into the article's claims. And when I view a TV ad for a political candidate I dislike, perhaps I should heed why its addressed audience finds it so compelling. In each instance, eavesdropping may enhance critical thinking by helping me better assess the situation.

Will eavesdropping work well in all situations? Will it work equally well for people in all cultural positions? Will it expose that the unthinkable is always a better way of thinking? The answer to all these questions is obvious: of course not. As with all rhetorical tactics, *kairos* factors into usage. But eavesdropping as a rhetorical tactic possesses potential for mapping common ground among people. In this way, it may be employed generally as a tactical ethic; it may also be employed specifically here as a rhetorical tactic to intervene in the structuring of history, whiteness, and rhetoric.

The Uses of History, History as Usage

The dominant narrative mode for thinking about history at this century's end, at least in the United States, is an origins mode, one that begins at the beginning (which is assumed to be obvious) and moves in a linear, evolutionary progression. My undergraduate students deeply desire and defend the origins mode, despite journalistic warnings about Gen-X's social and economic regression. So do most members of the mainstream culture. So, too, do some of our histories of rhetoric. James Berlin agrees: "Our 'official' histories of rhetoric—the formulations of George Kennedy (1980a) and Edward P.J. Corbett (1990) and Brian Vickers (1990) and Wilbur Samuel Howell (1971), for example—depict rhetoric's historical trajectory as a march of ideas, ideas characterized as unified, coherent, and rational" (112). The appealing features of the origins mode are obvious; the unappealing ones, less so. What gets displaced in the origins mode is the presence of the past in the present—or, the *then-that-is-now*—and what gets further displaced is people's sense of accountability for the *then-that-is-now*. Although rhetorical theorists have challenged the origins mode in order to rethink rhetorical history (for example, Victor Vitanza's excellent collection *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*³), I offer yet another challenge to the origins mode of historiography, one that fore-

grounds our accountability for the *then-that-is-now* in our daily lives. Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Toni Morrison, I offer a mode of historiography that not only shifts our focus from origins to usage but also demonstrates how we may eavesdrop on history, circling through time in order to expose the circling of time. Such a mode will help me in the next section of this paper to analyze our accountability for the rhetoric of whiteness.

In *What Is Called Thinking?* Heidegger ponders the connections between the movement of time, the movement of thinking, and the sphere of language (what today we might call *discourse*). In Heidegger's view, sometimes the "only way to go forward is to return to the origins and seek a new beginning," and he believes that the vehicle for circling through time is language—"that sphere in which man can dwell aright and make clear to himself who he is" (Gray xxv; xix). Heidegger is obviously not imagining time travel but mind travel—circling back to "the origins" to trace how a historical moment emerges, how it gets constructed, how it becomes not just a past fact (something that happened) but a historical fact (something that happened and is preserved within cultural discourses) (E. Carr 10).

Heidegger's circling through time is exemplified in Du Bois' "Dialogue with a White Friend." In the following passage, Du Bois replies to a fictional white friend's claim of white superiority:

You are obsessed by the swiftness of the gliding of the sled at the bottom of the hill. You say: what tremendous power must have caused its speed, and how wonderful is Speed. You think of the rider as the originator and inventor of that vast power. You admire his poise and *sang-froid*, his utter self-absorption. You say: surely here is the son of God and he shall reign forever and ever.

You are wrong, quite wrong. Away back on the level stretches of the mountain tops in the forests, amid drifts and driftwood, this sled was slowly and painfully pushed on its little hesitating start. It took power, but the power of sweating, courageous men, not of demigods. As the sled slowly started and gained momentum, it was the Law of Being that gave it speed, and the grace of God that steered its lone, scared passengers. Those passengers, white, black, red and yellow, deserve credit for their balance and pluck. But many times it was sheer luck that made the road not land the white man in the gutter, as it had others so many times before, and as it may him yet. He has gone farther than others because of others whose very falling made hard ways iced and smooth for him to traverse. His triumph is a triumph not of himself alone, but of humankind, from the

pusher in the primeval forests to the last flier through the winds of the twentieth century. (36-37)

This passage not only exemplifies Heidegger's concept of circling through time but also exposes the danger and difficulty of circling. The danger lies in embracing false origins, such as the sled at the bottom of the hill. In this instance, embracing false origins erases our knowledge of common effort and hence undermines our imperative to work for the common good. The difficulty lies in establishing true origins, such as the sled in the primeval forest. If (and let me stress *if*) true origins exist as single causal phenomena, they may have occurred within our past but outside of our history, in which case they are either forgotten or remembered today as myths, legends, folklore, or speculation. As such, they may challenge the limits of our historical knowledge, but often they do not receive the same respect as historical knowledge. If (and let me again stress *if*) true origins exist as complicated, interwoven webs of phenomena, then they may be impossible to pinpoint exactly (read: *empirically*) (Mountford).

To sidestep this danger and this difficulty, let us shift our thinking about history from origins to usage. Let us heed Heidegger's advice and mind travel, but with a twist: instead of focusing on travelling back *to* a moment of origin, let us focus on traveling back *from* a particular moment of usage. Travelling from a moment of usage, we may find ourselves circling back through historical narratives, finding pertinent threads (rather than origins in the traditional sense) and weaving our way forward to our current moment.⁴ This shift from origins to usage is more than the rhetorical sophistry denigrated by Plato. It is the rhetorical sophistry defined by Jarratt, a sophistry that links history to bodies, tropes, and cultures, a sophistry that does not forsake truth and ethics but demands their continual negotiation within different moments of usage (11-12).

What emerges if we lay this usage-based mode of historiography (circling through time) alongside Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" (the circling of time)? As depicted in *Beloved*, rememory represents the embodied circling of time. It is an insidious embodiment for Sethe, the escaped slave who kills her two-year-old daughter rather than let her be taken back to the horrors of slavery on a plantation called Sweet Home. According to Morrison's narrator, rememory is triggered for Sethe by a smell, a sound, or a touch: "And suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty" (6). In this way, rememory has an agency all its

own. Rememory comes back whether or not Sethe wants it to return (14)—sometimes falsely (6), sometimes releasing repressed memories (61-62), but always serving as a testament to her seemingly infinite capacity to hear bad things (70). Still, Sethe and other characters assert some agency over rememory, at least for a while, via these coping strategies: Sethe can “[beat] back the past” by kneading dough every morning (73), by folding and double folding sheets (61), or by rubbing the leg of someone she loves (72); Paul D can “leave it alone” (71). But denial and forgetfulness are ultimately impossible as well as dangerous. As Sethe warns her daughter Denver, “If you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (36). Ultimately, the characters (and the readers) must wrestle with the past just as Sethe wrestles with Beloved, who represents not only the ghost of Sethe’s long-dead daughter but also the “sixty million and more” dead slaves to whom Morrison dedicates her book. Readers learn what Paul D and Sethe learn: to put our stories next to someone who “is a friend of [our] mind” and to realize that we are our own “best thing” (272-73). This ethic of love—both love of others and love of self—tenders to us the agency necessary for escaping the repetitive circling of denial and the idealized dreams of forgetfulness. It offers a means of telling our rememories as stories, using them as a means of getting on with our lives. As represented in this novel, Morrison’s concept of rememory exposes the past not simply as a series of fixed points on an abstract historical continuum but rather as a series of inscriptions in discourse and on our material bodies, inscriptions that continually circle through our present and form our identities, inscriptions that will control us if we do not acknowledge them and pass them on.

What emerges from placing a revised Heideggerian notion of circling through time alongside Toni Morrison’s rendering of the circling of time is a sense of a past that haunts the present. This past is both a cultural structure and an individual embodiment of that structure, with the embodiment being different in different people depending on their experiences with(in) the cultural structure. This usage mode of historiography enables us to deal with the past so that it may strengthen us (like Denver, we can walk off the porch). When we do not deal with the past, it saps our strength, relegating us either to emotional prisonhouses (for example, Paul D’s rusty tin box of a heart) or to endless repetitions of the moments that landed us here (for example, Sethe’s rememories of Sweet Home). When we change modes of historiography—that is, when we reject the dominant (and oh-so-desired) origin-to-happily-ever-after mode

and embrace a not-so-dominant (and let's be honest, not-so-desired) usage-as-ever-present mode—we (re)cognize that narratives of history refuse to give up the ghost, so to speak, until (like Denver, Paul D, and Sethe) we refuse to pass on them so that, in turn, we can garner the strength to pass them on. Such a (re)cognition of history enables us to eavesdrop and circle through time to expose the circling of time. Thus, we find ourselves accountable to ourselves and to others not for the *then* but for the *then-that-is-now*.

The Trope of Whiteness, Whiteness as Embodied Trope

In the United States, one site of usage (and accountability) for the *then-that-is-now* is the trope of whiteness. In this section, I first define the terms *trope* and *trope of whiteness*; then I circle through history, eavesdropping, to expose how this trope resonates at *this* particular moment of usage. I will focus only on its dysfunctions as they are articulated by people of color and by white people. Though by no means a comprehensive discussion, what follows may help us analyze in the next section how these dysfunctions remake rhetorical theory.

As we all know, tropes are figures of speech, such as metaphor, metonymy, analogy, and aposiopesis. Although such tropes are sometimes defined as “the dressing of thought” or as a deviation from ordinary expression, they are much, much more (Corbett 459). Tropes designate the movement of a text, as when a prosecuting attorney employs a domino analogy to simplify a complex web of causation. Indeed, tropes designate the very movement of language itself. Because all language is inherently figurative (that is, because a term always signifies something other than the term itself), all terms are tropes. Although tropes are terms within discourse, the socially constructed attitudes and actions associated with these terms become embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our socialization; for example, in the United States we are born into discourse communities wherein the term *student* signifies certain attitudes and actions about learning and classroom behavior. Once embodied, these tropes, with their associated attitudes and actions, may (un)consciously inform our own attitudes and actions. This chicken-and-egg cycle continues in perpetuity, with discourse socializing people and people accepting, resisting, and revising this socialization via discursive practices.

Like any other socially constructed category (*student, teacher, dean, gender, race, class*), whiteness is a trope, and the actions and attitudes associated with this trope are embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our socialization. The real issue, however, is what we do with this trope

and its embodiment, both culturally and individually. Academic whiteness studies attempts to answer this question. For example, in *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev explores Irish immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century and describes his project as follows: "This book looks at how one group of people became white. Put another way, it asks how the Catholic Irish, an oppressed race in Ireland, became part of an oppressing race in America" (1). On the productive side of this process, the Irish, in becoming white, could "sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later they could compete for jobs in all spheres instead of being confined to certain work"; indeed, Irish men (though not Irish women) could begin taking advantage of the full rights of citizenship (2-3). The dysfunctional side of this process (in addition to the aforementioned gender bias) is that in becoming white, the Irish did not alter the cultural structure of oppression but managed instead literally to work themselves into the racial category of privilege, thereby reinforcing already existing oppressive patterns for those still categorized as nonwhite (for example, American Indians, Chicanos(as), African Americans). Is Irish assimilation more complicated than what can be explained through a focus on economics and whiteness? Yes, it is complicated by factors such as the nation's industrial status, religion, regional politics, and the like. But Ignatiev's point is well-taken: whiteness is a crucial factor in the process of assimilation and socialization.

As a trope, whiteness designates both people and practices.⁵ Yet, as AnnLouise Keating reminds us, a "conditional" relationship exists between white people and white practices. That is, while not everyone can be classified as a white person, everyone can perform white practices (907). Performing whiteness is a very visible practice for people of color. "Acting white" on the job or in school may garner promotions or good grades (or, in the case of a comedy routine by Paul Rodriguez or Chris Rock, lots of lucrative laughter). But acting white in homes and communities may garner charges of betraying one's roots. Conversely, performing whiteness is often an invisible practice for white people who assume their own thinking and acting to be the norm. Like any trope, whiteness is historically and locally grounded, always already evolving and open to multiple interpretations. But as Ruth Frankenberg reminds us, in the United States whiteness has consistently signified privilege—a privilege that fosters stasis by resisting and denying differences (236-37).⁶ Historian David Roediger explains: "Whiteness describes, from Little Big Horn to Simi Valley, not a culture but precisely the absence of culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on

what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (*Towards* 13). In short, whiteness is typically defined in terms of what it is not—*not* African American, *not* Latina, *not* Chippewa, and so on.

As a trope that fosters stasis by resisting and denying differences, whiteness has very real implications in everyone's daily life. People of color have astutely observed these implications in their struggle to survive. Some whites have also done so, by choice, in their effort to move politically and ethically against social injustice. But when most whites are asked what it means to be white in the United States, they simply stare blankly. Either they have never thought about it (because they don't have to) or they are afraid of answering for fear of being associated with extremist racist organizations, such as the KKK, that have for too long claimed whiteness as their own turf and defined it in their own terms. Notable exceptions are Frankenberg and Roediger, as well as Smith, whose *Killers of the Dream* predates the current whiteness studies movement yet provides an admirable model for naming and critiquing whiteness.

People of color claim that whiteness signifies in myriad ways, ranging from acting white to terror. The core of this terror—white violence and its effects on everyone—is captured in Claude McKay's poem "The Lynching," which describes a lynched black man as a "swinging char," a "ghastly body swaying in the sun" (ll. 8, 10). It describes white female observers as: "never a one / Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue; / And little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee" (ll. 11-14). In "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," bell hooks argues that such representations of terror emerge not just from African Americans' stereotypes about white people but also from African Americans' ethnographic observations of white people. Such observations have often functioned as an African American survival strategy throughout U.S. history—from centuries of slavery to contemporary prison demographics, welfare reforms, corporate glass ceilings, even unwelcoming classrooms (39-40). To deal with this *then-that-is-now* terror, hooks offers a simple yet difficult strategy: understanding how whiteness functions culturally without resorting to an essentialized us-versus-them mentality that plays into the white desire for stasis. Her strategy is one that both she and a white male friend have employed: "Understanding how racism works, he can see the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing himself as bad, or all white people as bad, and all black people as good" (49).

Many people of color also claim that whiteness signifies the drive to

consume others' lands and cultures. Ethiop (William J. Wilson) describes how white consumption functioned in the United States in the nineteenth century: "Restless, grasping, unsatiated, [whites] are ever on the lookout for not what is, or ought to be theirs, but for what they can get" (59). Alice Walker exposes the white consumption implicit in a "melting pot" mentality, which she believes is actually a way of normalizing difference in terms of whiteness. She makes this claim in "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus," written in 1981. She argues that, by inserting Uncle Remus into the Brer Fox/Brer Rabbit stories, Harris robbed her of her heritage: "How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from their own people and not from Walt Disney" (239). And this white consumption is what encourages Lyman Lamartine, a Chippewa entrepreneur in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, to ponder turning the tables on white people by opening a bingo palace: "He'd . . . teach Chippewas the right ways, the proper ways, the polite ways, to take money from retired white people who had farmed Indian hunting grounds, worked Indian jobs, lived high while their neighbors lived low, looked down or never noticed who was starving, who was lost" (327). Ironically, Lyman suggests a recycled white consumption in order to counter white peoples' consumption of his ancestors' land and culture, and he justifies his own consumption in terms of prior ownership privileges and fairness.

Many people of color have also associated whiteness with hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy, as when people profess Christian principles yet practice racism. In "The Color of Heaven," historian Mia Bay exposes this hypocrisy when researching nineteenth-century white slaveowners' conceptions of heaven and finding it to be a "racially divided place" (69). And Martin Luther King, Jr. pinpoints this hypocrisy in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," addressed to eight white clergy in Alabama: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice" (892).

People of color have also associated whiteness with a denial of race issues, a denial stemming from fear and guilt. In "White Man's Guilt,"

James Baldwin maps the interrelated web of denial, fear, and guilt: it “is heard nowhere more plainly than in those stammering, terrified dialogues which white Americans sometimes entertain . . . the black man in America. The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea. Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it” (321-22). Yet, according to Baldwin, “on the same day, in another gathering and in the most private chamber of his heart always, the white American remains proud of that history for which he does not wish to pay, and from which, materially, he has profited so much” (322). By abating fear and guilt, denial creates a safe space in which white America may live without having to confront its past.⁷ In his essay, Baldwin exposes the dominant either/or logic haunting whiteness in this country: either whiteness has perpetuated great violence, or it has fostered great accomplishments. There is little room in anyone’s mind for a both/and logic, even though it may just be the ground needed for initiating genuine dialogue.

People of color have also linked whiteness with an ignorance of other cultures, although they may disagree about what this ignorance signifies. In Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Rich, the good-hearted white boyfriend of Chinese American Waverly Jong, arrives at her parents’ home with a bottle of French wine, but Waverly’s parents do not own wine glasses; he also calls them Tim and Linda (their names are Tin and Lindo) (196, 198). Tan’s point is that whites are often ignorant not just of other cultures but also of their own ignorance of other cultures. Morrison sees this ignorance in literary studies less as an unconscious phenomenon than as a “willful critical blindness” (*Playing* 18). And in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Ana Castillo (Chicana poet, fiction writer, and theorist) does not let whites off so easily: “The ignorance of white dominant society about [Chicana] ways, struggles in society, history, and culture is not an innocent and passive ignorance, it is a systematic and determined ignorance” (5).

People of color have not always been alone in disclosing the meaning of whiteness. In *Killers of the Dream*, Smith makes visible the convergence of bodies, tropes, and cultures. She also makes visible the intersections of multiple tropes (race, gender, class, region, sex), a move much heralded by 1990s feminists of all races:

I shall not tell, here, of experiences that were different and special and belonged only to me, but those most white southerners born at the turn of the century share with each other. Out of the intricate weaving of unnumbered threads, I shall pick out a few strands, a few designs that have to do with what we call color and race . . . and politics . . . and money

and how it is made . . . and religion . . . and sex and the body image . . . and love . . . and dreams of the Good and the killers of dreams. (27)

Smith's ellipses are just as important as her terms. The ellipses invite readers to pause and contemplate each term individually (for example, "color and race," then "politics"); they also invite readers to link the terms together metonymically; and they invite readers to fill the gaps with their impressions of "white southerners born at the turn of the century" as well as with their own experiences and definitions.

From her standpoint as a mid-century, upper-middle class, Southern white woman, Smith identifies the white "terror" not just with "the Ku Klux Klan and the lynchings I did not see" but also with "the gentle back-door cruelties of 'nice people'" (12). Smith in no way implies that her experiences of white terror are comparable to the experiences of those lynched; however, she does analyze its influence on her own body and moral consciousness:

The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their "place." The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that "all men are brothers," trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my "soul," taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition. (27)

Smith also analyzes the influence of this white terror on everyone else's body and moral consciousness and on the culture they all share:

Something was wrong with a world that tells you that love is good and people are important and then forces you to deny love and to humiliate people. I knew, though I would not for years confess it aloud, that in trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from so many good, creative, honest, deeply human things in life. I began to understand slowly at first but more clearly as the years passed, that the warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. (39)

In her analysis, Smith employs a usage-based circling through time to expose the circling of time in her own body: "I am afraid this book has played tricks on me: I am caught again in those revolving doors of

childhood" (13). When writing, she grounds herself in her current moment, picking out "threads" from the past that still haunt her in order to explain her present. Her circling of time exposes her (and our) responsibility for the *then-that-is-now*. Smith explains: "We know White Supremacy is indefensible in today's world, we know that as an idea it is dead, but the bitter struggle goes on, . . . wasting minds and time and hearts and economic resources, tying us to a past where ghost battles ghost. And while this happens the human spirit sits on the rim of things, waiting" (235). This ghostly battle represents the dichotomy of real and ideal that pervades racialized (and gendered and classed) discourses in the United States. And "so we stand," Smith says, "tied to the past and clutching at the stars!" (253).

Before we can untie ourselves from the dysfunctional realities of the past and the dysfunctional idealizations of the present, we must make (at least) two moves. First, we must make visible and/or audible the reality of the *then-that-is-now*. Smith tried to do this in 1949. Academic whiteness studies is attempting to do it now. For example, Lynn Worsham's "After Words" weaves her personal stories of performing whiteness into a critique of the discourses and cultures surrounding us. Second, we must stop hiding behind the ideal of color blindness. In addition to academic whiteness studies, some popular publications are attempting to do this too. For example, in a recent biography of Vince Lombardi, which lauds his anti-racist work while he coached the Green Bay Packers, author David Maraniss claims, "It has always been easy for whites to claim [the ideal of] color blindness in the United States since white is the dominant color in American society, but the claim often serves as a ruse for not recognizing the [real] obstacles faced by non-whites" (8). In other words, in academic and popular discourses, we must investigate whiteness, eavesdropping within history, so that bodies, tropes, and cultures may converge in moments of productive rhetorical usage, moments when personal and social change may be achieved.

The Agencies of Rhetoric, Rhetorical Agents

Discussions of history and whiteness are significant for rhetoric and composition because they invite, among other things, questions of ethics and agency. According to Lawrence Buell, "ethics has gained new resonance in literary studies," and, consequently, literary scholars are rethinking agency in its various guises—discursive agency, authorial agency, readerly agency, and sociopolitical (or cultural) agency (7, 12-14). I would extend Buell's claim to rhetoric and composition. Rhetorical

studies (in all its multiplicity) is the site where discursive, authorial, readerly, and sociopolitical agencies have been kept in play and their intersections have been duly noted—even when biographical criticism privileged the author, New Criticism privileged the work, deconstruction privileged textuality, reader response criticism privileged the reader, and cultural studies privileged class. Indeed, if we associate discursive agency with tropes, authorial and readerly agencies with the body, and sociopolitical agency with culture, what emerges is not a battle for which site possesses agency but rather a question of how the agencies of different sites converge to produce moments of rhetorical usage.

When I circle through history, at *this* moment, eavesdropping to trace how the dysfunctions of whiteness remake rhetorical theory and usage, I find that these four agencies are not simply concepts lifted from classical times and dropped into our lives; rather, they are concepts remade in the image of their moments of usage. In the twentieth century, for example, the whiteness-that-fosters-stasis has worked to circumscribe all four of these agencies. Granted (and this is an important point), whiteness is not the only force at work in this circumscription, but it has definite vested interests. What follows is an attempt to articulate some of these interests. Inspired by Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own" and Kathleen Welch's "Interpreting the Silent 'Aryan Model' of Histories of Classical Rhetoric," the following comments also invite more such work to be done.

As a practice of discursive agency, the whiteness that desires stasis also encourages the denial of language play. Ana Castillo describes the performance of this denial as follows: "Word-play for the Mexican Spanish speaker is contagious, a reflection of our sense of irony and humor about life. . . . In attempting to do this with English dominant speakers—especially, but not exclusively white people—I am always disappointed to see that the unimaginative way they have been taught to hear language makes a complete disaster of my attempt at 'word-play'" (168). This denial suppresses the tropological functions of language, and, by extension, it constrains the ways bodies, tropes, and cultures are imagined to converge. Let me offer four examples.

First, the practice of whiteness-that-denies-language-play signifies an (un)conscious desire for closure in mythmaking and storytelling. As Leslie Marmon Silko claims, white culture foolishly tries to freeze frame stories to preserve them forever: "The folks at home [Laguna Pueblo] will say, 'If it's important, if it has relevance, it will stay regardless of whether it's on video tape, taped, or written down.' It's only the western Europeans

who have this inflated pompous notion that every word, everything that's said or done is real important, and it's got to live on and on forever. And only Americans think that America . . . [will] just continue on" (qtd. in Barnes 52). This particular practice of whiteness reinforces the separation of whites from people of color, story from history, poetics from rhetoric.

Second, the practice of whiteness-that-denies-language-play erases how blackness participates in the formation of whiteness. In "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ralph Ellison explains: "Much of the sound of [U.S.] language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear. So there is a *de*'z and a *do*'z of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents, and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it—doubtlessly introduced there by Old Yale John C. Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy" (164). This practice of whiteness reinforces the dominant culture's tendency not to hear or listen to other cultures (especially women's voices) as well as its tendency to inflate its own autonomy and importance.

Third, the practice of whiteness-that-denies-language-play also erases how whiteness participates in the formation of blackness.⁸ In *Beloved*, Stamp Paid brilliantly articulates for Paul D how whiteness inscribes blackness: "It wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread . . . until it invaded the whites who had made it. . . . Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own" (198-99). As Stamp Paid implies, this practice of whiteness essentializes blackness and whiteness as biological destiny; it also obscures their status as tropes and ignores power differentials between definers and defined as well as the potential of language use for personal and social change.

Fourth, the practice of whiteness-that-denies-language-play not only effaces "colors" other than black and white but also hides the slippage of these categories of color. Cherríe Moraga's commentary on "light-skinned breeds" exposes these effaced colors and the slippage between categories:

With a Black lover in apartheid Boston I was seen as a whitegirl. When we moved to Brooklyn, we were both Ricans. In Harlem I became "Spanish." In México, we were both Cubans. With my brown girlfriends

we be brown girls sitting on brownstones. We be family. Among Indians in the States I'm a half-breed who looks like every other breed, colored mixed with cowboy. . . . Among Chicanas, I am everybody's cousin Carmen. Whitegirls change my shade to a paler version. People think I'm Italian, Jewish. (232-33)

Finally, despite this slippage, the practice of whiteness-that-denies-language-play blinds and blindsides people by offering them socially constructed concepts, such as race and gender, presented as The Truth. Smith concretizes this claim when discussing the politicians of her childhood: "The singsong voices of politicians . . . [were] telling us lies about skin color and a culture they were callously ignorant of—lies made of their own fantasies, of their secret deviations—forcing decayed pieces of theirs and the region's obscenities into the minds of the young and leaving them there to fester" (12-13). According to Smith, these festering obscenities exist both on "semantic" and "somatic" levels; in other words, bodies are troped and tropes are embodied⁹ (130, 161).

Fighting these festering obscenities is doubly difficult when tropological functions of language are placed in the background. Language becomes literal, in the service of The Truth; language play becomes suspect; rhetorical negotiation is deemed dubious; and the possibilities of discursive agency are thereby limited. Also limited are possibilities we ascribe to authorial, readerly, and cultural agencies. To counter such limitations, teacher/scholars in rhetoric and composition studies must think seriously about how the tropological functions of language connect to our concepts of truth/Truth, knowledge, and belief. We also must integrate our thinking *consciously* into our theories and praxes, including our pedagogy. Too often these concerns hover at the edge of our thinking and doing, unspoken and unheard. For example, consider our injunction to students to "write clearly." As a trope, *write clearly* needs to be more fully interrogated. Scholars, teachers, and students all must ask: (1) what writerly and cultural attitudes and actions are associated with the trope *write clearly*?; (2) what benefits (there are many) are associated with it?; and (3) what gets lost in our stated and implied definitions of clear writing? (For example, *clearly* signifies differently in different discourse communities.) Such attention to language provides a means of questioning discursive agency and an opportunity to articulate authorial agency.

As a practice of authorial agency,¹⁰ whiteness (in its desire for stasis) encourages what Nedra Reynolds calls the reduction of our concept of *ethos* to a concept of individual ethical appeal ("*Ethos*" 327-29). As

Reynolds shows, Aristotelian *ethos* is not merely the “ethical appeal” of an individual but is “a shared enterprise among members of the community” with the community deciding “what constitutes justice, temperance, bravery, or ethics” (328). In the United States, we typically reduce *ethos* to individual ethical appeal, metonymically linking it to rugged individualist ideology. This ideology is haunted by the ghost of St. Jean de Crèvecoeur’s 1782 American, a white male of European descent who succeeds on the basis of individual will and toil (7, 9). De Crèvecoeur’s description, along with other texts (both legal and literary), led Morrison to conclude that while *American* has been presented as an inclusive term it has often played out as a code for *white male* (*Playing* 39-44). Following Morrison’s logic, the *ethos* of the rugged individualist in rhetorical theory must be understood as the narrow and exclusionary *ethos* of the rugged white male individualist.

Limiting our concept of *ethos* to individual ethical appeal may work for de Crèvecoeur’s American because it is tailor-made in his own image. (To identify the *then-that-is-now*, we need look no further than presidential wanna-be Donald Trump.) But this limited sense of *ethos* does not always work for those falling outside of de Crèvecoeur’s category. A concept of *ethos* that celebrates individual will and toil ensures that “falling outside” will be interpreted in only one way: as failure of individual will and toil. Sometimes it is such a failure, but not always. Note, for example, the effects of falling outside of Milwaukee Public Schools’ desegregation plan. A former MPS board member recently—well, finally—admitted that the court-ordered school desegregation plan of the late 1970s “was set up for ‘white benefit’ at the expense of African-American children” and their communities (Williams A1). In practical terms, this admission calls attention to the fact that white students stayed in their home communities unless they chose to attend magnet schools in African American neighborhoods, but African American students were compelled to attend outlying area schools. NAACP volunteer and school board member, Joyce Mallory, explains the consequences:

What really hurts now is when I look at all these kids in prison, a lot of that is the result of thousands of kids not getting a good education and being forced, pushed and dropped out of MPS in the last 20 years. . . . A lot of them dropped out because going to the Pulaskis, the Bay Views, the Hamiltons and the Madisons of this community weren’t places where they could be educated in a climate and an environment that valued who they were as individuals. (qtd. in Williams A8)

When, as in the MPS example, the actual individual does not mesh with the existing cultural category of individual, “falling outside” may result from factors other than individual will and toil. But reducing *ethos* to individual ethical appeal occludes these other factors—what Reynolds calls the “spatial and social” dimension of Aristotelian *ethos* (“*Ethos*” 327),¹¹ what Buell calls readerly, discursive, and sociopolitical agencies (12-14), and what I call the convergence of bodies, tropes, and cultures. To combat this costly reduction, we must foster an expanded concept of *ethos*.

The possibilities of an expanded *ethos* may be seen by examining the reception of Smith’s text. In 1949, *Killers* was given a decidedly chilly reception, which disciplined not just Smith but other white writers.¹² In 1994, *Killers* was received more favorably.¹³ If we work from a reduced concept of *ethos*—one that is limited to individual ethical appeal—we might argue that only individual writers and speakers are responsible for their reception (for example, we might blame Smith for the chilly reception in 1949 and praise her for the warmer one in 1994). But if we work from an expanded concept of *ethos*—one that acknowledges its individual, discursive, and cultural components—we might argue that negative reception, such as Smith’s initial reception, may represent a convergence of bodies, tropes, and cultures for an individual author but a failed convergence for the dominant white culture. We might also argue that successful reception, such as Smith’s recent reception, represents a more successful convergence within the dominant white culture. While this expanded *ethos* rejects the possibility that *ethos* functions only as an individual enterprise, it retains the possibility that *ethos* emerges as a result of rhetorical negotiation in which speakers and writers are active agents (albeit with discursive and cultural limitations) in the dance of bodies, tropes, and cultures.

As a practice of readerly agency, whiteness (in its desire for stasis) reinforces rhetorical theory’s tendency to relegate readers to secondary importance in the making of meaning. Contrary to the prevailing view—which holds that Aristotle’s rhetorical theory uses audience as its foundational category for classifying speeches and audience members (*Rhetoric* 1.3.1358b.1-5), and that his concept of enthymeme invites audience members to insert their own ideas into the orator’s gaps (2.23.1400b.25-35)—I want to propose that enthymemic gaps are ones that the speaker/writer purposefully employs so that audience members will feel smart, concur with the argument, and believe they are full partners in the making of meaning so that the speaker/writer’s will may be realized without (too much) resistance. As Michelle Ballif claims, rarely do rhetorical theories

(or speakers or writers) ask, “What is it that the audience wants” or desires or demands or needs? (51).

Because whiteness is embodied differently in white people and people of color, whiteness socializes us all into *different* secondary positions of readerly agency. According to Castillo, white socialization gives white readers certain expectations: they expect to be included in a text “in a direct way, if not as subjects, then emotionally. Otherwise, they are disinterested, and even feel threatened when excluded” (17). Whether white readers accept or resist this socialization is for each to negotiate. According to Royster, white socialization gives readers of color different expectations, especially of white speakers and writers: “I have been compelled to listen to speakers, well-meaning though they may think they are, who signal to me rather clearly that subject position is everything. I have come to recognize, however, that when the subject matter is me and the voice is not mine, my sense of order and rightness is disrupted. In metaphoric fashion, these ‘authorities’ let me know, once again, that Columbus has discovered America and claims it now, claims it still for a European crown” (31). But just as European crowns may be overthrown, readerly agencies haunted by whiteness may be circumnavigated.

Castillo, Royster, and Smith all offer critical readerly agencies for circumnavigating whiteness and its haunting legacy. Castillo’s is the most drastic. She chooses to express authorial agency by not addressing white people directly. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, she writes,

I AM A BROWN WOMAN. . . .

Throughout the history of the United States “I” as subject and object has been reserved for white authorship and readership. However, when I speak of woman within these pages, I speak very specifically of the woman described above. . . . (This also holds true for the use of the word men, children, people, and so on. I refer at all times to Chicanos/as-mejicanos/as unless otherwise specified). (1)

Castillo offers brown women readerly agency by saying, in effect, “At last, you are the subject—enjoy.” But she carefully qualifies her claim: “Non-white readers” in the United States are “not asserting that our perspective is the only legitimate one, that it is superior to or should replace, repress, or censure others. What we are conscious of is that our reality is vastly different from that of the dominant culture” (5). Castillo likewise offers white readers a form of readerly agency that in effect says, “Get over it, but keep reading (eavesdropping).” She believes that Chicana struggle “is relevant to anyone trying to understand the world he or she lives in” (17). She does not position whites as subjects or even invite

them emotionally into her world; she therefore potentially proves her point about white readers' expectations each time one resists her. Thus, Castillo challenges white readers to critique not only her claims but also their own reactions to her claims.

Royster's model of critical readerly agency offers all readers a more rhetorically (and emotionally) complicated positioning. In "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own," she demonstrates how two or more people may interact so as to approximate equal positioning:

My experiences tell me that we need to do more than just talk and talk back. I believe that in this model we miss a critical moment. We need to talk, yes, and to talk back, yes, but when do we listen? How do we listen? How do we demonstrate that we honor and respect the person talking and what that person is saying, or what the person might say if we valued someone other than ourselves having a turn to speak? How do we translate listening into language and action, into the creation of an appropriate response? How do we really "talk back" rather than talk also? The goal is not, "You talk, I talk." The goal is better practices so that we can exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding with the intent of being in a good position to cooperate, when, like now, cooperation is absolutely necessary. (38)

This listening model of readerly agency imagines a readerly agency that is inextricably intertwined with discursive, authorial, and cultural agencies.¹⁴ Instead of submitting to traditional rhetorical moves in which authorial agency tries to control readerly agency, Royster offers the possibility of both agencies functioning as subject positions, with everyone rotating in and out of each position, assuming respect for the process, the people, and each other's subject positions.

Finally, Smith posits a model of critical readerly agency that demonstrates the interactions of one person's many voices. Her readerly agency is also intertwined with discursive, authorial, and cultural agencies: "I was in dialogue with myself as I wrote, as well as with my hometown and my childhood and history and the future, and the past" (13). And, as Smith notes, this readerly agency has ethical dimensions:

Our big problem is not civil rights nor even a free Africa—urgent as these are—but how to make into a related whole the split pieces of the human experience, how to bridge mythic and rational mind, how to connect our childhood with the present and the past with the future, how to relate the differing realities of science and religion and politics and art to each other and to ourselves. Man is a broken creature, yes; it is his nature as a human being to be so; but it is also his nature to create relationships that can span

the brokenness. This is his first responsibility; when he fails, he is inevitably destroyed. (21)

Although this vision may seem utopian (and haunted by apocalypse), it is a possible ethical choice with material consequences. Note its *then-that-is-now* echo in Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*: "Change is possible, I believe. Language used consciously, a matter of rhetoric, is a principal means—perhaps *the* means—by which change can begin to take place. . . . It's a utopian hope. . . . The utopian, I know, drives me, even when tempered by the practical" (121). And mention of "the practical" leads us directly to issues of cultural structures that must be negotiated.

As a practice of cultural agency, whiteness (in its desire for stasis) occludes the influence of cultural structures—such as race, gender, class, and the like—on everyone's life, rendering these structures either invisible or apparently unimportant. By now we can all rehearse the Marxist maxim that the most ideologically entrenched position is the one that appears invisible, unimportant, or natural. Smith concretizes this naturalizing process in terms of the cultural structures of her own life and times: "Southern Tradition taught well: we learned our way of life by doing. You never considered arguing with teacher, because *you could not see her*. You only felt the iron grip of her hand and knew you must go where all the other children were going. And you learned never, never, to get out of step, for this was a precision dance which you must do with deadly accuracy" (96; emphasis added).

How does the practice of whiteness (in its desire for stasis) participate in this occlusion of cultural structures? Through denial. This practice of whiteness, which Baldwin claims denies race, further complicates that denial with other intersecting denials. For example, Villanueva's critique of how people of color are positioned within academia and the dominant white culture shows how ethnicity is complicated by a denial of class: "It's hard to discuss the class system in America, because for so long we believed that ours was a classless society. John Kenneth Galbraith believes that most Americans still hold to the notion and cites George Bush as saying that class is 'for European democracies or something else—it isn't for the United States of America. We are not going to be divided by class'" (56). In a critique of our field's reception of nineteenth-century black women, Shirley Wilson Logan shows how ethnicity is complicated by a denial of difference within the category of gender. Logan speaks through Marsha Houston to remind us that "women of color do not experience sexism *in addition to* racism, but sexism *in the context*

of racism; thus, they . . . bear an altogether *different* burden from that borne by white women” (46). No doubt we could all list examples of denied and occluded cultural categories, such as age, religion, political affiliation. But the point is this: by denying the role of cultural structures in the construction of identity, whiteness perpetuates a theory and practice of what Villanueva calls “bootstraps” (xiv, 121). Are these denials and occlusions of cultural agency the result of a grand conscious conspiracy? Not exactly. If they were, they might be easier for insiders to see and for everyone to resist. The denials exist, the occlusions occur, and the status quo remains, because, like the segregating signs on the water fountains of Smith’s childhood, whiteness is often taken “for granted” (57).

Thus, one means of resistance is to stop taking whiteness for granted. Again, Smith’s receptions exemplify this point. In 1949 Smith’s authorial agency alone could not guarantee a positive reception of her book. Though body, trope, and culture had converged in 1949 for Smith and other people in a way that allowed them to see and to critique whiteness, they had not yet converged in the majority of white bodies or dominant discourses of white culture. As Smith notes, “The quickest way for a writer to be banned as an Outsider . . . was for him to seek new words, new ways of interpreting the earth-shaking hour we live in” (224). No matter how carefully she had crafted her authorial agency, the dominant discursive, readerly, and cultural agencies worked against her. Yet, Smith’s experience is not the occasion for despair or the rationale for a retreat into gradualism. It is a model for how a resisting agency may challenge other agencies haunted by whiteness.

In sum, whiteness (in its desire for stasis) celebrates a discursive agency in which language is made literal, an authorial agency in which *ethos* is reduced to individualism, a readerly agency in which readers are relegated to secondary importance in the construction of meanings, and a cultural agency in which the influence of cultural structures on identity is occluded. Such a practice of whiteness puts authorial agency on a pedestal, subordinates the other three, and denies the intertwining functions of all four. Can the aforementioned dysfunctions be challenged in terms of how they remake rhetorical theory and rhetorical usages? As I have tried to demonstrate, some people have done so and, indeed, are doing so. As for the rest of us, a pertinent response may be heard in Smith’s conclusion (though it obviously does not address this question directly): “We have the means, the technics, we have the knowledge and insight and courage. All have synchronized for the first time in history. Do we have the desire? That is a question that each of us must answer for himself” (253).

(In)Conclusion

What evidence attests that the current convergence of bodies, the trope of whiteness, and mainstream U.S. culture is not a momentary anomaly? Within academic culture, there is whiteness studies. Within popular culture, there is Maraniss' biography of Lombardi. There is even the white guy at the CCCC convention cocktail party. Was he being snide or simply jocular when he claimed that it is hip to be a white guy again? To be honest, when I overheard his remark, I could not tell. But whether or not I am able to discern his intent is little cause for concern. As Reynolds reminds us, Aristotle, in one of his finer moments, says that "we become just by doing just acts" (qtd. in "*Ethos*" 328). Perhaps the cocktail party guy will accidentally overhear himself and, as a result, embody the trope of whiteness in ways that will help him understand his accountability for the *then-that-is-now*. Perhaps he already has. Such are the possibilities of rhetoric.

But whether or not the cocktail party guy accidentally overhears, or purposefully eavesdrops on, himself, *we* should eavesdrop on him—and then act on what we hear. Such are our challenges as scholars and teachers. As scholars, we must reflect on the influence of whiteness in our discipline, our professional journals, our conventions, our books and articles, our professional networks, and, dare I say, even our friendships. As teachers, we must introduce students to rhetorical tactics that will enable them to reflect on the influence of whiteness in their own lives and cultures. Many tactics are available. For example, Susan Jarratt offers rereading (xxiv); Cheryl Glenn, remapping rhetorical territory (1-17); Roxanne Mountford, resisting empiricism; Jackie Royster and Joyce Middleton, listening (Royster 38); Michelle Ballif, speaking as a listener (59); Nedra Reynolds, interrupting ("Interrupting" 70-1); Diane Davis, hearing a/new; Shirley Logan, speaking the unspeakable (55); Ellen Gil-Gomez, piece-making (204); Lynn Worsham, composing storied cultural critiques (336-46). To that list, I add eavesdropping. By living and teaching such tactics in ways that are pertinent for our particular locales, we remind ourselves and our students that even as history, whiteness, and rhetoric encircle us, we have access to agencies (admittedly in varying degrees) for circling through them.¹⁵

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Notes

1. Poulakos provides one answer to this question by invoking a Nietzschean critical historiography: “The critical conception of the past operates from the assumption that much of what the past has produced is dysfunctional and useless because it was not, indeed, it could not have been, produced with our present predicament in mind. Therefore, if we are to place history in the service of our life [a Nietzschean imperative], we must rid ourselves of the burdens of the past and strive to create from them materials that are useful, that augment our capacity to live joyfully” (90). Poulakos’ source for this critical historiography is Nietzsche’s “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” which posits three kinds of history—monumental, antiquarian, and critical (72-76). (I’d like to thank Michelle Ballif for referring me to these sources.)

2. For landmark research associated with the contemporary whiteness studies movement, see Allen; Dyer, Fine, et al.; Frankenberg; Hill.

3. For other challenges to the origins mode of historiography, see Jarratt’s feminist sophistic historiography (10-12) and Vitanza’s Nietzschean (sophistic) “sub/versive” rhetoric (“Notes” 100-01, 106-14).

4. Rich’s description of the poetic moment also explains why the convergence of body, trope, and culture is often interpreted as a moment of origin: this convergence is “the crossing of trajectories of two (or more) elements that might not otherwise have known simultaneity. When this happens, a piece of the universe is revealed *as if* for the first time” (8; emphasis added). Her “as if” exposes that what we name moments of origin are actually moments of usage, which (given our deep desire for origins) are often received *as if* they were origins.

5. One important white institution is law. As C. Harris argues, within the legal system whiteness emerges as property: “Whiteness—the right to white identity as embraced by the law—is property if by property one means all of a person’s legal rights” (105).

6. People of color have also been aware that whiteness represents privilege. Powell claims that the use of the term “‘white privilege’ is a redundancy [since] Whiteness has always signified worthiness, inclusion and acceptance” (qtd. in Roediger, *Black* 100).

7. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo concretizes this safe space in terms of writing. Quoting Ivan Argüelles, she claims that white writing is “evocative, finely crafted, witty, urbane, sophisticated, occasionally troubling, but always *safe* . . . sometimes politically correct, but sanitized and with only faint air-brushed innuendos of anger” (168; emphasis added).

8. Another example of how whiteness informs blackness is played with in Rogers’ “Debating the Senator” (1917), in which a black pullman porter informs a white segregationist Senator from Oklahoma that

“The word, slave, has a white origin.”

“A white origin!”

“Yes, sir, it comes from ‘Slav,’ a very white-skinned people who were reduced to slavery by the Germans. . . .” (98)

9. Smith demonstrates the “semantic” level of discursive socialization when she describes how adult white Southerners of a certain class denigrate their childhood love for the black women who cared for them by naming these women “nurses” and then tearing up at spirituals for the rest of their lives instead of continuing a caring relationship with these women (130). Smith demonstrates the “somatic” level of discursive socialization when she describes how Southerners use language (she implies but never states the n-word) to dehumanize African Americans and justify whites’ physical torture of them. This socialization is played out on both black and white bodies, obviously with very different results (161).

10. I use Buell’s term “authorial agency” to signify positions of production (i.e., speaking and writing), and I use his term “readerly agency” to signify positions of reception (i.e., reading and listening). While I recognize that these forms of agency interact, I also think the power differentials of these positions, as they play out in U.S. culture, are worth exploring separately.

11. Reynolds reminds us that the community in which Aristotle was writing precluded the participation of women and slaves within communal decision-making (“*Ethos*” 329). Consequently, even if it were possible, simply lifting the theory and dropping it into our lives won’t work. We must remake it for our own historical moment.

12. Gladney explains the silencing of Smith in 1949: “Although *Strange Fruit* [an interracial love story set in the South after World War I] brought Smith international acclaim and greatly expanded her sphere of influence as a social critic, *Killers of the Dream* . . . affronted too many southerners—including powerful moderates—to be financially or critically successful. After an initial 30,000 copies, sales dropped dramatically, and when reviewers and critics refused to accord it critical notice, Smith was effectively silenced as a writer. . . . This subject matter and Smith’s innovative style were met with hostility, or deliberate silence, by the literary establishment, the New Critics, and the general public of Cold War America” (iv).

13. In 1994 not only was *Killers* reviewed but Smith was hailed by critics as “original and insightful” (Hobson 756), as “bold and honest” (778-79), as “one of the most important white civil rights figures of her time, virtually alone among white Southern ‘liberals’ in condemning gradualism in all of its forms and in calling for an immediate end to institutionalized segregation in the interest of all Southerners, white as well as black” (Watson 470). Also see C. Carr and Romine.

14. Two other responses to Royster’s question “How do we listen?” may be found in Ballif’s and Ratcliffe’s articles on listening.

15. My thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their rich suggestions for revision, and especially to Lynn Worsham for her comments on eavesdropping.

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