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Rhetorical Genre Theory and Whiteness

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Rhetorical Genre Theory and Whiteness

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KEYWORDS—*rhetorical genre theory, whiteness, composition, first year writing, white supremacy, higher education, James Baldwin*

INTRODUCTION—Whiteness is a socially constructed system of norms that grant those classified as white—typically individuals with light skin—a great deal of unearned opportunity and privilege. The definition of what makes someone white is negative, that is to say, it is based on what they are not rather than what they are. To be white is to not be a person of color; the grouping of people who are white do not have anything in common ethnically. In the United States whiteness is used as a way to maintain white dominance over a society that claims to be a meritocracy. Those in the white group are privileged, with their ways of knowing and being considered norms. All others must conform or suffer the constitutions of being rejected from the dominant group.

It is also important to understand that whiteness intersects with class status. Whiteness and the American middle class are linked by common values and exceptions. If one can navigate the ways of knowing and being of whiteness, they can likely navigate our middle class. It is not a coincidence that for a child of white parents the path through the educational system and into the middle class is relatively unobstructed. Thus they not only end up in a position of relative socioeconomic power, but also reinforce the myth of the meritocracy in their own minds.

Whiteness is the foundation on which academia is built. It shapes the institutions and methods of knowledge-making that form what we call education. If we hope to make radical, meaningful change to our systems of learning and knowledge, a critical step will be decentering whiteness. In this paper I start by discussing and marking my own whiteness and describing the ways in which it has influenced my experiences in higher education. I do so to clarify that this is a white, middle class, and male piece of writing—identities that all too often go unstated and unaddressed by the author. This lack of awareness and discussion of an author's whiteness contributes to fortifying the hegemony of whiteness.

I also define whiteness as I am conceptualizing it in

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this paper. To help define what it means to be white and how it intersects with learning, I look to James Baldwin's thoughts on whiteness and integrate his writing throughout the paper. It is also important to address how writing instruction serves as a gatekeeper of the academy, privileging the thoughts and practices of those who have access to white, middle-class discourse, and how white teachers fall into the trap of reinforcing white hegemony.

Finally, I address rhetorical genre theory as an example of how, like many of our tools and methods of knowledge-making, it arose from whiteness and should not be considered ideologically neutral or universal. In closing, I further discuss what Baldwin termed the "price of a ticket" to access whiteness and outline some of the work that the individuals most privileged by the hegemony of whiteness must do to aid in its decentering.

MY WHITENESS—I have had what many would consider a successful but unexceptional college experience. Checking the boxes, I worked my way from remedial classes at community college to graduate-level courses during my last year as an undergraduate. One of the things I want to examine in this paper is why my experience, as a white, middle-class male, is considered so typical that no one would think to look more closely at it. What allowed me to go from remedial classes to doing graduate coursework as an undergraduate? As much as I might be encouraged to say that it was only my hard work and dedication, and to think nothing more about it, I don't believe it was. I know that I was able to succeed

because I am operating in institutions that were built from the ground up for people who look and think like me—people whose families hold the same values and have the same histories as mine. Access to whiteness has influenced my success in college. I was supported by a system of norms that has allowed me to excel because I was born into it, raised in it—it is the air I live and breathe. And just like the air around me, I can't see it, can't feel it; no one is going to point it out to me, and say "You've done well, but be sure to thank the invisible force guiding you along the way." If someone said to me that it was not my brain, but my whiteness that got me to where I am, it would be culturally normal for me to take offense. Those of us who are white have been trained to defend its invisibility. We do this by focusing on the white experience as a normal and neutral baseline, and disregarding or disbelieving the experiences of those who are not white. But I have come to understand the importance of naming whiteness for what it is and to always question my idea of normal in any given setting.

It would be easy for me to think that the journey I have had is typical or to think it was not anything outside of my control that facilitated my success and ease of adjustment in higher education. But I have learned better than that. I now know that I am the type of person these institutions were built for, built on an academic tradition going back to the abbeys of Europe. While I may have had my own private doubts about my place at Humboldt State University, it is unlikely anyone else doubted me.

My identity as a white, middle-class male is an important influence on my interpretation of whiteness in academia. Without bringing my identity to light, it would fade into the background as it is the dominant, "neutral" discourse. The white man is the default, the assumed identity. Those with identities like mine are granted ideas without scrutiny, and they enter the scholarly conversation without an attached qualifier, such as an LGBTQ author or writer of color. It may seem odd for a white person to argue for the decentering of whiteness, however, I believe that whiteness in academia cannot be decentered if it is not addressed. Just like any other part of a person's identity, having access to the power structure of whiteness shapes how the world is seen.

People who grow up white rarely have their view of the world challenged. It often seems to them that everyone sees and experiences the same world, regardless of whether they are white. They also tend to be unaware of the influence that their whiteness has on their view of

their environment. White people can easily believe that they see the world objectively, that there are no parts of their identity that are interfering with their assessment of reality. Robin DiAngelo (2016) explains it well through her experience in her book, *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*: "I did not see the world objectively as I had been raised to believe, nor did I share the same reality with everyone around me. I was not looking out through a pair of objective eyes, I was looking out through a pair of white eyes" (p. 2). This belief is reinforced by a white dominant system that allows white people to remain immersed in whiteness in their daily lives, including in academia. Throughout my years at Humboldt State University, for example, all of the classes I have been required to take have been taught by white faculty. In the fall of 2016 Humboldt State University had 241 tenured/tenure-track faculty, 77% of whom were white. The English department I study in reflects these numbers. This is not uncommon in higher education and only helps make reality seem more normatively white.

WHITENESS AS POWER—I conceptualize whiteness not as a race but as a power structure. Within this structure those with white skin are given more privilege, opportunity, and resources. These advantages are not acknowledged. The success of those with access to whiteness is used to measure what is normal within the structure, while those outside of the white group are deficient. Whiteness, and the understandings it holds as norms, has become a powerful hegemonic force in the world around us. These understandings are reinforced at every level of education. In schools, and in higher education especially, whiteness acts as a gatekeeper of success. Those who cannot make it in school are written off by society as hopeless, and the white, middle-class dialect used in schools is a tool to dictate who reaps the rewards of education. The fact that high school dropouts make so much less than college graduates is framed not as a social injustice, but as punishment for those who could not succeed in the educational system and a reward for those who could. This power structure does the work of both making sure that those who succeed already have access to whiteness and of blocking the progress of those that do not, thus perpetuating power imbalances between those with access to education and those without.

James Baldwin was a novelist, essayist, and social critic who wrote at length and with piercing insight about

the American experience. Baldwin articulated the white experience as lacking both culture and ethnicity, an experience that is nothing more than an invisible power structure that privileges those deemed worthy of access. Baldwin (2011) wrote of whiteness: "The world is not white; it never was white, cannot be white. White is a metaphor for power, and that is simply a way of describing Chase Manhattan bank" (p. 158). Baldwin's use of whiteness as a metaphor for power has been influential in my own conceptualization of whiteness. Stating emphatically that the world is not white, cannot be white, speaks to the fact that no matter how deeply entrenched whiteness might be, it is nothing more than a way of seeing the world that is invested in maintaining the power held by the likes of Chase Manhattan bank. If someone is white, they are not part of a group defined by anything but power. The concept of whiteness is socially constructed to privilege and oppress, and it has become an incredibly strong hegemonic force in our world. Those with access to whiteness are trained to see their privilege as innate superiority and personal achievement, while those without access are treated as deficient or personally responsible for their oppression. Conceptualizing whiteness as power helps it become visible. It traces and decenters the hegemony of whiteness and makes visible and dismantles the ways in which it supports white supremacist power structures within our institutions.

We do not have to look far to see the influence of whiteness in our educational system. Differences in outcomes between white and non-white students are referred to as "achievement gaps"—the white students' level of achievement is the norm while all others' underperform. The underlying influences of whiteness must be addressed and made clear that the norms it holds are not universal or superior. As James Baldwin wrote: "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (2011, p. 42). The ways in which the hegemony of whiteness is taken for granted in education must be faced if it is to be changed.

Baldwin (2011) also articulated the price of whiteness and how America became white: "The price of a ticket was to cease being Irish, cease being Greek, cease being Russian, cease being whatever you had been before, and to become 'white.' And that is why this country says it's a white country and really believes it is" (p. 156). The price of a ticket, as Baldwin puts it, is to give up who you are. This is fine for those of us born into whiteness; we never had cultural attachment to begin with. But the cost is

much higher for those who must cease being who they are culturally and survive in a white supremacist system by assimilating to a view of the world that does not make room for them.

WHITENESS AS OBJECTIVE AND NEUTRAL—

Whiteness and *langue* are closely related to each other. "Standard English"—the English canonized in many style guides and manuals—is the *langue* of whiteness. It is the primary dialect of the white, middle-class people in the United States. Even though The Conference on College Composition and Communication has asserted Students' Right to Their Own Language (1974), it is still enforced as proper and the norm. Those who speak English get a head start on their education, as they are not being corrected by their teachers for the way they speak. An example of how teachers may reinforce whiteness in education is offered by Joan Wynne (2008), who writes about her experience giving questionnaires to gauge the attitudes of almost uniformly white teachers-in-training and working teachers about language use in the classroom. One of the respondents claimed that "all children should speak 'Standard English' because, 'We are a part of the Human Race and Standard English is the common denominator,' ... a 'neutral and universal language'" (p. 211–2). This response is one of the more extreme, but it reflects the overall response to Wynne's questions about language. Particularly telling is the comment about Standard English being "neutral" and "universal," as both terms accentuate the teacher's unawareness of their whiteness. This person does not see their whiteness as something that is politically charged or as something that gives them a great deal of social power. To them it is normal and natural, the "common denominator" across all students. They do not see the privilege embedded in that statement, to never having to think about their language as anything but universal. These teachers are the foot soldiers of whiteness. They guard the gates of social power and accessibility, and without knowing it beat back language expression that is not white and middle-class.

Writing classes are some of the most powerful tools that academia has to teach students the logic and methods of whiteness as neutral and universal. Even position statements like the Students' Right to Their Own Language (1974) do little to address the way white, and supposedly neutral and universal, academic discourse is used as a tool of white supremacy. It certainly is important to articulate that students have a right to their own language and

composition studies have done good work to move the field away from skill and drill grammar instruction. But just as removing a dress code will not remove the stigma attached to some clothing, allowing students to use their own language does not remove the stigma attached to non-white ways of speaking. As Asao Inoue (2014) states, we must do more than simply acknowledge that there are many ways of speaking (p. 71), we must also stop believing that white discourse holds the keys to “creativity, insight, critical thinking, explanation, and communication.” Language differences must not be viewed as a deficiency to be overcome (p. 89). Inoue highlights one of the ways that language is an effective gatekeeper for whiteness. Even when non-white discourse is an option for students, it doesn’t change the stigma that other forms of language are less effective, less objective, or even less moral than white, middle-class English.

In “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” Lynn Bloom argues that first-year college English classes are a site where middle-class values are instilled in students as they enter higher education. Bloom’s writing focuses on middle-class values, but I think that it can also be interpreted as a statement on instilling whiteness in first-year writing classes. These writing classes are understood to be one of the key places where the skills that are needed to succeed in college are taught. In an institutional system that is so deeply entrenched in whiteness, it is not hard to imagine that these first-year writing classrooms might become one of the places where whiteness is reproduced in the academy. The so-called objective and neutral logic and practice of academia are shown to students, and the students are told that to succeed they must learn to use these tools. Or as Bloom (1996) put it more bluntly: “Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English” (p. 656). The danger of this process is that it is seen as ideologically neutral. Students are learning to be objective and think critically, but they are doing so on the terms of an educational system that is based in whiteness. Because the whiteness of the academy is unmarked, the tools that students are expected to use are working on students as much as for them.

RHETORICAL GENRE THEORY AND WHITENESS—Whiteness plays a central role in shaping the academy, especially in the first-year writing classroom. It would be worthwhile to look more closely at one

of the theories that informs those writing classes and how they are both shaped by whiteness and help explain how whiteness shapes the academy. Rhetorical Genre Theory is a way to understand rhetorical situations. This theory holds that “genre constructs and responds to recurring [social] situation[s]” and that “Genre is truly ... a maker of meaning” (Devitt, 1993, p. 580). Or as Bawarshi (2000) put it: “Genre is what it allows us to do, the potential that makes the actual possible, the ‘con’ and the ‘text’ at the same time” (p. 357). It helps to understand the rhetorical situation and how it functions within our society, but it also illustrates that genre is contingent upon the social situations that arise. Genres both meet the needs of the situation and shape the response to it. We write thank you notes because of a need to express gratitude, and the note we write is shaped by the rhetorical constraints put in place by the genre. Miller (1984) discusses how those situations are constructed: “Situations are social constructs that are the result, not of ‘perception,’ but of ‘definition.’ Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the center of action is a process of interpretation” (p. 156). If human action is directed by meaning, and genres are makers of meaning, then genre is a critical piece to understand when considering how writing is constructed, how it works in the world after its construction, and how these two phases are interrelated.

But how does whiteness work within this theory that can tell us so much about the social functions of writing? Miller (1984) addressed the fact that there are many ways recurring situations could be reacted to and lamented the lack of shared meaning among individuals: “What recurs for me does not for someone else; with a wealth of stimuli and a dearth of shared knowledge, we hardly know how to engage each other in discourse. We have many and confused intentions, but few effective orientation centers for joint action” (p. 158). Bawarshi (2000) frames Genre as a tool that has the power to bridge differences in the field of English studies: “I posit genre theory and analysis as a method of inquiry that might very well help us synthesize the multiple and often fractionalized strands of English Studies” (p. 336). The kind of universalizing being called for would be useful in the sense of increasing the potential for shared knowledge and community action. But it is important to ask, on whose terms are methods and knowledge being universalized? A lack of shared meaning should not be solved by developing a normalized understanding of the world based in whiteness. This is not

to say that rhetorical genre theory is not useful or cannot lead to greater understanding. But tools used to gain understanding cannot be viewed as neutral, reflective of a universal, ideologically neutral form of knowledge. This problem is compounded by the fact that a white lens, the functional foundation of the academy, is conflated with a lens that is objective and neutral. Universalized knowledge based on a white lens would only serve to reinforce white supremacist hegemony. While knowledge-making or inquiry of any kind always employs some type of lens, it is important that these lenses are discrete and obvious tools. White scholarship and white understandings of the world must be seen as white, not as neutral and universal.

Another example of the universalizing of rhetorical genre theory is given by Bawarshi (2011), who posits what he calls the genre function: "which constitutes all discourses' and all writers' modes of existence, circulation, and functioning within a society" (p. 338). Genre may indeed contain all of these things, but the theories used to explain genre come from a small set of academically located discourses that are centered in whiteness. It is important to make the distinction between a tool of inquiry and an object of study. The former is the theories and methods used in academia to make sense of the world; the latter is the part of the world being studied. These tools are no more neutral nor objective than the world they seek to understand. The ways of knowledge-making we have at our disposal may seem to account for everything, but they can only complete this task by using the basic assumptions of the hegemony of whiteness.

An issue that arises with analytic tools rooted in whiteness is that while they may expand understanding for those with access to whiteness, they limit other ways of understanding. When whiteness is presented as neutral or universal, it cuts down the potential for a plurality of voices. Theories based in whiteness limit our tools of understanding. Miller (1984) states that, "The number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society" (p. 163). However, the academy works against the complexity and diversity of the students who enter and aims to make them into scholars who will develop the complexity of white and middle-class ("academic") thought and theory. This means that the academy is a self-regulating system that limits processes of understanding to standards of scholars based within whiteness. Students must both be given access to the knowledge-making tools

of the academy and encouraged to fully understand the ideological nature of those tools.

The paradox of using tools based in whiteness to decenter whiteness must be addressed head on. Intersectional feminist Audre Lorde (1984) wrote: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." This could also be interpreted as the idea that the tools of whiteness will never decenter or dismantle whiteness. It is important to remember that rhetorical genre theory is both a tool of whiteness and a tool that can be used to help understand whiteness. But the paradox of using a tool of whiteness to work against whiteness should not be forgotten.

Rhetorical genre theory is also connected to whiteness in that it searching for typicality among texts. Rhetorical theorists are likely to be seeking conformity and examining generic expectations (Devitt, 2000, p. 705). The fact that whiteness plays such a large role in shaping the typical genre means that what rhetorical genre theory marks as typical will likely be white and middle class, and what it marks as deviations or errors will not be. This is not to say that identifying and understanding genre with the tools of rhetorical genre theory cannot teach us a great deal, but the positionality of the tools themselves must be acknowledged. It must be understood that the standards and expectations of academic theories are not ideologically neutral. When the theories being used are meant to explain how rhetorical situations are shaped and met, it is important that the forces working to shape those situations are being accounted for. This is where whiteness becomes an important factor. It is the power structure that shapes so much of what we do and how we think in the academy, and we must make ourselves aware of how it influences what we write, say, and think. This is especially true in a setting that gives teachers the power to set generic expectations, and the students' ability to meet those expectations has a great impact on their success or failure.

Charles Bazerman (2004) addresses the need for a greater understanding of how genres function for different populations directly: "There are serious methodological difficulties with relying totally on our 'native speaker intuitions' as anything more than a first approximation. Technically, relying on our intuitions already makes us assume many of the things we want to investigate." What Bazerman calls "our native speaker intuitions" could also

be called our whiteness. He goes on to state that “We are already assuming that everybody understands these texts exactly as we understand them” (p. 377). The understanding that Bazerman references is rooted in the fact that the tools being used are built out of whiteness and supported by it. Just as genre reacts to and shapes rhetorical situations, so too does whiteness, as it works to shape assumptions in ways that both make it appear to be objective and reinforce white supremacist hegemony. It is not enough to make gestures acknowledging whiteness, to point out that we are making assumptions based on whiteness. Whiteness must be actively worked against by exposing and decentering it. The ways it shapes our reality must be understood and pointed out at every opportunity.

CONCLUSION—Rhetorical genre theory is just one example of how the tools we use to generate knowledge are embedded in whiteness. The basic assumptions of whiteness are what allow for the theories and methods of academia to be seen as universal. The question becomes, how can we decenter whiteness in our thinking and research? The first step is identifying whiteness, making it visible, working against all that has been done to make it as invisible as the air around us. Bazerman (2004) suggests responding to what he calls relying on “our native speaker intuitions” with the following:

We have only a bootstrapping operation of increasing our knowledge and perspective through research such as examining more texts in a more regularized way; interviewing and observing more writers and readers, and ethnographically documenting how texts are used in organizations (p. 377).

There is value in expanding knowledge in the ways Bazerman is suggesting, but there is also a need to take a step back and be aware of the tools one is using. Leaning more heavily into methods embedded in whiteness, without acknowledging whiteness, will only lead to greater understanding through a white lens. The hegemony of whiteness will remain unchallenged and will continue to function as a white supremacist system of privilege and oppression.

Baldwin (2011) offered his own thoughts on how we might address whiteness in the academy and scholarship: “One hears from a long time ago that ‘white is merely a state of mind.’ I add to that, white is a moral choice. It’s

up to you to be as white as you want to be and pay the price of that ticket” (p. 157). There is a choice to be made when it comes to whiteness. It can be left unchallenged and unmarked, or it can be marked, decentered, and dismantled. Anyone who is situated within the “white state of mind,” and who has access to the power structure that is whiteness must develop reflective habits and must be willing to stop paying the unseen moral price of membership. This price is not easy to become aware of, but it must be understood that the centering of whiteness at the exclusion of any other experiences will always lead back to a system in which the white, middle class, and male will be privileged. It is critical for those who are the most privileged by whiteness to do the introspective work required and learn how to stop blindly paying the moral price of whiteness.

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