

COLOR ME AUTHOR: TEACHING RACE AS A RHETORICAL STRATEGY

David G. Holmes

Composition teachers must continue to develop assignments that underscore the rich complexity of the African oral and literary traditions, and to develop assignments that complicate racial ethos. Such assignments encourage composition teachers to reflect upon and tacitly introduce their students to two interrelated questions: 1) Can race be used as a strategy to construct ethos in writing? 2) Can this goal be accomplished without ignoring the social realities of race? The first question assumes that race is a construct, not an objective reality, a well-documented observation. The second question underscores the need to recognize race as a largely arbitrary construct, while acknowledging the existence of racism and the value of the culture of people of color. Put another way, the questions expose the need for composition teachers to reflect upon the historical and theoretical import of race.

For the purposes of this article, I contend that rhetoric and composition professors should be able to trace the historical codification of anti-black racism in this country, if they are to address the needs of contemporary African-Americans students. Such a survey should include a consideration of the following pertinent topics: (1) racist doctrines about physical traits that were used to justify subordinating blacks during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, (2) the one-drop rule as a genetic marker of racial identity, and (3) dialect as a mirror of black consciousness.

Similarly, any writing teacher would do well to acquire at least a fundamental grasp of the salient issues in race theory. Such a

grasp may be one approach to balancing the theoretical critique of the American race construct (as scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah posit) with the practical concerns about contemporary racism within and without the academic community. To some degree, Kwame Anthony Appiah sees the canonization of African-American writing as an insidious inversion of the Eurocentrism that has characterized American letters in general. The issue for Appiah is not whether we should include texts written by those called “Black” or “African-American,” but rather how this inclusion, if motivated primarily by race, reinforces what proponents of Afrocentrism seek to discredit, namely race as a determinant of literary value.

Houston Baker, conversely, believes that Appiah begs two key issues: first, the right of a group of people to define themselves by their own terms, “traditions,” and art and, second, what he calls the “taxi fallacy.” Baker introduces the difficulties Black men in New York confront when trying to catch a cab to exemplify the practical irrelevance of projects like Appiah's; or as Du Bois surmised over fifty years earlier, “the Black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”

Similarly, in *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison offers a political rationale for avoiding the trap of assuming race no longer matters, a conclusion that could be drawn from Appiah's position. She argues that the recent push towards the colorlessness of the Western tradition aesthetic represents the same hegemonic power that established racial boundaries to begin with. For the writing teacher, Appiah's, Baker's, and Morrison's arguments need not be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, one can assert that race is constructed without dismissing its private and public significance.

Likewise, the two questions that open this reflection evoke myriad pedagogical implications, far too profound to explore here. I will, therefore, offer as starting point for the discussion a case study of my attempt to begin engaging these questions in my composition class at Pepperdine University. Of the many authors one could probably experiment with to teach on race and ethos, I chose Zora Neale Hurston. My rationale for considering Hurston

is personal as well as academic. Indeed, it is in some senses more personal than academic. Appropriating a worn allegory, one that Bunyan mastered and Homer employed centuries before him, I compare my growing understanding of race, voice, and identity to a personal journey, a quest.

My initial conception of my racial identity was imposed upon me as a child in the presence of other black children who couldn't understand how someone "who looked so black could sound so white." I've never had to face the dilemma of passing. Even so, the exclusion I experienced during many such childhood encounters was just as quickly replaced with bewilderment. After all, a number of other black children in my South Central neighborhood sounded as "pale" as I supposedly did. Were they too being harassed? Trust me, harassment is not an exaggerated description of what I confronted before I left California to attend undergraduate school in Oklahoma. For me, the peer-pressure to sound and walk as the "cool" blacks did was far more pronounced than were the solicitations to use drugs or join a gang.

I don't want to give the impression that whites did not contribute to the formation of my racial sense of self. On the contrary, during my second semester in junior high school, while I was being bussed to the valley, and later during my three year sentence at a lily white mid-western college, I watched my white counterparts react with disbelieving glances, and even more incredulous retorts, whenever I discussed my upbringing in the "hood." After all, any white American twelve-year-old, even the underachiever, knows that "all homes in South Central Los Angeles are female led." And if there are a few fathers around, they could not have been both college graduates and legitimately employed, as I claimed my father was.

I didn't realize that there was a cultural history behind the drama that these white students, other black students, and I were performing. I didn't realize that arguments about black identity were confined neither to inner-city playgrounds nor mid-western campuses, but are presently enacted in the words and lives of black and white individuals, who still believe thirty five years after

the Mod Squad that blackness can be defined as easily as one grows an Afro or puts on a dashiki.

The shadowy suspicions I harbored as a child and as an undergraduate took on highbrow form when I became a man within the academy. They constitute the reasons why I am intrigued with Zora Neale Hurston. That is, Hurston became for me the literary harbinger of current rhetoric and composition scholars that complicate the links among race, writing, and identity. Keith Gilyard's coming of age excursion in language, literacy, racial culture, and individuality, *Voices of the Self*, provides one example. But why and how would I use Hurston to teach my predominantly white classes at Pepperdine about race and authorship?

Southern Black Culture and Suburban White Campuses: Hurston's Abiding Relevance

Zora Neale Hurston defies simple characterization. Because she was extremely proud of the traditions of the all-Black town in which she was raised, many other black artists accused her of being the "happy darkie" and of denigrating her people. Richard Wright and Sterling Brown, particularly, chided Hurston for not vividly depicting the horrors of the South in her writing. Yet those who claim that Hurston never spoke out against racism are ignoring much of her work. In fact, many of her statements against racism were at once overt and unconventional. For example, Hurston objected to the 1954 *Brown versus the Board of Education* desegregation ruling because she believed the decision implied the inferiority of Black teachers.

She studied anthropology with the famed Franz Boas but remained intrigued with the mystical world of voodoo. And through her ethnographic masterpiece, *Mules and Men*, she blurred the confines among genres—can social scientific writing also be creative and hence artistic? As a result, she set the standard for including folklore vernacular in fiction.

Some of her works describe the blessings and perils of marriage, yet she was anything but conventional in her view of this institution, her attitudes most resembling those of Janie Crawford, the heroine in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Because both her personal and professional life challenged the conventions of her time, she became an early spokesperson for African-American feminism.

Most importantly, Hurston wrote within the larger historical frame, 1870-1920s, when blackness and artistic voice were being codified along academic, artistic, and sociopolitical lines. Like other older writers of color, Charles Chesnutt and W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance, she confronted the dilemma between the arbitrariness of race and the materiality of racism, suggested in the questions I raised a moment ago. Each challenged popular assumptions about race and culture. Chesnutt blurred the demarcation between the black/white racial binary by projecting mixed-race as a distinct category. During his long career, W.E.B. Du Bois's terminology for racial categorization changed several times. Unlike either Chesnutt or Du Bois, Hurston did not remotely denigrate African-American folk traditions as she complicated the issue of racial identity.

Curiously, according to Mary Helen Washington, reports of Hurston's physical appearance parallel her intellectual complexity. Washington's essay, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman in Half Shadow," recalls three dramatically different descriptions of Hurston's complexion:

Whether Zora Neale Hurston was black as coal, light yellow, or light brown seems to have depended a great deal on the imagination and mind set of the observer. These three divergent descriptions of her color serve as a paradigm for the way Zora Hurston, the personality, and Zora Neale Hurston, the writer, have been looked upon in the world which judged her. Outstanding novelist, skilled folklorist, journalist and critic, Zora Neale Hurston was for thirty years the most prolific black woman writer in America. And

yet from what has been written about her, it would be difficult to judge the quality of her work or even know what color she was. (7)

Washington's essay was written in the seventies. And although scholarship on Hurston has significantly increased since that time, she remains a woman obscured by shadow. For Washington, this is attributable to the way others have perceived Hurston. But I think it has more to do with how she projected herself. From her childhood, Hurston resisted categorization and, according to Robert Hemenway, "possessed a high tolerance for contradiction" (5).

Moreover, her resistance to being categorized was motivated neither by the desire to transcend racial identity nor to use race for political advancement. Rather, Hurston's quest is rooted in the play of the search itself. Her life and writing are marked by endless ambiguities, and this is precisely how she wanted it.

Early in her career, Hurston accepted race as a social and personal paradox. Hence, she never sought closure insofar as her racial identity was concerned. Her 1928 essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," provides a most ironic critique of race. This article was published in *World Tomorrow*, "a white journal sympathetic to Harlem Renaissance writers" (Johnson 131). The title itself evokes irony. The elimination of "like," as in "How It Feels To Be Colored *Like* Me," suggests that what Hurston's readers would deem objective reality, namely her "coloredness," she frames as subjective experience.

Additionally, had Hurston used "Negro" instead of "colored," her initial projection of blackness (and race) as variable would not have come across as effectively as it does. Barbara Johnson concurs:

...the essay is dotted with sentences playing complex variations on title words "feel," "color," and "me": But I am not tragically colored. I do not always feel colored. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a white

background. At certain times, I have no race, I am me.
(133)

Johnson also views Hurston's title as supplying the threads that form the ideological fabric for the entire essay. And, if Hurston is addressing, as Johnson surmises, a question asked by liberal whites during the Harlem Renaissance--"How does it feel to be colored?"--then the essay would not overtly threaten her white audience.

Hurston continues to relegate her color to the province of subjectivity by showing how her racial identity was initially shaped, not by her own perceptions, but by the colored perceptions of some white people she met as a girl on a river boat. In other words, "becoming colored" has more to do with social interactions and norms than with genetic characteristics. Since this is the case, Hurston creates a space in which color can be understood as shifting instead of static, or to borrow from Barbara Johnson, as a matter of "seeing and wearing" (138).

One of the most striking moments in this essay occurs as Hurston recalls a time when she and a white friend were listening to jazz together; her focus is their divergent responses. She is moved to "dance wildly" and "yeeoow"! He merely "drums the table with his fingertips." Hurston concludes:

Music. The great blobs of purple and red have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so paled with whiteness and I am so colored. (154)

A cursory reading of this passage makes Hurston guilty of stereotyping. Whites are not affected, moved by Jazz the way blacks are. That is, blacks have an instinctual tie to this music. Again Barbara Johnson counters this superficial reading, recommending instead one more in keeping with the ironic play manifested elsewhere. The colors employed to describe black

feelings are "skin paint," not "skin color." Thus "the 'tonal veil' is rent indeed, on the level at once of color, of sound, and of literary style" (Johnson 134). Also, the white man's "drumming with his fingers" is an "alienated synecdoche for bodily release," supposedly associated with the jungle.

The images of paint and the veil have another significance. One often speaks of emotions in terms of color. We immediately recognize "feeling blue" or "being green with envy" as figurative. Including something as truly colorless as emotions further gives Hurston's readers the opportunity to question whether race itself can be taken literally.

With the veil, Hurston plays on a salient image in African-American thought. W.E.B. Du Bois uses the veil to symbolize the irreconcilable differences between blacks and whites. They are, as Hurston remarks, "oceans" and "continents" apart, even while sitting next to each other. Once again, Hurston complicates the impenetrable differences between blacks and whites that Du Bois assumes.

"How It Feels To Be Colored Me" is a satirical masterpiece. Hurston projects an ethos that is fervently embraced by her audience. While their arms are open, however, she comes in for the kill. She persuades her white audience to appropriate a revisionist concept of race before they realize it.

The Mark of Zora: Using Hurston in the Composition Class

I will now outline a step-by-step approach for using "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" to teach race as a rhetorical strategy. Of course you have an advantage over my students, because I have given you background information on Hurston and this essay, albeit brief, that I do not start them off with.

Instead, I begin by dividing the class into two groups. In my composition classes that means approximately nine students per group. I assign each group the responsibility for answering one of the following related pre-reading discussion questions: 1) how do

people generally learn about their racial identity? and 2) when and how did you learn about your racial identity? They are given twenty minutes to collaborate on these questions.

After we come together as a class again, I prepare two columns on the chalkboard. I list the two groups' answers in their respective columns. The objective is to see to what extent the general observations about discovering racial identity parallel the personal experiences.

Next, I supply brief biographical information on Hurston, particularly her pride in black folk culture. For homework, I assign "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," reminding them that although I am interested in their own reactions, they should also pay attention to the extent to which Hurston's own construction of racial identity appears to be personal or social.

During the next class period, I start off with the students' more general reactions to the text. Then I return to the question: "For Hurston, is racial identity more personal or social?" I encourage the students to use textual evidence. Finally, I ask a series of questions, which along with the textual evidence they have shared, will ideally lead them to the conclusion that for Hurston the construction of racial identity is not a matter of either the self or society, but both. Rather, the key is to uncover the interplay, the tensions if you will, between self and society in the initial and ongoing formation of one's racial identity.

Having done this, I am ready to assign the essay prompt: "In an essay of seven to eight pages, reflect on the relationship(s) of race to the formation of personal and social identity in Hurston's essay. Pay particular attention to the ways in which Hurston distinguishes between individual and societal perceptions of the racial self. In what sense, if at all, does Hurston's understanding of race compare to your own?" Of course, after assigning the essay, I guide the students through those steps integral to drafting an acceptable document, including participation in peer revision groups and tutorials.

The goal of this and similar assignments is to enable the students to move from accepting race as a transcendent reality to

using race as a rhetorical strategy. After completing the assignment on Hurston, some of my white students began to interrogate their whiteness for the first time. Similarly my black students uncovered nuances about their identity, many of which go beyond materialist considerations of race. Ideally, I want all of my students to move towards considering race as something that can be, to some degree, manipulated for self-expression and to communicate one's cultural and political values. To use race, instead of being used by it.

This is not to say that my students would or should totally distance themselves from their existential investment in their racial identity. My conscience won't allow me to ask them to do what I cannot. For me, this essay and the other scholarly excursions I have and will take on the subject of race are more than professional. They're personal. And to some degree, when our students of color write, we should encourage them to mediate the tensions between the academic and the personal. Indeed, rhetoric and composition professors should avoid the pitfalls bell hooks ascribes to one of her teachers. hooks's essay "When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution: Coming to Voice" recounts her experience as the only black student in an all white creative writing class at Stanford:

When I became a student in college creative writing classes, I learned a notion of "voice" as embodying the distinctive expression of an individual writer. Our efforts to become poets were to be realized in this coming into awareness and expression of one's voice. In all my writing classes, I was the only black student. Whenever I read a poem written in a particular dialect of Southern black speech, the teacher and the fellow students would praise me for using my "true," authentic voice, and encouraged me to develop this "voice," to write more of these poems. From the onset this troubled me. Such comments seemed to mask racial biases about what my *authentic voice would or should be*. (Emphasis added, 52)

In reality, according to hooks, it was in the segregated schools of the South that she and her peers learned that “our sense of self, and by definition our voice, was not unilateral, monologist, or static but rather multidimensional.” Thus, they “were as at home in dialect as...in standard English” (52). Let’s not assume our students of color are, and thus make them feel, “homeless” when it comes to Edited American English.

Race as a way of constructing ethos introduces pedagogical as well as larger ideological vistas to addressing the dilemma posed by the questions I raise at the beginning of this article. As rhetoric and composition scholars, we must recognize the ubiquity of the socio-political effects of racism. But we must also remain aware that the links we forge among race, language, and identity are often constructed. And this meta-awareness should inform our thinking and teaching, particularly about race and the construction of ethos.

That is to say, we must make ongoing efforts to uncover direct but pliable links among American social history, race and identity theories, and contemporary composition pedagogy. Any theory that ignores the investments students of color have in their own dialects and cultures is not only impersonal but also anti-linguistic and ethnocentric. Conversely, any theory that elevates the experience of one person of color as a representative for all other persons of color is presumptuous and stereotypic, and will lead to a constrictive pedagogy.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Victor. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1931.
- Butler, Melvin A., et al. “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” *College Composition and Communication* 25 (Fall 1974): 1-32.

- Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987). *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 348-359.
- Davis, F. James. *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991.
- Ferguson, SallyAnn H. "Rena Walden: Chesnut's Failed 'Future American.'" *The Southern Literary Review* 15.1 (Fall 1982): 74-82.
- Forner, Philip S., ed. *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*. New York: Pathfinder, 1991.
- , ed. *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1920-1963*. New York: Pathfinder, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. *Race, Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- , and Sieglinde Lemke, eds. *The Complete Stories of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1995.
- , and Cornel West. *The Future of the Race*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- Gayle, Addison, ed. *The Black Aesthetic*. Garden City: Anchor, 1972.
- , ed. *Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in The Creative Arts*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature and Learning*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996.
- Gossett, Thomas F. *Race: The History of an Idea in America*. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1963.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Heermance, J. Noel. *Charles W. Chesnut: America's First Black Novelist*. Hamden: Arch, 1974.
- Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- hooks, bell. "When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution: Coming to Voice." Rpt. in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Ed. Peter Elbow. Davis: Hermagoras P, 1994. 51-58.
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Art and Such." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 21-26.

- . "Crazy for This Democracy." *I Love Myself When I am Laughing...And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*. Ed. Alice Walker. New York: Feminist P, 1979. 165-68.
- . *Dust Tracks on the Road*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1942. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.
- . "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." *I Love Myself When I am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*. Ed. Alice Walker. New York: Feminist P, 1979. 152-155.
- . *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1934. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- . *Mules And Men*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1935. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- . *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981.
- . *Seraph On The Suwanee*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1937. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
- . "What White Publishers Won't Print." *I Love Myself When I am Laughing...And Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*. Ed. Alice Walker. New York: Feminist P, 1979. 169-173.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston." *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 130-40.
- Johnson, Charles. *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.