

Doing Whiteness: On the Performative Dimensions of Race in the Classroom

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*While many scholars study whiteness as ideology, where the body is completely denied, or as materiality, where the body stands as the sole communicative marker of race, I examine whiteness in this essay through performativity—a theoretical approach that accounts for both the material and ideological by situating the material body as a product of reiterative acts. This critical ethnographic study explores how students in an entry level communication classroom performatively constitute whiteness as a privileged cultural category. Through analysis of public performances, I consider the ways whiteness gets reified and normalized, all while remaining under-examined as a site of investigation. **Keywords:** whiteness, performativity, critical ethnography*

To view the social construction of identity as an activity, a performance, is to imbue the process with play and discovery. The production of identity, negotiation of meaning, arbitration of power, and definition of self are constructs, to be sure, but these constructs are produced, refined, and re-produced through performance. Thus, the study of performance provides a heuristic device for social constructionism (Corey, 1996, p. 148).

Currently, the academic scene has witnessed a flurry of scholarship surrounding whiteness as a social and political identity. The multitude of these research pages attempt to play out what it means to claim the racial category 'white' and what implications that cultural category renders within our collective social world. However, much of the work done in cultural studies tries to analyze whiteness in the abstract, ignoring bodies and individuals who live within the world. Scholars like AnnLouise Keating (1995) claim that to

shift from 'whiteness' to 'white *people*' [. . .] draws on false generalizations and implies that all human beings classified as 'white' *automatically* exhibit the traits associated with 'whiteness': They are, by *nature*, insidious, superior, empty, terrible, terrifying, and so on (p. 907).

¹This warning should not be taken lightly for it highlights a very real problem in any research on race: essentialism. In other words, by locating race on bodies, one risks assuming like qualities based solely on skin color without acknowledging the different cultural factors that work together to construct identity. I do not want to discard this warning, but rather to suggest that if one wants to theorize race, the body—that physical representation of race that communicates culture—must be accounted for in complex and sophisticated ways. Yet scholars who focus on the body as a racial representation—a physical text that people will read and interpret—many times fail to account for how that body comes to have meaning in the first place (i.e., Dyer, 1997). That is, a reading of race that both resists the essentialism of which Keating warns, as well as a reading of race that accounts for the physicality of

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(and concomitant effect of) the raced body must be combined and complicated if one is to articulate the complexity that is the social power of whiteness. For these reasons, I will advocate a more performative reading of racial identity—where the presence of race does not get reduced to a reading of an essentized raced body, nor is the body divorced from racial identity creating a false separation between whiteness and the bodies that visibly read to others as white.

To accomplish this performative end, I offer a more focused study of racial performance where race is examined in situ, working to see how race is made apparent and thus working to recreate racial categories. Therefore, I work in this essay to examine individuals' performances of race within the context of an introductory performance studies course. This site allows for a study of students, each of whom derive from multiple ethnic heritages, and their enactment of race within the institutional confines of the classroom. In this site, students enact mundane performances of whiteness, while also interacting in a context where culture is commonly a topic of educational conversation. In order for me to locate everyday enactments of racial identity in the classroom, ethnography served as a critical and powerful method for uncovering and examining how participants communicatively construct identity (Braithwaite, 1997; Conquergood, 1994; Corey, 1996; Hartigan, 1997).

It is in the vein of looking at everyday communicative behavior that I hope to address Elizabeth Bell's (1995) urge that performance focus on situations in context where "specific embodiments" are the site for social research (p. 107). She advocates research that derives from and impacts upon peoples' lives. This research begins with people in everyday life situations and theorizes possibilities for improving their (our) social world. This study will add to the research already asking about cultural positionality and performance of identity, while also considering the ways racism and whiteness are constructed subtly through classroom interaction.¹ Whiteness, while a systemic historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment—through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding scrutiny and detection. This study locates performances of racial identity and deconstructs them with the intention of undermining their social power. Performance is, as Corey (1996) reminds us, a powerful tool for understanding the social construction of difference.

With the above issues in mind, my study attempts to account for the limited amount of critical research by whiteness scholars on race and people in interaction. These concerns lead me to several specific questions: How does whiteness get played out in lived experience? How does one enact whiteness through bodily activity? How does one construct staged performances of race? What underlies these performances? What are the hidden values that are expressed through staged performances, especially staged performances that take race as a primary theme? And ultimately, how does whiteness get constituted and made meaningful in these performances in ways that do not necessarily relate to the specific intent of the performance? This is to say, in constructing these performances, how do students construct rhetorical messages about racial identity, specifically whiteness, without acknowledging they are doing it? With these, I acknowledge that the need to examine bodies drives this research from the very beginning. In this study, I enter into a specific classroom and examine how raced bodies interact with race. The primary purpose of this research focuses on how race, specifically whiteness, gets performatively accomplished.

On Site and Method

This ethnographic study centers around race in an introductory performance studies class. I chose to examine a classroom setting because this location allows for a pedagogical view of race. This is to say that in the classroom, I can examine how race gets both enacted and communicated through pedagogical interaction between students, teachers, and the institution, as well as how race, as an educational subject, gets communicatively and performatively taught. "Performing Cultures," the course from which this study is based, is the basic performance studies course offered at this predominately white, Midwestern university. I spent approximately three semesters in the classroom, where I had the opportunity to view classroom discussions, group work, and performance rounds.² The material in this essay stems from one particular class within a larger research project. In this specific class, the majority of the students were of average college age (between 18-22), although some individuals claimed non-traditional status. Most students were not experienced performers, although through my observation I learned that some of them had encountered some kind of staged performance before. The course design introduces performance to students who have never experienced this type of academic work.

My selection of this class for my research was strategic in that it made space for students' own understandings about race to enter into dialogue with cultural communication work advocating anti-racism.³ In fact, the focus of this course was quite useful for me as a researcher interested in whiteness for it made space for students to advocate and express their opinions on racial diversity. During the course of my fieldwork I witnessed white-identified students working through issues as diverse as inter-racial dating/marriage, gay/lesbian rights, anti-racism, inner-city life, homelessness, and various sites of violence. While the ideology of antiracism in this course influenced the students' work in the class, I contend the flexibility of the course at least provided space enough for students who disagreed with the pro-diversity component of the class to focus on alternative performance topics.⁴ This study could very well have occurred in any communication classroom where students were asked to think through their own relationship to people of cultures different than their own.

When I first entered the room, I assumed, based on what was visually present to me, that all except two or three students were white, although as my time in the classroom increased I learned that appearances are often deceiving.⁵ Several students explained through casual conversation in the site and through their staged performances that their racial identity derived from descendants of various races, including one male student who claimed Lebanese heritage. While one can interrogate his conflation of nationality and racial identity, the fact that he identified as non-white keenly reminded me of the instability of the category "white." Thus, he was one of the students who appeared to pass as white, even though he self-identified otherwise. The instructor Renee self-identifies as white.

My desire was to enter this site and conduct an ethnography, with the specific purpose of 'watching for whiteness.' This, I had hoped, would allow me to balance several concerns at once. First, I could watch how bodies interact in space. Even though I ultimately affect the performance of race in the site, I hoped I could begin to uncover some of the ways race gets carried through bodies. Given this first point of focus, the absence of student voices is apparent in this study. While I made a strategic choice to focus on their in-class performances, I am aware that the absence of their

explicit understandings of performing race creates a limitation, yet I contend that the focus of this essay works to help explore understandings of race in site as communicated through students' public communication.

Second, this research allowed me to engage the participants in various ways, searching out their understandings of what it means to be raced in this culture through their expressions and performances in class. Thus, I could view pedagogical conversations of racial identity, while also examining students' own understandings of race in the context of a staged cultural performance round. Finally, I could see how students talk about race while also watching their bodies enact race both in staged performances (i.e., the enactment of another race) and in mundane everyday life performances. The combination of the two offers an opportunity to see an embodied transformation of visually marked, and mostly self-identified, white students into cultural others. The method of ethnography, informed by cultural studies and performance theory, served as an opportunity to watch, record, and sift through these students' performances of race through the mundaneness of the classroom.

Whiteness: A Brief Review

Whiteness literature has recently exploded on the cultural studies scene.⁶ Scholars have begun to articulate the white experience, trying to uncover the ways whiteness contributes to and is responsible for the continuation of racism. Through various research initiatives, many scholars offer critiques of multicultural programs that focus their attention on studying cultural 'others' to the exclusion of the white center of cultural power (see Dyer, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Warren, 1999). Thus, cultural studies scholars have turned their gaze inward toward whiteness to see how this unnamed center maintains cultural privilege and power. The basic premise of this work relies on the argument that by ignoring whiteness, whiteness maintains its power and goes unquestioned, uncritiqued, and unchallenged.

Most of the literature in "whiteness studies" tends to rest on two essential foundations.⁷ The first is that whiteness functions as cultural and social privilege; whiteness provides fundamental advantages attributed to the "white" subject, which then work to give that subject unearned leverage over others (McIntosh, 1988). The second central theme in this research focuses on the invisibility of whiteness to white subjects; whiteness appears so normalized to white subjects they fail even to see its workings (Dyer, 1988). In an earlier work, I discussed both of these themes, as well as located four permeable, but relatively distinct frames: whiteness as anti-racist practice; reading whiteness in literature, cinema, and scholarship; whiteness as a rhetorical location; and whiteness as a performative accomplishment (Warren, 1999). To review the work done in this research, I will briefly discuss these categories, providing examples for each.

While all the work in whiteness studies typically serves an anti-racist practice, several authors like Michelle Fine (1997), David Wellman (1997), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), and Alice McIntyre (1997) provide good examples of research that directly attempt to uncover and dismantle racism and white privilege. For instance, Frankenberg's (1993) often-cited study consisted of interviews with thirty 'white' women in order to determine how "race shapes white women's lives" (p. 1). This work analyzes the respondents' understanding of race in order to promote an anti-racist agenda. This differs from the work of scholars who examine scholarship, literature, and

cinema in order to uncover how whiteness is represented through those texts in that it foregrounds readings of specific textual sources. Scholars like Dyer (1997; 1988), Henry A. Giroux (1997), and Mike Hill (1997) study various cinema texts in an effort to see how film creates and reproduces images of whiteness that perpetuate dominance. Toni Morrison's (1992) crucial book *Playing in the Dark* provides a powerful example of the work done in literature, where she examines the metaphorical weight of whiteness as a cultural identifier, while examining how American literature always positions the reader as white. The third general trend considers whiteness as a rhetorical location, where researchers explicitly examine the rhetorical force behind the cultural and social position of whiteness. This research shifts focus to representational understandings of race emphasized in the above studies and moves to whiteness as a social identity constructed, and then levied, for political purposes. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek (1995) characterize this research as a linking together of the ways "individuals and groups construct identity, administer power, and make sense of their everyday lives" (p. 291). Scholars like Carrie Crenshaw (1997), Raka Shome (1999), and Warren Montag (1997) have written on the rhetorical force that whiteness carries, each examining the power of this particular subject position and its influence in this social world.

The examination of whiteness as a performative accomplishment stems from the desire to understand what it means to embody and enact one's identity. Building from Butler's (1990a; 1990b; 1993) work on gender, this trend examines how identity is constituted through individual acts. While they do not explicitly detail performativity, one could consider Shannon Jackson's (1997) work with staging whiteness, Peter McLaren's (1997) notion of decentering whiteness or bell hooks' (1995) work with whiteness as terrorism as examinations of whiteness as a performance of identity. In this essay, I examine race very much like John Hartigan Jr. (1997), an ethnographer who studied whiteness in Detroit, in that he argued that the way one does one's race differs depending on a contingency of other factors. While I will demonstrate that the ways students enact race may differ, that they all do it and do it in particular ways and through particular logics demonstrates the pervasiveness of whiteness in these students' everyday lives.

The Performance of Identity

A performative theory of identity, as articulated most powerfully by Judith Butler⁸ (1990b), understands the subject to be essentially unstable, never natural and thus constructed through embodied actions. Performativity denies, in some fundamental ways, the stability of identity, moving toward a notion of repetition as a way of understanding that those markers used to describe one's identity (i.e., gender, class, race, sexuality) get constructed through the continual performance of those markers. In other words, those labels that describe identity are constructed on the basis of arbitrary characteristics (e.g., sex on the basis of reproductive organs rather than hair color or height) and have been so repeated through time as to make them seem like natural constructs. The construct of difference, or those markers that constitute our identity, has the illusion of existing before the subject because of the naturalized processes of enactment that have become sedimented by political and cultural forces that regulate how we move through the world. As Butler (1990a) eloquently argues in regards to gender as an element of difference, "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 25). Here, Butler argues against

essential subjectivity; there is only the enactment of that identity which, as a result, constitutes the category itself. As Nietzsche argued, “the deed is everything” (cited in Butler 1990a, p. 25).

Performativity finds commonality in diverse theoretical camps such as ethnomethodology, as conceptualized by Harold Garfinkel (1967) and then extended by Candace West and her colleague Sarah Fenstermaker (1995), and Post-Semiotic Philosophy of Communication, as detailed by John Stewart (1995). In both of these areas, scholars are interested in how meaning is constituted through social interaction; however, performativity allows scholars to occupy a unique position from which to study racial constitution because it foregrounds how such identities become so naturalized that they appear to derive from bodily materiality. This is to say, performativity argues that identities such as race are made to appear material through a repetition of communicative acts—what Butler (1990b) calls a “*stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 272). To consider identity as Butler would have us, where the acts (gestures, habits, movements, patterns of talk, and all other modes of communication) constitute one’s very subjectivity, suggests that performativity allows for a keen understanding of how subjects come to mark and reify their identities through enactment. This reification (through such a stylized and continuous repetition) allows identity the illusion of materiality, when the materiality itself is thus constituted through the very act of assuming the identity. Applying Butler’s work to race and whiteness, this would not suggest that differing skin pigments are fictional or without consequence. Rather, it means our ‘colored’ bodies must be placed in an historical context. The fact that white skin exists is not accidental—it is an accomplishment of a history of discursive normalized moments that worked together to make that skin tone. Race is in part biological—but biology must be understood as a social, historical process regulated by social beings to maintain cultural expectations. As Butler notes in relation to gender, our materiality is a “continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities” (Butler, 1990b). Certainly, as Butler (1990b) argues, this does not necessarily assume that everyone enacts their identity exactly the same: “Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not an individual matter” (p. 276). The very fact that race or gender is an identifiable marker of difference, while simultaneously containing variation on those markers, suggests that identities are socially, performatively constructed.⁹

In this essay, I look at just one marker of identity/difference: race. My intention is to enter into a classroom site and try to locate the reiterative moments of racial enactment with the ultimate goal of seeing how race gets accomplished. This project is complicated by two key aspects of the performance of race in this classroom, both of which serve to hide the production of racial identity. First, I am entering into a process that historically hides its own production. In other words, performative theories of race deny that identity is so easily interrupted, noting that while race is not essential, it is also not whimsical. Thus, racial production occurs through a historical process of repeated acts (both in terms of particular values, modes of communication, and ways of being, and also in terms of the very practices of reproduction that dictated who shall mate with whom). Secondly, the performative process of race strategically hides its own construction by naturalizing race. The more one views race as materially essential to the body, the more race obscures its construction: Race, like gender, “is thus a construction that regularly conceals its

genesis" (Butler, 1990b, p. 273). Performativity thus provides a heuristic way of seeing race in ways that foregrounds how whiteness continues to construct itself as a privileged racial category of difference.

In this analysis, I examine performances of whiteness that provide space for one to see the process of performativity—as race gets made present in the act, one can see the cultural machinery that makes such productions possible. For these reasons, I offer this theoretical base for my examination of whiteness in this communication classroom and engage this site in an effort to apply Butler's philosophy of identity to race, demonstrating the heuristic value in this kind of ethnographic reading.

Performing Cultures

As in any ethnographic research, the overwhelming amount of data one collects must ultimately be organized into some kind of coherent picture. As I approached this site, I found fascinating, and ultimately telling, the way students constructed both the aesthetic and rhetorical dimensions of their performances. In other words, I found that these students strove to make statements about race, injustice, and methods for equality through their performances, based in their understandings of how race and transformation should be constructed. However, I found that identifying mundane moments of whiteness in the act of reconstitution was a difficult project indeed. I spent countless class periods staring at white-appearing students, noting how they sat, how they walked, how they interacted with classroom material and other students; but, I never felt comfortable in connecting a student's posture with a particular enactment of race. My frustration, I suspect, derived from the slipperiness of whiteness itself. Whiteness, as Dyer (1997) argues, is many times ignored as a racial identity, noting that traditionally studying race meant "that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people" (p. 1). If race is only associated with non-white people, then whiteness obscures its own racialization through naturalization and reification. This is clear in everyday language use where non-whites are labeled with markers of color: people of color, colored people, or other terms bearing 'colored' status. The ability of white people to go without such labels demonstrates the slippery-ness that is whiteness. Therefore, identifying characteristics of whiteness in the classroom becomes difficult, for my white eyes have been conditioned to see only students, not patterns of whiteness. This would suggest, as others have argued, that schooling is essentially a whitewashed social process.¹⁰

The more time I spent in the classroom, the more I was convinced that I was looking at the wrong phenomena. In other words, I was looking at the bodies of the students and expecting to see race manifest itself; however, I discovered that this relied on inadequate notions of race. My reliance on the body as the site of race (and explicitly whiteness) only essentialized race to the body and removed it from social interaction. Thus, I needed to reframe what I thought of as race, shifting to a more performative view of whiteness that acknowledged that the bodies I saw in this classroom that appear white are only manifestations of multiple repetitions of acts—historical acts of mating that, through social norms, generated the bodies I see in front of me. I decided that the theories of race that locate identity in the body were inadequate to my cause and called for an analysis that went deeper into the process of racial production—I needed to see how whiteness was being socially communicated by these participants to see if I could uncover how race (and our conceptions of race) were being constituted. This meant listening to and watching how these students spoke about, reacted to, performed as (and ultimately constituted) culture

in/through the actual performances. Here, I was able to see students actively and consciously make rhetorical choices about what a culture values and how a culture acts, which allowed me to uncover the underlying assumptions in mundane performances of whiteness. Even though the performances framed the students' talk as staged, planned, and crafted communication, I maintain the performances still reflected many of their own understandings, especially since they so adamantly defended those choices during the talk-back sessions following the performance rounds.

In particular, students seemed to really invest in the second round of performances, where the assignment asked them to place several texts together, creating an intertextual performance that combined prose or poetry with their own lived experience. Many of these performances included student written narratives that either spoke back to the text they chose from the anthology, or simply put their own 'story' next to another text to highlight points of connection or contrast. During Renee's debriefing after the day's performances, students would narrate how they constructed their messages to express their own views, address issues of culture, or promote equality. For these reasons, I found it fruitful to examine a round of intertextual performances in an effort to see how students construct messages about themselves in relation to cultural others, allowing me to uncover some of the students' constructions of whiteness.

The following analysis will consider three general trends I saw in the performances offered by this group of young performers. The first trend centers directly on the issue of the color-blindness, which functions to keep whiteness secured as the cultural center through a logic of race evasion. Second, I found a desire to individualize issues of difference, where racism becomes reduced to prejudice. This reduction depends on simplistic notions of intent, rather than complex readings of racism as a system. Finally, I found a dependency on stereotypical notions of race, where images of race get located in specific images: the KKK, the black mugger, or poor white trash. Further, I will consider how each of these trends performatively reconstitutes whiteness, where whiteness stands as the invisible cultural center.

"Fuck Jim Crow, Fuck Racism"

Many scholars have discussed what happens when whites ignore the impact of race. Whether it is the logic of individualism or the rhetoric of 'sameness,' scholars warn that any attempt to articulate 'color-blindness' effectively accomplishes the opposite of what is intended. As Frankenberg (1993) so powerfully reframed, 'color-blindness' actually functions as "color-evasiveness" because buried in the assumptions of individualism, which 'ignores' skin pigment, is the illusion of pre-established racial equality (p. 14). That is, one must actually believe that we don't see race—that the manifestation of racialized bodies in culture have no impact on what we do or how we interact with people. The very fact that social categories exist, not to mention the scores of published research on racism and social inequality, undermines this cultural logic. However, the power of 'color-blindness' as a perceived solution to racism, or as a logic one should follow, continues to persist in the American ideology of meritocracy.

This ideology was very persistent in Renee's classroom, where several students either directly advocated color-evasion or enacted race in such a way as to allude to an underlying belief in this rhetoric. As I will address later, this helps to constitute

whiteness as the naturalized cultural center. To explore this issue in the classroom, I examine how students either marked, or failed to mark, racial difference when entering into performance space. This is to say, how does the white student performer perform non-whiteness? Consider the following performance:

Jerry, a white-appearing performer, has created a complicated set consisting of a platform with chairs on either side. As the performance begins, Jerry stands in the center of the platform with an opening narrative making references to growing up black in a white world—a “survivor” of racism. When this first narrative finishes, he walks straight out and looks at the audience and loudly states “fuck Jim Crow, fuck racism.” He then turns and crosses to the empty seat to the left of the platform. The next piece Jerry performs centers on a young girl being relocated to a Japanese internment camp. While Jerry’s tone of voice shifts slightly to accommodate the youthful speaker, he retains his southern dialect, his posture only slightly changed. After a few moments in this narrative, he rises, repeats “fuck Jim Crow, fuck racism,” and proceeds to the chair just right of the platform. There, he sits with his legs wide open, rocking the chair back on its two hind legs. With a thick southern drawl, he begins to address the audience, telling stories about his life with the KKK. As this character talks, Jerry slumps in his chair, his eyes wide, his speech slow, and his expression empty as he describes a person of color, “this one, he’s a coon!” When finished, he again utters the connecting line and turns toward the audience asks us to consider the destructive power of racism (13 November 1998).

There are two key aspects of this performance that need to be drawn out of the above example: First, Jerry’s performance is clearly strategic—he took great time to work these pieces together, each following a similar theme, similar styles of narratives, and reoccurring images. His blocking and use of space also suggests care and attention to detail. However, a key aspect of the performance was not marked as clearly as most other choices. While Jerry allows the texts to differentiate the race of the speaker, Jerry fails to mark the presence of another race in vocal tone or posture. While each of the different narrators exhibit subtle differences in volume, mood, or tone that suggest a different speaker, Jerry does not mark racial difference bodily. In fact, none of the characters are marked as racially different except through the language in the script—each narrator is presented in Jerry’s Midwestern dialect, each embodied Jerry’s general posture and walk, and the performance of each were strikingly similar to Jerry’s everyday class behavior. Race is so unmarked in this performance that the people he performs are essentially unracial—they are ‘just’ human, with each just telling their individual tales. This elision of race marks invisibility through its absence; that is, the personas are all seemingly white, like Jerry himself.

This omission of race might seem inconsequential, except for the fact that Jerry chooses to mark the region and intelligence of the KKK member. For as soon as he increases the southern drawl, stupefies the language, and slumps the posture of the white KKK member, he physically and vocally ‘others’ that figure from the rest of the narrators we have met thus far. The performer creates a characterization of the racist—the one whom we can easily see to be prejudiced. This marking allows the performer to perform whiteness while not performing self, even if he himself is white. In other words, by aligning his everyday performance of self with the non-white narrators, he erases their racial difference in and through his own whiteness. Jerry must create another kind of whiteness—an overtly ‘racist’ whiteness coded through dialect, posture, and expression—in order to separate himself from the KKK example he performs. In this way, he cites or locates another easily recognizable performance of racism and concomitantly deflects his own in the process.¹¹ If whiteness (and only overtly racist whiteness) gets constituted as different in this performance, it would appear that all of the others are ‘really the same.’ The

extreme effort to otherize the KKK member deflects Jerry's own associations with whiteness and systems of domination. The presence of this white man's body on stage with the unmarked racial others serves to continue to make whiteness unmarked, uncritiqued, and thus recreates it as the stable and invisible cultural marker by which all other racial identities are measured. Note here how whiteness gets performatively reconstituted: Jerry's othering of the KKK member's whiteness reifies the illusion that racism only exists in the extreme and that Jerry, by aligning himself with physically non-marked, but nevertheless of-color, speakers, he assumes the role of the non-racist white. His performance of whiteness (re)constitutes racism as only an extreme act of hatred, while people of color are effectively erased of their color and conflated with Jerry's own whiteness. Color-blindness as a performative of white privilege functions as a naming, a repetitious elision of power differentials that cites the discursive power of meritocracy—the myth that color has no historical legacy of racial inequality (Butler, 1997).

If one places Jerry's performance in dialogue with Sandra's performance, race gets positioned in a very different way:

An African-American woman, Sandra, is performing a piece about being bi-racial. The first segment of her performance details several persons of racially mixed heritages, detailing their family lines and how they prefer to be addressed. When this segment has concluded, she addresses the audience directly, noting how race is a performance in and of itself, both white and black. She then smiles and states, "And I play," moving off to the left of the performance space. Here, her body stiffens, her English is standard American. The performance takes on an aristocratic tone as she "smooches" an imaginary other on the cheek in greeting, waving a flowing scarf. After she discusses going out on her yacht, her body returns to its previous posture as she moves center stage, again saying "And I play." As she continues moving stage right, her tone, walk, and language shift. Hand gestures grow as the woman speaks in black vernacular about her lack of cash: "Hey, What's up? You know I ain't got no mon-ey!" As she speaks, the language is rhythmic, highly articulated, and emotionally charged (16 November 1998).

In the text of Sandra's performance, race is as much an issue as Jerry's above, yet it gets marked in different ways. Rather than evading the issue of difference in the performances of race, race itself is taken up as a performative choice. The performances of whiteness and blackness in grossly stereotypical dimensions function here as a subversive performance racial identity. While Jerry's decision to distance and separate himself from race seems evident by his appeal to individualism and sameness, Sandra's presentation foregrounds social differences, allowing her to articulate a very different understanding of how racial identity is made through the embodiment of cultural messages, as well as to offer a vision for how one might make race meaningful through a staged performance of identity. Sandra's performance interrupts the everyday performance of race by calling attention to its performative nature—race is allowed to be seen as a social construct, a socially informed performance.

It also seems worth noting that this performance is by a woman of color, a woman who has to notice race because this performance of identity contains consequences for her in the world. The marking of the performative nature of race tells us that these choices are mundane, repetitious, yet simultaneously chosen in accords with the social sanctions and rewards within which such performances manifest. In other words, they are performances made, conscious and particular, all while acknowledging that those choices are not made in a vacuum; there is an historical, social,

cultural, and political reason for masking the making of those choices. The fact that Jerry can choose not to make these choices more marked in the performance is made possible only by the privilege of his own whiteness. This is to say, the very fact that Jerry can choose whether to mark race (or can ignore it as a factor) is a product of white privilege that Sandra's performance denies, for Sandra does not have that same kind of racial invisibility. Thus, Sandra embodies racial constructions with the metaphor of play, while Jerry relies on racial invisibility, serving to reinscribe an ideology of color evasion which strengthens whiteness' discursive power in the process.

In both these performances, the students constructed complex arguments about racial politics, thus reflecting and contributing to how race is understood by these participants. But these performances did more than simply illuminate one's understanding, they helped to make and remake racial identities. Certainly performance scholars have long noted the constitutive nature of performance (i.e., Bacon, 1987; Conquergood, 1983), yet uncovering how race is constructed through these performances remains an important site of critical interest, for in these moments racial production becomes visible. In Jerry's performance, the advocating of color-blindness performatively reconstitutes whiteness in such a way as to protect its privileged status. Thus, Jerry protects whiteness from critique by framing the KKK member as the single example of racism in action, and in return effectively eliminates his own implication in this system of advantage and disadvantage. So while his public message seems to construct anti-racism, his hidden message, made possible by a legacy of whiteness and racism, performatively works to remake his privileged position (Scott, 1990). But Sandra's performance dramatically works against Jerry's logic. By highlighting both the constructed-ness of racial categories through her stereotypical enactments and then framing them with "And I play," she undermines the stability of race itself. Unlike Jerry who protects whiteness through color-blindness, Sandra takes race itself as the central point of tension, denying any easy scapegoat by locating each of us in the production of race.

"A Racist: Someone Who Looks at Another and Judges Them Based on Skin Tone"

When McIntyre (1997) wrote about her work with white teachers, studying how they conceptualize their own whiteness, she notes many whites talk in ways that erase their own culpability for racism. She dubs this "white talk," claiming that this urge derives out of an unreflective immersion in the politics of whiteness (pp. 45-6). Whiteness, therefore, has particular strategies that allow it to go under-criticized and unexamined. As we saw above, Jerry chose a logic of color-blindness as a way of individualizing people (people are human beings rather than socially racialized human beings), thus performatively strengthening his own privilege by ignoring the institutional social systems that work to protect white racism from critique. Whether one conflates difference with personal opinion or points out the exception to the rule, individualizing locates strengths and weaknesses in the individual, rather than considering the systemic issues that surround those abilities (Ryan, 1971). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) note that localizing race or denying racial identifiers is part of whiteness as a strategic rhetoric.

Performances in this class, particularly performances by white students, consistently relied upon notions of the individual when discussing racism. However,

individualism functioned differently here; students used this logic as a way of localizing systemic racism in individual intent:

The lights have dimmed in the performance space. When Renee gives the ready signal to the performer, music blares from a portable stereo: "Free your mind and the rest will follow," claims the voice. Carrie, a young white woman, enters the room as the music volume is brought down. "A racist: Someone who looks at another and judges them based on skin tone," she begins (13 November 1998).

Carrie's performance, framed by a familiar song by musical group En Vogue, centers on the pressures surrounding interracial dating. She urges folks to "free their minds" and accept those who choose to date individuals from other racial groups. What is interesting here is that Carrie conflates racism and prejudice, describing throughout her piece the ills of judging someone else "based solely on the color of their skin" (13 November 1998). While racism is a system of domination, functioning much like Foucault's (1980) notion of power (a system that is enacted through everyone but not localized in any individual), prejudices are individual acts based on some arbitrary, though historically significant, characteristic (McIntosh, 1988). The term "racist" is a common way to describe prejudicial acts; however, Carrie continually elides the idea of the system that makes a "racist" possible. This reduces the social plague of racism solely to individual (and socially vacuous) actions, creating an illusion that the subtle changing of specific individual acts would make someone non-racist. As Butler (1997) might argue, such a move divorces the historical power of the performative, reducing the act only to a localized action. The simplistic nature of this kind of construction points to how whiteness, as a strategic rhetoric or systemic process of oppression, looks to the individual and, in effect, works to keep the system unchallenged. One then is or is not a racist, this logic argues, if s/he individually enacts, or chooses not to enact, prejudice against another person.

Other performances also featured the desire to look at individual attributes, rather than look at the systemic nature of racism. For instance, Robert, a performer who self-identified as Arab-American, discussed an instance where his race became an issue in fourth grade. During his story, he noted that individuals "should look at people for who they are," noting that "we are still American." Just as Carrie's performance was intended to express equality, Robert was expressing a desire for people to be judged on their character and not their skin tone, yet he also falls into the trap of locating this solely in the individual. By urging that one be looked at for who they are, he locates racism in the act of one person's failing to look at another's individual self-worth. This is to say, racism is created and maintained through the person doing prejudice, not through a system that makes these actions possible. Thus an appeal to individualism is a performative—a citation (and concomitantly a reiteration) of whiteness' discursive power, where institutional racism is obscured in order to reinforce white privilege through invisibility.

While both of these examples clearly demonstrate how seductive the logic of the individual is for students, they go further to locate the problem of racism within individual intent. Racism becomes reduced to specific acts carrying individual intention, where one must actively seek out and enact social inequalities. This is to say, Carrie's urge for people to not judge people "based on skin tone" asks the audience not to actively evaluate others. However, as Timothy Gould (1995) reminds us, there is a "perlocutionary delay" between one's illocutionary utterance (intent) and the ultimate perlocutionary effect (result) (p. 31). Put another way, just

because one does not intend to oppress others with an utterance or non-verbal does not mean that s/he is not responsible for the effects such communicative messages might have on others. So if one reduces racism to intent, then whiteness is again protected through the white talk discussed above; whites hold no responsibility for the perpetuation of racism and therefore they are free to keep inequities in place through their own inaction. Ultimately, racism and whiteness are both constructed as separate, allowing whites to protect (and performatively reconstitute) their privileged identity.

"The Face of a Mugger"

When McIntosh (1988) lists individual privileges that she receives based in her whiteness, she notes that people of color many times serve as stereotypes, while whites are constructed as individuals free from such collective generalizations. In other words, whiteness provides the privilege of being seen as individuals, while non-whites fall victim to stereotypical constructions based on assumptions of race. The urge to fall back on stereotypes, which then represent races, did at times find its way into the performances in this class. I find it important to note that these stereotypes were not just about people of color, but were also presented in situations in which the white performer wanted to distance him/herself from others of his/her race. In either case, the appeal to stereotypes gives white students the ability to disavow some 'other' from themselves, thus remaking their own whiteness as not-of-color and simultaneously not-racist.

An instance of this was in Jerry's performance of the KKK member, where his voice shifted into a southern dialect. The southern coding, most notable when the character said "Boy!" dramatically at the beginning of a sentence, relied on stereotypical images of KKK members. This is to say that relying on the common perceptions of the racist south allowed Jerry to utilize that stereotype rather uncritically. In another performance, Jacob, a white-identified male, refers to another white man as "poor white trash," thus accounting for this other man's racism. While much has been done to recover "white trash" (Wray and Newtiz, 1997), the use of this stereotype aims to separate the performer from the individual in his narrative. The use of this stereotypical image not only created a 'not-me,' like Jerry's KKK southern dialect, it also defined who this other man was: poor, dirty, uneducated, and racist.

In both of these examples, Jerry and Jacob constructed very particular performances of whiteness through which the stereotypes separated themselves from the persona described. This ultimately constructed the performers' whiteness as non-racist, while still allowing them to secure positions of privilege. Their whiteness was affirmed and thus unchallenged by their own talk, ultimately reifying the very system that hides, protects, and guarantees their privilege. Jessie Daniels (1997) notes a similar phenomenon when studying white supremacy groups, finding that the attention drawn to these overt examples of hatred obscures more mundane enactments of racism.

However, stereotypes were also constructed for blackness, as Janice's performance details:

Janice, a young white woman with long brown hair partially covering one side of her face, sits under soft lighting as she tells the class a narrative based on a "terrifying experience" of being held at gun point while working in a video store. She speaks in hushed and somber tones, her chin resting on her knees as she sits in a fetal position on the black plastic chair. The "true story" holds the class' attention, each of the audience members sit literally leaning forward toward her. She describes the man who

robbed her and notes his black skin, remarking that she was “looking in the face of a mugger.” Her narrative concludes with a confession that she now fears this man will get out of prison and search her out. (13 November 1998).

This narrative fascinates me as an audience member, especially as I reflect on how the image of the black man is used to distance Janice from the “mugger.” I am first drawn to the way the whiteness of Janice’s body, drawn up tight and exposed under the soft lights, is juxtaposed against the narrative of the violent black mugger. While her intent was to share a personal experience, it also served to solidify the stereotypical notion of black men in this country. Appealing again to Daniels’ (1997) work, Janice recreates the stereotype of the black man as a predator of white women. The availability of this stereotype and the ease at which it was offered demonstrates the power of this particular historical and cultural narrative. The violent black man, served up as an easy source of reference for explicating the fear she felt at that moment, relies on a stereotype to help generate sympathy for her situation. Drawing again on Butler, the summons of the stereotype is an interpellation; Janice’s offer of the story (the hail) and our accompanying acceptance constitutes multiple subjectivities in that moment (she is constituted as victim; the audience is constructed as sympathetic; and the black man is again constructed as always already criminal) (Butler, 1997). The moment the audience members either confirm the discourse through absent objections or through the physical act of comforting her at the end of her performance, we take up that discourse and reiterate the stereotypes it offers.

What ultimately gets constructed is a binary between the violent black man and the vulnerable white woman. This binary protects whiteness’ social and cultural power in two significant ways: First, whiteness and blackness are clearly separated in this construction. As Janice connects blackness and violence, she disavows herself and her whiteness from that construct. The mugger’s blackness, an integral aspect of the narrative, and her whiteness are seen as at odds, where violence and blackness become inexorably tied. Janice feeds the stereotype of the violent black male, thus constituting blackness as more savage, more dangerous, and more threatening. However, the easy reliance on this stereotype does more than just conflate blackness and savagery for it also constructs female whiteness as fragile civility that needs protecting. Whiteness’ privileged position in this social picture is affirmed, even as Janice acknowledges the problematic nature of her feelings. These acts, these citations of racial identity, have lasting effects regardless of Janice’s intention—they perpetuate racism through a continued naming. As Butler (1997) so convincingly argues, “Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking; it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name that is used” (p. 34). By citing the discursive construction of the black criminal, Janice remakes that identity before our very eyes, not necessarily out of desire but convention.

While these three examples demonstrate the power and utility of these stereotypes as performance choices for these students, there was one performance I must mention for it worked to upset the very stereotypes built and reified above. Chu, an Asian man, constructed a performance based in Arab culture, trying to explore the ease with which negative messages of Arab people were created and maintained through the media. While dressed with a towel around his head and sporting a fake machine gun, Chu reached into his bag and produced a can of cola. With a toss he announced that it was Petrol. Then, he produced another, tossed it into the crowd

and announced that it was a bomb. This was repeated several times covering several stereotypes of Arab people, noting the production of these stereotypes are as easy to produce as the colas from his bag. The deconstruction of stereotypes, while not present in most performances, was present in a few. These subversive performances did work to interrupt the performativity of whiteness, yet the vast reliance on such negative stereotypes undermined the potential reconstruction that took place in performances like Chu's.

Implications

I frame this concluding section of the paper "implications" rather than "conclusions" because the work of looking at specific enactments of whiteness through the lens of performativity, and other such methodologies that examine how whiteness might get accomplished through everyday interaction, must be continued for a coherent and complex understanding of whiteness and racism. Work by scholars like Daniels (1997) and Fuoss (1999) are already beginning to uncover how whiteness gets constituted, but much more needs to be done to really account for this process. I would suggest that this kind of micro-analytic work will greatly aid the work being done in both whiteness and communication studies, for it advances the level of complexity by focusing on the machinery as seen through the act. In other words, by looking at performances of whiteness (the acts of materialization in the process of performativity), one can get a glance at the historical and social process of reiteration that makes such productions possible. Most of the recent research attempts to see how whites understand their own whiteness (i.e., McIntyre, 1997; Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Wellman, 1993), but this usually only provides patterns or manifestations of whiteness. The generative power of performativity—the potential of locating race in its own process of reiteration—offers us the possibility of interrupting the discursive process of racial formation, as well as the naturalization and sedimentation of those racial categories. The ability to see how race gets accomplished in everyday life might just present the possibility of constituting race differently (Butler, 1990b). Performativity makes space for possibility and in that lies its strength.

As I close, I am reminded of the limitations of using the classroom as a site for studying racial production. While this site offers a lens through which one might witness a particular manifestation of whiteness, it is surely affected by the institutional limitation of the classroom. As McLaren (1993) so keenly notes, the classroom (and the social, institutional constraints of education) does change students behavior and performances of self, yet I would contend that this analysis speaks beyond the boundaries and confines of this group of participants, as well as the introductory performance course. First, this course functions as a general education elective, drawing many students from different backgrounds and career goals. This classroom's unique position in this university provides an opportunity to see a wide and varied range of student-participants in interaction. Second, this class is within a speech communication department that privileges student performance in the broadest sense. This is to say that whether the course centered on public address, debate, or intercultural communication, these 'performances' functioned as opportunities for students to make connections between their lived experiences and the course content. Third, the underlying performances of whiteness in this classroom ultimately bring to the surface whiteness as an on-going accomplishment that extends past the individual intent of these particular participants in this particular

classroom. These students are subjects embedded and constituted in a racialized system that continues to constitute their identities in ways that protect whiteness' normative power. That whiteness functions on this level means that the performances in this study only surface mundane understandings of race, all while continuing to mask those everyday (re)productions of race. The overall consequence of such staged performances of whiteness within our communication classrooms are only beginning to be uncovered, but in as much as these performances continue to reify the social privilege of whiteness, inequality will continue to persist in schooling.

Notes

¹Following the lead of Clifford Geertz (1973; 1988), this ethnography is in many ways interpretative. I have tried to balance two competing desires in the writing up of this ethnographic project. First, I have tried to explicitly paint a picture that suggests a sense of 'being there,' where the reader gets a sense of what it felt like to witness a particular cultural group (Geertz, 1988). Thus, while my brushstrokes create the picture, I have tried to be honest in my descriptive work. However, I also take the cautions about ethnographic objectivity by Geertz (1973), Rosaldo (1993) and Clifford (1986) seriously, each of whom argue that ethnography is always already an interpretative process—that any view of culture, my own included, stems from a source with a particular history and ideological point of view.

²During the course of each semester, I attended approximately 20 class sessions each lasting fifty minutes in length. My data collection consisted of in-class observation, during which I took extensive fieldnotes that were later transcribed and extended (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995; Lindlof, 1995; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The fieldnotes were then coded according to common themes and patterns, producing the trends discussed here.

³It is important to also note the politics of this course. This Midwestern university advocates diversity as part of its general education curriculum. This course (both in departmental focus as well as in this particular instructor's desire) advocates an anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-sexist ideological agenda. While students are encouraged to interact with material and discussions in ways that express their own understandings of cultural issues, the focus of the course cannot help but affect their performances and in-class contributions through which they are striving for positive evaluation. While this stands as a limitation of this study (as does any study of participants' understandings that happens in the classroom or any other institutionally marked space), I would suggest that this factor of the class matters little in the overall effect on this analysis because the reading I am conducting of students' performances focuses on the performative end of their communicative messages. Thus, the intent of the performer, the impact of the instructor, or the presence of an ethnographer matters little in the overall effect such discourse has on the classroom. The message still exists in time and space and is present for a critical reading.

⁴While the insistence of cultural sensitivity was present in this course, the assignments were not structured to mandate such products. Thus, a student who might not feel compelled to discuss racism or some other cultural issues could choose to focus his/her attention toward other pursuits. For instance, the specific round of performances I examine in this essay did not have to address race or culture in any way—only some chose to narrow their performances toward these issues. Thus, while I examine here the ways whiteness was deployed in these performances, other performers focused on family, home life, religion, or friendship. Therefore, I gathered that if a student radically disapproved of the political charge of the course, they at least had the flexibility to focus their energies toward different topics.

⁵Several times throughout this essay, I attempt to maintain a more performative notion of race even as I describe the participants. A performative notion of race would argue that students are not inherently white—that I, even as the researcher, cannot with certainty assign racial categorization onto another. In so doing, I use specific word choices to note this theoretical argument (e.g., 'white appearing'). Thus, such racial assigning of the students is clearly marked as a notation of the researcher, not as an inherent quality of the participants themselves. When a participant notes their own identity choice, I try to also draw attention to their naming. In theories of performativity, naming is part of how racial categories get reconstituted and normalized. I am, both in content and form, trying to disrupt that normalization through the choices I make in describing the students.

⁶While many scholars investigate whiteness' relationship to race, nationality, ethnicity, and culture, this essay builds from the literature examining whiteness as an ideological, social construction that levies and reproduces cultural power. The primary purpose of this research initiative is to uncover the power behind the political construct of whiteness as a discursive signifier of identity. See Carter, 1997; Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Roman, 1993 for preliminary conversations on whiteness' connection to the broad categories of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality.

⁷Whiteness studies as a discipline is really a misnomer; whiteness really stands as a movement within cultural studies designed to examine what whiteness means as a social construct. I use the term for its specificity, but acknowledge its limitations as an area of study in and of itself.

⁸In this essay, I adapt and apply Butler's philosophy of identity to the site of racial production. As I do this, I must admit that I am extending her work slightly, even though she herself preceded me in considering race as a performative construction (see Butler, 1993). As I read Butler, I see her using performativity as a lens to address identity, using gender as a location or site for her exploration. The adaptation of this work to whiteness is a logical extension of her work, particularly when discussing how bodies come to matter.

⁹My use of "performance" and "performativity" stem from Elin Diamond's (1996) distinctions drawn in her introduction of *Performance and Cultural Politics*. In that introduction, she borrows from Butler to argue performativity and performance are closely linked, noting that performance is the manifestation of performativity. This is to say, performativity refers to the reiteration process of becoming, while performance refers to the materialization of that process—the individual acts by human players in the world. Diamond (1996) argues: "Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance" (p. 5). I try to maintain her usage throughout this essay.

¹⁰By whitewashed, I mean to suggest that education, like any social process, was (re)created in this country by those in power to establish what it would look like, what it would feel like and thus how one would engage in the activity of learning. In this way, the teacher, the students and myself as researcher are performative accomplishments—our subjectivities as institutionally educated persons are the product of a cultural process informed by whiteness. For more on this conception of education, see Delpit (1995), Giroux (1997), and Loewen (1995).

¹¹Hartigan (1999) notes that whiteness should be understood as somewhat distinctive to the given locality in which it is produced (p. 314). By Jerry calling on or citing this regional performance of whiteness, he renders his own whiteness invisible. In this way, Jerry can align himself with the non-white speakers he has created.

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