I feel like I’m being judged for my white skin, but I wasn’t involved in the events the author describes. My grandparents immigrated to this country in the early 1900s. Slavery didn’t involve us.

I’m not white. What does this analysis of whiteness have to do with me?

Why are we focusing on this race stuff anyway? Why can’t we talk about everything we have in common as Americans?

I have heard these and similar comments from students when I teach Gloria Anzaldúa, Frederick Douglass, Leslie Marmon Silko, and a number of other writers who hold up the mirror to “whiteness.”! Whether they label themselves “white,” “African American,” “Native American,” “Chicana,” or “American” (which, for my students, does not always imply “white”), many students in my classes attempt to deny the power, privilege, and other implications of “whiteness.” Yet, as Krista Ratcliffe points out in “Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric,” this denial—because it reinforces an unjust status quo and a resistance to change—is itself a crucial element of “whiteness.” And, no matter how we identify, we all, to greater and lesser degrees, have been trained to think and act in “white” ways. We have internalized what
Anzaldúa describes as a “white” frame of reference. As she explains in an interview with Andrea Lunsford,

In this country the frame of reference is white, Euro-American . . . [W]e—the colonized, the Chicanos, the blacks, the Natives in this country—have been reared in this frame of reference, in this field. All of our education, all of our ideas come from this frame of reference. We’re complicitous because we’re in such close proximity and intimacy with the other. Now “us” and “them” are interchangeable. Now there’s no such thing as an “other.” The other is in you, the other is in me. This white culture has been internalized in my head. (254)

Ratcliffe makes a similar point in her article. Distinguishing between “white” people and “whiteness,” she asserts, “Like any other socially constructed category (student, teacher, dean, gender, race, class) whiteness is a trope, and the actions and attitudes associated with this trope are embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our socialization” (96). Unlike Ratcliffe and Anzaldúa, however, my students are almost entirely unaware of this “white” framework.

If, as Ratcliffe suggests (and I concur), this “whiteness”—which is not, necessarily, synonymous with “white” people—is associated with an unjust social system and a resistance to change, with the denial of accountability, with closure, with violence, with hypocrisy, and with ignorance of other cultures, then it must be investigated and exposed. Thus, she insists that “in academic and popular discourses, we must investigate whiteness, eavesdropping within history, so that bodies, tropes, and cultures may converge in moments of productive rhetorical usage, moments when personal and social change may be achieved” (102).

I completely agree with Ratcliffe’s position and believe that her article makes an important contribution to ongoing explorations of “whiteness,” especially as it affects rhetorical theory. Because “whiteness” has functioned as an oppressive, mythical, invisible norm that ranks people according to racialized ancestry and traits—and negates those (whatever their skin color) who do not conform to its standard—we need to investigate it, exposing its insidious power. But we can’t talk about “whiteness” without carefully thinking through the implications and our goals. What do we want to accomplish by investigating “whiteness” in the classroom? What’s the next step, once we’ve exposed “whiteness” to our students? If investigations of “whiteness” are not carried out with great care, educators risk simply reinforcing students’ already existing essentialized notions of “race,” as well as the “white” frame of
reference that holds these racialized identities in place.

More importantly (and potentially more destructively), the investigation of “whiteness” too often turns into a crisis for “white”-identified students, leading to what Michael Apple describes as “the production of retrogressive white identities” or what Charles Gallagher calls “whiteness . . . as an identity that evokes victimization and racist, reactionary imagery” (Apple ix; Gallagher 33). I have seen this “white” backlash in the classroom. When students who identify as “white” are introduced to recent investigations of “whiteness,” they are compelled to recognize the destructive roles “whiteness” plays in U.S. culture. Associating “whiteness” with “white” people, they experience a variety of negative reactions—ranging from guilt, withdrawal, and despair to anger and the construction of an extremely celebratory racialized “whiteness” that views “white” people as the most recently oppressed group. And, as I have argued elsewhere, although self-identified students of color may find it satisfying to see the “white” gaze that has marked them as “Other” turned back on itself, I question the long-term effectiveness of this reversal, for it inadvertently reinforces the status quo: the belief in separate “races” that is itself part of the “white” framework (915). These reactions foreclose potential agency; students of all colors view themselves as pawns in an already existing, highly racialized system that they cannot change.

Despite these dangers, however, we cannot simply dismiss “whiteness” studies as too problematic to explore in the classroom. Nor should we assist “white”-identified students in constructing positive “white” identities. Because “whiteness” and the concept of “white” people plays a crucial role in generating and maintaining a hierarchical and racist worldview, the construction of positive “white” identities inadvertently buttresses this already existing system. As Ian F. Haney López asserts, “Whiteness exists as the linchpin for the systems of racial meaning in the United States. Whiteness is the norm around which other races are constructed; its existence depends upon the mythologies and material inequalities that sustain the current racial system. . . . Its continuation also requires the preservation of the social inequalities that every day testify to White superiority” (187).

How, then, can we investigate “whiteness” without inadvertently reinforcing it? How do we expose it in the classroom without triggering (in students of all colors) feelings of anger, hatred, alienation, “white” guilt, or disavowal? I want to suggest that it’s not enough just to investigate “whiteness.” In addition, we must develop pedagogical practices that enable us to begin divesting ourselves of this “white” frame
of reference by exposing and resisting its power. Like James Baldwin, I believe that “whiteness” represents “a moral choice,” not an essential, biologically-based identity (180). As such, “whiteness” can be resisted. As Baldwin explains, this moral choice to be “white” is, in fact, utterly immoral and entails a lack of self-reflection; this moral choice denies the role “whiteness” and “white” people played in slavery, the genocide of Native peoples, and other forms of conquest; and this moral choice refuses to recognize the interconnections among apparently different racialized groups. People who, Baldwin says, “think they are white . . . do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history. Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers” (180).

Although I have no definite answers about how, precisely, we can divest ourselves and our students of “whiteness,” I believe that Baldwin’s assessment, coupled with Ratcliffe’s discussion of history as usage and rhetorical eavesdropping, offer some important clues. To divest ourselves of “whiteness,” we must retrieve this denied history while simultaneously denaturalizing and historicizing all racialized identities and exposing their relational nature. And this is where Ratcliffe’s concepts of history as usage and rhetorical eavesdropping are especially useful.

Like most people in the U.S., students generally assume that “race” is an unchanging biological (and divine) fact, based on natural (God-given) divisions among people. Coupled with a linear view of history, in which the past is, as Ratcliffe observes, “a series of fixed points on an abstract historical continuum,” this ahistorical concept of “race” prevents students from recognizing how the past continues to influence the present, or what Ratcliffe describes as the *then-that-is-now* (95, 93). This view of history as a series of fixed points informs the student comments I’ve used as my epigraphs. Locating the past entirely in a time before themselves, my students have separated themselves from past injustices and so cannot recognize how slavery, land theft, and other forms of conquest that began in the past continue to inform the present. Nor do my “white” students recognize that they still benefit from these national crimes. As Ratcliffe notes, this linear perspective denies accountability. Drawing on Toni Morrison’s concept of “rememory,” Ratcliffe suggests that the past can be more usefully understood as “a series of inscriptions in discourse and on our material bodies, inscriptions that continually circle through our present and form our identities, inscriptions that will control us if we do not acknowledge them” (95). Read in this light, “whiteness” and, more generally, “race” are themselves manifestations of the past in the present.
We are all the products of the history of "race," a history that simultaneously relies on and reinforces arbitrary divisions among people, granting privilege and power to specific groups by excluding and oppressing others.

By historicizing "race" and by underscoring the contingent, relational nature of "whiteness" and all other racialized identities, we can assist students in learning how to recognize the ways that "race," and the oppressive hierarchical thinking that it entails, have been inscribed on our bodies and in our minds. Tactical eavesdropping can play a role in this process. According to Ratcliffe, eavesdropping is a liminal form of listening; it involves "standing outside, in an uncomfortable spot, on the border of knowing and not knowing, granting others the inside position, listening to learn" (90). We can integrate this tactical eavesdropping into classroom instruction, and invite students to "eavesdrop on history" in passages that challenge and denaturalize restrictive ahistorical definitions of "whiteness" and "race." To be sure, this eavesdropping will at times be uncomfortable, but it just might also be transformational. I now want to illustrate one form this eavesdropping might take.

Recently, in a unit on audience, I assigned Baldwin's short essay "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies," first published in Essence, a magazine for African-American women. Since none of my students identified as African American, they were all forced to occupy this border position as they eavesdropped on a conversation that was not directed toward them. To borrow Ratcliffe's words, they began "hearing over the edges of [their] own knowing, . . . thinking what is commonly unthinkable within [their] own logics" (90-91). What they overheard terrified them. Many of those students who identified as "white" had never considered the implications or the content of their "whiteness," illustrating Ratcliffe's contention that "when most whites are asked what it means to be white in the United States, they simply stare blankly" (98). My students were deeply offended by Baldwin's depiction of so-called "white people" and felt that he offered no concrete solutions. Believing themselves to be the objects of Baldwin's allegations, they felt trapped by their "whiteness" and powerless to act.

After allowing them to express their frustrations, I focused their attention on Baldwin's words and invited them to reexamine how he was constructing "whiteness." Not surprisingly, they had essentialized Baldwin's analysis, conflating his discussion of "whiteness" with "white people." However, as I pointed out during our discussion, Baldwin himself does not make this conflation; on the contrary, he insists
that "there are no white people" and offers a decidedly constructionist view of "whiteness." He writes, "No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country. . . . America became white—the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation" (180, 178). I used this assertion to offer students a brief history of the invention of "whiteness." I explained that the Europeans who first colonized the continent didn’t identify themselves as "white," for the word had no meaning in racialized terms. It was not until slavery was racialized, in the late 1600s, that these people began naming themselves "white." I underscored the relational nature of this so-called "white race": these former Europeans became "white" in the presence of enslaved African peoples whom they labeled "black." As successive groups of European immigrants arrived on this continent and claimed it as home, their skin color enabled them to achieve a sense of belonging by adopting the racist beliefs, privileges, and practices that elevated "white" people above other so-called "races." They became superior by identifying themselves, and by allowing themselves to be identified, as "white."

I then complicated this "black/white" binary even further by talking about passing. If, as many scholars now know, during the past three hundred years many thousands of people "passed" from "blackness" into "whiteness," and approximately eighty percent of U.S. Americans labeled "black" have at least one "white" ancestor, then many people today viewed as "white" or "black" could more accurately be considered "mixed" (Goldberg 344; Zack 75). Throughout the semester I continued to complicate this "black/white" binary by expanding the focus to encompass texts by authors who were neither "black" nor "white." "So what," I asked my students, "does it mean to be ‘black’ or ‘white’?"

Through class discussion I tried to denaturalize "whiteness," inviting students to view it historically as a system of unearned privileges that relies on and reinforces a hierarchical social system and a dominant/subordinate worldview. Thus, by making "whiteness" visible to my students, I hoped to challenge them to recognize their own investments in this "white" frame of reference. I especially wanted them to recognize that this "white" framework entails an us-versus-them binary mode of perception that erases the history of "race" while using "race" to create arbitrary divisions among apparently different peoples. If, as Baldwin, Anzaldúa, Ratcliffe, and many others have suggested, "whiteness" is a way of thinking—one that we all, to various degrees, have been socialized
into—then “whiteness” becomes, in some ways, a choice. We can choose to think differently, to enact a more relational mode of perception that acknowledges our interconnectedness. As Anzaldúa explains, “We live in each other’s pockets, occupy each other’s territories, live in close proximity and intimacy with each other at home, in school, at work. We’re mutually complicitous—us and them, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and other, oppressor and oppressed” (254).

To be sure, these tactics are not, in themselves, enough to divest ourselves or our students of “whiteness.” Yet they can offer useful points of departure, for they enable us to begin breaking down the “white” frame of reference and its hierarchical, racialized categories. Moreover, these tactics offer ways to expose “whiteness” without reinforcing essentialized notions of “whiteness” and “race”—notions that, in my opinion, impede us in our effort to create a more equitable society.

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Notes

1. Throughout this essay, I use quotation marks with “whiteness,” “white,” and “race” to underscore their artificial, historical, and constructed nature.
2. This interview is an expanded version of “Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric,” originally published in JAC.

Works Cited


Kris, I Hear You

Joyce Irene Middleton

When my kids were adolescents and didn’t want to hear anything I had to say about things that were important to them (I was too old-fashioned, a nerd, and worst of all an English teacher), I faced a real dilemma as a single parent. I wanted to continue sharing my stories with them, and my work on orality gave me an idea. Whenever I wanted them to hear something important, I’d phone a relative or a close friend for some good conversation. I ensured that my voice could be overheard easily by my kids (preferably without the distraction of television, video games, computers, or even my immediate bodily presence). In this way, I intended to position them as eavesdroppers so that they might learn by indirection (an important form of learning in oral traditions). They loved the idea of listening in on Mom who was, they thought, “unaware” of what was occurring. Young people effortlessly soak in conversations. Like other aspects of aurality, eavesdropping can be extremely seductive. Listeners gain a great deal of pleasure in listening from the “margins” or