
Reviewed by AnaLouise Keating, Aquinas College

It's happened already. Less than a month into the Fall semester, and I've just learned that one of my students—a guy who identifies as "white"—has grown tired of our explorations of U.S. identities. He's not hostile or belligerent. (In some ways, hostility would be easier to confront; I could simply react with my own righteous anger.) He's rather sad as he states, in a quiet voice, "I know that what we did to the Indians and the slaves was wrong, and we need to learn about it, but it would just be nice to see some positive examples of 'white' men." As he sits in my office, looking expectantly at me, a voice screams in my head, "What do you mean 'positive examples of white men'?! You've experienced fifteen years of education that have centered almost relentlessly on the ideas, histories, and experiences of 'white' men, presented in such an unmarked, pseudo-universalized fashion that you haven't even realized it." But I have no desire to provoke a shouting match with this student, so I keep these thoughts to myself and contemplate the most effective way to engage his concerns.

As an educator, one of my goals in the classroom is to encourage students to become more responsible social actors. I select writings that explore complex, interconnected issues from a wide range of literary, cultural, and historical perspectives; and I structure syllabi, assignments, and discussions in ways that require students to grapple with conflicting yet overlapping world views. Because I believe that we can't look at ethnically marked texts and identities (African American, Asian American, Chicana/o, and so on) without also examining the previously unmarked "white" norm, I incorporate investigations of "whiteness" into my teaching. But my point is not to demonize people who identify as "white," nor to encourage feelings of personal blame for the slavery, decimation of indigenous peoples, land theft, and other horrific events that occurred in the past. Such highly personalized guilt is paralyzing and ineffective. Rather, I try to nurture an ethics of accountability that enables students of all colors to more fully comprehend how these oppressive systems that began in the historical past continue misshaping contemporary conditions; only then can they begin working for social change. And yet in this particular situation, it would seem that my carefully designed plan was backfiring.
This scenario, while not discussed in *Passing and Pedagogy*, illustrates another component of what Pamela Caughie describes as the "new ethical dynamic" occurring today, as when we use multicultural literatures and cultural criticism in the classroom. On the one hand, we want to introduce our students to the tremendous variety of ethnic and gender identities enriching contemporary U.S. culture. On the other hand, as we do so we risk reinforcing Enlightenment-based notions of subjectivity and knowledge production. According to the traditional pedagogies many of us were trained to employ (or absorbed—by osmosis?—from our years as students), teaching involves mastery: we attempt to discover the methods and keys that enable us to expose the truths about the texts and identities we explore. Yet, as poststructuralist theories indicate, these pedagogical strategies reinforce already-existing concepts of subjectivity and knowledge that inadvertently undermine the diverse texts we teach. As Caughie explains, "To teach diverse literatures because the world or the academy is more diverse is to remain committed to pedagogical assumptions based on a mimetic or expressive concept of literature: literature is 'about' life; literature represents characteristic experiences and conveys knowledge about others living in a world apart; literature expresses the author's experiences, ideas, values, and feelings. These notions, which have long informed the teaching of literature, may be challenged in theory—even by the very theory that informs the courses—but they commonly inform a pedagogical defense for teaching "marginal" literatures." Caughie offers no solutions to this dilemma. (I wish she did; I wish she could.) Instead, she urges educators to live with this paradox, to embrace "vulnerability, uncertainty, and inconclusiveness." She asks us to think seriously about the effects of our identities, to adopt a self-reflective practice that puts identity categories into play in the classroom and in the written word.

Drawing on poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, Caughie argues that because there are no stable, monolithic identities from which to teach, read, or write, we must be open to the implications this fluid view of subjectivity holds for our work: "The problem is... that the humanist subject continues to be produced as a solution to the cultural problematic that would place us all in the position of passing. The more passing becomes the very real possibility opened up by our interrogation of subject positions, the more, it would seem, we need to defend ourselves against it by making it unnatural, illegitimate, or unethical. However, as I have tried to show, such a cultural problematic cannot be elided by seeking a more authentic position. We cannot get out of passing by attempting to reclaim the subject, the body, or the 'real thing.' We have
to let it pass.” As this statement indicates, Caughie redefines “passing”—generally viewed in negative terms and associated with disguise, impersonation, appropriation, and fraudulence—as “a potentially ethical practice” that implies movement, action, and change. More specifically, she exposes the “binary logic of identity” that informs conventional notions of passing. This binary logic relies on a clear-cut distinction between appearance and essence—the belief, for instance, that if I’m passing as “white,” this “whiteness” is fraudulent, covering over my authentic “blackness.” Because such notions of authentic, legitimate identities rely on and reinforce “normative categories and oppressive social structures,” Caughie argues, we must let them go. Yet, to do so is not easy; it demands great risks: “Crucial to my use of ‘passing’ is the notion that these [postmodern] changes are felt most immediately as a threat or challenge to the individual subject, putting at risk one’s most profound understanding of what it is to be a person or agent.”

This theory of passing offers a powerful rejoinder to those in “whiteness studies” who argue that educators must assist white-identified students in developing affirmative identities of themselves as “white” people. As Caughie might argue, this perspective simply reinforces already existing concepts of stable identity. And, I would add, it also inadvertently reinforces students’ belief that “race” is an unchanging biological and divine fact based on natural divisions among people, and it thereby reaffirms “white” superiority. According to Caughie,

The point of all this for the teaching of literature and composition is that we need to provide our students with strategies and occasions for working through rather than taking up—in the sense of taking a stand on—certain subject positions. Such strategies and occasions are especially important whenever we make “whiteness” visible as a racial category, available for critique and open to delegitimation; whenever we reconceive concepts of essence and experience in the aftermath of poststructuralist theories; and whenever we engage the politics of identity in postmodern culture and in the (multi)cultural studies classroom.

To return to my opening example, if I apply Caughie’s ethical practice to the pedagogical event I described, I will not assist my student in developing a positive “white” identity, nor will I pull out the course syllabus and remind him of all the “white” women and men we’ve already discussed. Instead, I will ask him to think through the implications of his automatic identification with the “white” slaveholders and colonizers, to tease out the historical similarities and differences between their experi-
ences and his own. I will challenge him to become accountable to this history, to explore the specific ways in which he benefits—even today—from slavery and other past injustices, to recognize the role “white” privilege plays in his life, and to question the social inscriptions that have labeled him “white.” And I’ll take this conversation with me as I return to the classroom. Despite the risks involved, I’ll continue interrogating and exposing students’ assumptions about “race,” identities, and U.S. culture. Perhaps I’ll share my concerns with my students. Maybe I’ll even use my own experiences as a daughter of the African diaspora, bleached almost to “whiteness” by a family history of passing. Maybe I won’t. But whatever I decide to do, I’ll keep encouraging my students to recognize the limitations in Enlightenment-based views of self-enclosed identity and the relational nature of all identities. And this, I believe, is in keeping with Caughie’s argument.


Reviewed by Elizabeth Ervin, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

In the first paragraph of *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres*, Rosa Eberly confesses, “In writing *Citizen Critics*, I felt I was driving around in a place I had never been, using a map I had never seen. And I was never sure whether the map had not yet caught up to the road signs or the signs to the map.” I too felt this same sense of simultaneously exhilarating and frustrating disorientation. Eberly’s thesis is complex, and the range of scholarship she draws on to support it is vast. Yet, my effort to absorb her argument didn’t always pay off: concepts that are meticulously woven together early in the book never resurface, and the book ends without adequately exploring the implications of Eberly’s investigation.

*Citizen Critics* is organized around analyses of pieces of public discourse (mostly reviews, editorials, and letters to the editor of various publications) written in response to four controversial works of literature: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, and Andrea Dworkin’s *Mercy*. Eberly believes that these analyses can illustrate the ways in which citizen discourse participates in social change alongside discourse produced by legal and aesthetic experts or in the interests of media and corporate elites. A central