

Review of *Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness*

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Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness by Wendy Ryden and Ian Marshall. Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Communication, 2011.

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Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness is an investigation into whiteness studies within rhetoric and composition. Written as a dialogue via alternating chapters, Ryden and Marshall offer numerous critiques of whiteness and suggestions for redressing its stronghold in our classrooms and institutions. The book begins with a familiar trope of pointing out the inconsistency between de facto segregation in U.S. society and colorblind ideology. Ryden and Marshall connect colorblindness to student resistance and antiracist discussions. Part of the introduction is a discussion of whiteness studies, which “highlight (i.e., ‘make visible’) the normative center of racial oppression” (3), and how it connects to rhetoric and composition: “[W]e seek not only to understand the way discourses of whiteness shape our societies and permeate our classrooms but also how to equip ourselves and our students with the critical tools necessary to identify and confront these interpellations” (3-4). Ryden and Marshall quickly review some of the criticisms of whiteness studies and refute that whiteness studies still holds possibilities for social change. Overall, then, this first section provides a useful introduction to whiteness studies and the way it has been taken up in rhetoric and composition.

The first chapter investigates researcher “coming-out” narratives that often begin whiteness studies scholarship. Ryden gives her own narrative and critiques several others, putting them into conversation with narrative and trauma theory. Ultimately, Ryden problematizes these “awareness narratives” as being performances that reify whiteness in their subject-centeredness rather than challenge it; accordingly, Ryden and Marshall have written this book as a dialogue in an attempt to make it more productive. The analysis of the rhetorical effects of researcher narratives, particularly in the context of the increasing attention to researcher subjectivity,

makes this one of the best chapters in the book.

The next chapter is written by Marshall and is part narrative, part critique of his own experience not being racialized due to his not speaking African American English. This leads him to a discussion of African American students being placed into basic writing because of dialect differences that are perceived as deficiencies. Marshall's argument about students' right to their own language is not really new, nor is the idea that basic writing is racialized, but he does take a commendable stand in resisting the notion that acquiring Standard English should be the goal for all students. Marshall writes, "Not only does it fail to address the economic and social disparities (and realities) that AAL represents, but it also refuses to address the intrinsic racism of a school system and social order incapable of accounting for the language patterns of so many in the U.S. today" (47).

The third chapter is arguably the most compelling and holds the most possibility (depending on one's research interests). Couched in exploring student resistance to critical pedagogies, Ryden makes the argument that whiteness is kitsch, or false discourse. Ryden's claim is that "examining the media's liberal, multicultural rhetoric on race and racism through the lens of kitsch reveals an alienating and bankrupt discourse that refracts and prevents meaningful discussions of racism in the public sphere and in our classrooms and provides fodder for reactionary claims of postracism" (73).

There is a methodological problem in this chapter, though, in the way that Ryden is calling whiteness itself false discourse. In work that aims to disrupt the supremacy and privilege of whiteness, the term whiteness comes to be used metonymically for white supremacy, white privilege, white normativity, white racism, and efforts to disrupt all of the above. Ryden's use of whiteness conflates all of these terms. And since Ryden is talking about public discourse with the aim of improving classroom discourse, conflating whiteness itself with false, racist discourse will probably not be convincing to white students. She analyses the public reaction to Don Imus's "nappy headed hos" comment to demonstrate that condemnation of such comments does little to challenge systemic racism that continues in more subtle ways. Ryden insightfully shows unproductive racial rhetoric in public discourse and how white liberal condemnation of individual racist acts does little to challenge racism as an organizing hierarchical force in our society.

The next chapter is a list of ways that composition courses are embedded with white normativity, including through New Critical approaches to teaching texts, through the ideology of composition as assimilation, and through the way that whiteness is perpetuated

enthymematically by institutions and faculty in the field. Although these points are valid and necessary for progressing antiracism in the field, there are so many points in such a short space that they are presented without sufficient nuance and development. The claims here, too, seem uninformed by the work in composition and rhetoric that has noted the colonizing, assimilationist teaching and program practices. Since these practices persist, however, Marshall's conclusion that "the political and ideological context that students are asked to produce this writing in is always already interpellated as white since this context historically privileges white cultural norms to the exclusion of, and in opposition to, the written and linguistic norms of racialized others" is worth repeating (103).

Chapter five is a powerful chapter in that it connects whiteness with current scholarship on the role of affect in rhetoric. Ryden argues for the need to pay attention to emotion, to work through emotion rather than around it when trying to effect social change by discussing whiteness. She writes that critical pedagogy fails because it privileges logos over ethos with the assumption that if presented with information, students will understand racism to be illogical (120). However, scholars have found that whiteness is rationale for those who benefit from it (121). To incorporate the role of emotion into an effective pedagogy, Ryden recommends a "political conception of emotion" that seeks to understand how "emotion shapes and is shaped through the public sphere and how, through emotion, we effect social participation in 'common' discourses" (126).

These ideas are compelling and certainly reflect current work on the role of emotion in rhetoric. Once again, though, I am left wanting more details, such as what this pedagogy would actually look like with students. Thus, this chapter follows a trend in the book where Ryden and Marshall raise many questions, convincingly articulate many arguments for particular methods and outcomes, but leave me wanting to more fully understand how those methods work or how those outcomes might be achieved. Ultimately, then, this text functions as a call for more research into the important topics that Ryden and Marshall raise.

In the final chapter, Marshall adds a twist to the discussion on whiteness narratives by discussing his experience teaching as a black professor. Especially when compared to a white colleague of his, he found that students expect him to talk about race while simultaneously rejecting his views as being biased due to the way he is visibly raced. Marshall writes that his white colleague has a power unavailable to him: "Because [my colleague] is white, he can occupy neutral, invisible position with regard to race that I simply cannot. When he talks about race, it's not assumed that is from a

position of self-interest, but when I talk, subjectivity as black and male makes me biased – or so our student responses seem to suggest” (142). Marshall then talks about the strange relationship between colorblindness and multiculturalism, and how they both provide students with strategies for students to avoid full engagement. He concludes the chapter by illustrating these tensions through a student example.

Overall, this book will be most compelling for those interested in a brief but thorough introduction to whiteness studies and the ways that whiteness has been taken up in rhetoric and composition. This book will also be useful for scholars looking for exciting ideas to build upon. The largest drawback to the text is the amount covered in such a short space; since there are so many arguments explored, Ryden and Marshall use many sources and a handful of anecdotes and mini-analyses that would benefit from more development and explanation. Nonetheless, these chapters initiate and continue important dialogues about specific ways that whiteness has been or should be deconstructed in rhetoric and composition in a way that will be useful to both new and veteran scholars of whiteness and composition.