

Learning to Talk and Write about Race: Developing Racial Literacy in a College English Classroom

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Abstract

The author presents findings from a research study that examines the use of a racial literacy framework for teaching English in a community college classroom.

Race is personal in a way that poetry and physics can never be because race is lived, even as it is ignored, denied, vilified, and/or hidden behind. Race, in the mind of many students, requires a verdict of innocence or guilt, identifies victims and criminals, and makes everyone either good or bad. And students work very hard to make their case so as not to be found “guilty”, “criminal”, or “bad.”

— Lisa Guerrero, p. 7

“Teaching Race in the 21st Century: College Teachers Talk about Their Fears, Risks, and Rewards”

Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.”

— Toni Morrison, p. 63

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

Introduction

One of those “defining moments” in my teaching career happened over a decade ago when I held a workshop for a group of high school teachers on English language arts (ELA) standardized tests. My goal was to provide an overview of the use of ELA standardized tests in public education and discuss the anti-testing movement that was gaining momentum across the country. I spoke to forty predominantly white novice teachers who worked in urban schools and were also graduate students at the predominantly white university that sponsored the workshop. At the end of the discussion, an Asian woman came to the front of the room where I was talking with a group of other pre-service teachers. Our eyes locked just as she said, “I just want you to know that I was expecting to have a white, male professor today. You actually did OK with the material. Better than I expected.” The young woman left before I could respond to her comment. I thought to myself, ‘Was that supposed to be a compliment?’ and, ‘What gave her the right to speak to me that way?’ A range of emotions flooded over me: I was embarrassed that she had made this bold statement in the presence of others; but most of all, I was confused and incensed by what she said to me. I wondered what stereotypes she had summoned that day about my race and gender that led to her conclusion? I wondered if the graduate program she was in, or any other educational experience had engaged her in critical conversations on race. I have never forgotten this critical incident, and it is one that has been instrumental in shaping my pedagogy. At the time, I was teaching an English course at a community college, and this incident as well as my growing understanding of race, racism, and issues of diversity led me to wonder: 1) How do explicit discussions about race, racism, and issues of diversity impact students’ understanding of these topics? 2) What does the process of racial literacy development look like in a college English classroom? 3) How might explicit conversations about race, racism, and issues of diversity affect student writing, discussions, and the classroom community? In this article I draw from data collected during a semester-long study on the development of racial literacy skills in a community college *Freshman English and Composition* course. I define racial literacy in this context as a skill and practice in which students probe the existence of racism, and examine the effects of race and other social constructs and institutionalized systems which affect their lived experiences and representation in U.S. society. Students with racial literacy are able to discuss the implications of race and American racism in edifying and constructive ways. A desired outcome of racial literacy in an outwardly racist society like America is for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an anti-racist stance, and for persons of color to resist a victim stance.

Theoretical Framework

As salient as race is to our lives, it remains a topic that needs constant (re) examination and must be done so in context. Educators and scholars must seek to understand how race affects pedagogy in particular classrooms and schools and how it impacts the discourse of diverse communities and societies. Admittedly, this pedagogical approach is emotionally and politically-charged and laden with challenges (Guerrero, 2008; Mangino, 2008; Kim, 2008; Isaksen, 2008).

The concept of race is deeply rooted in our lives and is articulated through our legal system and schools; it affects how we think, speak, and perform culture. Ruth Frankenberg (1996) notes: race, like gender, is “real” in the sense that it has real, though changing effects in the world and real, tangible, and complex impact on individuals’ sense of self, experiences, and life chances. In asserting that race and racial difference are socially constructed, I do not minimize their social and political reality, but rather insist that their reality is, precisely, social and political rather than inherent or static. (p. 11)

The theoretical framework used to design the curriculum for my *Freshman English and Composition* class consigns research that supports an examination of race as a scaffold to understanding and problematizing how it has been used in the U.S. (and Britain) to disunite people and normalize racial hierarchies that relegate people of color to the margins of society (Bolgatz, 2005; Guinier, 2004; Johnson, 2009; Twine, 2003). Students who develop racial literacy understand the concept of marginalization (and can verbally resist it) even as they identify how it occurs in their lives and in the lives of others.

The social transformations our nation have undergone over the past few decades, and the increase of immigrants and students of color in colleges and universities, have motivated faculty who teach outside of Ethnic and Women’s Studies, and Sociology departments to tackle the topics of race, racism, gender, and issues of diversity in their courses. For example, community college is the gateway to higher education for 45% of first-time freshmen (Community College Fact Sheet), and for an even greater proportion of people of color and poor or working class students. The community college facilitates access to higher education for diverse groups irrespective of language, race, ethnicity, age or gender, and include individuals with weak academic skills, and other characteristics that create barriers to further education (Bailey & Weininger, 2002). Thus, community colleges fulfill a unique role on the post-secondary educational landscape: they must provide developmental education

programs for students who need remediation, as well as educational curriculum that meets the needs of students on various academic trajectories. There are more than 11.5 million students enrolled in 1,195 community colleges nationwide. The vast majority of students are women (60%), Black (46%), Latino/a (55%) and low-income (26%) (American Association of Community Colleges; Horn, Nevill, and Griffith, 2006). Developing the racial literacy of community college students is critical to helping them succeed in school and read the [racialized] world in which they live (Freire, 1998). Carol Schick (2002) and Ward Churchill (1995) argue that colleges and universities perpetuate the status quo of white supremacy, stating that the institutions' curriculum normalizes whiteness, and discourages open and critical conversation about race. However, Guerrero (2008) reminds us that integrating race in their courses can become "an especially precarious experience for junior faculty who need the support of their department in order to achieve tenure and promotion" (p. 9). The findings of my study convinced me that in spite of the risk, teaching with a deliberate focus on race provides personal and professional fulfillment, and insight into the ways in which students struggle to discuss critical issues that affect their lives.

Research Context

Costland Community College¹ is located on a 75-acre campus in a white middle to upper-middle class neighborhood in a large metropolitan city. My students were a group of 21 ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse individuals from predominantly low income or working class families who self-identified in the following ways: African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Italian American, African, biracial (Black and White), Asian American, Russian/Ukrainian, Russian/Jewish, Arab American, Israeli American and Anglo Saxon. Their ages ranged from 18–30 years old. All of my students that semester lived on the outskirts of the neighborhood and commuted forty-five minutes or more to school. During the fall 2006 semester, for four days a week, two hours per class session, over 12 weeks, my students in *Freshman English and Composition* read texts, participated in class discussions, and produced writings that centered on the topics of race, racism, and issues pertaining to diversity (i.e. race, class, gender, etc.). The College's goal for the course was to introduce students to a variety of genres and to elevate student writing and critical analysis skills to college-level status. I, too, was interested in my students reading various genres, but I specifically wanted to use the literature as a scaffold for developing their racial literacy, increasing their knowledge about the social construction of race (Omi & Winant, 1986), and growing their confidence in having discussions

¹(pseudonym)

about race. That semester, they read texts by novelists, playwrights, essayists, and poets of diverse backgrounds who center the topics of race and racism in their work. My research questions for the semester-long study were: 1) How do explicit discussions about race, racism, and issues of diversity impact students' understanding of these topics? 2) What does the process of racial literacy development look like in a diverse college English classroom? 3) How might explicit conversations about race, racism, and issues of diversity affect student writing, discussions, and classroom community?

Method

As a community college instructor, I saw value in teaching my *Freshman English and Composition* course using a racial literacy development framework primarily because of the diverse group of students who attended the college, 21 of whom were enrolled in my class during the semester I conducted the study. I found the case study method Yin (2008) appropriate for my study. Yin (2008) describes the case study method as a "comprehensive research strategy," which incorporates specific methods of data collection, data analysis and a plan for analysis (p. 13). This method of qualitative research allows the researcher to study an individual, an institution, or a community and reveal their interactions and features. I studied my class as multiple cases (students) bounded within a single case (the community college English classroom). As the instructor for the course I also viewed my role as a participant observer and completed the readings and activities along with my students. I had an active role in teaching the course while I observed my students' journey into racial literacy. As a participant in the learning community, I also observed my own learning and took notes on my enhanced racial literacy development. The data I collected for this multiple-case qualitative study (Yin, 2008) consisted of students' written responses to three assignments and activities, student journals, copious observation notes about classroom discussions written within 12–24 hours after the class, responses to a reading and writing preference survey, and student reflections on an end-of-semester exit ticket. My observation notes captured verbatim comments that I viewed as having advanced, stagnated or complicated the classroom discourse. During the data analysis phases, I was particularly interested in analyzing how class discussions progressed or regressed over the 12 weeks of the course. Inductive and deductive analyses, and within-case and across-case analyses (Miles and Huberman, 1994) were used to help me interpret and organize the data. As part of my data analysis, I made a list of words and phrases found in the data and established final themes by comparing and contrasting their frequency of use (Maykut & Morehouse,

1994). Table 1 includes selected phrases that were compiled and categorized into the four development phases. I examined each student's individual racial literacy development as well as patterns of development across groups of students.

Constructing racial literacy in a community college English class

There is limited theorizing around racial literacy development in literacy education (Johnson, 2009; Rogers & Mosely, 2006; Skerrett, 2011) and no previous discussion of its application to a community college English classroom. For this study, I invited my freshman students to interrogate their understanding and attitudes through the use of texts that were explicitly centered on the themes of race, racism, and issues of diversity (See Table 2 for a partial list of texts). The texts helped students acquire language to discuss, problematize, and refute racial stereotypes and racist hierarchical systems in society, as well as begin to discuss and critique personal experiences involving race and racism. To encourage self-examination and critical discussion, I designed the following writing activities: *Jumpstreet Odyssey*, *Unpacking the Cultural Knapsack* and the *Racial Autobiography*. These activities deliberately asked students to think about their own racial classification(s) and how they viewed those with different racial (ethnic, class and gender) classifications. Below is a discussion of the activities and some examples of the ways in which the activities appeared in the phases that characterized student racial literacy development.

Activity#1: JumpStreet Odyssey

In this ice breaker activity students assembled in groups of three to discuss where they were born, grew up, and what languages or dialects were spoken in their home. They talked about where they attended school, and whether or not they perceived their classmates, teachers, and neighbors to be different or similar to them. The purpose of the activity was to have them reflect on self, community, and society: Sari, a Russian Ukrainian student discussed what it felt like to attend a predominantly Ukrainian Catholic school, where things "just seemed normal." However, she did remember that the few Puerto Ricans who attended the school were not fairly treated:

I remember during our parades, they had to dress in traditional Ukrainian clothing/costumes, but everyone knew they were not Ukrainian. I mean you could just look at them and tell. Besides that, I remember them being made to march in the back of the line. Some of the girls used to cry. I never understood why they would cry during such festive occasions. I guess now that I'm looking back, this activity is making me look back, maybe they

weren't comfortable. Maybe they knew the nuns weren't trying to make them fit in. Maybe they were making them stand out because they were different. Maybe the nuns were racist. I think the Catholic Church can be a little racist at times.

As Sari began to develop racial literacy an interrogation of the connection between her whiteness, and Ukrainian ethnicity and culture, and her Catholic religion supports instead of hinders her ability to “rethink the contradictions between our contemporary cultural beliefs about equality and the presence of race-based discrimination as a dominant force of social organization” (Mangino, p. 36). The *Jumpstreet Odyssey* activity prompted Sari to reflect on how “normal” things had been for her, and she was able to consider how the culture of the Puerto Rican students was ignored. Her epiphany centered on how those students may have been treated differently and unfairly not only because they were not Ukrainian, but also because they were not white. For Sari, as with other students I have taught over the years, the discovery that they were given preference because of their race or culture is often very painful for them to accept.

Activity # 2: Unpacking the Cultural Knapsack

Race is rooted in culturally specific social constructions that we give meaning and value to. As Sari reflected, she recognized the difference in treatment between herself and her Puerto Rican classmates. In Sari's case, she came to understand that race was as important as culture. Mangino (2008) argues “dissecting cultural assumptions about race in the classroom practically guarantees educator encounters with student resistance” (p.35). Over time, I have observed how the students with whom I work often conflate the concepts of race and culture. To move them toward acknowledging a relationship between race and culture, but not substitute one for the other, I asked them to “unpack the cultural knapsack”—an imaginary backpack they carry around with them that illustrates what makes them unique. They learn that a definition for culture is the shared perceptions of a group's values, expectations, and norms and that it reflects the way people give priorities to goals, how they behave in different situations, cope with their world and with one another, and experience their social environment. Including the cultures of my students in the curriculum was deliberate and purposeful. To move my students toward racial literacy, the activities included an explicit connection to culture as an attempt to help them recognize that much like race, culture is socially constructed and used by people to make sense of their world. However, Peter, an Italian American male, questioned the necessity of emphasizing

anything other than American culture:

I'm not getting the big deal in all of this. So we are Italian, my mom and dad talk about Italy, but we are Americans. My culture is American culture, baseball, apple pie, you know all that stuff. I may be Italian but I'm American first. All of us here in this class, we may say we're something else, but we're just really American first.

Dinesh D'Souza (1995) and Arthur Schlesinger (1998) would agree with Peter. They disagree with multicultural scholars' emphasis on individual cultures (Banks, 1997) over the idea of one American culture. Jeremy, a Puerto Rican male, agreed with Peter as he unpacked his cultural knapsack with the class:

So, I have the typical—foods, music, holidays, and all that. Even though I am Puerto Rican in culture, I don't really feel Puerto Rican because I don't speak Spanish. So I don't really know if it's my parents' culture or mine. I think the language thing is big. Well, if you ask me what I speak, I say I speak American.

Jeremy's experience is not dissimilar from what I've heard some of my other Latino/a American students say. Over the years, Latino/a students who were not raised speaking Spanish in their homes told me how their parents believed that speaking Spanish at home would interfere with their English language acquisition and delay their assimilation and acculturation process. The Latino/a students in my study spoke about feeling disconnected from their family members who speak only Spanish or limited English. After unpacking their cultural knapsacks, students were able to distinguish culture and race, yet recognize nuanced connections between culture (language) and race—noting that some groups considered racially different from them participated in similar cultural activities.

Activity # 3: The Racial Autobiography—Telling the (Partial) Story

The Racial Autobiography asked students to deeply consider the concepts of race, racism and anti-racism (Perry, 2001). Students were expected to examine their beliefs about members of other groups, and the group with which they identified. The Racial Autobiography asked them to discuss the racial and ethnic composition of the schools they attended and the neighborhood(s) they lived in. It asked them to recall their first time being conscious of race, and what they believed were/are their family members' attitudes about their own race/ethnicity and the race/ethnicity of others. Finally, the assignment asked them to discuss at least one moment when they made an uncritical assumption about someone based on their race. Abdul, an

Arab American male in the class had some difficulty completing the assignment after Samuel, an African American male, challenged him about his race. Abdul identified as white and told Samuel and the class that was how his parents, who had lived in the United States since the early 1960s, always identified. At first, Abdul resisted the racial autobiography assignment:

I don't need to write this paper. I know who I am. He [Samuel] can't judge me. Maybe he's upset because he can never be considered white. When my mom and dad fill out the Census form they put down that we are white. And that's what I am.

Samuel's challenge of Abdul's whiteness led Abdul to conduct some research. He discovered federal documents that mentioned how the United States' legal system considered any person from Europe, the Middle East or North Africa as white. Abdul did complete the racial autobiography and concluded he "was Middle Eastern, perhaps closer to African than European." Finally, as an approach to get students to think about ways of becoming anti-racist, they were asked to describe ways they've worked against racism. Noah, who self-identified on a class reading and writing survey as "Anglo Saxon" wrote in his racial autobiography:

I'm not sure if this is being anti-racist, but I do try to not think that all Black girls and all Spanish girls are fast, and just want to get with a white guy. Sometimes movies and videos make you believe that. I know it's the wrong way to think, that all people are just one way. Now, I have to learn how to stand up when my friends start cracking those jokes. I know that when I laugh along with them I am probably being racist at that moment. When you think about it, it's really kinda racist.

The Racial Autobiography uncovered students' latent beliefs and created a space to discuss their dysconscious racism—a form of racism that uncritically accepts the existing dominant (white) paradigm as normal. Students in my study moved recursively through four phases of racial literacy development that I identified as: engaging, expanding, disengaging and reconnecting. These phases frame their progression and regression as they attempted to overcome their racist beliefs, discuss race, racism, and issues of diversity, and embrace what it means to take on an anti-racist stance or a stance of resistance.

Findings: Phasing in (and out) of Race Discussions

I observed four recursive "phases" my students moved through and between as they attempted to overcome their racist beliefs, discuss race and racism, and embrace

what it means to become anti-racist. When I established the four phases, I noticed that common phrases and words were present in student writings and comments (See Table 1). The recursive phases are representative of the students' individual journeys, yet they also represent a pattern in how students were collectively experiencing their racial literacy development.

Table 1: Recursive Phases of Racial Literacy (Selected Phrases)

Engaging	Expanding	Disengaging	Reconnecting
<p>Irina: Well, I never had to think about race. I treat everyone the same. I think thinking about race means you are racist.</p> <p>Anthony: I need to read a little more before I know my opinion about this race stuff.</p> <p>Yvette: What if I find out I'm racist?</p>	<p>Irina: Maybe it is important to see race. Seeing race could be a way to seeing the individual person.</p> <p>Jeremy: It's a lot more complicated than I thought. You always hear about the Black White thing. You don't really hear about the ethnic people.</p> <p>Yvette: The issue of race is more complicated than I thought. It's not only white people hating black people, it's white women dating black men, Mexicans hating Mexicans, etc. I never realized how racist society is.</p>	<p>Irina: Why do we always have to talk about race?</p> <p>Abdul: Why aren't we talking about religious discrimination, too?</p> <p>Yvette: Why do we always have to talk about race?</p>	<p>Irina: Remember when we read "An American Story?" It seemed like she was racist against her own people.</p> <p>Shanice (in response): No, you can't be racist against your own people if you are Black. She was suffering from internalized hate.</p> <p>Yvette: I'm still not sure if Black people can be racist. Sometime the way I feel about [white] people, there's no way I can't be.</p>

Some comments are taken from the same student (displaying movement across the four phases) while others are selected because of their representative nature of what other students shared in their racial autobiographies, journals, and comments in class. The pathway to racial literacy for participants in this study was characterized by their moving through and between four phases: Engaging, Expanding, Disengaging and Reconnecting. These phases are not meant to suggest that all students who work toward increasing racial literacy skills will do so in phases, or even follow a particular pathway. The acquisition of racial literacy is contextual and particular to classroom environment and individual. How swiftly one builds racial literacy skills is determined by how much they are willing to connect their knowledge to action (Guinier, 2004).

Phase 1: Engaging Race

During the Engaging phase students expressed actions and emotions of resistance, guilt, shame and interest. They read literature like Debra Dickerson's *An American Story*, wrote the first draft of their Racial Autobiography, and engaged in discussions on racism and internalized oppression. Responding to the Dickerson reading Shanice, who identified as African American on the reading and writing preference survey and in class discussions wrote in her journal:

As a child, I always made myself a victim of self-hatred. I hated my color, my hair, and where I lived. I never thought how common this horrible situation was. As I got older, I began to see things in a new light by observing the world and reading books. The world sees all black people the same. It hurts me deeply to say it, but as a Black girl in America I know it's true. All we can do as a people is try to stop the disease of self-hatred from spreading to our children as it has been spread to us.

Shanice used her developing racial literacy to assess and interpret the feelings of self-hate she struggled with—feelings she believed most Black people must overcome. Her journal response reveals an understanding about the damaging effects that outward racism and internalized oppression has had on her life and the lives of others. However, she used her writing as a call to action—to stop her negative behavior and encourage others to do the same. Shanice took seriously the pursuit to build knowledge around the issues that were discussed in class, and pushed her classmates to research their opinions and “bring the knowledge back to the class”. After the class’s reading of an excerpt from Kenneth Clark’s memoir, *Racial Progress and Retreat: A personal memoir*, in an open letter to the class community she wrote,

I really wanted to write a poem to express my feelings toward the piece we

read in class, but the words in my poem would have made you go ‘ooh’ and ‘ah’ and it wouldn’t have lasted itself to your brain. I love all of you guys and I honestly want all of you to be aware of what life is and why it became this way. No matter how much you think you know its always something you don’t. I sit in class and I listen to all of your opinions, but I hardly ever see you have hard core facts. You admit there was a ‘Black struggle’, but you have to really see that it is not over. Do the research, and honestly ask yourself “how can we let it go when the struggle forever grows in our streets and backyards?

Phase 2: Expanding Race

During the Expanding phase students showed a high level of interest in what they were learning, and offered a more nuanced view of race and racism in their writing assignments and during classroom discussions. Some students experienced racial epiphanies—moments when they discovered they have been racist toward someone else, perpetuated a racist or negative stereotype against a member of their group or a different racial (cultural or ethnic) group. These racial epiphanies usually spur students toward an anti-discriminatory, resistance or anti-racist stance. During the engaging phase, some of my white students wanted to discuss the concept of *reverse racism*. For example, during a lively discussion, Frankie, who identified as white, told the class, “My dad has been unemployed for eight months now. Every time he turns around there is a Mexican getting a job he should have. He’s been in the country longer, why is he being discriminated against? Now tell me that’s not reverse racism!” (research log, 2006).

In a journal response to an essay on interracial relationships by BeBe Moore Campbell, Peter, another white male brought in the anonymously authored poem “I Am Not A Racist” to share with the class. The poet, who is white, asserts that he should not be called a racist because he prefers to be around white people. Ultimately, the poet contends that Blacks and other groups are racist, too, and therefore it’s not fair to only judge white people for their racist attitudes. Anniyssia, an African American female responded by writing a counter poem in which she reminded the poet (and Peter) of the power attached to “white racism” that was perpetuated through systems of slavery and Jim Crowism. Most powerfully, she said she did not blame Peter, the poet or others of their generation for the racism against Blacks, but asked them to acknowledge “the benefits you received from your ancestors from so many decades of putting down Blacks” (research log, 2006). A racially literate investigation

to racism opens space for all voices because it is not about placing blame, but making connections from history to everyday life, and working together to discover ways to dismantle the damage that racism continues to wreak on individuals and society.

There were students who vacillated between the engaging and expanding phases, mostly due to their struggle in understanding terminology—the differences between prejudice, discrimination, and racism. During the expanding phase, students attempted to involve family members and others outside of the classroom community with what they were learning in class. Maria, a Dominican female shared her disillusionment after she talked with her parents about what she was learning in the class. She told us during a class discussion: “Papi is a little more open to talking about this stuff. My mom, my mom ain’t trying to hear it. She want to know, bottom line, she want to know how is it gonna help me get good grades?” Several students expressed their disappointment in some of the reactions they received from friends and family members when they broached the topics with them. When those around them did not connect with the topic, the students began to question the practicality of having such discussions outside their *Freshman English and Composition* classroom. Failure to successfully begin and sustain these conversations with friends and family often led students to disengage from the topics discussed in the course.

Phase 3: Disengaging Race

The Disengaging phase was characterized by a waning interest in the literature that excited them just a few weeks before. I noticed less intense discussions and outright resistance to talking about race and racism (See Table 1), as well as increased lag time in turning in assignments. It is possible that the pressure of exams and projects in other classes contributed to their disengagement; however, I believe that the daily discussions about race for nearly three months started to take its toll. Some students told me in private, and others shared during class, that they felt overwhelmed by the literature and needed a break from “always talking about race” (research log, 2006). Early in the semester when students grappled with the focus of the course, I reminded them they could transfer to another section of the course that may not view *Freshman English and Composition* through a critical lens. Each student remained in the course, but repeatedly admitted in class or in their journals that the intense conversations about race and racism were not easy for them. Yvette’s comments during a class discussion on the U.S. civil rights movement signaled her desire to disengage. In particular, she referenced the activism of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and told the class “this is depressing. I am depressed because the things they fought for then are the same struggles people are experiencing today. Some of my friends

experience racism right at this college, and this place is supposed to support diversity. I am getting depressed. I need to read about something a little more positive and not so depressing. Don't you guys feel the same?"

Phase 4: Reconnecting Race, Racism, and Literacy

As the semester came to a close, students who entered a Reconnecting phase pondered what they learned and worked at making connections to readings and classroom discussions. Most students who arrived at this phase (students remained at different phases by the end of the course) saw themselves as being or becoming racially literate and felt a responsibility to take action. For example, in his final journal entry, Frankie wrote "Yeah, I would say that I have racial literacy. I believe I had it before this class, but it was probably more like racial illiteracy. I'd like to take what I learn and make change, I'm just not exactly sure how I would do that." Antonia, a white female equated the class discussions with "liberation" and told the class, "we crave to have these conversations. In high school no one cared about you, they just wanted to control you. In this class we talk about what is uncomfortable, but that's the only way we can push forward as a people who need to come together" and make some changes (research log, 2006). In her final journal entry, Anniyia reflects on her developing racial literacy skills. She wrote:

This class has helped me to be open-minded. My open-mindedness has helped me to learn about other races and their beliefs and respect them even if I don't always agree with them. I have not only developed respect for others, no matter what their race and culture and customs are, but I have developed respect for myself. The way I viewed issues on race and class before I entered this class has significantly changed. I now have a better understanding of why race and class systems exist. I've learned that society suffers from racial, ethnic, sexual, and mental confusion. As an African American student I was able to relate to the novels we read, and I was also able to relate to the many minority pieces we've read. This helped me to find my place in society. I now know where I stand as a Black female in America. I am no longer confused about where I stand. Even though this atrocity is all around me I am not afraid to refrain from being a part of it.

Anniyia refused to be a victim of racism even with her new knowledge of the history of African Americans in the United States. She resisted perpetuating stereotypical images of people, but instead wanted to be open-minded and get to know more about people's cultures, customs, and how they understand their racial category.

Concluding Thoughts

The ideology of race will remain a permanent feature on the American cultural landscape (Omi & Winant, 1986). The students in my study utilized class discussions and writing to make sense of how they and their peers engaged with race, racism, and issues of diversity. Their discourse and written comments reveal some challenges in discussing this work for an extended period of time. The four phases they moved in and between serve as a theoretical framework for understanding how they processed what they were learning, but also offer a possible model for how college English teachers might approach racial literacy development with the students in their classroom. This type of teaching can be politically risky, depending on the status of the professor and the college climate, and it is emotionally draining and time-consuming, particularly when there are 20 or more students in class, and the course is one of three taught by the professor that semester. However, the personal growth I experienced and the benefit of seeing the transformations experienced by my students outweighed any risks for me. At the end of the course, I gave students an exit survey that asked whether they would recommend this course to a friend, and to identify the number one reason why they remained in the class. All of the students said they would recommend the class to someone (many already had), and said they had not dropped the course because they were “intrigued,” “fearful but excited,” and “curious about how Professor Sealey-Ruiz would teach the course.”

During the completion of the written activities and throughout the four phases students continued to struggle with “sounding racist,” “offending someone,” or “going into a new territory with this controversial topic” (analytic log, 2006). Despite this, students developed their racial literacy skills and made connections with each other within and outside the classroom. For example, Shanice held a birthday party and invited the entire class. Denise, a Latina who was extremely shy, performed poetry about her new friendship with Anna, a Russian Jewish girl in the class. A few students decided they would take more classes together, and others vowed to take what they learned from the class to affect change at Costland Community College and in the world. Peter, the student who felt his dad had been a victim of reverse racism, and questioned why there should be a focus on anything but American culture, wrote on his exit survey: “I take seriously what we did in this class. I do want to be someone who changes things and not keep the blame game going. We, the younger generation do deserve a better world.” The classroom environment provided a space for students to examine their beliefs and understandings in critical and constructive ways. Building racial literacy skills helps Black students take a closer look at white supremacy and

provides insight into how racial stratification plays out in U.S. society. If they are able to see it, then perhaps they are less apt to blaming their “lack of ability” and “lack of intelligence” when they do not get what they work hard to achieve. King (2008) underscores how this level understanding does not always happen quickly or in neat ways. He notes that oftentimes students of color “fall back on their experience rather than engage the material centering class discussions.” A racially literate person can examine the complexities created by race and racism and engage in self-examination, an assessment of society, and action that can lead to change in the way people view and treat one another.

Table 2: Freshman English and Composition selected readings for the Spring 2006 semester

Text	Type	Author
An American Story	Novel	Debra Dickerson
Autobiography Of A People	Anthology	Herb Boyd
Black Like Me	Novel	Howard Griffin
Shaking The Tree: A Collection Of New Fiction And Memoir By Black Women	Anthology	Meri Nana-Ama Danquah
Racial Progress And Retreat: A Personal Memoir	Memoir excerpt	Kenneth B. Clark
Hunger Of Memory	Memoir excerpt	Richard Rodriguez
Black Men, White Women: A Sister Relinquishes Her Anger	Essay	BeBe Moore Campbell
White Privilege	Essay	Peggy McIntosh
Why We Can't Wait	Book-length essay	Martin Luther King
The Ballot Or The Bullet	Speech	Malcolm X
One Day When I Was Lost	Play	James Baldwin

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