This article explores the potential of a song lyrics-based curriculum to encourage the practice of racial literacy in the first-year composition classroom.

“I’m sick of talking about race!”

These are the words of a former colleague who, having inquired as to the research I was conducting, dramatically sighed and informed me that she planned to never again discuss race with her students. Race had nothing to do with composition, she insisted, especially in the twenty-first century. I could not disagree more. Race has factored, implicitly or explicitly, into research and scholarship on reading and text selection (Morrow; Salvatori); remediation (Rose); student experience and identity (Sharma; Shen); form and structure (Fort); campus politics (Hoang; Kynard and Eddy); and dialect and language variation in the classroom (CCCC; Smitherman). While my colleague seems to have tired of talking about race, I argue that race talk is more important today than ever before. The problem is how we talk about race.

Catherine Prendergast has called race the “absent presence” in composition studies: even when research is focused on groups categorized by race, our discursive practices around race remain uninvestigated (36). In recent years, Prendergast, Jennifer Clary-Lemon, and Victor Villanueva have independently explored the varied meanings and implications of race rhetoric in scholarship on composition studies; unfortunately, discussions in scholarly journals do not necessarily match our classroom instruction. Race talk, after all, is not easy to initiate or navigate, and many instructors—like my colleague—would rather avoid it.

Colorblindness, or what Pollock calls “colormuteness,” has long been the accepted mode of (avoiding) race talk in the post–civil rights movement United States. If we do talk about race, we rarely talk about racism, especially as it continues to influence individual experience (Prendergast). Even some of our well-intentioned educational practices discourage race talk. In the predominantly White high school Jennifer Seibel Trainor studied,1 the emphasis school culture placed on positivity and “a good attitude” inadvertently perpetuated meritocratic ideologies that silenced discussion of racism: addressing inequity was seen as “complaining” (97). Other
school environments more overtly silence antiracist discourse: Shannon Gibney, a Black professor in a predominantly White institution, was officially reprimanded after becoming an advocate for racial equity on the college campus where she is a faculty member (Coleman et al.).

Despite the workings of institutional racism on our students’ lives, there are too few opportunities for young people to discuss their experiences with racism or the social and cultural ideologies these experiences represent. This is especially problematic given increasing racial tensions across the United States. Neither the 2008 election nor the 2012 reelection of Black-identifying American president Barack Obama succeeded in ushering in the “potential postracial moment” initially promised (Johnston-Guerrero 820). Further, the November 2016 election of KKK-endorsed Donald Trump and the subsequent rash of racist violence (SPLC), some of which has occurred on college campuses (Reilly), necessitate that racism be addressed with urgency and focused attention in educational discourse.

Clary-Lemon, who contends that “race rhetoric (the discursive construction of race, if you will) is sometimes overlooked,” even in scholarly discussions (W5), calls for scholars to create a “space where it becomes safe to talk about not being able to talk about something, safe to examine our silence and substitutions” (W14). I suggest that we not only take up this call in scholarship but that we also create these spaces in our composition classrooms. The composition classroom is as much about the rhetorical and discursive construction and explication of ideology as it is about the craft of academic writing. Tasked with the responsibility of introducing new students to the academic writing practices of the university, first-year composition (FYC) instructors can—and, I argue, should—also make visible the processes by which ideologies are constructed, maintained, and subverted.

Racial literacy, a collection of skills and behaviors that allow individuals to “probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society” (Sealey-Ruiz 386), is vital in a contemporary American society that professes meritocracy and postracialism yet where racial tensions continue to give rise to fear, violence, and inequity. Such skills are especially important within educational institutions, which have historically functioned, at their worst, as sites of acculturation and oppression. At their best, these same institutions have functioned as cultural crossroads where competing and intersecting experiences and ideologies have given rise to intellectual growth and social progress.
Once called “democracy in action” (Pickett), two-year colleges provide an accessible, affordable introduction to higher education for students from historically underrepresented racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Put simply, they are “diverse institutions that serve a diverse population” (Purvis). In the two-year college FYC classroom, students can connect reading and writing skills to “inquiry about themselves and their world” (Sealey-Ruiz 396). In this article I describe a two-year college FYC curriculum in which song lyrics served as the textual starting point for race talk and racial literacy.

Research into race talk itself has largely dealt with the meaning of that talk. Composition studies, however, has long advocated awareness not only of the products of composition but also of the processes by which we and our students create (Flower and Hayes, “Cognitive Process”; Murray). I propose we take a step back and consider not only what students say and mean in the classroom, but also the approaches they take to engage in race talk. Race talk scholars note discursive moves of avoidance, apparent admission, and justification among White students (Bonilla-Silva and Forman; Sue) and rhetorical strategies of metaphor and metonymy among scholars (Clary-Lemon). However, while Frances Winddance Twine’s framework of racial literacy emphasizes the development of language practices through which to discuss race and racism, there is little definition or explication of the particular skills that make up these practices. Racial literacy researchers Amy Vetter and Holly Hungerford-Kressor identify language practices of hedging and challenging, but most scholars who employ the racial literacy framework emphasize social and historical awareness rather than its discursive moves.

Michelle T. Johnson has argued that the fields of composition and rhetoric must embrace a framework of racial literacy to rethink the ways in which these disciplines theorize and teach about race. To do so “requires theorizing and teaching about race as a discursive system” (160). However, in Johnson’s FYC classrooms, as in the classrooms Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz studied, students write about race rather than exploring race as a discursive paradigm. What, then, are the discursive practices of racial literacy in composition instruction? Do students ask questions? Share stories? Stay quiet? Only when we identify these “discursive tools” can we begin to develop curricula toward their development. Because racial literacy is a process of learning rather than a point of mastery (Guinier), I believe that by examining race talk, we can begin to recognize these discursive skills as they develop in the classroom.

Sealey-Ruiz has demonstrated that students can “use their writing to build racial literacy” (387, original emphasis); I contend that the reverse is also possible: with a well-designed curriculum in place, students can use the racial literacy tools they develop to better understand the concepts integral to composition studies and, potentially, improve their writing skills. This essay is guided by the following questions: 1) How do students engage in race talk during textual analysis in the English classrooms on this college campus? 2) In what ways might the introduction of a song lyrics curriculum encourage racial literacy? and 3) What rhetorical concepts and skills can a racial literacy curriculum offer students in FYC?
English 102 and the Narrative Song Lyrics Curriculum

This research was conducted at a public, urban, two-year college, where I was employed as an adjunct faculty member for three years. The school is ethnically and racially diverse, with a student population that reflects the surrounding community. In 2013, approximately 42 percent of students identified as Hispanic; approximately 22 percent as Asian; approximately 20 percent as Black; and approximately 15 percent as White. Nearly half were born outside of the United States; students enrolled in degree programs during the fall 2013 semester had been born in 157 different countries and identified as native speakers of 111 different languages.

Seventy students participated in this study over the course of an academic year: 37 during the fall semester of 2014 (September to December) and 33 during the spring semester of 2015 (March to June). Participants were not recruited but had enrolled in one of four sections of English 102 of which I was the instructor. In keeping with institutional procedures, participants provided informed consent in writing prior to the commencement of data collection. English 102 is the second and final required English course for nonmajors and functions both as an introduction to literary analysis and as a critical writing course. Official materials distributed by the department identified as the primary outcomes of English 102 the improvement of student writing and the interpretation of literary texts, two goals for which there were few other opportunities in the college curriculum (which lacked an English major).

I had hoped that by including multiple genres of lyrical texts by a diverse group of authors, I might be able to reach more students in my classroom and also encourage students to look beyond their comfort zone of musical—and textual—appreciation.

I had initially developed the NSL curriculum partly out of practicality—to meet students’ needs and the goals of the course, I needed brief texts through which to introduce the practice of literary interpretation—and partly as an expansion of existing music-based pedagogies. While a wealth of scholarship has attested to the power of hip-hop music and culture to teach composition and literary analysis (Carlson; Grater and Johnson; Kirkland; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade; Sundeen) and to integrate marginalized students into classroom discussion (Hill; Ladson-Billings; Love; Petchauer), less research has been conducted on the use of other genres of song lyrics not only to engage a diverse student population but also to encourage race talk and racial literacy.

I had hoped that by including multiple genres of lyrical texts by a diverse group of authors, I might be able to reach more students in my classroom and also encourage students to look beyond their comfort zone of musical—and textual—appreciation. Robert McParland has found that the use of music by songwriters of
diverse backgrounds encourages students to recognize both cultural differences and “similar universal themes and experiences” (106), which are key to understanding how race and other factors influence individual experience. Perhaps most importantly, because of music’s ubiquity in young people’s lives, educators have found that bringing music into the classroom puts students on a level playing field with one another and even the instructor (Carlson; McParland).

Though lyrics are frequently compared to poetry, NSL texts resemble short stories and utilize traditional techniques such as plot, character, setting, and conflict, just to name a few. I selected songs with literary elements that were clear but not overt or simplistic; all had some level of ambiguity to encourage students to look closely at the text. While I did not explicitly discuss the conceptual framework of racial literacy, I encouraged students to read NSL texts through rhetorical and critical lenses. In other words, they looked at the author, the implied audience, and contextual factors surrounding the production and reception of the text, as well as who was (or was not) represented in the text and how those individuals and groups were represented. Lyrics were read as written texts, though music was played following initial textual analysis to allow students to appreciate the “atmosphere of the music” and consider how instrumental elements contribute to the song’s meaning (McParland 103). To connect their reading and discussion to the goals of the composition classroom, students wrote informal commentaries and responses to NSL texts; character analyses; personal reflections; and two formal essays, including a final research project that invited students to consider questions of representation using real-life situations as texts.

The NSL curriculum included songs by Tracy Chapman, Eminem, Joni Mitchell, and others; however, the excerpts presented in the following pages emerged from discussion of one NSL text: “Straight Time” by Bruce Springsteen.

This research was conducted as a cumulative case study (Yin) within the methodological framework of teacher research. To examine situated language, as well as the behaviors and language of “people who interact over time” (Creswell 90), I borrowed from the traditions of discourse analysis (Gee) and ethnography as I collected and analyzed data. In addition to participant observation and audiotape, I took jottings in the classroom, which I later turned into formal field notes, to document and describe in-class conversations. (In the larger project, I examined students’ essays and informal writing exercises; however, as in-class time was largely spent on discussions of texts and approaches to composition, the study represented here deals with classroom dialogue.) To fulfill my dual roles as teacher and researcher without allowing my research to override my instructional obligations, I remained mostly silent once students were engaged in discussion. This approach is also effective pedagogy for literary analysis: textual meaning making occurs when students are encouraged to talk and respond directly to one another, which cannot happen if “the conversational ball is constantly thrown to the teacher, who then throws it to another student, who again returns it to the teacher” (Rosenblatt 68). As such, most of my contributions to discussion could be categorized as inquiry, prodding questions intended both to elicit clarification for my research and to encourage
students to work out their ideas without the authoritative input they might expect from their teacher.

Because teacher research is dynamic and constant-comparative (Baumann et al.), I was always engaged in analysis as I participated, took notes in my researcher journal, transcribed audiotapes, and planned lessons for the next week’s class meetings. Rather than use a predetermined coding scheme, I allowed first-cycle codes (Saldana), including descriptive and in vivo codes pulled directly from the students’ language to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Miles et al. 74), to emerge as I analyzed field notes and transcripts from one class section chosen at random, which I call Section A. Second-cycle coding served to develop thematic categories and establish patterns and connections in student dialogue.

While I looked at students’ expressed reactions to NSL texts and their stated perspectives on race and racism, I focused analysis on their approaches to race talk, as well as the surrounding rhetorical contexts: when and to whom they spoke, and the nature and content of discussion. Though themes unrelated to race talk emerged, I limited analysis to the discursive moves students used to engage in race talk. Additional transcripts and field notes were manually coded to confirm, contradict, and illuminate these patterns. While this was primarily a qualitative study, frequency was important in determining the prevalence of a particular discursive move. Table 1 displays the number of students who employed the discursive approaches identified by larger themes and smaller subcodes.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study draws upon a racial literacy framework to emphasize the significance of developing racially cognizant and antiracist dialogue in the classroom setting. Twine uses the term *racial literacy* to categorize the practices White mothers of biracial children in the United Kingdom employed to instill in their children racial awareness and identification with Blackness and to “theorize their parental labour as a type of anti-racist project” (878). However, the term has more widely been used to describe understanding of the role(s) race plays in all aspects of society, particularly in the United States.

The foremost behavior Twine associates with racial literacy is the provision of conceptual and discursive tools with which to understand the function(s) of race. Twine notes that the parents she observed encouraged their children to view situations they encountered in school (and elsewhere) and those they observed in the media through a critical, racially cognizant lens. This draws implicitly upon the work of Paulo Freire and the field of critical media literacy (Kellner and Share). I argue
that this practice, which Twine categorizes as “micro-cultural” (879), is significant not only inside the multiracial home but also inside the racially diverse classroom. I have also drawn from the racial literacy paradigm described by legal and civil rights scholar Lani Guinier, who contends that “racial literacy is contextual rather than universal” (114–15) and places emphasis on the relationship between race and power, taking into account the “psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions” of race (115). Moreover, a racially literate framework interrogates more than race: though it never “loses sight of race . . . it constantly interrogates the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender, and other explanatory variables” (115). Racial inequities, then, are symptomatic indicators of broader social maladies, including those that affect poor Whites, Latinos/as, and other marginalized populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic codes</th>
<th>Students using the approach* (N=70)</th>
<th>Approach subcodes</th>
<th>Number of students†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal sharing</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>Recalling experience</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asking peers’ opinions</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeing with peers</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disagreeing with peers</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stating emotions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labeling</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Self-identifying</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Labeling others</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning labels</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering stereotypes</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Identifying stereotypes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critiquing text representation</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring stereotype origin</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Correcting stereotypes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Essentializing/stereotyping others</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedging</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Hedging</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disclaiming</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>24</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Percentage of students who employed the approach at least once in in-class discussion.
† Totals of subcodes within thematic categories may exceed 70, as some students employed more than one approach.
Guinier’s promotion of racial literacy as an analytic paradigm for understanding structural racism and the ways in which race acts “as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks” (114), considered in conjunction with Twine’s microcultural practices, creates a layered conceptual framework from which matters of race can be viewed on the systemic and situational levels.

Race Talk in English 102

To develop pedagogies around the discursive practices of racial literacy, we must identify the tools students already employ to engage in race talk. Moreover, to explore racial literacy’s relevance for the FYC classroom, connections must be drawn between these race talk practices and the rhetorical concepts we teach in FYC, including the establishment of authorial positionality and ethos in research and composition; critical readings of texts; drawing conclusions from data; attention to style, diction, and delivery; and awareness of audience.

Four primary modes emerged to characterize students’ approaches to race talk in the English 102 classroom: Sharing; Labeling; Confronting Stereotypes; and Hedging. Table 2 summarizes the definition and function of each of these speech acts as well as its application in the composition classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Student voices</th>
<th>Related rhetorical concept(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Sharing of a personal experience, anecdote, or emotional reaction connected to material being discussed</td>
<td>To make sense of material through identification with subject matter; another person, text, or character</td>
<td>“But it’s not easy, though. Like, my dad, I grew up without my dad. I’m gonna share this …” “I have a son … He’s black. So when I see cops are killing kids who are unarmed … what do I do as a mother?” “Because I have dealt with heartbreak, I feel like I can relate.” “I feel you.”</td>
<td>Positionality: Sharing encourages reflection upon the factors that have influenced one’s relationship to content. Authorial choice: Sharing encourages students to be selective about how, what, and when they share. Relevance: Sharing helps students see how broad societal ideologies relate to individual lives and situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech act</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Student voices</td>
<td>Related rhetorical concept(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labeling</td>
<td>Self-identifying or identifying others based upon race, ethnicity, language, class, or geography</td>
<td>To refer to a person or group of persons</td>
<td>“I don’t even like saying Black people. It’s Brown.” “They’re hicks! They’re country.”</td>
<td>Situated language: Focus on word choice encourages students to consider the situatedness of language, including word origin and connotation. Authorial choice (with regard to diction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To interrogate the validity of a spoken label</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Encountering stereotypes</td>
<td>Employing, identifying, questioning or challenging others’ beliefs or assumptions about a group based upon race, ethnicity, class, gender, or geography</td>
<td>To challenge the validity of another’s assumption</td>
<td>“But what about lifestyle? That’s just their lifestyle.” “I think that we have that idea of the country because that’s what we see on television or in stories.” “Don’t speak for all of us.”</td>
<td>Critical thinking: Attempts to understand the origins of stereotypes help students recognize the need to look beneath the surface and even conduct research in order to find explanations and solve problems. Textual representation: Confronting media and textual stereotypes helps students see the constructedness of fictional elements like characterization, narration, and perspective.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To understand the context behind the use and development of stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hedging</td>
<td>Prefacing or following a statement with a condition, clarification, or apology</td>
<td>To prevent others from misunderstanding or taking offense at a subsequent or preceding utterance</td>
<td>“Like, I don’t judge nobody, but …” “I don’t want to be offensive for any of the stuff I’m gonna say …” “I mean, to be honest.”</td>
<td>Situated Language Audience: Anticipating listener reaction encourages students to consider the rhetorical relationship between writer and reader. Authorial voice and tone: Hedging encourages awareness of voice and tone in argumentation.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To assuage guilt following an inflammatory statement</td>
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“Straight Time,” which narrates an ex-convict’s struggles to connect with his family and avoid a life of crime, resonated with many students. Discussion of the Springsteen text led to conversations about situations with criminal (in)justice they had experienced or witnessed in their own communities. James, who self-identified as Hispanic, connected the narrator’s struggles to those he witnessed in his New York City neighborhood: “It’s the same thing in the ‘hood. I see all the time guys try to do good when they get out but most of the time they wind up going back.”

By the end of the semester, many students had decided to compose their final papers on police brutality and recidivism, and conversations about these issues were common in the classroom. While most students assumed that Charlie, the narrator of “Straight Time,” was White, many saw his struggles as resulting from poverty as well as race. In a discussion with Shane, a dark-skinned eighteen-year-old who said he was routinely stopped and frisked by police officers in his South Bronx neighborhood, Valerie, a White woman who had recently relocated from the Midwest, speculated as to how her experience with criminal justice might differ from a situation she’d recently read about in which a (White) celebrity was arrested.

Valerie: I get busted for shoplifting . . . I’m gonna probably go to jail for a long-ass time. She’ll get a slap on the hand and get probation or something, because she can afford the lawyer.

Shane: It depends, cause if y’all got money, you could get away with it.

Shane’s use of the second person plural (“y’all”) in a statement made directly to Valerie may serve to equate Valerie with the celebrity from whom she has attempted to distance herself. In her attempts to distinguish herself from the third party based on wealth and fame, Valerie overlooks the commonality they share—skin color. Shane appears to be drawing a distinction between his relationship to the criminal justice system and Valerie’s; further, he implies that in criminal matters involving Whites, it is money that determines the outcome. Through the sharing of personal anecdotes, these students have begun to contextualize their experience within a larger American society.

Nicholas, a thirty-year-old returning student and navy veteran who self-identified as Puerto Rican, saw the central conflict of “Straight Time” as more psychological than socioeconomic. He drew upon his personal experience as he made sense of the struggles Charlie goes through after his release from prison:

I think it’s a mindset thing. I mean, cause—and I’m gonna throw a little personal information out there—but like me, I have PTSD. When I came back from the military I haven’t been the same, and I deal with a lot of personal issues, and I
know that the mindset, it’s everything in my mind, but I feel like I’m in this sort of bubble. So I think that with this particular story, it’s just a mindset.

These instances of experiential knowledge echo a trend that remained throughout the semester. While questions of validity due to subjectivity, individualism, and the inaccuracy of memory certainly arise when considering experiential forms of knowing, the simple fact that they shared these statements is significant to an understanding of how students approach race talk. Students’ willingness to share personal experiences, particularly as they related to sensitive or contentious subjects around which there had already been occasionally heated debate, signals that (1) they felt safe enough in the classroom to share without fear of repercussion or rebuke; (2) even with the possibility that others would disagree or respond unfavorably, students believed their experiences were significant and warranted address in the classroom space; and (3) they were actively reflecting upon their own relationship to the issues at hand.

This sharing is even more significant when we consider that personal experience is more often than not discouraged in student writing. Derald Wing Sue explains that, given that the American educational system and accompanying academic protocol are largely based in the empirical realities of Western science, “experiential reality is not considered as reliable and valid information because it is contaminated by opinions, idiosyncratic experiences, emotions, and personal values” (67). This experiential knowing, however, is an integral part of successful race talk. In order for individuals to become racially literate, they must first begin to understand themselves as racial, and, more importantly, racialized, beings within American society. This is especially significant for White students who may think themselves raceless or without culture (DiAngelo; Helms; Tatum; Winans). The framework of racial literacy further reminds us that structural inequities are enacted in individual contexts; personal experiences shared by these students highlight larger concerns about race relations.

Sharing of personal experience also provided an opportunity for students to begin to consider their own positionality in relation to the texts they’d read and the broader social and cultural issues discussed in the classroom. More often associated with research ethics and methodology, the concept of positionality bears relevance for any situation in which individuals interpret, draw conclusions, or represent in writing interpersonal and social situations. In order to understand how knowledge is constructed and disseminated as well as to effectively communicate with others, individuals must identify the “assumptions that [they] take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by [their] own unique identity and experiences in the world” (Takacs 27). Self-awareness and “critical humility” are especially important where potentially sensitive matters of social (in)justice are concerned.
(European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness). In classroom interaction, the recognition that knowledge is situated both “empowers and disempowers individual expertise” and may help students become more open to listening to their peers’ perspectives (Takacs 29).

In Nicholas’s statement about the central conflict of “Straight Time,” for example, he seems to recognize that his interpretation of the narrator’s struggle as one of mindset is grounded in his own experience with post-traumatic stress disorder. Potential next steps in Nicholas’s understanding of positionality might be his consideration that while this personal experience affords him a unique lens on the characterization of Charlie, it may limit his ability to accept other interpretations. He may also consider how an audience may perceive his interpretation.

**Labeling, Identifying, and Questioning: Race Labels and Word Choice**

As might be expected, the use of race labels like *Black* and *White* was common in the classroom. Many students, including those born in Spanish-speaking countries, used the word *Spanish* as an identifier of Spanish-speaking Latino/a and Latin American people. This conflation of race and ethnicity/nationality is not limited to the students in the English 102 classroom: in “On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism,” Victor Villanueva problematizes the use of the phrase “race and ethnicity” in scholarship on race due to the differences between the terms, though he also admits to using the terms himself (648). In Villanueva’s discussions of enrollment and graduation rates at the postsecondary level, he lists Latinos alongside African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Whites; this choice is significant, given the absence of *Latino/a* (or *Hispanic*) from official classifications of race in the United States. Racism is such a compelling issue, Villanueva argues, in part because we are unsure how to define it, let alone remedy it. In the English 102 classroom (as in scholarship), race itself was difficult to define.

At the beginning of semester, Mimi, who self-identified as “blended,” frequently used the terms *Black* and *Spanish* in conversation. Toward the end of the semester, Mimi began to interrogate this use of racial terminology. Take, for example, the following exchange that arose during a conversation about police brutality on December 5:

Mimi: They want Black people to feel like—I don’t know—I don’t even like saying Black people. It’s Brown.

Cora: No one’s Black.

Omar: Why do you think that?

Amina: Brown is the same thing. It’s just a different color.

Mimi: But Black’s not really a color. Is anybody really Black? It’s a label!

Janessa: And that’s what happens with society.

Mimi: I’d just like to say Brown. I’ve always been that way.
Mimi shifts the focus of the conversation from police brutality to the language she and her peers have been using to identify racial groups. While this move away from discussion of racially motivated violence to the words themselves might be initially seen as topic avoidance (Bonilla-Silva and Forman), we must remember that language of identification is more than linguistic. Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out that, due to the significance of race in determining governmental policy as well as individual access to resources, including housing and employment, in our society, “how one is categorized is far from a merely academic or even personal matter” (3). In her review of race talk in composition scholarship, Jennifer Clary-Lemon writes that the linguistic shift “toward the constructed nature of race and ethnicity … turns the professional gaze of the field increasingly toward seeing representation, among other things, as a rhetorical construct” (W12). Such rhetorical strategies employed by scholars and educators “challenge our own racialized social system” (W12). In this sense, the deconstruction of language serves not only to aid in the understanding of race rhetoric(s) but also to begin to reinterpret, through language, existing racial ideologies.

Mimi’s use of the term Brown seems an attempt to reconfigure race not as a social construct but as a physical characteristic. While her questioning of her own use of race labels is a significant moment of self-reflection, she ultimately relies upon a familiar pseudoscientific categorization of race as a biological trait. As such, she reifies rather than reconstructs race, merely renaming categories “to create others that seem more appealing” (Clary-Lemon W4). Amina, who self-identified as Arabic (an ethnic identification that, according to US Census classification, would make Amina racially White) challenges this claim by acknowledging that because Brown is just another color, using the term in place of Black will ultimately make little difference in the way those terms are applied or interpreted. While she does not continue with that discursive thread, Amina’s awareness of the shortcomings of these categories is an important signifier of her own racial literacy.

With her final pronouncement, Mimi also steps back from the debate she introduced and repositions her argument as a matter of individual choice: “I’d just like to say Brown. I’ve always been that way” (emphasis added). Mimi claims that she has always “been that way,” but her earlier use of Black as a racial identifier speaks to the contrary and demonstrates the insidiousness of socially sanctioned race labels. Janessa tacitly acknowledges the difficulty of reconfiguring race rhetoric with her declaration that “that’s what happens with society.” It appears to be the discouraging nature of this comment, and the students’ recognition of the seeming inevitability of race labeling in American society, that prompt Mimi to withdraw from the conversation. Though Omar (who self-identified as Zoroastrian, a minority religion of Iran) does not express a direct opinion about the use of these racial labels, he inquires as to his classmates’ claims that Black is an insufficient identifier. In their research into racial literacy in the high school classroom, Amy Vetter and Holly Hungerford-Kressor point to such active listening and respectful challenging as key practices toward developing racial literacy (84).
Discussions of race labels segued—with a little urging on my part—into discussions of the situatedness of language as well as authorial choice and diction in composition. Using these labels (and other words like *ghetto* and *hood-style*) as reference points, students considered the ways in which a writer’s word selection conveys ideology and perspective. Through writing exercises and peer review, students examined their own language use on subjects both sociopolitical and academic. In the FYC classroom, racially charged terminology can be used to initiate discussion of the abilities of language to categorize and identify, as well as to reify, rearrange, and resist.

“Don’t Speak for All of Us”: Stereotypes and Textual Representation

When discussion turned toward the dangers of stereotypes and essentializing, students easily recognized others’ uses of stereotypes, particularly those in the media. Raymond, who self-identified as Jamaican and Black, pointed to the assumption that “all Jamaican people smoke weed”: “Some guys do,” he clarified. Nicholas got a few laughs when he offered “Bob Marley, man!” as a possible explanation for the prevalence of this stereotype, a tacit acknowledgment of the ways in which media may perpetuate essentialist notions of race and ethnicity (Kellner and Share).

Though students were mindful of the inaccuracies of racial, ethnic, and gender-based stereotypes, they were less concerned with stereotypes that were class- or location-based. While “Straight Time” would likely be classified as a piece of folk music, the majority of students clung to their initial impressions of “Straight Time” as a country song. Some, unfamiliar with Springsteen’s work, initially assumed “Straight Time” to be a hip-hop song:

Cora: Well, I’m not trying to, like, um, say a statistic or anything, but I mean, guy, prison, you know, how life is … that’s kinda what most rappers speak about.

Omar: Yeah, you don’t see some country hick locked up coming out and then trying to get straight.

Kevin: That’s not true! Country songs, that’s all they talk about.

Omar: I can’t imagine no White country person … getting locked up, coming out—

Mimi: I hang out a lot upstate, and there’s, like, rednecks up there … and gangs. They do drugs cause they’re bored, and they get in trouble.

Cora: It’s true.

Mimi: It’s the same as people in the city or people of a certain, whatever,
anybody. But I thought it was rap because of the slang he was using. I didn’t think country would use slang like that.

Here Mimi draws attention to the speaker’s dialect, which she identifies as slang. Many students noted the omission of the final consonant in the narrator’s use of present progressive tense: for example, “tryin’” (Springsteen, line 3), “doin’” (line 8), and “runnin’” (line 9). These observations led to a discussion of dialect variation in the United States, after which students began to reflect upon the ways geography and other cultural factors had influenced their own language and literacy practices. However, students seemed to have difficulty imagining that troubles associated with urban life (poverty, recidivism) could also prevail in rural America. Guinier reminds us that our country’s racial discourse, which often emphasizes race without acknowledgment of socioeconomic or geographic factors, “masks how much poor whites have in common with poor blacks and other people of color” (114).

In the conversation depicted here, Omar resists the possibility that a White person in the country could struggle with these pressures. It is unclear, however, if his doubts stem from matters of race or location, though, as a racial literacy framework reminds us, such factors are inextricably intertwined.

The vague language here, such as Cora’s reference to the stories often heard in rap music — “guys, prison, you know, how life is . . .” — or Mimi’s identification of “people in the city or people of a certain, whatever” strike me as attempts to evade direct race talk, the unspoken characteristic of urban rap being its affiliation with the African American community. These students speak very directly, however, about those they identify as “country”: students refer to rednecks and hicks with little acknowledgment of their use of pejoratives. This stands in stark contrast to the caution with which they spoke of people of color. Jennifer Beech points out that terms like redneck allow middle-class Whites to assert their racial and socioeconomic agency by pointing out how poor Whites behave “in ways supposedly unbecoming to or unexpected of Whites” (175). In doing so, they reify racist ideologies of essential distinctions between Whites and Blacks. Beech adds that “it is often students of color who more readily perceive the racial dimensions of mainstream characterizations of rednecks, hillbillies, crackers, white trash” (180). In my classroom, however, I did not see that same level of awareness on the part of students of color or White students. That the school is located in an urban metropolis known for its diversity and social progressiveness might have contributed to their assumptions about the rural south. The students who seemed to be most aware of poor White stereotypes were those who had themselves lived in areas where these stereotypes predominate, reiterating the significance of self-reflection and sharing of personal experience in racial literacy development.

Through productive classroom dialogue, students began to reconsider their own assumptions and biases.
own assumptions and biases. Janessa credited classroom discussion with shifting her perspective on geographic stereotyping:

My mind was so closed. This whole thing … opened my mind up to, like, this whole conversation. I would never even think of stereotyping people from the country until this conversation! Kind of opening up a little more of myself now.

Though quiet in class discussion, Mira, who identified as “half-Black,” confessed late in the semester that the class had made her increasingly cognizant of the discomfort and fear she felt around Black men. As a light-skinned biracial young woman who had grown up primarily with the White side of her family, Mira resembles the biracial children Twine studied. The discursive and interpretive tools Mira learned in our class allowed her to better understand her internalization of racist and essentialist modes of thinking, which can cause “members of a targeted group to devalue and more harshly criticize other members of their own group” (DiAngelo 78). Mira’s new awareness was unsettling: “I can’t watch TV without seeing how many Black men are portrayed as criminals. And all the Hispanic women are maids.”

As students became more aware of the ways in which texts (mis)represent groups of people, they also became more aware of their own language use. This glimpse into the constructedness of text also encourages students to see their role in composition as one of creation rather than one of reiteration. Though we did not directly discuss such terms as locution, illocution, and perlocution, students learned that it isn’t only the words that matter, but who says them, with what intent, to whom, and how that audience might interpret those words. Once they see how rhetorical choices contribute to the meaning of a text, they also learn that, through writing, they too can become creators of meaning. Because students can believe the myth of inspiration or discovery (Flower and Hayes, “Cognition of Discovery”; Smith), the confidence such a perspective affords a new college writer is invaluable.

Moreover, because students felt passionately about the ways in which they and others were (mis)represented in media texts, they sought to correct inaccurate representations through their own writing: in addition to offering counternarratives in the informal reading responses they wrote regularly for homework, many students chose to frame their final research papers around questions of identity, representation, and discrimination. Yasmin, a Colombian-born woman, explored how caballerismo (a Latin American code of chivalry) might influence romantic relationships among Colombian Americans; Mira considered societal attitudes toward Black-appearing biracial women. By using their own writing to correct inequitable stereotypes and
representations, students began to see writing not as a requisite academic task but a self-motivated contribution to a larger line of inquiry.

“No Offense, but …”: Hedging and Disclaimers

It was common for students to preface comments about race with disclaimers or follow up such comments by hedging. Disclaimers seemed to function as a pre-apology, intended to prevent negative reactions to potentially inflammatory comments; hedging served as clarification after comments were uttered. A student, having gauged (or anticipated) the reaction of her classmates, might rush to hedge the offending comment in order to alleviate others’ discomfort or assuage her own guilt. For example, during a conversation about the American criminal justice system, Cora pointed out that more Black men than White men were in prison; she immediately followed this statement with “I mean, to be honest,” as though she anticipated her comments, without clarification, might be received as presumptuous or inflammatory. Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor report similar patterns in the high school classroom (93). Sue explains that defensive statements serve as denials of individual racism, particularly for White people who fear being seen as racist (46). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tyrone A. Forman identify this discursive behavior as a “less overt expression of racist resentment” but a reification of ideologies that perpetuate White supremacy (52). In the English 102 classroom, few examples of hedging can be attributed to White students; most of these comments were made by students of color. What is notable, then, about hedging in English 102?

Recalling her move to the United States, Amina expressed surprise that stereotypes she’d heard seemed to be true in New York City:

I looked at all the dry cleaners and they were Asians! And I—I’m sorry, guys—but I would notice the Black girls, and they would have incredible nails, all of them, done hair, and they would talk the way I would see on TV, and I would think, Holy shit, this is all real!

Amina points to two stereotypes—the Asian dry cleaners and the Black girls with incredible nails—but only prefaces one with a disclaiming apology. Though there were two students I knew to be of Asian birth in the classroom, Amina apologized for comments that may have been offensive to her Black classmates, but she did not approach with the same caution her comments about Asian dry cleaners. Amina’s oversight is what Sue and others identify as a microaggression. Students’ cautiousness in conversation toward their Black classmates and their oversight of discrimination toward non-Blacks echo a pattern noted by Sue, Guinier, and others and exemplify the problematic binary of American racial discourse. Instances such as these point to the need for instructors interested in developing racial literacy curricula to expand their conceptualization(s) of race to include those who do not identify as Black or White.

While the speech act of hedging may give us pause as antiracist educators who resist evasive language practices, hedging can alternatively be interpreted as a
marker of “pragmatic competence,” an indication that a speaker has mastered the “niceties” of the language (Fraser 15). Hedging gave students the verbal space to rethink, clarify, rephrase, and essentially revise their statements with their audience in mind. As a result, conversations around race continued productively rather than abruptly shutting down as can happen when even well-intentioned but outdated language is used (McCracken). The students who hedged their statements before completing them were not only willing to engage in race talk, but they also sought out the most productive ways they knew to do so.

This is exceedingly important if we hope to engage our students in difficult or potentially controversial classroom conversations. They may use the wrong words at times. All writers—all people—do. But as budding academic writers, they are learning to better engage in these discourses not only by expanding their vocabularies and learning new terminology but also by developing an increasing awareness of what it means to truly communicate inside and outside traditional academic settings.

Reflections on the NSL Curriculum

Just as race talk cannot be separated from the material effects of racism, antiracist talk can serve to “reconstruct individual positionings and social relationships” (Rogers and Mosley 110). In this view, interrogating racialized language is itself a step toward racial literacy. Productive approaches to race talk, such as asking questions and sharing alternative perspectives, encourage discussion; on the other hand, statements of inevitability and hedging serve to conclude racially charged conversations. Instructors developing racial literacy curricula, therefore, should be aware of these distinctions and encourage students to work through moments of tension rather than back away from them.

That classroom conversation quickly turned (without my urging) from NSL texts to racial inequity was not surprising, given the sociopolitical environment of New York City in late 2014 and early 2015. The chokehold death of Eric Garner, a Staten Island Black man, at the hands of NYPD officers in July 2014 ignited sparks of protest that grew when a grand jury failed to indict the officers in question in early December. Throughout the fall semester, protestors lined the streets outside the college campus. There is no doubt these events influenced, even indirectly, conversations inside the classroom.

If current events provided the context, the NSL curriculum provided content. The openness of the story songs invited students to fill in “gaps” (Iser) left unsaid...
and allowed them to challenge each other’s interpretations of the characters and events described in the narratives. At the same time, students were able to see how they had used their own experiences to fill in those gaps, thereby exploring not only racialized representations in text but also their own positionality. Anson pointed out that this curriculum made him realize he should look past the surface of a text to “see the deeper meaning.” Jim recognized that we tend to “associate certain issues with different genres” but that some themes transcended those presumed boundaries. McParland has noted a similar phenomenon, explaining that as students analyze different music styles, they cross boundaries of “cultural space” and, through interpretation, can “present views that are negotiated in collaboration” (106).

Despite their enthusiasm for the material, however, many students continued to use labels they admittedly found problematic; others were unable to recognize the ways in which they had perpetuated stereotypes or indirectly offended their classmates. Further, as we have seen with Mimi’s frustration over the terms Black and Brown, it is quite difficult to talk about race through language that is itself a part of the problem. As Prendergast explains, by the time they enter our classrooms, students are “already socialized into discourses of race and power relations” (49, original emphasis).

Students may not, however, be aware of the rhetorical processes that have contributed to their understanding of the worlds they inhabit. The first step toward understanding the dynamics at play in maintaining social hierarchies is to “make them legible” (Guinier 114). By critically reading texts that represent, directly or obliquely, larger societal concepts of race and power, and by examining their own language use and experiences, students can develop an awareness of how language, perspective, and persuasion contribute to the construction and dissemination of ideologies. In addition to making space to interrogate race and racism, a well-designed racial literacy curriculum can introduce students to concepts such as positionality, language choice, representation, and audience. Because racial literacy requires us to develop a cache of discursive tools with which to critically read and respond to individual situations and broader societal practices as well as to investigate the rhetorical practices that maintain the long-standing hegemonic infrastructure of American life, I argue that there is no venue better fitted to racial literacy than first-year composition.
closely align with the concerns expressed by the race-resistant colleague with whose words I began this article. However, as David Bartholomae, Sheridan Blau, and Gerald Graff all contend, we must include our students in the conversations and debates that occupy the scholarly lives of writers and academics. In light of policies and politically correct mores that attempt to depoliticize teaching, which is itself a political act, the best way to ensure students are not “bullied by their teachers’ political views is to bring them into the debates between those views” (Graff 170). Given the significance of race, racialization, and racism in our society, we cannot and should not pretend to be apolitical.

Notes

1. Some researchers into race relations and racial identity formation in higher education have chosen not to capitalize racial identifiers (Johnston-Guerrero; Renn) in order to, as Kristen A. Renn explains, “minimize the notion of racial categories as immutable entities” (399). I have chosen, however, to capitalize these terms in order to emphasize their assignment as social classifications rather than innate biological characteristics.

2. Institutional demographic data are available through the school’s official website, but for ethical reasons I have chosen not to identify the school by name.

3. Given the racial and ethnic diversity of my classrooms, I felt that to rely solely upon hip-hop texts would be to assume that my students have a vested interest in hip-hop and risk betraying an essentialist perspective on race and culture, a potential pitfall of hip-hop–based education (Gosa and Fields; Hall). It is worth noting that many of the students who participated in this study expressed dissatisfaction with contemporary hip-hop music.

4. All student names are pseudonyms.

5. The New York City Police Department’s Stop-and-Frisk practices have been criticized for their disproportionate persecution of Black and Latino males. Newly elected Mayor Bill de Blasio placed these practices under particular scrutiny in early 2014.

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