

10 WRITING TOWARD RACIAL LITERACY

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OVERVIEW

Curricula that engage students in reading and writing about race and racism are increasingly common in composition classrooms, but writing about race, even when guided by an instructor well-versed in critical race theory and critical pedagogy, isn't easy.* Racial literacy requires that students develop a discursive toolbox with which to examine and respond to the functions of race and racism in society and in their daily lives. This chapter explores why reading, writing, and talking about race and racism matter in first year composition courses, previews some successes and struggles students may face, and offers strategies students can use to work through rhetorical and affective challenges of writing about race and racism. These strategies will help students critically examine and engage with the academic and social worlds they inhabit, communicate productively about often-sensitive subjects, and use their writing to challenge racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression.

At a dinner party a couple of years ago, I was seated across from a married couple I hadn't met before. We started talking about our jobs. The woman was a doctor; the man was a high school teacher. I said I was a professor and that I was working on my second book about education. This piqued their interest. What was the book about? they asked.

"My work focuses on racism in education. I'm writing about how most teaching practices perpetuate racism and White supremacy and how we challenge racism in the classroom."

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“Interesting,” said the woman. The man nodded his head and asked how I knew the hostess. We didn’t talk much after that.

This happens to me a lot, actually, and I’m not the only one who has had this experience. Education professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz also writes about someone she met who did everything possible to avoid talking about race: “Each time I tried to center race in our conversation, she would smile and politely change the subject” (385).

Talking about race often makes people uncomfortable, and people who are uncomfortable talking about race generally avoid it, especially cross-racially. Talking about race, however, can actually help people develop *racial literacy*, a set of skills, behaviors, and literacy practices with which to “examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation” (Sealey-Ruiz 386).

At this point, you might be wondering what this has to do with you and your writing. Well, you’re probably reading this because your teacher assigned it as part of a writing class you’re taking, which means that, at some point in your writing class, you’re probably going to be writing about race and racism. Like talking about race, writing about race, even when guided by an experienced instructor, isn’t easy. Writing about race requires a toolbox full of *cognitive* (mental), *discursive* (communicative), and *affektive* (emotional) capacities. I’ll share some of those with you in this chapter.

Let’s tackle a more general question first, one that might already be on your mind: What’s race got to do with writing anyway? It’s a great question, and the answer is: a lot.

WHAT DO RACE AND RACISM HAVE TO DO WITH MY WRITING CLASS?

Ideally, the “knowledge, skills, and techniques” you develop in writing classes “are able to transfer to other contexts—disciplinary, civic, personal, and professional” (Driscoll 2). You might interpret this to mean that, as teachers of writing, we want you to be confident writing in your major classes and in your future career. But it’s more than that. We don’t just want you to read and write academic texts; we want you to read, interpret, and respond to the world around you.

We are surrounded by language and text, but we can’t take everything we read at face value. Whether we are students or teachers, we need to read *into* and *through* texts to distinguish valid information from propaganda and misinformation. Language is a strategic medium; it is used rhetorically to elicit particular reactions from real audiences.

Race and racism function rhetorically too. Race is a *social construct*, meaning it is not a biological reality but instead something people created in order to categorize people and determine a system for distributing resources in society. Racism, however, is real – and has substantial, long-lasting impacts on everything in our society, from material resources like housing, health care, employment, and education to our daily interactions with other people, our sense of self, and even our writing and language practices.

There's a longstanding myth that literacy, the abilities to read and write, will open doors in society. It very well might. After all, your literacy practices have contributed to you being here, reading this essay. But that myth is only partly true. A lot of what happens in a racist society has less to do with how you write or communicate than with the body you occupy.

In school, from an early age, one learns a society's history, its values, and the so-called “appropriate” ways to speak, write, and act in its institutions. Think back to your experiences writing in school settings: Were you ever told that your writing was too “informal” or that some of the words you used were “inappropriate” for academic writing? Some teachers, perhaps unintentionally, may have tried to convince you that, to write well, you've got to use a “standard English.” If you identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color, you might have been told that “standard English” was key to success.

It might surprise you to learn that, from a linguistic perspective, there is no such thing as “standard English”! That's because all languages are constantly evolving. As writing studies scholar Laura Greenfield explains, what we refer to as standard is “really nothing more than whatever is *not* designated as nonstandard” (46). So, when someone tells you to use “standard English,” what they're really telling you is to stop using *your own* English.

Whether or not your teachers realized this, this practice is racist and rooted in White supremacy, the deeply ingrained belief that White people, ideas, and ways of being are superior to all others, a belief that is woven into the fabric of our society. In a White supremacist society, Whiteness becomes a sort of default or a universal standard from which everything and everyone else deviates. For example, maybe you've noticed that some major pharmacies and beauty supply stores have a “Black Haircare” section. This implies that the rest of the products in the store *aren't* for Black hair. Very often, race is only identified when the person or group being referred to isn't White. Whiteness goes unnamed, and White people are afforded privileges like access to resources (from easy-to-find haircare products to employment opportunities), feeling represented (such as by seeing

White faces on television), and the freedom from having to worry about experiencing racism on a daily basis the way Black, Indigenous, and People of Color do.

Racism is the combination of race-based prejudice and power. Civil rights scholar Lani Guinier explains that, to understand how racism functions, we have to acknowledge its “psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions” (115). Racism affects us individually and psychologically, such as when we racially label ourselves or are labeled by others or when we internalize stereotypical messages we receive from people around us or in the media. Racism also impacts our interactions with others. You might talk differently or about different topics with a friend of your racial group and a friend from a different racial group. Finally, racism is structural, meaning it works through laws, policies, and official systems and institutions (including schools) within a society.

To recognize and talk back to racist injustice, we need to “make legible racism’s ever-shifting yet ever-present structure” (Guinier 100). In other words, we have to be able to read the language and texts of race and racism, even as they change. This requires we develop critical reading and writing skills.

STRATEGIES FOR READING, WRITING, AND TALKING ABOUT RACE

When you practice racial literacy in a writing class, you can expect to do some of the following:

- examine the effects of race and racism on your lived experiences,
- explore your identities as a writer and as a racialized person,
- consider how your approaches to reading and interpreting published texts is situated in your experiences,
- counter-narrate stereotypical and negative representations of communities of color,
- read critically and metacognitively, and
- develop rhetorical awareness and flexibility that will help you in future writing classes and outside of school.

I won’t tell you that these are easy tasks. Your professor, however, will guide you through these practices and make sure that you are engaging productively but not unsafely. In the next few pages, I’ll share with you some strategies for talking, writing, and reading about race, based upon

my research and my own experiences. These strategies can increase your understanding of race and racism and build the reading, writing, and rhetorical knowledge you'll be expected to learn in your writing class.

PRACTICE CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

When I teach a racial literacy-focused writing class, I tell my students a little about myself and what I call my “racial literacy journey”—how I learned about racism. Your teacher may do this too. It might seem strange at first, especially if you're not used to learning a lot about your teachers. You might wonder why your teacher is talking so much about themselves when you're supposed to be talking about writing and racism. When I share this information, I'm trying to do two things: I'm trying to show my students how my perspectives are situated in my experiences in the world, and I'm trying to model the kind of critical self-reflection my students will be asked to do in my class.

I'll do a little bit of that now so you understand what I mean: I'm White, a woman, and ethnically Jewish. I grew up surrounded by people who looked like me and people who didn't, including in my family. We talked about race and racism a lot at home, but, in other spaces, I was discouraged from talking about race. I also saw that my Black and Brown friends were treated differently from me in school: I was kind of a “troublemaker” as a kid and I had a tendency to talk back to my teachers, but I never got in real trouble. The one time I had to report for in-house suspension, I realized that all the other students there were Black, even though half the kids in my middle school were White. I learned later that this is common; Black students are suspended three times as often as White students, even for the same offenses (Skiba).

Throughout my life, I've been called cruel words based upon my ethnicity. I've watched politicians and celebrities make anti-Semitic remarks on television and not be called out for them. I've seen Jewish people in books, movies, and television shows be caricatured and stereotyped.

At the same time, I benefit from White privilege and therefore have never experienced the racism that my friends who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color experience. This means that, experientially, there are limits to my knowledge of race and racism. I will never know what it feels like to not be White, and I always have to check my *whitely* tendencies: the ways I think, speak, and see the world based upon my White privilege. All of this matters in my understanding of race and racism. My experiences, combined with the relative ease and access I have due to my skin color, have helped me understand how White privilege works and

why it's so important to talk back to the stereotypical representations that prevail in the media.

You might be wondering what this means for you and the work you'll do in your writing class. Well, reflecting upon your personal experiences and identities can help you better understand your *positionality*, the way you are situated in relation to particular subjects as a result of your race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, religion, and other identities. As adult educator Jack Mezirow explains, "the justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends upon the context—biographical, historical, cultural—in which they are embedded" (3). Your positionality impacts how you see the world, how you are seen by others, and how you interpret texts and information. This is especially important in our understanding of racism because what one person sees or hears as racism, based upon past experience and prior knowledge, another person might see as benign and inoffensive. There are limits to your understanding, and reflecting critically upon your own positionality can help you recognize those limits.

When you practice critical self-reflection, you do more than identify your assumptions and beliefs—you also question those assumptions and beliefs, where they come from, and how they impact the ways you see the world and the choices you make in your lives. As a result, learning about positionality can also help you better understand your peers and their perspectives and, as a result, communicate more productively with people whose perspectives and experiences differ from your own.

To reflect upon your positionality, you might be asked to write a racial autobiography, a personal narrative in which you consider how you learned about race, racism, and your own racial identities. You might be asked questions like:

- When did you first learn about race?
- Was race talked about in your home when you were growing up?
- Outside your home, were you surrounded by "people who looked like you, spoke your language, or shared similar customs" (Grayson 86)?
- Have you ever been discriminated against because of your race or ethnicity?
- Have you ever discriminated against someone else because of their race or ethnicity?

These are just examples. Your teacher may create other questions to help you think about your experiences and identities. Critical self-reflection

about race requires that you consider how your positionality has impacted your understandings of race and racism, so you may be asked to analyze, rather than just report upon, these experiences. You might be asked why these experiences are significant to you, if your view of these experiences has changed over time, how you think your experiences connect to your racial or ethnic identities, or how you imagine your experiences differ from the experiences of others.

Here's an excerpt from a racial autobiography written by one of my students, Veronique, a Black woman who was raised in a predominantly White suburb in the United States. (All students' names are pseudonyms.) Here, Veronique is writing about a neighborhood nearby where most of the residents were Black:

It always seemed darker in that neighborhood. I grew up associating the neighborhood's young black men wearing baggy pants and chains with drugs, vandalism, and danger. Whenever they came near, I would walk faster; my heartbeat would rise or I would take a sudden turn. It never occurred to me the similarity in skin tone... I was blind to the racial stereotypical assumptions I was falling into. But I fell right in step with my white neighborhood.

In this excerpt, Veronique practices critical self-reflection by recognizing and considering how she had internalized the racist stereotypes about Black people she had heard in her White neighborhood. She also acknowledges the ways that she saw herself as separate from other Black people, perpetuating a discourse of *exceptionalism* in which some Black people are positioned as different from—and better than—other Black people. By now recognizing her own assumptions, Veronique was able to see how they had come about and how they impacted her view of race and racism.

Critical self-reflection is part of *transformative learning*, the process of transforming “taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets)” into more inclusive, flexible, and reflective ways of knowing that enable you to continue to grow as a learner (Mezirow 7-8).

READ CRITICALLY

When you read about race, you'll likely encounter a lot of different types of texts, some of which are multimodal, meaning they aren't only linguistic but instead incorporate visual, digital, or aural modes in addition to words and print. Depending upon what your teacher assigns, you might work with scholarly essays, newspaper articles, stories, movies, advertisements,

song lyrics, or social media posts. You might also practice reading real world situations that you witness or experience in your own life as texts.

In writing classes, we read texts rhetorically and critically, thinking about what they *do* as well as what they say. As you practice racial literacy in your writing class, you'll be asked to pay attention to how meaning is constructed and how texts represent, reinforce, or resist racist belief systems. Because racism is often subtle rather than overt and is embedded in language practices, learning to "decode race and racialism" (Twine 92) when you interact with texts can help you more easily recognize racism and discrimination in real-life situations.

When you read texts critically, you'll start to notice how texts perpetuate stereotypes about people of minoritized racial groups. One of my students told me that, even though "the racial literacy tools she learned allowed her to better understand how she had internalized discrimination" as a biracial woman, she now had trouble watching television "without seeing how many Black men are portrayed as criminals" (Grayson 68).

Sometimes these stereotypes and misrepresentations are less apparent. You may recognize them, however, through careful attention to language. When you hear a word like "thug," for example, who is it used to describe? Who do you picture when you read the word "terrorist"? You might associate these words with specific racial, ethnic, or religious groups because of how those words are often used.

You might notice these patterns in visual texts, too. One of my students, Tyrone, noticed that, while the major news networks shared a social media photo of a Black teenager who was murdered, they shared a very different picture of a White criminal. He wrote about this in his final essay for our class:

We see a pattern in the images the media uses to represent white people. They usually use school photos or formal family photos. When people see formal pictures of the suspect or victim dressed nicely or smiling they associate them with being good... The media represented a convicted rapist in a respectable manner while they represented a slain young man in a disrespectful manner. Again, the differences in the individuals were skin color.

When you encounter stereotypes or misrepresentations of a minoritized group with which you identify, you can use your writing to *counter-narrate* those inaccurate representations. When we write counter-narratives, we tell our stories in ways that contradict the stereotypes we encounter in the media and in popular and political discourse. Counter-narrative is a

significant part of practicing racial literacy for those who identify as members of marginalized racial groups.

Another student, Jaleesa, counter-narrated the portrayal of Muslim people as violent by explaining that people of Muslim descent are actually frequent victims of hate crimes. In addition to offering statistics, Jaleesa discussed her own experiences and the experiences of people she knows personally. After sharing that the mosque she attended had received violent threats, she wrote:

Many of my friends have chosen to conceal their faith by removing certain religious garb or use a different name to publicly pass as a non-Muslim. I personally do not wear the hijab, so that makes me less likely to be a target in comparison to my fellow Muslims, but I truly worry for individuals who are more visibly adherent to the religion.

Your teacher may invite you to write a counter-narrative to dispel inaccurate and biased representations in media and other texts and to remind you that, when you write, you contribute your voice and your perspective to an academic conversation. Your contributions matter in the classroom.

EXPLORE THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS OF WRITING

The more attention you pay to textual representation and racialized language, the more you'll understand the significance of the words and phrases you use in your own writing, why you might choose certain words over others, and how those words impact your readers. You'll also learn to think about the ways in which your own approaches to writing are situated in social and cultural contexts and how, when you write for an audience, you have to consider real readers who bring their own positionalities and expectations to texts.

“All cultures have *rhetorical expectations*” that influence how members of that culture receive a text (St. Amant 149). These expectations relate to the kinds of information included, the genre of the text, and the conventions of that genre, the typical patterns of organization, style, and language choices. For example, have you ever been told that the thesis statement of your essay should be right at the end of your introduction? It's not true, but it's probably something you've heard in writing classes at least once or twice. Why do you think that is?

In short, it's cultural. Western cultures like the United States place a lot of emphasis on individualism and self-expression and tend to value di-

rectness in written communication. A speaker or writer generally presents an idea and then explains the argument. The emphasis in writing in these cultures is on the individual perspective or argument, which is why that argument tends to appear early in the essay. (In other cultures, writers might be expected to build up to an argument or provide more description before stating their own ideas.)

As writers, we have to think about the effect our choices have on our audience. Generally speaking, when we write in a way that doesn't fit our audience's expectations, our work might be "dismissed as non-credible" (St. Amant 152).

But, like comments about "standard English," that dismissal is part of how racism functions covertly, under the radar, as a part of the normalized practices and assumptions about language and text. If you notice, in the previous paragraph I talked about culture as though it's singular when society is actually racially and ethnically diverse. Still, you've probably learned to write in a way that reflects White Western norms and perspectives. These so-called rules have been passed down through systems and people, like schooling and teachers, for so long that we might think they're the only way to write.

Learning how racism is already embedded within our reading and writing practices can help you more critically consider the choices you make as a writer, which, in turn, can help you better communicate with people in other contexts. When you practice writing for real audiences who bring different rhetorical expectations to the text, you might consider how different audiences might respond to your ideas and the words you use. This can help you think about how to adapt your writing to different contexts, like another class you're taking or an application for a job you're interested in. It can also help you understand where your readers are coming from and better communicate with audiences whose experiences or perspectives differ from your own. (I don't think I'll ever forget the student who told me that the most important thing she learned in my writing class was how to disagree with her girlfriend without getting into an argument!)

There are other benefits to thinking about writing this way as well. How much more comfortable might you feel in a classroom if you could use the variation of English you're most familiar with? Or if you could *code-mesh* by combining the language(s) you use at home with the English you hear in school? How much easier might it be to express yourself in writing if you didn't have to worry that someone would unfairly judge your language?

SIT WITH PRODUCTIVE DISCOMFORT

I'll warn you now: Chances are that, at some point, you'll experience discomfort when you read and write about race. You might be uncomfortable writing about yourself. You may not be comfortable sharing personal stories or experiences. A comment made by one of your classmates or something you read in a course text might make you uncomfortable. You might be uncomfortable just thinking about it now.

Discomfort is a strange thing in education: a little discomfort can be productive and lead to transformative learning, but a lot can prevent that same transformation. If you've ever had a panic attack or if you struggle with anxiety, you probably know what I mean. It's hard to think clearly when your body is overwhelmed with emotion or your mind feels like it's spinning.

Many of us have been taught that race is an uncomfortable, even dangerous, topic. So, if you're uncomfortable, consider why: were you told as a child not to talk about race outside of the house or with people who don't look like you? Does thinking about racism make you feel guilty or defensive, like you're being accused of something? Have you thought about your own race at length before? Critically writing about race and racism takes work and practice. If you're concerned that you'll say or write the wrong thing and accidentally offend someone, that's actually a great opportunity to pay attention to your language choice and to critically examine your ideas.

Other experiences of discomfort are less productive. One of my students, for example, was worried about writing the racial autobiography because he didn't want "to turn this into a list of traumas" (Grayson 88). I worked with him to modify the assignment so that he wouldn't have to rehash painful personal experiences of racism. You should never be forced to share something you don't want to, especially personal experiences that come with painful or even traumatic memories and feelings. Maybe you're uncomfortable because someone else in the class has said or written something offensive. As a teacher, I hope this won't happen and I spend a lot of time at the beginning of the semester establishing shared guidelines for discussions with my students. Still, it does happen on occasion. Just as I do, your teacher will likely have procedures in place for reporting negative situations that arise.

Reflecting upon your feelings is an important part of critical self-reflection. We tend to think of feelings as separate from learning, but that's actually not true at all. Emotion and reason are deeply connected. Two important emotive capacities of racial literacy include the abilities to tolerate

frustration and to empathize with others; expanding these capacities can benefit you as a writer and student. Ideally, throughout college, you'll learn new things and be exposed to new perspectives; some will change your way of seeing the world and some won't. Increasing your abilities to empathize and tolerate frustration can prepare you to engage with new concepts and viewpoints, even those that initially turn you off or confuse you.

As you practice racial literacy, frustration may arise in a few different ways: If you have experienced racism firsthand or if you've spent a lot of time thinking about racism, you might be frustrated that you have to talk about this again. You might get frustrated trying to explain yourself to your classmates, especially if some of them don't have the same experiential knowledge of racism that you do. Even if you have experienced racism personally, learning more about how racism works on a structural level may be frustrating, upsetting, and even infuriating.

If you've not really considered before how race and racism impact your life or society more broadly, you might be frustrated to learn that society isn't as fair or as just as you thought it was. You might question what your parents told you or what you learned in school. You might even question your own successes. If you're the kind of person who likes to solve problems and find answers to questions, you'll probably be frustrated because racism is a big problem that can't be solved with easy answers.

The United States and other Western societies have what linguist Deborah Tannen calls an "argument culture" that frames discussion as a fight between opposing sides. We tend to see ideas through a binary: right or wrong, yes or no, good or bad, win or lose. This prevents "collaborative thinking and the development of social competence by conditioning us to think adversarially in terms of winning or losing, of proving ourselves smart, worthy, or wise" (Mezirow 11). Instead of working together to make meaning, we often battle one another to win a debate.

Writers write to communicate and to participate in ongoing conversations. When you read and write about race, you're likely to encounter ideas and experiences that differ from your own. In such situations, drawing upon your capacity for empathy can lead to more productive interactions with other people. If you identify and acknowledge your own frames of knowing (how you see things and why), you can consider where others are coming from and what they're experiencing. You can't really know what it feels like to walk in another person's shoes, but by listening to your classmates, reading critically, and using your imagination, you can practice "trying on' another's point of view" (Mezirow 20).

These practices can help you become more mindful, examine the limitations of your positionality, and expand your understanding of others and their perspectives. Empathizing with other people—even if you don't agree with them—can help you navigate disagreements that arise in class, at work, or at home, and growing your capacity to manage frustration increases the likelihood that you'll be able to argue your perspectives productively. Tolerating frustration and being more mindful in stressful situations can even help you take exams or complete other high-stakes assignments!

WHAT COMES NEXT?

According to sociologist France Winddance Twine, people who practice racial literacy do the following:

1. recognize racism as a contemporary rather than historical problem,
2. consider the ways in which race and racism are influenced by other factors such as class, gender, and sexuality,
3. understand the cultural value of Whiteness,
4. understand the constructedness and socialization of racial identity,
5. are able to decode racialism in seemingly mundane situations, and
6. develop language practices through which to discuss race, racism, and antiracism.

The truth is that you may not get all of those in one semester. That's okay. Think of it this way: For how long have you believed that White supremacy was limited to violent hate groups and not embedded in society's institutional structures and belief systems? How many people have told you that you shouldn't talk about race, or that you're being too sensitive when you do?

My point is, when we practice racial literacy, we're often learning to think about things differently, which takes a lot of unlearning, reorienting, and, simply, practice. It can help to think of racial literacy as a journey instead of a destination: "it is about learning rather than knowing" (Guinier 115). I encourage you to continue practicing these strategies after the semester ends. Ideally, you'll find some classmates or friends with whom you can have productive conversations about race, identity, and racism. As you read and write about race and racism, you'll increase your understanding of how writing functions in the context of a racialized society. When you

share experiences, critically read and respond to texts, and exchange ideas, you become better prepared to communicate across cultures, form communities, and recognize and challenge racist rhetoric you experience or witness in your life. Ultimately, practicing racial literacy helps us work toward antiracism, the active challenging of the systems and structures that maintain racism and White supremacy.

The truth is that literacy may open some doors, but it won't open all of them. Practicing racial literacy in first year composition can help you become more critical about what those doors are made of, why and to whom they're closed, and what it might take to open them.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR WRITING TOWARD RACIAL LITERACY

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay offers an overview of why students may be encouraged to read and write about race and racism in the writing classroom as well as strategies for engaging critically and productively with such activities and assignments. This essay would be a good text to share with students early in the semester to provide some framing and help students to prepare themselves for the work to come.

In this chapter, I suggest approaches to critical self-reflection around identity and positionality and offer suggestions to help students through the affective challenges of reading and writing about racism. I cover possible assignments such as the racial autobiography and the counter-narrative, though I do so broadly to ensure the assignments be adapted to fit the course, curriculum, and institutional context. I also address some of the ways that race and racism are already embedded in literacy practices. It is important to note, however, that I do not offer a comprehensive explanation of the history, societal functions or structures of contemporary racism and White supremacy, nor do I provide extensive unpacking of the racial literacy framework. As such, I suggest that teachers use this essay to supplement other texts (linguistic, visual, and multimodal) that offer such information.

Most importantly, I advise that any teacher considering sharing materials about racism in the classroom first work to develop their own racial literacy in order to guide students through the processes of critically reading and writing about race in productive, equitable ways. This process takes time for teachers, just as it does for students, so it might be a good idea for teachers to practice the assignments and activities alongside students.

I include below a series of questions that invite students to reflect upon their socially and culturally situated experiences and attitudes toward race and racism and to self-direct their racial literacy learning in and beyond the classroom. I also include a sample assignment for the racial literacy autobiography.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This essay opens with a story about a conversation that stalled when the writer tried to talk about race. Have you experienced a situation like this? What happened? How would you approach a similar situation if it happened today?
2. In the section on critical self-reflection, the writer talks briefly about their personal experiences with both discrimination and White privilege. Did this story impact your attitude toward the writer or your engagement with the essay? If so, why do you think that happened?
3. The writer explains that “racism is already embedded in our reading and writing practices.” How, if at all, do you think this has impacted your experiences writing in academic settings? How do you think this might impact the writing you do in school from now on?
4. In the section on productive discomfort, the writer explains that emotions and learning are closely connected. Based upon your experience, which emotions have helped you as a learner? Which have interfered with your learning? What might “productive discomfort” look like for you?
5. The writer lists six characteristics of racial literacy. How many of these were familiar to you? Which were new? Since racial literacy is an ongoing practice, consider developing a plan for continuing the practice once you’re finished with this class. Make a list of the people you can have these discussions with, the activities you practiced in class that you’d like to continue, and the resources (texts, social media accounts, in-school programs, people) you’ll turn to if you need guidance or information.

ACTIVITY: THE RACIAL LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The racial literacy autobiography is similar to a literacy narrative. Instead of asking students to consider their earliest and most significant memories with reading and writing, this activity invites students to consider how they first learned about race and racism. The assignment is meant to invite critical self-reflection, so, rather than simply report upon their experiences, students should consider the ways in which their identities and social posi-

ationalities have contributed to the ways in which they decode and discuss race and racism. Here are some sample questions for students to consider, some of which are shared in the chapter:

- When did you first come to learn about the concept of race?
- When did you first come to learn about racism? How?
- Was race talked about in your home?
- Did you grow up near people who looked like you, spoke your language, or shared similar customs?
- What does the word “culture” mean to you?
- Have you ever felt out of place because of your race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class (or some part of your “culture,” however you define that term)? What happened?
- Have you ever been discriminated against? How so?
- Have you ever discriminated against someone else? How so? Why?

The questions, of course, are highly customizable but should be at least somewhat open-ended to encourage reflection.

This is best used as an informal assignment early in the semester. Depending upon the level of trust built with students, teachers may collect the assignment, or they may use it as an in-class free-write prior to a more critical discussion of positionality. Once students get to know one another, instructors may invite students to share their personal narratives in small groups. If this is the case, however, it is important that students are told beforehand that their peers may be part of the audience to ensure that they include only what they are willing to share. It is imperative that students are not pushed to share personal details pertaining to their identities or traumatic experiences with racism if they are not ready. Teachers can also build upon this assignment by inviting students to revise it at the end of the semester to incorporate some of the theory and critical framing students engage with throughout the semester.