

2020

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Danny Rodriguez

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Author: Danny Rodriguez

Mentor: Megan Schoen

Issue: 3

Publication Date: November 2020

Stable URL:

<http://constell8cr.com/issue-3/countering-racial-enthymemes-what-we-can-learn-about-race-from-donald-j-trump/>

Countering Racial Enthymemes: What We Can Learn About Race from Donald J. Trump

Danny Rodriguez, Texas Christian University

“As a result of decontextualized and simplistic conversations about race, great schisms in communicative and interpretive practices occur and dialogue shuts down. The schisms, I argue, necessitate the continuation of taboo-laden race discussions”

—Iris D. Ruiz, *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies* (4)

As a Mexican-American in a historically white field, I have observed discussions and even scholarly presentations relating to race that represent convoluted concepts such as racism, and even whiteness, as stagnant definitions ostensibly as a result of public knowledge. Race appears without qualifiers in the titles of conference presentations, journal articles, and books, implying that as a concept race is inherently unambiguous. Despite the scholarship that focuses on race and the racial blind spots in that research, a major problem in our approach to race—particularly grounded in cultural contexts—is the enduring assumption that *we all interpret race in the same way at all times*. In terms of my own positionality, I did not always prioritize a definition of race. Potentially similar to others, I expected academics and even students to either share or be familiar with my interpretation of race. To me, race is a social construct, but it is also a metaphor that has real effects and a fluid base. As I.A. Richards contends, all language is metaphorical (92-99). While my DNA may be similar to other Mexican-Americans, our experiences and spaces of theorizing vary. Because of these differences, our definitions evolve and may clash at times. However, I am content with this realization because I can only then hope that we complicate every definition to ensure that our conversations about race never become static. As I will discuss in this essay, we are not always cognizant of competing definitions of race as we attempt to differentiate between and discern overt and subtle racialization. To convey the significance of explicit and implicit definitions concerning race, I turn to the severity of racial enthymemes.

As some scholars have argued, we can make hidden claims about race visible by rhetorically analyzing enthymemes. In her contribution to *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* two decades ago, Meta G. Carstarphen called attention to the

implications of a racial enthymeme by analyzing this statement of a journalist, Carl Rowan: "Bigotry, ethnic and *racial hatreds*, the dark side of man's nature, can never be expunged from human life. It can only be controlled" (26; emphasis in original). According to Carstarphen, Rowan's statement becomes the following enthymeme: the major premise is "Bigotry and ethnic and racial hatreds (A) are the dark side of human nature (B)," the minor premise is "Every man (C) has a dark side to his nature because he is human (B)," and the conclusion is inevitably "Every man (C) has bigotry and ethnic and racial hatred in him (A)" (28). Carstarphen criticizes this enthymeme because Rowan represents implicit arguments as truths: Rowan asserts that hatred has a relation to darkness, and he subtly claims that hatred is dark, and the opposite of hate, love, is lighter (i.e., love is white); furthermore, universal definitions of terms such as "racial hatreds" exist, and racism is inexorable (28). Carstarphen reveals that without even using the term race, authors can make racialized claims about particular identities. If an audience fails to detect an enthymeme or elects not to parse the implications of the enthymeme, an author's assertions about race will remain invisible and naturalized. Although the field has not adequately developed Carstarphen's research, I draw our attention to contemporary racial enthymemes within political, pedagogical, and academic contexts to highlight the need for solutions in our present moment.

Matthew Jackson postulates that an understanding of how enthymemes operate within racial discourse provides white people with the rhetorical ability and space to confront their own racism. By examining racial enthymemes in relation to whiteness, he argues, "Racist enthymemes can function to support arguments for white supremacy inconspicuously and indirectly" (606). According to Jackson, these racial enthymemes construct "an enthymematic relationship" between "the hegemonic premises and claims of white supremacy" and white people (607-08). Jackson does partially recognize his own accountability by reiterating that the silence of whites means that they are complicit in upholding white supremacy (626). However, to truly "learn how to identify whiteness . . . and to work against it," we, as a field, have to propose practical resolutions because, as Krista Ratcliffe suggests, simply identifying racially coded enthymemes to recognize whiteness or racism does not solve the issue (629). While Ratcliffe calls attention to Jackson's white guilt and blame (287), she also discusses how "the pedagogical challenge remains to make whiteness visible and to help others . . . articulate how we are all personally implicated . . . in systemic whiteness" (288). To answer Ratcliffe's call to make whiteness evident, I develop Jackson's research concerning the racial enthymeme

from my standpoint of a person of color and offer a potential solution during these particular times.

I argue that expressing a working definition of race in our own research will mitigate or minimize (un)intentional racial enthymemes. I also argue that we have to remain rhetorically sensitive to our working definitions even when we examine the racial enthymemes of others. To emphasize its intricacies, I first provide an overview of the enthymeme. Second, to illustrate the overwhelming prevalence of contemporary enthymemes and the importance of definitions, I analyze racialized comments of Donald Trump as ready examples of how whiteness unapologetically operates in officially sanctioned, public spaces. Third, I discuss the consequences of absent definitions of race and the unintentional enthymeme by examining the arguments of two scholars, Jennifer Clary-Lemon and Amy Goodburn, who contribute to our conversations about race but do not offer their own definitions of it. As exemplary models of research that focus on race, these scholarly works allow me to illustrate how we can take substantial contributions even further by stimulating racial awareness at the levels of definition and positionality. Finally, I call for an academic obligation among scholars to define race particularly when we utilize the concept in our scholarship. Consequently, we may become more aware of racial enthymemes and our own positionality.



Figure 1: "Donald Trump head as a doll"

Racial Enthymeming and Donald J. Trump

Since Aristotle stated that “the enthymeme is a kind of syllogism” and “for [in rhetoric] the conclusion should not be drawn from far back, nor is it necessary to include everything” (168-69), scholars have expounded the meaning and functions of an enthymeme (e.g., Burnyeat, Dyck, Raymond, and Walton). In his attempt to characterize the enthymeme, Lloyd Bitzer claims that audience determines the effectiveness of an enthymeme as he argues, “The enthymeme succeeds as an instrument of rational persuasion because its premises are always drawn from the audience” (408). As Jackson¹ has noted, Bitzer’s view of an audience is problematic in regard to enthymemes because we cannot ignore the position and responsibility of an audience. Since—as Grimaldi expresses—probabilities and signs² are “the sources for argument by” rhetorical enthymemes (115), unstated premises should warrant critical observation since they do not have to be “universally true” to persuade (Corbett 64). If we accept the syllogistic nature of an enthymeme, an audience ought to object to any controversial implied premises, but such a call-to-action becomes complicated as we reflect on the basic structure of an enthymeme.

As recent as 2018, James Fredal problematizes our interpretations of the enthymeme by arguing for a more accurate reading of Aristotle: “To create an enthymeme, you don’t write a syllogism and elide a premise; you tell a story and highlight a significant fact” (37). According to Fredal, an enthymeme “asserts and invites the audience to attend to . . . a stated and accepted fact,” “places the fact in a narrative context,” “helps frame and answer the legal question at issue,” and “inverts the opponent’s argument” (34).³ An audience comprehends an enthymeme of a rhetor because it likely already accepts a position as factual. The rhetorical choices of a rhetor, such as providing a narrative context, then, remind an audience of a shared truth. Fredal’s definition advances our understanding of the enthymeme while uncovering a significant and yet troubling detail. On one hand, a traditional perception of the enthymeme undervalues its rhetorical potential by

¹ Jackson argues, “Bitzer’s definition of the enthymeme has been criticized because it places the completion of the enthymeme in the complicit moment of agreement or understanding” (612). Agreement and understanding suggest that an audience may not want to openly disagree or demand for clarifications from a rhetor (615-16).

² “Aristotle distinguished two kinds of signs that figure in an enthymeme—infallible and fallible. An infallible sign is that which invariably accompanies something else. . . . If a sign does not invariably and exclusively accompany something else, it is fallible—that is, any conclusion drawn from a sign of this kind will always be open to refutation” (Corbett 63).

³ Fredal explains, “Not every enthymeme achieves all four goals, but the closer it comes, the more enthymematic it is” (34).

limiting it to a syllogistic structure; consequently, we, as rhetorical critics, should not restrict an enthymeme to a rigid configuration. On the other hand, Fredal's reinterpretation of the enthymeme in practice would appear as fact-based; in other words, an audience understands an enthymeme because the enthymeme is or appears truthful. Although Fredal qualifies his definition and states that an enthymeme is irrefutable because an "opponent cannot easily refute" it or an audience would likely recognize the conclusion of an enthymeme as "unavoidable" (39-40). While *what an enthymeme is* remains imperative for this discussion, *what an enthymeme offers* can have racial implications. Rhetorical awareness of how an enthymeme operates in other areas, such as the teaching of writing (see Green; Gage; Emmel), intertextuality (see Scenters-Zapico), embodied rhetorics (see Prenosil), and visual rhetoric (see Finnegan), encourages us to assess how it influences everyday lives.

Before I discuss the importance of them in defining race, I consider how enthymemes can be racially coded by analyzing only a few of the many illustrative enthymemes that Donald J. Trump has constructed in his interviews, speeches, and Tweets. As Jennifer R. Mercieca states in her contribution to *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Donald J. Trump*, "Donald Trump's 2016 election to the presidency of the United States was a political rupture—it represented a break with traditional presidential campaign rhetoric as well as a break with a traditional presidency" (174). While I apply a racial lens to this rupture, we cannot completely decipher Trump's rhetorical practices and the effects of his practices without considering his presidency in relation to women, immigrants, the LGBTQIA+ community, Muslims, and every other group of people that Trump has further marginalized. As Patricia Roberts-Miller states, "If we are intent on preventing another Hitler, as scholars of rhetoric should be, we should not just focus strictly on Hitler or his rhetorical strategies. Rather, we should ask what made his demagoguery powerful at some times and not powerful other times—why did the same rhetoric sometimes gain compliance and sometimes not?" (234-35). As upcoming sections will reveal, the lack of a foundational definition for race has made Trump's demagoguery powerful and unchecked.

In "Donald Trump's Racism: The Definitive List," David Leonhardt and Ian Prasad Philbrick—journalists for *The New York Times*—compile a plethora of examples of Trump's racist rhetoric. Without offering definitions of race and racism while labeling Trump's rhetoric as racist (which it is from my position), they have to operate with ambiguous and unsaid, but present, working definitions for race, racism, and racialization to even reach this conclusion. Frankie Condon and

they don't have an advantage or this and that. I've said on one occasion, even about myself, if I were starting off today, I would love to be a well-educated black because I really believe they do have an actual advantage" (qtd. in Leonhardt). Trump's troubling message that "they do have an actual advantage" points to an unsaid and ambiguous reference: it "functions as an enthymeme because the audience can think of possible ways to complete it by supplying the missing premises and conclusions based on shared assumptions and values" (Jackson 617). According to Trump's message, a missing premise could be that blacks who are not well educated do not have an advantage. The obvious conclusion would, then, be that blacks need to be well educated. Unfortunately, this conclusion is dangerous since Trump seems to only want to trade his whiteness for blackness if he were "a well-educated black," thereby arguing that whiteness is always advantageous regardless of what it means to be well educated. By using racial enthymemes, a person can reinforce systemic racism by openly admitting one's white privilege while attempting to appear as racially aware when making racist remarks.

During Trump's presidential campaign, his early remarks about undocumented Mexicans induced many of his audience members to identify⁶ with him as a result of his employment of enthymemes. Trump expressed, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems . . . They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (qtd. in Leonhardt). His oratory contains not one but two enthymemes about the dichotomy of so-called Americans and Mexicans. These enthymemes can have the following forms:

First Enthymeme:

Undocumented Mexicans are not ideal citizens

Undocumented Mexicans are not like "Americans" (i.e., Trump's audience members)

The missing premise is "*Americans are ideal citizens.*"

Second Enthymeme:

⁶ I use identification as Burke explains it: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 55).

Many undocumented Mexicans are criminals; therefore, they do not belong in the U.S.

The missing premise is *"Americans are not criminals."*

As recent as 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 60.4% of the U.S. population, which lives on Indigenous land, is classified as "white alone" (i.e., "not Hispanic or Latino"), and a nationality is always already racialized due to its racial and ethnic demographics ("QuickFacts"). Critics of the two enthymemes in the examples above have likely ascertained the racial coding of his message. The utilization of nationalities, as Victor Villanueva argues in "Blind," prompt the erasure of race. Therefore, those who accept the enthymeming of Trump would likely support nominalism⁷ but it is difficult to even presume Trump's definition of race in this particular context. However, together, these enthymemes are effective if Trump's target audience agrees with the linkages that they create. According to Jeffery Walker, beyond a "quasi-syllogistic structure of claim-*because*-premise," an enthymeme draws "from what Perelman has called a 'web' or a network of oppositions and . . . *liaisons*" to engage the audience and to "foreground stance and motivate identification with that stance" (56). Enthymemes, then, "set up" the liaisons and oppositions (56) that contribute to our cultural networks of people and associations. As someone who is not part of this cultural network of Trump supporters, my scholarly and personal commitment to anti-racism motivate me to identify potential implications of his enthymemes. His enthymemes do not reinforce my cultural network; however, reinforcing my cultural network, or embracing anti-racism, does not appear to be his goal. In other words, an enthymeme is not simply a rhetorical syllogism but also a cultural practice that reaffirms or challenges the networks and associations that cultures develop.

Trump has even defended himself against the label of racist as he explained, "I'm not a racist. I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed, that I can tell you" (qtd. in Shear). Regardless of intent, he constructs an enthymeme that reveals a grave contradiction:

Another racial enthymeme:

⁷ As Linda Martín Alcoff argues in *Visible Identities*, three distinct views about race dominate our conversations about the subject. She claims that "nominalism" is a view which posits "race is not real . . . because recent science has invalidated race as a salient or even meaningful biological category" (182). If an individual endorses such a definition, this individual may also perceive racialization and racism as invalid. However, nominalism does represent one definition of race.

I am not a racist because I am the least racist person you have conversed with in your life.

The troubling implied premise would then be, *"The least racist person is not really racist."*

Racism existing in a spectrum does not mitigate racial tensions or the effects of racism but rather exacerbates these tensions and effects. The troubling implication of this enthymeme is that a U.S. president has a particular definition of racism that allows him to justify the intent and consequences of his rhetoric. Furthermore, Trump is able to communicate this implied premise to an audience that can, in turn, weaponize it. In "Trump, the KKK, and the Versatility of White Supremacy Rhetoric," James Chase Sanchez posits that Trump "uses language in ambiguous ways that might imply a specific meaning to one group and something else to a different group" (49). Trump denying that he is racist constructs an implied premise that (un)intentionally authorizes a white supremacist attitude: as long as a person is not the most racist person, a moderately or even severely racist person can overlook his or her own racial unawareness. This white supremacist attitude remains since definitions of concepts like racism remain unexpressed and, therefore, ambiguous.

In response to the riots that occurred due to the murder of George Floyd, Trump threatened to use the U.S. military to silence angry and hurt voices expressing themselves in various forms of protesting. Despite the graphic footage of the death of George Floyd, Trump explains:

A police precinct has been overrun here in the nation's Capitol, the Lincoln Memorial and the World War II Memorial have been vandalized. One of our most historic churches was set ablaze. A federal officer in California, an African American enforcement hero was shot and killed. These are not acts of peaceful protests, these are acts of domestic terror. The destruction of innocent life and the spilling of innocent blood is an offense to humanity and a crime against God. (Gregorian "Trump says he will deploy military")

Racial Enthymemes Regarding George Floyd:

Overrunning a police precinct, vandalizing a memorial, burning a church, and killing law enforcement are acts of domestic terror, offenses to humanity, and crimes against God.

A dangerous implied premise is, "*The death of George Floyd is not an act of domestic terror, offense to humanity, or a crime against God.*"

Trump clearly equates land, property, and the police to innocent life and innocent blood. Additionally, he equates protestors to vandals and domestic terrorists. Despite all the troubling enthymemes within this section of his speech, a crucial missing premise involves Trump's perception of George Floyd. Since Trump does not explicitly mention George Floyd, Trump suggests that the murder of George Floyd was not "an offense to humanity and a crime against God." These enthymemes are racial since they have racial implications. For an audience that is more concerned about various forms of protesting, this audience will likely continue to disregard George Floyd, or the racism which caused these protests. In regard to an audience that seeks racial justice, we will recognize Trump's inability to confront systemic racism. In the following section, I will continue to focus on the truncated syllogism to demonstrate the consequences of unapparent definitions.

Unstated Definitions and Unintentional Racial Enthymemes

In addition to the presence of enthymemes in our media and classrooms, enthymemes exist in our own scholarly research. As rhetoricians, we possess the positionality and necessary tools to minimize such enthymemes. To understand the function of racial enthymemes in our own field, we have to reconsider the importance of definitions by reviewing our own scholarly standards. Since definitional differences obstruct dialogue, rhetorical critics, to discover the cause of such differences, should begin with focusing on foundational concerns not expressed in usage. In *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, Edward Schiappa postulates, "Definitions typically are treated as reporting one of two kinds of fact . . . a fact of essence" or "a fact of usage" (6-7). As fact of essence considers what "X really or truly is" while a fact of usage acknowledges how people employ terms in their daily conversations (6-7). In other words, people can dispute whether or not a definition is accurate or if a person correctly utilizes a term based on the standards of its definition. Differences can result from either "a definitional gap" or "a definitional rupture" (8). According to Schiappa, a definitional gap occurs when a person does not understand a word and resorts to finding a definition (8), whereas a definitional rupture transpires when a person encounters discourse that employs words which contradict recognized definitions of such words (e.g., "That song is really *bad*" offers conflicting connotations and denotations with how many define and elect to use and perceive "bad") (8-9). To state pointedly, if a person is unfamiliar with a term and seeks an immediate or working definition, the situation creates a definitional gap. If a person questions the usage of a word because he or

she does not believe the word applies to the context, this situation establishes a definitional rupture. When we acknowledge the concept of race, a definitional gap or rupture (or both) is possible because race does not have a single definition. Identifying those gaps and ruptures in our scholarly works may be especially important for productive discussions of race.

Choosing to use a certain word or phrase in a specific way is rhetorical, of course, and ignoring the possible ruptures of such usage discloses an absence of awareness. Schiappa argues that “definitions are always political. . . . definitions always serve interests and advance values, and they always require the exercise of power to be efficacious” (177). When it comes to scholarly argument, in particular, definitions directly affect the power and benefits granted to a scholar, and too often, not specifying definitions can be convenient or even advantageous. For example, a scholar who does not state his or her conception of race can succeed in advancing a conversation without accepting the responsibility, and avoid the risk of working through the process of constructing or realizing a definition. Neglecting this responsibility forestalls a process that could otherwise force a scholar to revise the definition or possibly acknowledge any complicating issues with his or her positionality. Additionally, without a clear definition from the outset, the author neglects the responsibility for rectifying definitional gaps and ruptures—or to raise awareness of them, especially when they concern language that has real consequences.



Figure 3: “It’s A Privilege To Educate Yourself About Racism”

We need to consider some fundamental issues concerning what we mean by race and what race may mean to each particular individual. In “The Language of Narratives,” Sheila L. Carter-Tod states that a racial identity contains seven components⁸ (136), and with so many factors in a racial identity, our approaches to race should be nuanced and unique. In addition to nominalism, Linda Martín Alcoff defines two other central positions on race. She labels the second view as “essentialism” since this position views race as “an elemental category of identity,” suggesting that “racial groups share a set of characteristics, a set of political interests, and a historical destiny” (182). This position also becomes problematic if we consider the potential dangers of assuming that people of any color have innate qualities and predictable behavior; yet again, we have to acknowledge that this essentialist view endures. Lastly, she claims that “contextualism” endorses race as a social construction. This construction is, then, “historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices” (182). In this well-established framework, even though we may define race as a social construction, our approaches to it can also embrace nominalism or even essentialism—or prioritize specific identity components, highlighting the significance of explicit definitions. In the discussion that follows, I analyze one example that represents the absence of a definition of race and another example that contains a racial enthymeme due to an unarticulated definition, both of which show that whatever frameworks are in play, definitional clarity is a must.

In her examination of how scholars discussed race over a sixteen-year time period, Jennifer Clary-Lemon offers several significant insights about the ambiguity of race in *College Composition and Communication* (“The Racialization of Composition Studies”). As her data conveys, scholars defined race as a “social construction” or explained race through language that related to the concepts of “diversity” and marginalization (6). She asks academics to acknowledge “that we encode race” and that this encoding has effects (14). I would add, importantly, that we also implicitly or explicitly encode race through how we choose to define, or not define, race. Despite Clary-Lemon’s conclusions about encoding concepts, she does not supply her own definition of the concept. She cites Henry Louis Gates, who suggests race is simply a social construction, mentions how “social constructionists” perceive “race” as an “arbitrary and ideological categorization,” and discusses how Keith Gilyard implies that “race” is “multidimensional” (3-4). She works with others’ definitions of race, however, without providing her own.

⁸ These components include “cultural attachment,” “early experience and socialization,” “political awareness and orientation,” “spirituality,” “social and historical contexts,” “physical appearance,” “racial ancestry,” and the “other social identities” category (136).

I am not critiquing Clary-Lemon's overall argument. In fact, I agree with her stance. However, her own failure to define race leaves readers with no other choice than to accept that they should share the same definitional framework of race, to ignore the various ways we all can explain race, or to speculate about what race is to Clary-Lemon. For example, she problematizes "terms like 'difference'" and even states, "Thus both publicly and professionally, race and the use of language have been intertwined, evident from the early 1970s until the end of 1990s" (10-11). Even with the best intentions, theorizing about race without constructing a statement that discloses a definition of race indicates the scholar as occupying a place of privilege: producing research about race without the uneasy task of creating or finding a definition of race and then analyzing all the implications of choosing that tentative definition. While this type of privilege does not necessarily efface an author's positionality, such absences dilute authorial positionality because it signals an absence of awareness—or at least an assumption that the audience shares the same racialized worldview. I am not arguing that any scholars are fully aware of all their privileges, but the assumption that a personal authorial definition of race is unnecessary contaminates positionality with privilege and can unknowingly produce racial enthymemes.

Succinct reflection and thorough analysis may not expedite or simplify the process of concocting a definition for race. In "Racing (Erasing) White Privilege in Teacher/Research Writing About Race," for example, Amy Goodburn exposes her own privilege and racialized experiences. Based on an ethnographic study of "a class of eighteen students," "ten men (eight white, one African American, and one African American/Native American); eight women (six white and two African American); and a white teacher," Goodburn "as a participant-observer" presents her field notes about a student discussion (73-75). She also analyzes her field notes, such as the complications of selecting "social descriptors" for students who did not self-identify themselves racially (75-79), and how the job market prompted certain epiphanies, such as why Goodburn unknowingly paired student stories together based on race, through a racial lens (80-83). In essence, she displays racial awareness of being a white academic, which requires a level of metacognition. Goodburn concludes, "Understanding racist relations of dominance and my privileges of whiteness as a white woman professor within these relations is much messier, an ongoing project in which I must always work to uncover and struggle against the invisible norms of power that my culture affords me" (83). Goodburn performs a task, filled with tension and discomfort, that does not make whiteness

fully visible because her own interpretations of whiteness and race are indiscernible.

She expresses, like scholars of color have also argued, that her understanding of white privilege and race is an ongoing process that requires both revision and reflection. Consequently, conversations and thinking about race and white privilege will never end. Additionally, her experiences enlighten her theories about race, thereby disseminating her positionality—she is reflecting on and processing both her successes and failures. Despite her insights, however, she does not provide a definition of race. Based on her conclusion, she subtly equates “my culture” with “whiteness.” Therefore, “culture” and “whiteness” likely function as a metaphor for race because they become substitutions for a term that she is implicitly referencing. In effect, her employment of metaphors for race conceal the complexities of whiteness, or specifically how she defines whiteness, and a self-serving form of white privilege: discussing race without defining it.

In her reflection about her classroom discussions, she makes the following statements: 1) “It’s also important to question why I focused on issues of race only in the classroom populated with students of color” and 2) “And because the white students generally did not view themselves as even having a race, there was definitely a lesser degree of tension in discussing racial issues” (77-78). This enthymeme for race could be described as: *“I focused on race differently with my students of color than I did with my white students; therefore, student demographics affected my teaching.”* Unfortunately, the unexpressed premise is that student demographics then define race, which ultimately means that race is simply an optic test. Again, this is not the author’s central definition for race. Rather, I am highlighting the consequences of expecting an audience to complete an author’s unclear conception of race and why we should continue to take a critical look at scholarship about race.

An Academic Solution to the Racial Enthymeme

When spaces of theorizing and experiencing intersect, transparency with clarity is a rhetorical imperative. Moving forward, a commitment to transparency in our research warrants attentiveness and the explicit communication of our own working definitions, which may relate to theory, experience, or both. While theory is essential to literature studies, in “Working Definitions: Race, Ethnic Studies, and Early American Literature,” Joanna Brooks discusses how our experiences inform our motivations for our research and teaching. Brooks does not begin her analysis of early American texts, specifically those of African-American and Native American

voices, until she expresses her own working definition of race: “First, a few working definitions: race, as I understand it, is an effect of racism. The idea of race came into being as a means of organizing social relations in order to establish and maintain political and economic domination” (313). As a person of color, I do not pause to deconstruct or praise Brooks’s perspective on race. Instead, her argument, and more importantly, her positionality become evident. She not only offers her interpretation of race, but she also elects to *open her argument* with a working definition. In addition to Brooks’s candor, her research also evinces two different spaces that inform racial scholarship: people of color experience race in one space and “European and Euro-American intellectuals” typically theorize about race in another (316). Brooks theorizes about race, and she is transparent about working from a space of theory, not experience. Her positionality is then lucid because Brooks does not burden her readers with the responsibility of deducing her definitional space. Though theorizing and experiencing about race may seem like a dichotomy, these intersecting spaces can function as a bridge for productive discussions of race in academia.

More recently, in *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, in addition to offering both a “methodology and method” that relates to the importance of racial theory to our field (21), Aja Y. Martinez provides one of her syllabi. Because her course focuses on “Race Critical Theories,” Martinez’s course description includes her definition of race: “‘Race’ in the United States is defined by societal structure, human representation, and cultural representation to form a ‘common sense’ regarding racial order, meanings, and identity” (147). From an educator’s point of view, expressing our own understanding of race conveys the complexities, and, therefore, significance of race, to our students. As Martinez’s course description suggests, defining race gives us the opportunity to explain (1) what we mean by race and (2) how race also operates. In other words, without explicitly expressing our working definitions, it is unlikely that we can have productive and clear conversations about how to address racism.

Whether we are fond of academic conventions or not, genre conventions do exist. As teachers, we may encourage our students to perform some of these conventions, and as researchers, we may even prove we are aware of these conventions, thus reaffirming their importance. Of course, one long standing academic convention is to define concepts before deploying them. For example, if I am using Burke’s concept of “recalcitrance” (*Permanence and Change*), I will likely provide a definition for potential readers. Since race will not disappear and our conversations about race will only continue and “the processes of defining race and

racism must themselves be ongoing and incomplete” (Gutiérrez-Jones 27), I propose a new academic convention as an obligation. If writing about race, academics have to provide some type of authorial definition, whether rooted in theory and/or in experience. I call for more scholarship that documents the results and processes for defining race and other related terms (e.g., racial, racialization, and racism).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Danny Rodriguez is a doctoral candidate at Texas Christian University. He specializes in cultural rhetorics, specifically critical race theory and the rhetorics of Hip-Hop culture. His most recent research, "Racial and Reconnective Literacies: Malcolm X and a Literacy Event," appears in *Critical Insights: Malcolm X*. His

upcoming article, "Reclaiming Malcolm X: Epideictic Discourse and African-American Rhetoric," will appear in *Rhetoric Review*.

ABOUT THE MENTOR:

Megan Schoen is an associate professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at Oakland University, where she serves as the director of first-year writing. Her articles have appeared in *Rhetoric Review*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and *The WAC Journal*. She is a co-founder and co-managing editor of *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society*.

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