Blind: Talking about the New Racism

by Victor Villanueva

A writing center. An amiable kid. He sits at your desk, paper in hand. He says his girlfriend had taken care of the "grammar and stuff" but that she didn't know about the ideas. Well, that's a sight better than the usual for the writing center (Welch). The young man looks down, says "She thinks I'm wrong."

You read the paper, about the movie Crash. It reads:

The Matt Dillon character is supposed to be the obvious racist in the movie, like when he molests the Halle Berry character. But later he saves her life when she could of been blown up. He's full of hate because of what happened to his father.

I believe that the policeman who had molested the black woman isn't a racist because there were hardships he had endured that made him a racist.

Let's say you haven't seen the movie, didn't know that the father had suffered hardships because of affirmative action, really complicating the whole racism thing. Do you find yourself trying not to deal with racism, just wanting to deal with the circular reasoning, that he can't write the cop wasn't a racist and was a racist in the same sentence? Well, that's what you do. Later you realize you did the same thing the young man's girlfriend had done, decided not to enter the controversy. Besides, there's a kind of sense to what he's saying, that sometimes irrational behavior has rational causes.

But here's the problem: the argument (even your internal argument) is about you and the student and Officer Ryan. Individuals. Sure, that's what the movie is doing, individuals trying to represent things larger than individuals—metonymy, in the language of rhetoric's tropes, in terms of figures of speech—but we get caught up with the individual. We avoid the large. Racism is becoming more taboo than politics and religion as subjects for casual conversation.

About the Author

Victor Villanueva is Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts at Washington State University. His publications and presentations have all concerned the connections between language and racism.
Another class, another set of students walking into a writing center: English 101, a teacher wanting to deal with racism. You're seeing the students who really want revision help. Not just folks wanting you to bang out the punctuation, but real, substantive help. It happens. And you, you've heard of this teacher, the almost religious zealot about racism, the white teacher always quoting Malcolm X. A student walks in asking for help. You almost fall into the trap, looking at the paper, thinking sentence structure, seeing it's good, maybe even an A paper. What's she doing here, you start to ask. She got a B. And she says she really really needs an A for this class.

The paper goes on about not judging people by the color of their skin, that each of us is unique and should be judged by what we do. Hard work leads to merit. And that's all it should be about. Merit. You don't see the problem. She's right; it really should be about merit. Teacher Malcolm's comments read:

"Of course you're right, but since this ain't [sic] how it works, and is surely not what bell hooks is writing about, you need to complicate things. How does hooks describe things in larger terms?"

Maybe you see what he's saying—something about references to the reading, something about being ideal, but you still don't know how to address this. You're a writing tutor; you study comp and maybe a little rhetoric, but you're not an ethnic studies professor. And you can't appropriate the students paper, after all. Lil Brannon told writing tutors that a long time ago (Knoblauch and Brannon).

It's week five. An English classroom. The rhetorics of racism—Heath, Cintron, others among the readings. Books and papers aren't jibing. Good papers, but not registering an understanding of what's being read. The instructor finally stops. Says it out loud:

"I'm a person of color, raised in the ghettos, raised in the fifties. You all started elementary school in the nineties. So tell me! How do you see racism?" Writing centers can never forget to talk with students. Teachers, especially when not doing comp, can forget—but shouldn't. It took me five weeks to ask them what they thought about the subject as opposed to the reading.

The students say they understand there is such a thing as racism—they saw Rodney King on TV—but it doesn’t affect them. It's got nothing to do with them. Rather than race, they see cultures. And I wonder. I wonder at "culture" as a trope. I wonder that when we say racism we are thinking of something now; and they are thinking of something past: slavery and lynchings and geno-
cide and exclusion, things they don’t see now. We are speaking different rhetorics. We are failing to see different tropes at play.

1941. Kenneth Burke had his essay “Four Master Tropes” published in the Kenyon Review. It later appears as an appendix to A Grammar of Motives. What makes this essay interesting is that it is here that Kenneth Burke makes the assertion that rhetoric is epistemological, that the four tropes he names have the power to lead us to some understanding of “truth” (Burke’s Encounter). This idea of language (and particularly language use) as carrying large implications gets born out by others, like the rhetorician Richard Weaver, or like linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s Metaphors We Live By. We process knowledge by way of tropes—though non-experts kind of fold all the tropes into one: metaphor.

In effect, a whole lot of theorists have arrived at what Burke said over sixty years ago: we are affected, often not consciously, by the language we receive and use, by trope. And that means that we are ideologically affected. What I mean is that our assumptions about how the world works are influenced by—might even be created by—the language we receive and use. Large things. World views. Now, if that’s the case, then we’re also affected by the language we don’t use. It’s this sensibility that prompted what came to be called “pc,” political correctness. If we use only words with “man,” woman gets ignored. If we no longer speak of “racism,” racism gets ignored. It’s more than just etiquette, pc; it’s a matter of epistemology and ideology.

A graduate course in the MBA program. Discussion centers on New Orleans, post-Katrina.

Teacher: “What will have to be considered in rebuilding New Orleans?”
Answers fly: the cost of real estate, matters of providing low-income loans, re-establishing confidence in tourism. An animated class. One student, a clean-cut white man, a loan officer at a local bank, but also the boyfriend to one of my daughters, a frequent guest at our house, says “Well, we’ll have to be more conscious of racism.” And he is greeted with silence, long silence, followed by the professor deciding to discuss other matters. The subject of New Orleans has ended.

After class, he calls my daughter: “I think I scared my class today.”

Did he scare them? Or have we lost our ability to talk about racism? If we follow Burke’s reasoning, the master tropes signal what is to be said and what is not to be said. They tell us something about what’s happening now, like why it becomes increasingly harder to speak of racism to those who aren’t the apparent victims of
it and how to articulate what the victims feel but can’t seem to defend quite ade-
quately when confronted by their classmates, when trying to articulate to a tutor
what’s trying to be written.

The tropes Burke sees as the big ones are

- metaphor
- metonymy
- synecdoche
- irony

As with all taxonomies, these four bleed into one another. And maybe it isn’t all
that important to recognize which trope is which but to recognize that “figures of
speech” are also “figures of ideology” are “figures of thought” and “figures of often
unintentional censorship.” But since I’ve opened the door, let me define them.

**Metaphor.** Metaphor, says Burke, is the foundation to the other three. It’s the
one all students know. It’s the one they’re taught (and simile, which is metaphor
with a “like”). In Burke’s terms, metaphor brings out the “thisness of a that, the
thatness of a this.” The word “race” drops out and other words get used: ethnicity,
identity, culture.

An interview. A situation much like the writing center. Both
the student and the interviewer identify as white and middle class. The inter-
viewer is a soc grad student. The interviewee is in an ethnic study course. The
interviewee says that

> Just from like looking at the Black people that I’ve met in my classes and
the few I knew before college that...not like they’re—I don’t want to say
waiting for a handout, but [to] some extent, that’s kind of what I am hint-
ing at. Like almost like they feel like they were discriminated against hun-
dreds of years ago, now what are you gonna give me? Ya know, or maybe
even it’s just their background, that they’ve never, like maybe they’re first
generation to be in college so they feel like, just that is enough for them.
(“I’m Not a Racist, But...” 68)

Black folks aren’t biologically lazy; it’s a cultural pathology tied to a history. This is
the new rhetoric of racism.

**Metonymy.** A reduction, says Burke. The ultimate reduction, as far as I can see,
is individualism. If everything is reduced to individual will, work, and responsibili-
ty, there’s no need to consider group exclusion. “Identity” plays into this one quite
well, because then it becomes an individual assertion of a group affiliation, the
individual taking precedent.
A faculty member says in a discussion about identity politics—well, we get to choose our identity. I say something like, “So if I choose to be a big white guy, I can be?”

But that was a cheap shot. I did understand what he was trying to say. He was pointing to the fact that we all carry many identities, and that we assert one over another based on the contexts in which we find ourselves. When I’m among a bunch of folks in my business, I identify as one of them—a compositionist, say—and apart from them—a Latino. If I’m among a bunch of Latinos, I’m more likely to be a Puerto Rican. Among Puerto Ricans, a Nuyorican. Or maybe a Professor. Abuelito. Dad. We choose.

What this doesn’t get at, however, is that we have limits to our choices, limits that are on the one hand linguistic and limits that are extra-linguistic. And what this doesn’t get at is that if we’re all of these individual atoms circling about, we never collect, never take part in collective action. All those individuals in New Orleans chose to remain behind before Katrina struck, we were told, an escape from a large structural reality. A friend’s sister in Cincinnati says “they’re fourth generation welfare,” after all. And all those individuals in prisons throughout the country chose to break laws. That there’s a history behind who gets locked up or left behind is acknowledged and denied.

Same interview as above. When the interviewee is asked about why folks of color tend to have worse jobs, income, and the like, she says part of me wants to say like work ethic, but I don’t know if that is being fair...I just don’t know, I think that if you look at the inner city, you can definitely see they’re just stuck, like those people cannot really get out...like in the suburbs...I don’t know why that would be. I mean, I am sure they are discriminated against but...("I’m Not a Racist, But...” 68)

Somehow or other, it becomes individuals picking themselves up by their bootstraps. Individualism. A super reduction, a master metonymy.

Irony. For Burke, irony is the grand trope, because he says it is the one trope that is dialectical, that exists only by engaging with what is not or with what is opposite. The absurd metaphor for this trope (I know I’m creating a tropical ambiguity here) is being color-blind. It is a metaphor that takes pride in what we would agree is a disability (and I say this without disparaging the abilities of those who are truly blind). Why take pride in denying what is obvious to everyone? Omi and Winant say that the second thing we notice when we approach someone new is our conceptions of race (the first is gender which includes some judgment about sexuality, gay or straight). You meet someone new. Gender first. Quick eval. Often uncon...
scious and immediate sexual/aesthetic evaluation. Then, if not white, race and its association with place. Then, if white, place (based on dialect cues). To declare being color-blind is a lie; at best it’s a wish, echoes of MLK and content of character rather than color of skin. Nice dream. The right dream. Then there’s the reality we’re in. Besides, no one wants to be rendered invisible, have a blind eye turned on her or him. A passage from a novel:

They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their voices. And because they were blind they would destroy themselves. I laughed. Here I thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn’t see either color or men (Ellison 383-84).

Ralph Ellison, 1952, Invisible Man. “Color blind” is irony in all senses of that term: as a trope, and as in the common sense of “isn’t it ironic?” Isn’t it ironic that people with eyes to see can be proud in choosing not to?

The consequences of that choice can be painful, though, can have material effects. Clare Xanthos, a Black British scholar, writes that the trope of being color blind is so deeply ingrained in the British ethos, for example, that it allows for the denial of racial profiling in schools, the denial of racial profiling in the judicial system, racial profiling in law enforcement, and the like. She writes that in Britain, talking about race is a taboo, which effectively requires that blacks do not speak about the realities of everyday discrimination; in white environments, there is the unspoken assumption, “what ever you do, don’t mention race.” At the same time, there has been a backlash against using anti-racist measures, making the identification of racist behavior even more subversive. Ultimately, making racial bias unmentionable is its own oppression; it is merely another form of social control of black people in the contemporary world. (“A Black British View”)
Yet a British witness to the shooting says that he saw "an Asian guy" who "ran on to the train," tripped and was then shot while down five times in the head by plain-clothed policemen (BBC News, UK edition, 22 July 2005). The Brazilian, living in the land which had been the greatest importer of Black African slaves during the 19th century, a land without laws on miscegenation, would see the victim as light. The Brit saw him as "Asian" (what US Americans would call South Asian or East Indian). An American would likely have seen the victim as Latino or Hispanic. Apart from the witness account, no mention of race. It was the coat they chased. But it was the head they shot, a brown head.

Another irony within the irony of color-blind is that its affect is to be color-dumb, in all the senses of the word "dumb."

**Synecdoche.** Whereas metonymy is a reduction, synecdoche is a representation. In other words, something is lost in metonymy—to say culture (or even ethnicity) is not to say racism. But synecdoche carries it all. No more talk of races; no more talk of religions, or nationalities, or languages, while talking about all of them, mixing them up in the most unseemly ways. I will come back to this. This is the big one—cultures (with a final s) or civilizations (with a final s) or national identity (without a plural).

Four tropes—the words we use to create or deny the reality we’re in, to create, in the words of Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, a true, sincere belief that

one of the greatest achievements [of Anglo-Protestant culture], perhaps the greatest achievement, of America is the extent to which it has eliminated the racial and ethnic components that historically were central to its identity and has become a multiethnic, multicultural society in which individuals are to be judged on their merits. (Who Are We, xvii)

This was before the levee broke and momentarily washed away denial.

Two years ago one of my nieces showed up at my university, a first-year student, a “regents scholar.” She was the reader of the two nieces, the introverted one. She was also the one who favored her father, as they say: pink-white skin, glass-like blue eyes, lovely blonde hair. As she walked into the local prestige university, her sister walked into the Lays Potato Chip factory, a single mother. She’s just as smart as her “scholar” sister, and even quicker on the verbal draw, a sharp eye for world events and a sharp wit with which to relay it. She favors her mom, though, my sister: dark skin, dark hair, a beautiful
Boricua. The blonde makes it; the Boricua does not. I made it—male and light-skinned, “good hair” and a thin nose. I’m a college professor. My sister lives in a modular, an office worker, no college—the woman, dark-skinned, straightened hair. She doesn’t believe in racism. Every encounter she has with it in Central Washington is just individual ignorance. The trope: individualism. Students say I make too much of “sheer circumstance.” But how many coincidences do there have to be to make for a pattern?

One of my daughters and I go to see a movie: The Island. For us, the movie is striking. It’s striking to me because, set in 2050, it captures what would be a hundred years since the end of a particular form of racism and the beginning of another form, fewer lynchings, no more trails of tears, no more concentration camp (though I don’t know how else to think of Guantánamo, a camp on the edge of the island of a Spanish-speaking enemy: that trope—terrorism—the clash of civilizations).

The plot of The Island is simple enough. It’s a Frankenstein Clone Flick. The truly wealthy have themselves cloned so as to use their clones for organ transplants later in life. Their doubles are duped into thinking that a lottery spin will send them to an island paradise, when in reality, they’re on the way to get their body parts harvested. The duping is done through language and image, repeating catch phrases over and over. The Dr. Frankenstein character forgets to take into account that memory and something like the soul is also reproduced in the clones. Two clones escape; an hour of chases and crashes (loads of fun); then the clones return to set others free. They’re helped by a Black man who had been stamped with the tattoo of slave, of “less than human” in a war in Africa, he says; the clones are also branded, literally. The escaped clones arrive just as the still-captured clones are about to be put to death in a gas chamber (just in case we miss the history repeating itself stuff). By the end of the movie there is freedom and love in the glow of bright sunlight. A happy ending.

Cheesy movie. And still, AnaSofia and I cried when the Black man and the White Clones got together against the evil Dr. Whatever, sucked into that trope: us against them. The word “racism” was never once uttered in the movie. One of the clones was as blonde as all get out, after all. The actor’s name is Johansson. Race with a new twist: a race of clones and a race of former slaves together against a common enemy and somehow that tired old trope, biology, though now a man-made biology, culture in the Petri-dish sense tied to culture
in the historical sense, all tied to capitalism. I make too much of a cheap shoot-em-up, my students tell me.

Though racism has always been tied to language, has always had to be sold rhetorically, the rhetoric has changed, the tropes are different more often than not. There's been a tropic shift in the topos of racism. And we aren't keeping up. So we don't know how to engage, don't know if to engage.

Those of us dedicated to anti-racist pedagogy, to addressing the current state of racism find ourselves every day trying to convince folks that there really still is racism, and it's denied. In the face of all that front-page misery of hurricane Katrina, it's denied; in the face of all those brown-skinned terrorists (even when one is simply a Brazilian late for work), it's denied; even in the lack of parity in the land of opportunity, it's denied. Our rhetoric and the rhetoric of the everyday aren't jiving. We see racism. They see something else, sedimentation of a racism that was, perhaps, but not what we rail against.

A Zapatista poem:

We the orphans of opportunity
have dared to pass through the door opened by the Zapatistas
and cross to the other side of the mirror
where everyone can be the same
because we are different,
where there can be more than one way of living
where rejection of the present system
exists together with the desire to build a new world
in which many worlds will fit. (De Colores 197)

It's a new racism, we're told by the likes of Martin Barker and Etienne Balibar and Howard Winant. It's no longer founded on the presumption of white supremacy, no longer functions under the rhetoric of biological determinism, no longer even takes race as a given. One of the great historians of racism, George Fredrickson, even argues that we've gone full circle, from a race born out of religious intolerance—a theo-ism, I reckon—back to a language tied to othering on the basis of religion. And we can see that: the new crusade, “terrorism” tied to Islam. Then again, Islam is tied to race, no? No white folks in the axis of evil. E. Sanjuan, Jr., like Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, argue that the new religion is nationalism. In Sonny SanJuan's terms, nationalism is “the new opiate of the masses.” So we're now at twice removed from racism, except that the new religion is tied to the old religion is tied to races, even if not the comfortable American
notion of races. Reminds me of Texas governor Ma Ferguson having said “If
English is good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for the children of Texas.” But
then, she said that before the new racism. How about a televangelist that advocates
the assassination of a Latin American president on the grounds that the Catholic
country is a haven for Muslim terrorists? Or how about the former Secretary of
Education—of Education—saying that we can lower crime dramatically if we abort
all black pregnancies. Nationalism, theo-ism, racism. It’s new. New tropes, old con-
sequences except so much broader in scope.

Sandra María Esteves
From Fanon
We are a multitude of contradictions
reflecting our history
oppressed
controlled
once free folk
remnants of that time interacting in our souls

Our kindred was the earth
polarity with the land
respected it
called it mother
were sustained and strengthened by it

The european thru power and fear became our master
his greed welcomed by our ignorance
tyrranny persisting
our screams passing unfulfilled

As slaves we lost identity
assimilating our master’s values
overwhelming us to become integrated shadows
unrefined and dependent

We flee escaping, becoming clowns in an alien circus
performing predictably
mimicking strange values
reflecting what was inflicted

Blind: Talking about the New Racism
Now the oppressor has an international program
and we sit precariously within the monster's mechanism
internalizing anguish from comrades
planning and preparing a course of action. (186-87)

I once (or more than once) wrote that the difference between the minority and
the immigrant was a colonial history. I still think I'm right about that. But lately
I've come to notice others railing against racism, feeling the effects of racism: the
Bengali student, the Sri Lankan, her son who had to become black to find a peer
group—Valisana becoming Val, learning basketball, growing a 'fro. And so I real-
ize that colonialism is global now, attempts at global economic colonialism, neo-
colonialism, in a postcolonial world, and all those from the third world become the
colored of the globe. And I see the outrageous misnomer in “minority,” a reductive
term in so many ways. And the hierarchy of the old racism becomes the new hier-
archy of economy, the trope of rank: first world, third world. In Balibar's terms, the
new racism is a racism without races. It's a clash of civilizations, a clash of cultures
on a global scale, a dead issue carried on by folks of color on a national scale.

And so I've told the story of the elementary school teacher who wrote me to
say that she doesn't think in terms of color so why do people of color. The mas-
ter trope of irony: saying one thing, asserting its opposite.

And I've told the story of my daughter, the one who looks most like some
idea of a Latina who having shown disrespect toward a teacher (because of her
own sense of injustice) had been told “That might be okay in your culture but
not in mine” (“On the Rhetoric” 654). When confronted, the teacher denies
having said such a thing. What she had said was “That would not be okay in
your culture and it's not okay in mine.” And the question remained: what did
culture have to do with it? After I broke into a lecture on racism, the princi-
pal said “Well, we had some problems with racism at the beginning of the
semester, but we took care of it.” Racism, a thing of the past. The new trope:
culture, a synecdoche.

A follow up. A Sri Lankan woman, a Tamil Tiger in exile, confronts the
same school principal over matters concerning her son, Val, a victim of racism,
she's trying to argue. He interrupts: Are you Victor's student? Surely racism
is the fancy of minority university types. Trope: color-blind.

Something happened to our racial attitudes with the end of World War II glob-
ally, with the Civil Rights movement in the US. We had gotten to see racism at its
worse—technologized genocide to kill off a race that looked so much like other Germans that members of that race had to wear armbands with the Star of David to identify them as Jews. The outrage of that kind of racism marked the beginning of the end of the kind of racism that had prevailed since the sixteenth century in some sense, that had been taxonomized through Kant and Hegel ("On the Rhetorics" 656-57) and most significantly by Johann Freidrich Blumenbach, who by his third edition of *De generis humani varietate nativa liber* (On the Natural Varieties of Mankind) had created five biologically distinct races of humanity: Malayan, Mongolian, African, American, and Caucasian (which wasn't quite the blue-eyed blond), the science of races that reaches its height in the nineteenth century. With the holocaust, natural selection based on phenotype could no longer be tolerated. Even South Africa dropped that line of reasoning, even as it began to create apartheid, the grand version of *Plessy*. By 1978, the Supreme Court's decisions concerning Allan Bakke's suit against the Board of Regents of University of California solidified the end of white supremacy in the United States. In affirming Bakke, the Court named White as a race no different from others and affirmed that there is racism, a selective exclusion of groups, by sustaining affirmative action.

Allan Bakke had applied for admission to the University of California Medical School at Davis twice and twice was rejected for lack of space, given his qualifications. Each time, however, people of color with lower qualifications than his (test scores and GPAs) did get in. Sixteen seats had be set aside for minimally qualified people of color. We still feel the sting of affirmative action as less than qualified, the direct result of the Department of Labor's 1974 decision to interpret "affirmative action" as the creation of quotas. The Supreme Court decided, 5-4, that Bakke's 14th Amendment right to equal treatment under the law had in fact been violated. And the Supreme Court decided, 5-4, that processes that would assure proportionality, race-based criteria, could be maintained. On the one hand, there began the cry of "reverse discrimination"; on the other, the sanctity of individualism within a meritocracy—a color-blind system—was maintained.

* A student says to her American Indian teacher: "There's a multicultural center; how come there's no white-cultural center?" Knee-jerk egalitarianism.

* Without skipping a beat, he says "You're standing in the middle of it!"

For rhetorician John Lucaites, the Bakke case demonstrates that "race" in the new racism is a *topos*, a kind of generative theme. I'll accept that. But what I think is more important is that what happens in response to Bakke and other factors, like the Civil Rights movement, the international sanctions against apartheid, the repulsion of industrial genocide and internment camps is that "race" becomes *topos non*
grata, receding behind—and taking shape by way of—Kenneth Burke’s master tropes. So let’s return to synecdoche—a representation, a piece that represents a whole; or even a whole that contains its represented part. Watch these words: national identity and civilizations.

Every power nexus has had its intellectual defenders or apologists, some by design, some by circumstance. In Foucault’s terms, “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Power/Knowledge 131). Truth is a rhetoric. And the current truth-sayer seems to be Samuel P. Huntington. Latinos who have heard of him dismiss him, think he’s a kook in the ivory tower. But he’s been influential: a Harvard professor of political science for about forty years, the co-founder of the journal Foreign Policy, former head for security planning of the National Security Council under President Carter, and director of the John M. Olin Institute, a conservative endowment fund which supported the development of his book The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. The book’s hypothesis [is] that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (“Clash” 22)

And so, with a very impressive book, we are allowed to disregard racism and class inequity and a whole series of actors in world-scale political economy. The world becomes divided into nine civilizations—and the names are telling, a mix of geography, religion, and race. The civilizations are:

- Western
- Latin American
- African
- Islamic
- Sinic
- Hindu
- Orthodox
- Buddhist
- Japanese (Clash 26)
We needn’t worry about race or racism. The problem is civilizations. The natural order of things is civilizations and the cultures they contain, and the natural order of things is to resist contamination by other cultures.

A section of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* begins by reducing U.S. immigration as coming from two civilizations, the Sinic and the Latin American, more specifically Asians and Mexicans, and even more specifically Filipinos and Mexicans. He then writes:

> While Europeans see the immigration threat as Muslim or Arab, Americans see it as both Latin American and Asian but primarily as Mexican...[T]he central issue will remain the degree to which Hispanics are assimilated into American society as previous immigrant groups have been....Mexicans walk across a border or wade across a river. This plus the increasing ease of transportation and communication enables them to maintain close contacts and identity with their communities. Second, Mexican immigrants are concentrated in the southwestern United States and form part of continuous Mexican society stretching from Yucatan to Colorado. Third,...resistance to assimilation...Fourth, the area settled by Mexican migrants was annexed by the United States after it defeated Mexico in the nineteenth century...In due course, the results of American military expansion in the nineteenth century could be threatened and possibly reversed by Mexican demographic expansion in the twenty-first century. (205-206)

All this gets expanded in a 2004 book titled *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. It is from here that I got the earlier quote in which he says we’ve solved racism. Done. Multi-us. Racism isn’t the problem. The problem is that when civilizations clash, national identity goes down, he writes, taken over by a people whose values contain a "lack of ambition" (Did he say lazy, that old, tired trope?), taken over by a people for whom the "acceptance of poverty as a virtue [is] necessary for entry into Heaven" (not racism but Catholicism as the problem). The only way that Mexicans will not ruin America’s national identity is for them to embrace the Anglo-Protestant ethos, its American dream, able to "share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English" ("Hispanic" 36). As of 1999, twenty-five states—half the country—have now established English-only laws, as if laws can accelerate cognitive processes. After a certain age, we can learn a language just so fast. So while folks learn, they’re excluded, left to dream, only to dream.

So here we stand. The new racism embeds racism within a set of other categories—language, religion, culture, civilizations pluralized and writ large, a set of master tropes (or the master’s tropes). We heard them all when faced with Katrina, and even as racism finally got acknowledged, it got dismissed—low-interest hous-
ing and a couple of thousand in bank accounts, and all will be forgotten. America resides in short-term memory.


A placid balding bureaucrat here boasts
before a roomful of black and yellow men
that he is a man of action
though like other bureaucrats
he lacks the courage to call a racist a racist.
His lips don't even tremble when he boasts,
and he doesn't lick them to a glisten. When he dies,
black and brown boys will knock over
the headstone on his grave, mocking men of action.
On television another bureaucrat promises action
to the homeless and hungry. In an executive helicopter
that costs more than they will ever earn he has flown
over their diseased and muddy waters, the rages
of levees that, knocked over, threaten to become
their living headstones. His coat and tie removed,
his sleeves rolled up, he stammers into microphones
that help is coming, that he is a man of action,
the white savior, that they must remain hopeful and calm
and blame no one.

Bureaucrats are funny that way.
They evict us, lock us up, starve us, drown us,
and then threaten to silence our rages.
But in the picture on the front page of today's paper
the body of one of ours, shrouded in a blanket
in a gesture of poor people's dignity, floats face down
in downtown New Orleans. On an overpass a few feet above,
a young black woman pours water onto a bit of food
she has discovered in the wreckage of this most unnatural
of natural disasters. "God moves on the water,"
goes one of Blind Willie Johnson's songs. And the devil is
a man of action...A bureaucrat.

Stir the waters. Scream rage. Scream bloody murder.
We can’t buy into the silencing of what we know is still racism, even if the lynchings are now few, even if we know that Jim Crow is now Manuel Labor, even if we know that the jails represent an exclusionary political economy. We do rhetoric. And Nancy Grimm is right: the writing center really is the site for the “mediation of differences.” She writes, “[W]riting center workers must be prepared to offer more compelling and more socially just visions of literacy to counteract the simplistic understandings that lend themselves to social ranking rather than communication” (46). She’s right. It’s you, after all, who do the most important teaching—the one-with-one. You teach writing, but you also have the context with which to teach the art of conversation, of civil discourse handled civilly. We cannot remain so frightened of controversy that “pc” means “policed conversation,” turning a blind eye, safe in the silence. We would rail against censorship. Rail against self-censorship. Be bold.

So when that next paper comes your way that says there is no racism, please think of the silence, expose it, looking at the Master’s Tropes. Let’s look to the language. Behind it there is a material reality—the reality of racism, still present, and not all that new after all.

WORKS CITED


---