

**Kennedy, Tammie M., Joyce Irene Middleton,  
and Krista Ratcliffe, editors. *Rhetorics of  
Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular  
Culture, Social Media, and Education*. Southern  
Illinois UP, 2017. 338 pages.**

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Aja Y. Martinez

“Whiteness.” Such is the threatening nature of this word to surface resistance, defensiveness, and outright denial when mentioned in the company of most white folk—especially when linked to the word “privilege.” As a person of color (POC) who teaches first-year composition courses at a PWI (Predominantly White Institution), I have yet to experience a semester in which I can introduce this term into course lexicon without having to first carefully lay groundwork with my students about how “whiteness” is an institutional and systemic consequence of white supremacy, and before we can even venture into this precarious territory, I know I must cover other examples of systemic hegemonic influence such as Christianity, Patriarchy, Ableism, and Heteronormativity—to name a few. And through these examples, my students and I eventually (usually six-weeks into the 16-week semester) come to a point in which I, a woman of color, can be trusted (somewhat) to engage my majority white students in an examination of white supremacy, privilege, and whiteness toward establishing race and racism as topics worthy of discussion in the college writing classroom. Yet as Sara Ahmed and others (Villanueva, Puwar, Kynard) have made clear, the work of diversity, in particular, doing the diversity work POC are generally hired to do in PWIs—providing the institution with the aesthetic of diversity, but also engaging the institution in issues of diversity through the production of research and courses on topics of social inequities and injustice—is, by and large, left to POC with little to no institutional resources and support. Which brings me to another pathway of inquiry, the question of allyship on the part of white teacher-scholars. Whereas the concept of being a white ally has been taken up contemporarily, and critiqued most effectively in popular discourse (see Zack Linly’s “It’s time to stop talking about racism with white people”) the question of white allyship aims to expound the very real danger, risk, and consequences associated with true allyship—an allyship that ventures into what others have aptly characterized instead as being an “accomplice.” Whereas allies are viewed as those who

identify as “helpers” to the oppressed, accomplices are those who will stick their necks out, bear the risk of consequences, and, as blogger crunkadelic on the Crunk Feminist Collective said, “get your people.”

It is with these thoughts of systemic whiteness and allyship that I consider Tammie Kennedy, Joyce Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe’s collection *Rhetorics of Whiteness*. As a collective project, both on the part of the editors and the contributors, I view this collection as our field’s first meaningful attempt to hold a mirror to rhetoric and writing studies and stare hard through the smoke into the reflection of who we are with regard to whiteness (Villanueva 253). While many rhet/comp-situated critical race scholars have pieced together our critiques of whiteness through the good work of scholars in Law (D. Bell, Delgado & Stefancic, Haney López, Crenshaw), Education (Cabrera, Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, Dixson), and other social sciences (Bonilla-Silva, J. Bell & Moore, Roediger), this collection offers burgeoning critical race scholars in rhetoric and writing studies an entry point to this important conversation that is specific to our field. Although some of the subject matter taken up in this collection covers conversations being hashed out in a variety of disciplines, the organization and thematic foci chosen by the editors result in a text that is attractive and accessible to teacher-scholars in our field who understand the importance of rhetoric as it informs our pedagogical practice. But to my points in my opening paragraph, with the taboo nature of the term “whiteness” and the uneven work of diversity, usually overly proportioned on the backs and shoulders of POC in this field, I am heartened to see a collection organized and supported by the work of ally-identified white scholars with a considerate interweaving of perspectives of scholars of color.

Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe have separated the book into five major sections, with a notable forward by Lilia D. Monzó and Peter McLaren. In the forward, Monzó and McLaren lay out the contemporary contextual scene of white supremacist racial violence that necessitates this work. The authors also draw the audience’s attention to key theoretical concepts within the text, such as “oxymoronic whiteness” (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe 8), “spectacle of black suffering” (Jay 22), “disciplining of racial rhetoric” (McDuffie 71), and “white innocence and black abstraction” (Beech 132). Concepts such as these provide the readership terminology and frameworks by which to navigate this text and also serve as anchor points to assert the theoretical contributions of this collection to the overarching and interdisciplinary conversation on whiteness. The five sections, as outlined by the editors in their introduction are as follows: Part one, “Hauntings in Popular Culture”; part two, “Hauntings in Social Media”; part three, “Hauntings in Education”; part four, “Hauntings in Pedagogy”; and part five, “Problems Haunting Theories of Whiteness.” As can be inferred from the subtitle of the overall text, as well as the consistency of

the term as invoked by contributors in each of the five parts of the book, “haunting whiteness” is a central concept that the editors claim shaped their vision for this project. The concept of whiteness as a haunting entity is unpacked and defined by the editors as “a term functioning as a trope with associated discourses and cultural scripts that socialize people into ways of seeing, thinking, and performing whiteness and nonwhiteness” (5). I think it’s interesting that both the spectral and the figurative are at play in this collection’s articulation of whiteness because whiteness as a lived reality is so often denied by whites themselves.

Yet the haunting nature of this trope is very much its affect and effectiveness within the racialized U.S. hierarchy. In a hegemonic sense, all members of this society, of which whiteness (understood interchangeably with white supremacy) is the overarching racialized order, are not meant to actually see or pinpoint how whiteness functions to benefit some and to oppress others. One example the editors provide is the term “American” and the assumptive whiteness that haunts this identifier. While my own nationality is most certainly U.S. American, my brown skin and Mexican heritage make it necessary for me to explain to audiences in my own country and also when I am abroad that, while I am brown, my national identity is indeed American—the usual response? “Oh well you don’t look American.” Such is the world-wide strength and persistence of this haunting, and only one example among many others provided by contributors throughout the collection.

In section one, “Hauntings in Popular Culture,” the contributors directly take on assumptive whiteness as it functions within film, television, and celebrity. Annette Harris Powell frames this section with her contribution “Postracial,” which reviews a damning litany of colorblind racist presidential rhetorics from Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” to (at the time of publication) candidate Donald Trump’s “take America back—make America great again” campaign slogan (19). From a rhetorical standpoint, all pop culture representations can be understood within the context of socio-political leadership, and thus the texts the authors in this section analyze are in direct response to the implied postraciality of our times. As Powell argues, there has been no greater assertion of postraciality in this country than during the Obama administration, when a “we have overcome” sensibility swept the nation with his election—however, as Kristi McDuffie discusses in this section’s fourth chapter, this perceived victory was and is haunted by whiteness (71). There is no greater evidence of this haunting than in the pop culture artifacts created during this time, such as the book and film *The Help* that is effectively analyzed in two separate contributions: one by Gregory Jay and a second by Christine Farris.

In all, this first section provides readers material in the form of rhetorical artifacts in pop culture that would serve teachers well as examples to initiate a discussion of whiteness with students in the classroom. I am especially partial to engaging difficult classroom subject matter and discussions through pop culture pathways because this offers students an opportunity to first see how hegemonic influences such as whiteness pervasively invade and infect/ affect socially constructed art. Strategically, I have found it effective to begin with mainstream artifacts and not personal and potentially self-implicating practices that would ask students, especially young (presumably FYC or undergraduate) students to think about whiteness for what in many cases might be the first time with difficult prompts like “think about how you benefit from whiteness in society.” Beginning the conversation with texts removed from the self, but likely still important to the students (if for no other reason than their pop culture popularity), gives students the opportunity to view, almost in an outsider-looking-in mode, the pop culture text before turning the frame of whiteness analysis inward, which can in turn take up texts like social media platforms and students’ engagement with such mediums.

Section two, “Hauntings in Social Media,” is the most compelling and important section in this book to the progression of the overall interdisciplinary discussion of whiteness. Due to the fast-paced and ever-changing nature of social media platform and modality options, I believe it is important to have grounding pieces of scholarship that we can build social-media-specific whiteness conversations from—this section offers our field a point of entry. Catherine Prendergast’s introductory reflection points to examples of hashtags and blog posts, which the section’s contributors in turn take up in their exploration of platforms from eHarmony (Austin) to Facebook (Beech), and social media modalities such as the meme (Engles). An interesting aspect of the discussion in this section is the perceptual distance a computer or phone screen creates between writer and audience in these social media spaces, that in some cases relieves writers of any responsibility to consider the ways whiteness informs the way they navigate said spaces. As the contributors in this section suggest in their separate essays, social media, like other institutionalized instantiations of whiteness, provide venues for perpetuating a haunting whiteness and a stage (sometimes metaphorical, sometimes literal) for antiracist activist gestures, most notably discussed in Engles’ essay on “Racialized Slacktivism.” In all, each contribution to this important section of the collection makes evident the necessity for additional work in Whiteness Studies with social media as a centralized object of concern.

Organizationally, the third section, “Hauntings in Education,” and the subjects the contributors discuss in each essay, could very well have served as the first section of the overall collection. Examples such as Cedric Burrows’

important discussion of how oft-cited civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are anthologized through a lens of whiteness in textbooks and Casie Moreland and Keith D. Miller's groundbreaking examination of the white supremacist foundations of dual credit courses set a contextual framework wherein the institution and its curricular tools garner a necessary second look. Considering the organizational schema of the collection, the discussion of artifacts like pop culture and social media could very well follow section three, as the contributors in each section use texts and media worthy of analysis within white supremacist educational spaces. This is especially true with regard to Lee Bebout's curricular review of the banned Arizona ethnic studies courses, where beyond curriculum, the very texts used by educators were in some cases boxed up and stripped from the hands of students. While the contributors in section three give specific examples of how whiteness functions institutionally, sections one and two, with their thematic attention on texts worthy of pedagogical use and examination, would provide a fitting transition into the fourth section that deals specifically in pedagogical considerations.

With section four, "Hauntings in Pedagogy," the contributors provide tangible methods for educators to employ in the anti-racist classroom. A particularly chilling, yet no less important, contribution in this section is Leda Cooks' discussion of presumed white innocence in her essay "On the Cover of the Rolling Stone: Deconstructing Monsters and Terrorism in an Era of Postracial Whiteness." In the wake of the Las Vegas mass shooting—yet another terrorist attack by a white American man—prominent social media activist-bloggers such as Son of Baldwin tellingly commented: "When they do not mention the race of the criminal, we can pretty safely assume that the criminal is white. #StephenPaddock." As noted in individual section contributions by Meagan Rodgers and Alice McIntyre, teachers can take measures within their own practice to reflect on their own subjectivities with regard to whiteness and to, in turn, model mindfulness for their students. The authors suggest that this introspection, when tied to the use of social media and pop culture artifacts as suggested by contributors from previous sections, can inform a learning experience that is dedicated to anti-racist transformation for all involved.

The concluding section, "Problems Haunting Theories of Whiteness," is characterized by the editors as meant to identify "individual and structural problems haunting definitions of whiteness" and to offer "concepts for reimagining these problems" (12). From the direction indicated in the title of this section, and the above quoted editors' description, I expected to read essays that reviewed and commented on some the foundational and defining theories of whiteness from early scholarship in Critical Race Theory, History, Education, and Sociology. While the essays included in this section are

individually very good analytical works identifying whiteness within artifacts—I am referring primarily here to Ersula Ore’s look at Obama in relation to racialized space and Nicole Ashanti McFarlane and Nicole Snell’s poignant example of AAE and captioning technologies—it is really only Ronald Kuykendall’s “Whiteness as Antidialogical” that takes a look backward with a goal of moving forward with specific theories of whiteness. Having worked on edited collections myself, I understand the difficult role editors must take up with regard to receiving and successfully placing all contributions within the overall thematic organization of the book; however, this fifth and final section is the least cohesive of all the sections in terms of a centralized thematic focus. I note this more as an observation than a critique because I can appreciate the effort of Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe in wanting to be sure the important work and voices of all the contributors in this section made it into the book. That said, it was the right move on the part of the editors to end this section and the contributions of this book with the attention Kuykendall brings to the logics and ethics of whiteness and to a rethinking of Whiteness Studies in its disciplinary sense. In his discussion of whiteness as “antidialogical” (302), Kuykendall says:

As pointed out by George Yancy, “whites may approach race/whiteness as intellectually stimulating, something to master without personal risk.” But this is a hypocritical performance that disguises ways of being from ways of appearing. Thus, whites can engage race and racism at the conceptual level without challenging their own whiteness at the interpersonal level. (306)

It is with Kuykendall’s astute observation that I arrive at the conclusion of this collection and this review. Beyond Whiteness Studies, whiteness in theory, even whiteness praxis, what does it look and feel like to do the work of dismantling whiteness so that we move beyond the oxymoron that is the white anti-racist? Kuykendall states nothing short of revolutionary transformation will constitute a resolution (305).

At the conclusion of this collection, I can reflect on the initiating nature of this conversation for teacher-scholars in rhetoric and writing studies, and as I have commented above, this collection constitutes an entry point to an ongoing conversation in Whiteness Studies. As a critical race theorist, activist, and person of color who navigates the very institutions and structures reviewed by the contributors of this book, I come away from this collection encouraged by the effort of all involved, but also worried about the lived reality involved in a true commitment toward the task of dismantling whiteness. I am hopeful that white contributors to and readers of this collection commit to an identity of white accomplices and that they take into consideration the various and

manifold critiques and suggestions toward practice that this work offers. My hope beyond hope for the continuance of this work is that the hauntings that are whiteness are actively pursued by white accomplices, banished, and no longer welcome in this house we live in.

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## **About the Author**

**Aja Y. Martinez** is Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University. Her scholarship, published both nationally and internationally, focuses on the rhetorics of racism and its effects on marginalized peoples in institutional spaces. Her efforts as teacher-scholar strive towards increasing access, retention and participation of diverse groups in higher education.