

Introduction

Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial is a collection of six scholarly interviews with internationally renowned intellectuals outside of rhetoric and composition whose work has direct implications for scholarship within the discipline. Included are interviews with postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, postcolonial feminist and race theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, African American race scholar Michael Eric Dyson, British cultural studies scholar (and a founder of that field) Stuart Hall, Argentinean political theorist Ernesto Laclau, and French philosopher Chantal Mouffe. These interviews constitute a cross-disciplinary dialogue among these influential scholars on subjects related to rhetoric, writing, race, feminist theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory.

Because rhetoric and composition is a uniquely interdisciplinary field—drawing heavily on current scholarship in anthropology, feminist theory, linguistics, literary criticism, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and other areas—a significant portion of its scholarship draws on the work of scholars and theorists prominent in other disciplines. Consequently, the careful investigation of these scholars' work is essential. Thus, the interviews in this book function as a *primary source* in the discipline, in that they are direct, focused opportunities for six of these scholars to address the key intellectual questions in the discipline's scholarship.

The collection begins with a conversation with Homi Bhabha. Bhabha suggests that the field of rhetoric and composition fulfills important intellectual and social roles in that writing, the field's principal preoccupation, is always already a "political" activity linked to the acquisition of agency through critical literacy. Those who are able to read their world and then have voice within it are positioned to have a certain modicum of power within that world and over their destinies. Teaching students to read and write the

world, then, is a way of helping them to achieve this power, to resist the dominating forces at play in their lives. This is why Bhabha believes that theory plays such a crucial role in literacy education, for it helps us to disrupt the continuity of “common sense,” to challenge assumptions, preconceptions, fixed notions. It also helps us better understand cultural difference not as a question of fixed, monolithic groups of others defined by distinct borders, but as a constructed discourse about questions of power and hegemonic struggle over the ability to read and write the world—and, thus, to gain access to its resources. The work we do in rhetoric and composition, then, is crucial according to Bhabha.

In many ways, Bhabha’s work is about the ability to speak—to have voice and thus to gain agency. This is also a main theme of Gloria Anzaldúa’s work. Anzaldúa fiercely resists the “tradition of silence” in which she, as a woman of color, finds herself ensnared. Like Bhabha, she rejects the discursive dichotomies that bind us in such material ways—dichotomies of racial, ethnic, and sexual identity; dichotomies of reason and emotion, spirit and matter. She echoes Bhabha in insisting that identity knows no rigid borders, that we must struggle against the categorical violence of thinking cultural identity as prepackaged, fixed realities. For both writers, identity is fluid, washing over and through a person. Especially for those like Anzaldúa who inhabit a borderland space between multiple ethnic sites, achieving voice, subject position, is a matter of negotiating multiple identities, multiple voices. This is why Anzaldúa calls for new states of consciousness involving a multiplicity of writing strategies—what is referred to here as “mestiza rhetoric,” or mestiza writing. For Anzaldúa, writing is a primary way of challenging rigid structures and transforming society’s fixed categories; it is a “means of enabling the kinds of ongoing transformations necessary for inhabiting the borderlands.” As a writer and a kind of writing theorist herself, Anzaldúa understands the double-edged nature of composition’s project: as compositionists we are associated with the colonial, gatekeeping enterprise of enforcing “standard” ways of writing and “accepted” ways of thinking; but we can also associate ourselves with the emancipatory venture of enabling students to read and write their worlds.

While Anzaldúa speaks passionately about her struggles as a Chicana woman in a white, patriarchal society, Michael Eric Dyson is equally passionate about how constructions of race affect the

African-American experience. Straddling both the academic and outside worlds, Dyson hopes to disrupt traditional notions of race and to interrogate how race, class, and gender get constructed in ways that reinforce structures of domination. He believes that academics can indeed play an important role in the struggle for a more equitable society, that theory can help open up avenues of inquiry that can lead to material changes in the larger world. To Dyson, language and language instruction are at the forefront of these struggles. For example, he points out that narrativity is a central “component of self-understanding and the way in which African-American peoples constitute their own identities,” and comprehending how narrativity works can lead to a better understanding of some racial and ethnic groups. Echoing both Bhabha and Anzaldúa, Dyson sees writing as a potentially revolutionary force in that it can contest narrow conceptions of self by situating writer and reader in a convergence of contested, conflicting identities. Thus, for all three theorists, writing is key to identity construction, to understanding and making use of the notion of self as protean.

Dyson is a champion of studying popular culture and of closing gaps between academic and popular cultures—the very same project that Stuart Hall has devoted his professional life to. Hall, however, does not share Dyson’s exorbitant enthusiasm for importing cultural studies into the academy. While Hall agrees that culture deserves rigorous intellectual scrutiny and that cultural studies can serve important pedagogical ends, he worries that the institutionalization of cultural studies is dulling its political edge, diminishing its power as a discourse of disruption and resistance. Too much of what passes as cultural studies, according to Hall, is simply “a waste of everyone’s time.” Much more important are investigations of how culture constructs race, class, ethnicity, and gender. Like all of the theorists in this book, Hall is especially concerned about the liberal, pluralist notion of multiculturalism that tends either to erase and homogenize difference or to essentialize it. Like Bhabha and Anzaldúa, he calls for a “sliding and translation” among differences, among cultural identities. This more complex notion of difference will help scholars and other cultural workers to focus on the formation and material effects of race and ethnicity, how cultural identity contributes to social inequality and political powerlessness. This is why, for Hall, theory is a “deadly serious matter.” He agrees

with Dyson that theoretical work in the academy can have very real, material effects when new ideas are turned into everyday practice.

Ernesto Laclau, too, argues that intellectuals should not underestimate their potential to influence social policy. He points out that “high theory” and other intellectual developments have occasionally resulted in substantive change; however, he also believes that academics must begin to write specifically to nonacademic audiences if they wish to maximize their influence. Laclau’s concern about intellectuals’ maximizing their influence derives from the central concept of his work: hegemony. For Laclau, hegemony is not a one-way imposition of ideological structures on people by an elite; it is an ongoing struggle among various groups for the acceptance and ascendancy of their values and world view. Hence, hegemonic struggle is never-ending, and it therefore relies on constant persuasion—on rhetoric. Rhetoric, in its broadest sense, is central to hegemonic struggle, and this is why Laclau believes that literacy is necessary to revolutionary struggle. Literacy, for Laclau, is a “culture of questions,” and it is the job of progressive academics to create such a culture in their classrooms—an important way in which our academic work can lead to real social change.

Laclau’s frequent coauthor, Chantal Mouffe, further develops the notion of hegemony. She fears that the political left is abandoning hegemonic struggle, allowing the neoconservative right to triumph in such struggle by default. She calls on the left to establish a new hegemony, to transform the current relations of power, to offer an alternative to neoliberal discourse by redrawing political frontiers. Such an effort entails attempts to create consensus, but not some impossible or unreachable situation in which everyone agrees; rather, a fluid, flexible consensus in which parties join together in strategic solidarity to accomplish mutually beneficial goals. As in Laclau’s political theory, rhetoric and argumentation are key to this process. In fact, Mouffe believes that rhetoric is crucial both to the construction of collective identities and to the functioning of an effective democratic political community, or *societas*. Like all of the theorists in this collection, Mouffe expresses optimism that proper action on the part of all of us can lead to a more equitable society.

Often in these interviews, the participants refer to the work or statements of the other interviewees, thereby creating a kind of cross-dialogue or polylogue. *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial* might

thus be seen as a multi-level discussion in which these various theorists link their theoretical and political interventions to broader considerations of cultural struggle, whether such struggle focuses on race, national identity, writing, or teaching. These interviews are meant to clarify positions, provoke debate, and encourage response. We hope that they encourage compositionists to read these theorists' works and to incorporate them into their own scholarship; doing so, we believe, will enrich work being done in the field and lead to a deeper understanding of the functioning and interconnectedness of rhetoric, race, gender, and systems of power and domination.

*Gary A. Olson
Lynn Worsham*