

# Standard English and Colorblindness in Composition Studies: Rhetorical Constructions of Racial and Linguistic Neutrality

Bethany Davila

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines instructors' talk about standardness in anonymous student writing in order to identify discursive patterns that perpetuate colorblind ideologies. Specifically, this article explores explicit and implicit assertions that academic student essays and standard English should not or cannot reveal authorial identity, including race. Identifying colorblindness in talk about student texts highlights rhetorical constructions of racial and linguistic neutrality and illustrates the ways that the ideologies undergirding colorblindness and so-called standard English (ideologies of whiteness and standard language ideologies, respectively) are co-constitutive—especially concerning perceived neutrality. Finally, the article offers suggestions for disrupting the rhetorical patterns that promote colorblind ideologies in talk about written standardness.*

*I wish the problem of race had not intruded . . . but well, yeah, there it is.*

—George, study participant

The title of this article might strike some readers as unlikely. How, they might ask, can there be colorblindness—the systematic and structural denial of the ongoing implications of race (Bonilla-Silva; Carr; Villanueva “Blind”)—in the field of composition studies when so many scholars study race? Indeed, it is true that many scholars do study race and do so through multiple approaches, such as rhetoric (Gilyard; Powell; Villanueva *Bootstraps*), language (Perryman-Clark; Richardson; Smitherman; Young), assessment (Inoue and Poe), and curricula (Kinloch; Smitherman and Villanueva). Colorblindness, though, does not require conscious intent on the part of the field for enactment and reproduction. Colorblindness is a product and producer of whiteness, the race-based ideology of neutrality and standardness that “ensur[es] existing privileges for white people in this country” (McIntyre 3) through “specific discursive and material processes

and circuits of desire and power” (McLaren 66). Whiteness is a historical and structural system of (sometimes unconscious) beliefs and practices that creates white dominance; one manifestation of whiteness is colorblindness.

In addition to denying the importance of race through colorblindness, whiteness works to protect constructs associated with the white race (though often presented as unaffiliated), including standard edited American English (SEAE), which ostensibly functions as E. D. Hirsch’s “trans-dialectal” grapholect that seemingly “belongs to no group or place in particular” (qtd. in Bizzell and Herzberg 60). Nicholas Behm and Keith Miller argue that SEAE “hides the coercive force of whiteness by seeming so ostensibly neutral, normal, and commonsensical as to deracialize whiteness while simultaneously highlighting and defining ‘others’ as abnormal and inferior” (131). Jane Hill similarly argues that standard language is created, in part, by associating linguistic standardness with privileged people, including—maybe even especially—white people (35). John Hartigan asserts that everything “white people, generally speaking, do and think” become norms, and any deviance is racialized and viewed negatively (496–97). According to Stephanie Wildman, “This normalization of privilege means that members of society are judged, and succeed or fail, measured against the characteristics that are held by those privileged” (14). SEAE, then, is a standard language variety that is associated with and defined by white people and that affords unearned racial privilege all while seeming like commonsense or a social norm.

To further explore the relationship between colorblindness and SEAE under the umbrella of whiteness, I examine instructors’ talk about student writing to identify and describe rhetorical patterns that allow composition instructors to avoid addressing race in conversations about SEAE and to perpetuate the perception that race isn’t important in our interactions with student writing. I then suggest changes we can make to work against colorblindness.

It is important to note that the language practices I describe in this article also allow instructors to avoid addressing other social identity categories, most notably socio-economic class. Because I am examining practices and products of whiteness, I will focus on constructions of colorblindness and racial neutrality. Furthermore, like Wildman, I see the value in examining one oppression at a time in order to avoid further silencing particular issues—in this case, racial privilege and structural racism.

#### WHITE TALK: THE LANGUAGE OF COLORBLINDNESS

The two main categories of white talk are either to avoid talking about race or to assert that race doesn’t matter. The first category—avoiding

talking about race—relies on coded language and silences. Bonilla-Silva and Forman describe the “indirect subtle and racially coded words” that allow college students to “avoid racist language and direct racial references” (70). Villanueva uses a rhetorical lens to interrogate the coded language of white talk and outlines strategies that allow for the denial of contemporary, institutional racism. For example, he describes the shift from addressing racial inequality to focusing on equality for all students as the rhetorical trope synecdoche (“Blind”). Mica Pollock focuses on the “predictable . . . silences” (14) around race, noting that in her study in a low-income public high school “adults . . . actively suppressed race labels when they were discussing inequitable patterns potentially implicating themselves” (9). She then argues that “the moments when we delete race . . . from our talk are perhaps the moments in which race matters most dangerously” (14). Krista Ratcliffe interrogates the possible consequences of silences around race, arguing that if we don’t talk about race, we might mistake our own racial ideologies as Truth (16). Similarly, Wildman notes that “by avoiding race . . . we default to the status quo that makes whiteness privileged” (77).

In addition to avoiding talking about race, other white talk strategies involve denying the relevance of race to the topic at hand. These strategies include claims of fairness (equal opportunity/access), blaming the victim (cultural deficiency), and discourses of liberalism (race shouldn’t be a factor; therefore, it isn’t a factor) (Bonilla-Silva and Forman). Moreover, Teun van Dijk argues that people are able to deny racism by focusing on intentions: racism coupled with good intentions is simply “accidental” racism, and intentional racism is only evidence of one bad seed (91). Catherine Prendergast further highlights the role of intentions in denying racism when she asserts that racism is legally defined “as necessarily intentional, effectively invalidating the notion of unequal outcomes as racism” (28). In other words, as long as there is perceived equal access or opportunity—as long as one can’t prove intentional racism—continued racial inequality isn’t legally racism. Similarly, Leslie Carr argues that the focus on equal access has made “legal equality” synonymous with colorblindness as laws passed during the Reconstruction period and continuing to the present state that “individuals [should] be given freedom *from* their race, not freedom *in* their race” (77; emphasis original).

#### SEAE IN COMPOSITION STUDIES: ACKNOWLEDGING POWER AND RESISTING PRIVILEGE

In 1974, CCCC adopted the Students’ Rights to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution, which argues “the claim that any one dialect is unac-

ceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another,” calling such an act “immoral” (Committee 3). Collections such as *Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice* (Smitherman and Villanueva) and the recently-published *Students’ Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook* (Perryman-Clark et al.) offer suggestions for enacting this important policy. Staci M. Perryman-Clark, one of the editors of the SRTOL sourcebook, identifies the aim of her scholarship as “provid[ing] examples of how composition can affirm SRTOL [and] teach Standard English” (470), an agenda that she aligns with scholars such as Gilyard, Richardson, and Kinloch, among others. Vershawn Ashanti Young tackles this issue by calling on compositionists to recognize and allow for the code meshing that he argues is inherent in our language use, where different language varieties—“dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups” (67)—are used together. The approach of providing students access to multiple languages or language varieties aligns with Horner et al.’s call for translanguaging composition instruction in which language differences are seen as resources. Paul Matsuda considers the issue of linguistic diversity and the role of SEAE through the lens of second-language writing and argues that composition instructors need to provide feedback on grammar and that WPAs should create clear policies regarding teaching and grading grammar (157–59). Presumably, Matsuda is referring to SEAE when he references “grammar.” All of these scholars, in one form or another, argue for teaching or allowing nonstandard language varieties in composition classrooms. However, they also “acknowledge the benefits associated with learning Standard English” (Perryman-Clark 470) given “the ongoing, dominant political reality that posits and demands” SEAE (Horner et al. 305).

In this article, I focus my analysis and argument on SEAE as a site of standardness (in part because of the scholarly conversations to which I am responding). However, it is impossible to disentangle SEAE from either academic discourses or school-based genres. SEAE is a commonly expected convention of both academic discourses and student essay genres. Likewise, SEAE is a dialect that can enact many registers or genres, including academic discourses and student essay genres. As such, I include instructor talk about SEAE, academic writing, and student essays because SEAE is very likely part of instructors’ understanding of and expectation for these genres and registers.

---

## IDENTIFYING WHITE TALK AND UNCOVERING IDEOLOGIES

To examine patterns of white talk in conversations about SEAE and to uncover underlying ideologies of privilege and neutrality, I analyzed IRB-approved interviews with composition instructors from two different Midwestern universities about their perceptions of anonymous student texts and the authors who may have written them.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this work are most relevant to contexts in which instructors interact with anonymous student writing such as placement exams, portfolio assessment, and student writing awards. However, the rhetorical patterns I identify and examine can be found in more generalized conversations about student writing (for example, the metaphor of clarity, which I discuss later in this article).

### *Participants*

I asked twelve composition instructors from two public Midwestern universities to read, respond to, and grade anonymous student essays.<sup>2</sup> The participants had all taught at least ten sections of college writing. All twelve instructors were white; there were equal number males and females; and the instructors self-identified as coming from middle-class (ten instructors) or working-class (two instructors) backgrounds (see table 1).

Although I didn't ask explicit questions about instructors' backgrounds and experiences (other than to ask how long they had been teaching writing), scholarship on racial formation (Omi and Winant) and whiteness (Frankenberg) suggest participants' backgrounds were very much part of the process of imagining identity—especially racial identity. Indeed, many instructors noted that professional experiences at other institutions and personal experiences with education informed their responses. However, the prevalence of white talk in these interviews and national contexts suggests that ideologies of privilege and neutrality are compelling, pervasive, and may eclipse local meaning making. Additionally, the rhetorical patterns that allow instructors to avoid talking about race may not be bound geographically as they align with categories discussed by scholars such as Villanueva, Bonilla-Silva and Forman, and van Dijk.

### *Student Papers*

Before the interviews, I provided each instructor with a set of three anonymous student papers (chosen randomly from a total of nine essays) and asked them to mark places where the essays strayed from their expectations for college writing. Each paper (except one) was read by at least four different instructors.

Table I  
 Instructor demographics (Self-reported gender, race, and SES)

	Gender	Race	SES	Other
Becca	F	White	Middle	MFA
Daniel	M	White	Working	MFA
George	M	White	Working	MFA
Meghan	F	White	Middle	English Literature graduate student; has taught at multiple institutions
Mindy	F	White	Middle	MFA; works in university's writing center
Nadia	F	White	Middle	Has taught at multiple institutions
Paul	M	White	Middle	Has taught at multiple institutions
Sarah	F	White	Middle	Composition studies graduate student; taught mostly at other institutions
Scott	M	White	Middle	MFA
Shirley	F	White	Middle	Has taught at multiple institutions
Terry	M	White	Middle	Composition studies graduate student
Todd	M	White	Middle	Composition studies graduate student

Though not an object of study in this research project, the student essays were the springboard for discussion about expectations, standards,

and identity. Therefore, collecting and choosing these texts was an important aspect of the study design. The nine essays were written by incoming first-year students in response to a prompt that asked them to read an article and write an argument “for or against [the author’s] proposal using evidence from the article.” The prompt asked students to write “an essay in which [they] clearly articulate a position and support that position using evidence,” and it noted that students’ writing would be evaluated for focus, structure, and evidence/analysis.

I chose essays written by white, African American, and Hispanic students because these racial groups represent both privileged and historically marginalized positions in the academy, in part related to language use.<sup>3</sup> Within each racial category, I chose essays from the first students who volunteered; I did not choose papers based on the content or language use other than to eliminate papers that explicitly disclosed aspects of the student author’s identity. After collecting the papers, I asked the WPA and the writing center director from one of the universities to confirm that the sample reflected writing they had commonly encountered in first-year composition courses.

When designing this study, I wasn’t interested in knowing if instructors could accurately guess student author identities or identify particular dialects of written English. Instead, I wanted to know two things: 1) which textual features were marked for identity for the instructors participating in this study and in what ways and 2) how do instructors talk about standardness and identity in relation to student writing—in this case, anonymous writing. With these goals in mind, I was comfortable limiting the racial categories of the actual student authors to the three groups mentioned above. However, by not including other racial groups, I may have unintentionally limited the range of identities instructors imagined. Worse yet, I could have contributed to the invisibility of certain racial groups on college campuses (such as Native Americans).

### *The Interviews*

I began the interviews by asking the instructors to “briefly describe the student-authors you pictured when reading these papers.” I then asked them to walk me through their comments to one of the papers, prompting them to describe what they commented on and why. Finally, I asked the instructors to describe in more detail the student-authors they pictured as having written each paper with specific follow up questions about gender, class, race, prior educational experience, geographic background, etc. as needed.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the interview, I asked the instructors which features in the text

signaled the particular identity characteristics they described. The primary difference among interviews was whether or not it was necessary to ask specific follow up questions and which follow up questions were asked.

### *Data Selection and Analysis*

In a previous analysis of this data, I coded the interviews for themes of identity and identitylessness, marked and unmarked language, and standardness. For example, responses to questions about how instructors pictured the students were coded for identity when instructors mentioned particular identity categories and for identitylessness when instructors indicated that they didn't have a sense of certain identity categories. Likewise, when instructors identified features that signaled particular identity categories, the passage was coded as marked, and when instructors said there were no signals in the language, the passage was coded as unmarked.

Given the findings of the previous analysis (Davila) and the wealth of research on language and identity, I began this project with the assumption that language signals identity or that language is indexical. For the purposes of this article, *indexicality* refers to the natural and ideological process that links language (from whole languages to specific features) to identity characteristics.

In this analysis, I narrowed my data to interview excerpts that I had coded as unmarked or identityless. I then used discourse analysis to study "what is said [and] what is not said" (Hill 32), coded language, and rhetorical maneuvering in order to better understand the transcripts and how the instructors create perceptions of neutrality—either related to language or identity. Studying coded language and silence is necessary for examining ideologies of colorblindness and whiteness as they both actively work to create a silence around race. For instance, in this study, the terms *language*, *standards*, *correct*, and *clarity* (among others) signal SEAE; *inner-city* and *urban* often serve as codes for poor African American students; and one instructor uses the term *rural* to refer to poor white students.

### *Ethics and Role of the Researcher*

Any research that involves studying coded language or "predictable . . . silences" (Pollock 14) runs a risk of misinterpretation. This risk was mitigated in part by my focus, which was not on instructors' intentions but on the role of language in creating perceptions of language and/or identity not mattering (which may or may not align with instructors' explicit beliefs). To address the biases I bring to my readings of the data and to ensure I was not misrepresenting instructors, I performed member checking of my analysis.

My race aligned with all of the instructors I interviewed. Based on scholarship on whiteness and previous personal experiences, I entered the interviews thinking it possible that white participants would be willing to speak with me about race because of “ingroup allegiances” (van Dijk 88). To some extent, I believe I was correct; I can’t imagine that if I were black, one of my participants would have admitted, “I guess it’s racist, but the worst writers here and elsewhere that I’ve had are black women” (Nadia). However, some participants would not talk about race with me, and this, too, served as useful data. As the opening quote of this article demonstrates, participants were not always sure how much race should matter to their perceptions of standardness and identity. Because I asked questions about student-author identities, many instructors stated that it felt as if I was asking them to stereotype. Indeed, I did ask them to call on their experiences as teachers and to note patterns in student writing to help them answer questions.

Because this study is not about the instructors and their intentions or about the accuracy of their perceptions of student identity, I have not included excerpts from the student essays or attempted to fully represent or contextualize all of my participants’ talk. I do not argue that the instructors I discuss in this article represent all composition instructors and the ways they talk about language and identity. The importance of this research rests on the prevalence of colorblindness and the continued privileging of SEAE in composition curricula. It is my hope that exploring the role of SEAE in allowing colorblind ideologies to persist in conversations about writing will offer inroads to challenging both constructs.

#### LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: ERASING IDENTITY IN INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENT TEXTS

The majority of the instructors in this study (8 out of 12) position SEAE as widely accessible. Instructors cite prior schooling, reading, and home literacy practices as avenues through which students have access to SEAE. One instructor noted that some students have an “innate sense of language” (Paul), implying that access to SEAE can even be internal. The perception that SEAE is widely accessible adds to the desirability of this privileged dialect as it can presumably “overcome socialization” (Bizzell and Herzberg 61), erasing differences that could, in other contexts, result in discrimination. If everyone has equal access to SEAE, standardness is an individual accomplishment based on effort, and students are largely responsible for their own failures as well. Similarly, the perception of equal access and opportunity means that it is difficult to successfully claim or acknowledge

structural inequality related to unearned privilege. In what follows, I offer extended examples of how instructors shift attention from the structural to the individual as well as other strategies used to assert that social identities don't matter to our interaction with student papers. In fact, as I illustrate in this article, the instructors in this study assert that academic student essays and SEAE don't or shouldn't reveal identity, or even, that student essays and SEAE erase identity.

Two instructors in this study, Daniel and Scott, repeatedly state that student writing is largely nonindexical—that is, the writing in student essays does not signal or reveal particular identities. In fact, they are outliers in their unwillingness to even guess about most aspects of student identities. As such, they are represented in this article more than the other participants. Drawing on their language as well as passages from other participants, I illustrate how student texts can be constituted as identityless.

Daniel and Scott (both of whom have MFAs and teach creative writing alongside first- and second-year writing) cite creative writing as a space where writing and identity intersect and contrast it with academic essays, which they state do not allow for the expression of student identity, except for very specific instances (e.g., incorporating anecdotal evidence). Scott says,

writers don't feel many times like they can express . . . identity in the framework of a college essay . . . it's more that you . . . conform with this outside structure and there isn't much room for one's personal identity in that equation.

This description of the college essay and students' agency constructs identities as individual, self-contained, and deliberate. Each student has a "personal identity" that can be inserted into creative writing or that is constrained by the "structure" or "framework of a college essay." The writer can choose—to some extent—whether or not to "express that identity." In this quotation and throughout the interview, Scott does not acknowledge, nor seem to allow for, identity that is either attributed to writers by readers or interactionally created by writers, readers, and texts.

Daniel also describes the relationship between writing and identity as one of choice. Specifically, Daniel states that conventions of student essays related to SEAE—"diction and syntax and other non-narrative, non-anecdotal rhetorical strategies"—reveal only "academic preparation." Daniel suggests that the conventions of the academic student essay discourage representations of identity so that this genre can function as a fair measure of ability, stating that the possibility for identity to be connected to student writing is "not part of [his] rubric for processing writing" and that

he couldn't imagine how an instructor could get a sense of identity from diction and syntax alone. Furthermore, Daniel removes the importance of his own identity and subjectivity when he describes his grading process as mechanical; he states he has trained himself to respond to student papers "like a robot . . . feeding the, the language into that computer part of my mind." He goes on to say: "to [grade] fairly, I've developed a mechanism by which I take a language [sic] from a student and shovel it in there and out pops a grade." Daniel's representation of the grading process asserts that identity (the author's or his own) does not and should not—perhaps cannot—matter. The language is either nonindexical to begin with or becomes nonindexical because identity doesn't matter. What matters are ideas, which he states are the most important aspect of student papers.

Here, social identity is put in opposition to ideas, which become a proxy for individual students. This metonym, or reduction of social identity to individuals, is a common strategy in colorblind rhetoric. Asserting that social identity doesn't influence the grading or reading process contradicts evidence to the contrary—evidence from other analyses of this study (Davila) and evidence that attempts to describe and explain existing educational achievement gaps (e.g., Piché et al.; Inoue and Poe).

Another, more common way that instructors shift attention from language to individual ideas is through the metaphor of clarity, which suggests that writing—if transparent—can transport ideas and meaning from the author to an audience. The metaphor of clarity aligns with and reproduces the belief that so-called standard languages are superior to nonstandard languages, in part because they purportedly will not unduly impact the outcome of communication (Cameron 120). If language is clear, instructors are able to both understand and focus on students' ideas; if language is unclear, it interferes with the transmittal of ideas from students to instructors. What is clear, though, aligns with white, middle class norms—it is one of the white ways of knowing, reasoning, and writing that scholars interested in whiteness studies have worked to catalogue. Ratcliffe specifically notes the trope *write clearly* as one that can mask "writerly and cultural attitudes and actions" (124).

All of the instructors in this study refer to clear writing or clarity at least once to signal their perception of writing as non/standard. In the example that follows, the metaphor of clarity puts sentence-level language features in service of ideas. In response to my question about what was striking in one of the papers, Shirley states that the student "had an idea . . . but he didn't express it . . . did not express it very clearly." She sums up her response by saying "not a lot of clarity here." When I asked Shirley to explain what she meant by clarity, she said, "this one . . . had trouble with verb tenses. And

that's a—to me, is a bad sign . . . that's, that's an inner city sign.” I asked whether the phrase *inner city* held race or class connotations for her, and she stated that she assumed a low-income African American student writer based on the “trouble with verb tenses.” In this clarification, Shirley turns to what could be a dialectal difference—the verb tenses—and positions it as cultural deficit. However, she does not acknowledge that the difference she identifies might be one of dialect. Instead, Shirley imagines an identity defined by deficit—in contrast to what is standard—or more specifically, she imagines an African American, low-income student from the inner city (an identity likely informed by her institution, which lists its student population as 26% African American).

While Shirley uses clarity to focus on what isn't standard, Todd refers to clarity when talking about a student author he perceives as high achieving. He says, “I thought generally there was a clarity of thought and understanding of what needed to happen in the essay and what kind of moves the writer needed to make.” In both of these examples, the metaphor of clarity functions as coded language for standardness related to dialect or genre conventions. When Shirley notes that the paper “had trouble with verb tenses,” from the context of the full interview, it is clear that her expectation is that students should write in SEAE (both for this assignment and more broadly). Nonetheless, when talking about clear writing, Shirley does not name the dialect in which she expects this communication to take place. Coding the language in this way allows Shirley to avoid addressing the problematic position of asserting that only one dialect—and one associated with already privileged people—can communicate ideas effectively. Through the coded language of clarity, the instructors in this study are able to avoid addressing the relationship between language and identity and create a perception of fairness in that they, ideally, will focus on students' ideas, not their language, which is (in part) what “Students' Rights to Their Own Language” calls for.

More specifically, the SRTOL background calls for shifting attention from correctness—which the authors link to standardness—to content, naming “the essential functions of writing as expressing oneself, communicating information and attitudes, and discovering meaning through both logic and metaphor” (Committee 8). The background asserts, “all languages and all dialects are essentially the same . . . regardless of how varied the surface structure might be” (Committee 9). As such, the background implies that dialectal differences in writing, which are located at the surface or sentence level, are not related to meaning. Instead, meaning is located at the level of the text and is seemingly unrelated to standards, grammar, and dialect. In the process of asking writing instructors to look past dialectal

differences (at the sentence level), the background treats the social identities that are connected to dialects as unimportant.

This critique of SRTOL is not meant to question its overarching goal. Instead, I aim to show the prevalence of certain rhetorical patterns when talking about writing and identity that can inadvertently lead to the disassociation of identity and language. The assertion that instructors should focus on ideas, which are linked to individual students, can discourage an acknowledgment of structural inequality (related to SEAE) and allow for victim blaming. Note that I am not suggesting SRTOL encourages or perpetuates victim blaming.

In order for the metaphor of clarity to be linked with a specific language variety, that dialect must be seen as largely unaffiliated or not linked to any particular group. In the case of SEAE, this positioning takes part both through the perception of equal access described at the beginning of this section and through the insistence that SEAE does not signal identity. Although Daniel and Scott are unique in their insistence that the student essays are nonindexical, other instructors described academic student essays as ideally identityless. Three instructors even suggest that student essays actively work to erase identity. Becca states that this genre “kind of wanted to sort of wash that [identity] all out,” and Mindy says that academic writing “tries not to” reveal identity. In response to finding out that Paper H had been written by a black, middle-class female as opposed to the white, upper-class male author identity he had imagined, George replies,

Well, good. Okay. Then that proves the point . . . If you're well trained as a writer, and, for, for an academic context, either A; it will correctly strip you of identity, right? That it will be your ideas, content of your character, etcetera, it will be your ideas and your engagement with those ideas that is the thing that the person notices, or B; you will, like all other well-trained people, look like a rich white guy.

The first part of George's response denies the importance of identity and shifts focus from structural patterns of privilege to individuals and their ideas. Moreover, this passage demonstrates the portrayal of standard academic writing as doing more than masking identity: it erases (“strip[s]”) identity and makes authors identityless. By beginning his response with “well, good” and alluding to Martin Luther King, Jr. (“content of your character”), George implies that stripping authors of their identity is a laudable goal of academic writing; identity shouldn't matter. Like Daniel, George suggests that removing identity allows readers to correctly focus on ideas. Moreover, the opposition between social identity (race, class, and gender, in this example) and individual identity (“your ideas, content of

your character”) does not allow for the two types of identity to influence and constitute one another. In other words, students’ ideas are separate from their racial, classed, and/or gendered identities.

However, the second half of the quotation directly contradicts and challenges a portrayal of academic writing as erasing social identity. At least in this instance, the writing was not stripped of identity; instead, George states that good academic writing signals a privileged identity—“all . . . well-trained” student-authors are likely to “look like a rich white guy.” Furthermore, during the interview, George stated that he imagined the author of Paper H as a very privileged, white, male student-author. Therefore, despite George’s explanation of the process of removing identity in order to focus on “ideas and . . . engagement with those ideas,” George did not perceive Paper H to be identityless or unmarked for identity. For George, the writing was marked as privileged. Even though George later describes the identity work in Paper H as one of masking certain identities, his first imagining of identity reveals an elision between normative social identities—in this case, the white race—and identitylessness.

The repeated expectation for identitylessness in what the instructors term as “good” college writing—noted throughout several interviews—implies a positioning of academic writing as nonindexical, which, as George acknowledges, may actually be indexical for unmarked white identities. The repeated insistence that academic student papers are nonindexical perpetuates a myth that student papers are never indexical and can mask indexicality when it does occur. For example, the belief that SEAE is widely accessible alongside the standard language ideology tenet that the standard is superior to other language varieties contributes to assumptions about students who do not write in SEAE. This indexicality through contrast performs the “double strategy of positive self-presentation on the one hand, and a strategy of expressing subtle, indirect or sometimes more blatant forms of negative other-presentation, on the other hand” that, according to van Dijk, undergirds white discourse about race (88–89). Yet, because indexicality is justified through ideology, SEAE is perceived as nonindexical and unaffiliated. That is, the positioning of SEAE as widely accessible contributes to both the perception that this dialect is not linked to any social group and the logic that blames nonstandard language users for not trying hard enough to achieve standardness (a type of indexicality). Finally, the positioning of SEAE as unaffiliated and nonindexical allows instructors to both maintain colorblindness and establish intentionality that protects them from any accusations of either contributing to systemic inequality or even personal racism.

## RESISTING COLORBLINDNESS

This study highlights the kinds of talk about standardness in student writing that allow for the avoidance of the role of race in interactions with anonymous student texts. Specifically, this article shows that constructions of SEAE as neutral, clear, widely accessible, and nonindexical privileges colorblind rhetoric in conversations about writing. As many scholars convincingly argue, ignoring race perpetuates the denial of racism and the perception that white racial frames are objective and true. Identifying white talk in conversations about student writing does more than highlight rhetorical constructions of racial neutrality, it also productively illustrates the ways that the ideologies undergirding colorblind rhetoric (whiteness) and SEAE (standard language ideology) are co-constitutive—especially concerning perceived neutrality. Whiteness studies’ scholarship has long noted the importance of perceived neutrality to whiteness and the privilege associated with white people. The same is true of standard language ideology, which affords SEAE privilege, in part, based on a presumption of linguistic neutrality. The findings from this study show that SEAE and the white race are connected not only in that they are perceived to be neutral but also in the ways they signal and constitute one another.

To address the first issue, the avoidance of race, I argue—like Villanueva—that because “rhetoric . . . is how ideologies are carried” it is also the way they can be exposed and resisted (*Bootsraps* 121). The perceptions of SEAE revealed in this study are ideological in nature and, in the case of perceived linguistic neutrality, rhetorical in construction; as such, the intentions of the individual instructors do not matter. Again, the instructors I interviewed may not believe that SEAE is linguistically neutral or that identity doesn’t matter; however, their discursive practices work to reproduce standard language ideology and colorblindness. Part of working against these discursive practices, then, is to resist them in our classrooms, programs, and institutions.

Following the lead of whiteness studies, the first way to challenge SEAE’s position in the neutral center is to name it. Given the prevalence of coded language and the shifting of focus from language to ideas, it is possible that SEAE is an unstated expectation—that instead of explicitly stating that students are expected to write in SEAE, assignment prompts, rubrics, student learning outcomes, and program-wide policies might only refer to *grammar*, *English*, or even *language* without specifying which grammar, which variety of English, or which language is expect in any given situation. While students might assume that they are expected to write in SEAE, not naming this dialect leaves SEAE unnamed and contributes to its

position as neutral. WPAs can review program materials to be sure SEAE is never left unnamed or as a coded assumption and can ask instructors teaching in their programs to be sure they are always explicit about which grammar(s) and dialect(s) they expect.

As part of resisting the perceived neutrality of SEAE, we can also resist the metaphor of clarity that positions SEAE as an ideally non-interfering container for ideas. A first step is to be honest with ourselves as administrators and instructors when the term *clear* is standing in for either SEAE as it did with Shirley or for a cultural logic, “a belief system or way of reasoning that is shared within a culture” (Ratcliffe 10), as might have been the case with Todd’s statement that the writer knew “what needed to happen . . . what kind of moves [he or she] needed to make.” Instead of allowing the terms *clear* or *clarity* to communicate hidden requirements and a sense that language is neutral, we can work to articulate our expectations more precisely. Not only have I tried to stop using the terms *clear* or *clarity* in my own classroom materials, I also point it out to the instructors who take my practicum courses and ask them to work at unpacking the expectations bound up in those terms; the fact that it is often very difficult to do so speaks to our field’s reliance on coded ways of communicating about cultural expectations.

A final way to challenge the perceived neutrality of SEAE is to reveal and disrupt the indexicality associated with whiteness and standard language ideologies. Of course, revealing and disrupting indexicality is difficult given its inherently ideological nature, which often renders it invisible. Nonetheless, paying attention to the ways that language signals identity is possible. In my own practices as a researcher, administrator, educator, and even as a parent, I work to disrupt the automatic connection between language and identity so that I notice when it is happening. I pay attention to language that stands out and think about the meaning that is ascribed to that difference, considering whether I am making assumptions about people based on particular language use. More importantly, I work to do the reverse: pay attention to the language that seems common or normal and identify the assumptions I make based on that categorization as well. This is work that we can involve our instructors in, walking them through activities that encourage a careful consideration of assumptions they might make about students based on language use. The purpose of this sustained attention to assumptions related to language is not to stop indexicality from happening; it is to uncover the related ideologies and to resist the damaging ones.

These acts of resistance, though small, challenge perceptions of SEAE as neutral and force a conversation about language and identity—particularly race—that works against colorblind rhetoric. Importantly, these

efforts align with Bonilla-Silva's call for antiracists to "tak[e] responsibility for [their] unwilling participation in [racist] practices and [begin] a new life committed to the goal of achieving real racial equality" (15).

## NOTES

1. This study (HUM00024659), was approved by the University of Michigan's IRB (IRB0000246) on September 30, 2008.

2. One university is located in an urban setting and has approximately 29,000 students representing the following racial categories: 50% white, 26% African American, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Hispanic. The other university is located in a college town with 75% of the undergraduates (over 26,000 students) self-identifying as white and the remaining 25% listed on the university's website as "African American, Hispanic American, Native American, or Asian American."

3. In this article, I use the term *Hispanic* as a racial indicator because that is the language used by the student participants who self-identified as such.

4. These interview questions were related to research questions regarding the relationship between perceived standardness and perceived student-author identities. See Appendix A for full interview protocol.

### *Appendix A: Interview Protocol*

#### Part I

1. How long have you taught?
2. Where else have you taught?
3. Please briefly describe the student-authors you pictured when reading these papers.

#### Part II

4. Pick one text and walk me through the notes you made to the paper. As you are talking, use as much detail as possible to explain what you marked and why you marked it.
5. Please also tell me how you would talk to the student who you imagine wrote this paper about what you marked.
6. From your experience, what does it look like when writing doesn't meet your expectations?
7. How do you account for these instances?
8. In your experience, how common are these occurrences?

#### Part III\* — Questions for each of the student papers

9. Are there particular details that are striking to you in this paper? Why?
10. In as much detail as possible, describe the student you pictured as having written this paper.

If not addressed by the response to Question 6:

11. How old do you think the student is?
12. What kind of education do you think this student had before coming here?
13. Where do you think the student grew up?
14. What political affiliation do you think the student has?
15. What race do you think this student is?
16. What socio-economic class do you think this student comes from?
17. What gender do you think the student is?

#### Part IV

18. Did you identify with anything in this paper?
19. Can you imagine writing on this topic?
20. Do you personally agree with the argument or stance in this paper?
21. Would you ever use language or phrases similar to this student?

#### Part V

22. Reveal gender, race, and class of student author
23. If it matches up with the instructor's profile: Do you think this means that our writing reveals our identity? Or that our writing is connected to our identities?
  
24. If it doesn't match up with the instructor's profile: Do you think in other instances you could tell a writer's identity from the text? Do you think there is a connection between writing and identity?

#### Part VI

25. How do you self identify in terms of race?
26. How do you self identify in terms of socio-economic class?
27. How do you self identify in terms of gender?

\*For each of the questions in Part III, I asked, when necessary: What from the text and your prior teaching experiences make you think that?

#### WORKS CITED

- Behm, Nicholas, and Keith D. Miller. "Challenging the Frameworks of Color-Blind Racism: Why We Need a Fourth Wave of Writing Assessment Scholarship." *Race and Writing Assessment*, edited by Asao B. Inoue, and Mya Poe, Peter Lang Publishing, 2012, pp. 127–38.

- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. "‘Inherent’ Ideology, ‘Universal’ History, ‘Empirical’ Evidence, and ‘Context-Free’ Writing: Some Problems in E. D. Hirsch’s *The Philosophy of Composition*." *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, edited by Patricia Bizzell, U of Pittsburgh P, 1992, pp. 51–74.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 4th ed., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.
- , and Tyrone A. Forman. "‘I’m Not a Racist but . . .’: Mapping White College Students’ Racial Ideology in the USA." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2000, pp. 50–85.
- Cameron, Deborah. *Verbal Hygiene*. Routledge, 1995.
- Carr, Leslie G. *Color-Blind Racism*. Sage Publications, 1997.
- Committee on CCCC Language. "Students’ Right to Their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 25, no. 3, Sept. 1974, pp. 1–18.
- Davila, Bethany. "Indexicality and ‘Standard’ Edited American English: Examining the Link Between Conceptions of Standardness and Perceived Authorial Identity." *Written Communication*, vol. 29, no. 2, April 2012, pp. 180–207.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Gilyard, Keith, editor. *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Hartigan, John. "Who are These White People?: ‘Rednecks,’ ‘Hillbillies,’ and ‘White Trash’ as Marked Racial Subjects." *White Out*, edited by Ashley W. Doane, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Routledge, 2003, pp. 95–112.
- Hill, Jane H. *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. "Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." *College English*, vol. 73, no. 3, Jan. 2011, pp. 303–21.
- Inoue, Asao B., and Mya Poe, editors. *Race and Writing Assessment*. Peter Lang, 2012.
- Kinloch, Valerie Felita. "Revisiting the Promise of ‘Students’ Right to Their Own Language: Pedagogical Strategies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 1, Sept., 2005, pp. 83–113.
- Matusda, Paul Kei. "Let’s Face It: Language Issues and the Writing Program Administrator." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 36, no. 1, Fall 2012, pp. 141–63.
- McIntyre, Alice. *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*. State U of New York P, 1997.
- McLaren, Peter. "Whiteness Is . . . the Struggle for Postcolonial Hybridity." *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, edited by Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault, Macmillan, 2000, pp. 63–76.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Perryman-Clark, Staci M. "African American Language, Rhetoric, and Students’ Writing: New Directions for SRTOL." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 64, no. 3, Feb. 2013, pp. 469–95.

- , David E. Kirkland, and Austin Jackson, editors. *Students' Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015.
- Piché, Gene L., Donald L. Rubin, Lona J. Turner, and Michael L. Michlin. "Teachers' Subjective Evaluations of Standard and Black Nonstandard English Compositions: A Study of Written Language and Attitudes." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 12, no. 2, May 1978, pp. 107–18.
- Pollock, Mica. *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton UP, 2009.
- Powell, Malea. "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 3, Feb., 2002, pp. 396–434.
- Prendergast, Catherine. *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After Brown v. Board of Education*. SIUP, 2003.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. SIUP, 2005.
- Richardson, Elaine B. *African American Literacies*. Psychology Press, 2003.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*. Routledge, 2000.
- , and Victor Villanueva, editors. *Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. SIUP, 2003.
- van Dijk, Teun. "Discourse and the Denial of Racism." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1992, pp. 87–118.
- Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. NCTE, 1993.
- . "Blind: Talking about the New Racism." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2006, pp. 3–19.
- Wildman, Stephanie M. *Privilege Revealed*. New York UP, 1996.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Should Writers Use They Own English?" *Writing Center and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*, edited by Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan, Utah State UP, 2011, pp. 61–72.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the reviewers of this piece, particularly Frankie Condon, whose feedback strengthened this article. I am also indebted to many friends and colleagues for reading drafts of this article and offering seemingly unlimited support and insight. Finally, I am especially thankful to the instructors who generously gave their time to participate in this study.

*Bethany Davila is assistant professor of English in the Rhetoric and Writing program at the University of New Mexico, a public, highest research activity, Hispanic-Serving Institution. Her research focuses on the relationship between perceptions of written standardness and authorial identity and on integrating linguistic diversity into writing programs.*