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Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School

Jennifer Seibel Trainor

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In *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School*, Jennifer Seibel Trainor proposes a new understanding of the roots of racism, one that is based on attention to the role of emotion and the dynamics of persuasion. This one-year ethnographic study argues against previous assumptions about racism, demonstrating instead how rhetoric and emotion, as well as the processes and culture of schools, are involved in the formation of racist beliefs.

Telling the story of a year spent in an all-white high school, Trainor suggests that contrary to prevailing opinion, racism often does not stem from ignorance, a lack of exposure to other cultures, or the desire to protect white privilege. Rather, the causes of racism are frequently found in the realms of emotion and language, as opposed to rational calculations of privilege or political ideologies. Trainor maintains that racist assertions often originate not from prejudiced attitudes or beliefs but from metaphorical connections between racist ideas and nonracist values. These values are reinforced, even promoted by schooling via "emotioned rules" in place in classrooms: in tacit, unexamined lessons, rituals, and practices that exert a powerful—though largely unacknowledged—persuasive force on student feelings and beliefs about race.

Through in-depth analysis of established anti-racist pedagogies, student behavior, and racial discourses, Trainor illustrates the manner in which racist ideas are subtly upheld through social and literacy education in the classroom—and are thus embedded in the infrastructures of schools themselves. It is the emotional and rhetorical framework of the classroom that lends racism its compelling power in the minds of students, even as teachers endeavor to address the issue of cultural discrimination. This effort is continually hindered by an incomplete understanding of the function of emotions in relation to antiracist persuasion and cannot be remedied until the root of the problem is addressed.

Rethinking Racism calls for a fresh approach to understanding racism and its causes, offering crucial insight into the formative role of schooling in the perpetuation of discriminatory beliefs. In addition, this highly readable narrative draws from white students' own stories about the meanings of race in their learning and their lives. It thus provides new ways of thinking about how researchers and teachers rep- resent whiteness. Blending narrative with more traditional forms of ethnographic analysis, *Rethinking Racism* uncovers the ways in which constructions of racism originate in literacy research and in our classrooms—and how these constructions themselves can limit the rhetorical positions students enact.

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