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To cite this article: Amir Jaima (2019) On the Discursive Orientation toward Whiteness, Journal of Intercultural Studies, 40:2, 210-224, DOI: [10.1080/07256868.2019.1577233](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2019.1577233)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2019.1577233>



Published online: 04 Mar 2019.



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On the Discursive Orientation toward Whiteness

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ABSTRACT

There is a discursive tendency when examining questions of race and racism to address a reader who is implicitly white. This discursive orientation limits the range and rigour of our research questions and proposals. In addressing a white reader who is potentially hostile, or suffers from ‘white ignorance’, we find ourselves beginning our analyses, not from a historiographic survey of the question, but from a pre-emptive justification that we should continue to pose it at all. Drawing on literary theory and Africana philosophy, I conclude that in order to redress the racist, epistemological strictures of a discursive orientation toward whiteness, we need to explicitly reorient our discursive voice toward a non-white reader.

KEYWORDS

Whiteness; racism; race; reader; literary theory; Africana philosophy; epistemology

There is a discursive tendency when examining questions of race and racism to address a reader who is implicitly white. This discursive orientation limits the range and rigour of our research questions and proposals. In addressing a white reader who is potentially hostile, and/or must be re-educated – which is to say, disabused of fundamental preconceptions about race and racism – we find ourselves beginning our analyses, not from a historiographic survey of the question, but from a pre-emptive justification that we should continue to pose it at all.

In one sense, this is not a controversial claim. Africana philosophy in the West at least – that is, outside of continental Africa – has always been a kind of philosophy ‘born of struggle’: the ‘products of social groups doggedly fighting to survive [...] perennially confronted by a world that refuses to see Afro-Americans as humans and as peers’ (Harris 1983: ix). Consequently, the Africana thinker, in one important respect, is dialectically oriented toward and against an oppressive, ‘white,’ potentially discursive entity. We cannot yet characterise this entity as a proper ‘interlocutor,’ because equally endogenous to Africana philosophy has been the critique that there are inherent, insurmountable, methodological limitations to this discursive orientation. As Audre Lorde famously and pithily put it, ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde 2007: 110; see also Gordon and Gordon 2016). Incisive examples of this critique include Tommy Curry’s characterisation of the ideological tendency to appeal to European conceptual norms as contributing to a ‘derelictical crisis’ in Black philosophy, which ultimately ‘condemn[s] our area of study to under-specialization’ (Curry 2011a: 144; see

also, Curry 2011b). Similarly, Leonard Harris has argued that Pragmatism, as it pertains to questions of race and racism, is fundamentally defective; generally, Pragmatism suffers from a ‘legitimation crisis’ (Harris 1987: 60), but specifically, it fails the ‘insurrectionist challenge’ (Harris 2002: 192). And Lucius Outlaw argues, ‘for us black folk who would philosophize’, we need, most importantly, to ‘become transparent to ourselves as a class in terms of our history, our responsibilities, our possibilities’ (Outlaw 2015: 29–30). Or in the words of historian and activist Vincent Harding, echoing the poet Mari Evans, the ‘Black scholar’ needs the conceptual and discursive space ‘to speak the truth to our people, to speak the truth about our people, to speak the truth about our enemies’ (Harding 1974: 8).

The proposed solutions and interventions of past Africana thinkers – including those cited above – to what we might describe as the ‘problem’ of Black philosophy have generally operated at the meta-philosophical level – the development of alternative conceptual schema, ‘canons’, and/or methods. These solutions are what I would call ‘the long game,’ and must, of course, be continued – or, reintroduced. My intervention in this article operates, conversely, at the practical and proximate level of discourse, that is, in our everyday writing practice. I propose that in order to redress the racist epistemological strictures of a discursive orientation toward whiteness, we need to *explicitly* reorient our discursive voice toward a non-white reader. As I will explain below, this is a pre-methodological consideration, and a necessary condition – though not a sufficient one – for *speaking the ‘truth’*.

One additional point must be noted. The political stakes of doing productive Africana philosophy – that is, scholarly work that *speaks the truth* – are particularly high. In the United States, at least, a country built on the premise and promise of white supremacy, the public Africana thinker has always, to some degree, risked their lives. Recall David Walker, who in 1830, was killed following the publication of his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829), where he advocated for Black unity and slave insurrections. And we are well-versed in the prices paid by our civil rights-era heroes and thinkers. What is particularly disturbing, however, is that even today the threat of death for doing Black philosophy continues. Many scholars whose recent public work bears upon Africana questions have received credible death threats and endured racist, vitriolic scrutiny. These scholars include George Yancy, Tommy Curry, George Ciccariello-Maher, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, Johnny Eric Williams, Sarah E. Bond, among others (Pappano 2018; Flaherty 2017a; Flaherty 2017b; Yancy 2018b).

Some Africana thinkers, of course, have already adopted this reorientation – notably Curry, Harris, Outlaw, and Harding – but many others have not. My goal in this piece, however, is not to ‘name names’ and call out specific Black scholars. Instead, I hope to exhibit some tools with which each of us can re-evaluate the rhetorical and conceptual accommodations that we have been compelled to incorporate in our prose in advance of any utterance. These tools that I exhibit here come from literary theory, where, unlike philosophy, questions about the effect of concrete structural devices have received explicit attention.

I begin by drawing upon the ideas of French literary theorist Gérard Genette in order to convey the importance and priority of the addressee – namely the narratee and or the implied reader – for the contours and content of our texts. I then examine the consequences of constructing our texts *around or for* a ‘white’ narratee/implied reader. Following this I analyse two contemporary, public efforts to speak to white people about racism

in order to appreciate concretely the limitations. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of my proposal to reorient our voice.

The Narrating Instance of Scholarly Texts

Literary theory provides us with some vocabulary and conceptual tools that we can use to analyse the mechanism of this discursive orientation. First of all, as forms of communication, all of our written works necessarily entail a number of personae. The most salient ones are, of course, those of the author and the actual reader. Yet, between these apogeic nodes we find the narrator, the ‘characters’, the narratee, and the implied reader. Gérard Genette calls the discursive space occupied by these personae the ‘narrating instance’ or ‘narrating situation’ of the text (1980: 212). This is an adaptation of French linguist Émile Benveniste’s idea of the ‘instances of discourse,’ which are defined as ‘the discrete and always unique acts by which the language is actualized in speech by a speaker’ (Benveniste 1971: 217). Translator Jane E. Lewin clarifies that Genette’s ‘narrating instance, then, refers to something like the narrating situation, the narrative matrix – the entire set of conditions (human, temporal, spatial) out of which a narrative statement is produced’ (Genette 1980: 31, fn.10). These conditions manifest in our texts as structural elements: ‘the time of narrating, narrative level, and ‘person’ (that is, relations between the narrator [...] and the story he tells)’ (1980: 215).

While Genette’s narrating situation refers specifically to literary texts, scholarly texts entail an analogous situation, along with its constitutive elements. The ‘time of narrating’ refers to the inherent quality of language, namely *tense*, whereby we, the readers, ‘locate the story in time with respect to my narrating act, since [the author] must necessarily tell the story in a present, past, or future tense’ (1980: 215). Most commonly, stories are told in the past tense, suggesting that the narrating occurs *subsequent* to the recounted events. Nevertheless, predictive and simultaneous narrating temporalities – which is to say simply, the primary use of the future or present tense respectively – also exist to great effect.

Scholarly texts are generally ‘simultaneous narratives’, so to speak, which is to say that they primarily employ the present tense. Simultaneous narratives, Genette notes,

can seem like the height of objectivity, since the last trace of enunciating that still subsisted in the Hemingway-style narrative (the mark of temporal interval between story and narrating, which the use of the preterite unavoidably comprises) now disappears in a total transparency of the narrative, which finally fades away in favor of the story. (1980: 219)

In other words, the use of the past tense conspicuously places the content – arguments, evidence, etc. – at a temporal distance. Additionally, the narrator becomes relatively conspicuous, since they become the means by which the content traverses that distance. The use of the present tense creates the illusion that the narrator is absent, or at least unnecessary, since the content occurs here and now and is witnessed directly by you, the reader.

The ‘narrative level’ refers to a ‘threshold represented by the narrating itself’ (1980: 228). For example, in our common everyday manner of describing a literary text, we would say that a conspicuous narrator is in some sense *within* the story, inhabiting a world at a different ‘level’ of reality, so to speak. In scholarly texts, even if we aspire to speak as ourselves, as is often the case, from the moment the text is written the author’s

persona bifurcates. On the one hand, we say, appropriately, that the author says or writes such and such; and when quoting their words, we use their name. Nevertheless, the fact of the text creates a threshold beyond which the words must be attributed to a kind of caricature of the author, namely the author-of-such-and-such-on-this-publication-date, who speaks on behalf of the living and breathing author. This caricature of the author is the narrator of our prose; they are frozen in time, they probably speak in a 'scholarly tone,' and they have perfect recall for the words of others. The implicit acknowledgement of a narrator enables us to describe, for instance, the evolution of a thinker over time, whereby a scholar has early, middle, and late 'narrative personas', each of which consist of distinguishable characteristics.

And importantly for our analysis, 'person' refers to the 'two protagonists' (1980: 255) of the narrating situation, namely the narrator and the narratee. The narrator serves several functions in the text. Most obviously, they *tell* the 'story'; they are the invariant orienting 'character' who articulates the text; they do so necessarily in their voice and from their perspective. The narrator also serves as the one who *organises* the 'story', often explicitly 'mark[ing] its articulations, connections, interrelationships' (1980: 255). This signposting gesture is related but not reducible to the telling. The scholarly counterpart to this includes section headings and prefatory and summative remarks. The narrator may also indulge in some meta-diegetic commentary, which is not the same as signposting.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the narrator is responsible for 'establishing or maintaining with the narratee a contact, indeed, a dialogue' (1980: 255), since all texts are inherently dialogical and prefigure a recipient. A literary narrator who participates in the story usually addresses another character. The narrator of a scholarly texts, however, is what Genette would call 'extradiegetic,' which is to say that they are a 'third-person', quasi-omniscient, observer of the content. And since narrators address a narratee at the same diegetic level, scholarly narrators address an extradiegetic narratee, which, Genette notes, often 'merges with the implied reader' (1980: 260). Genette continues,

the more transparent the receiving instance and the more silent its evocation in the narrative, so undoubtedly the easier, or rather the more irresistible, each real reader's identification with or substitution for the implied instance will be. (1980: 260)

The discursive convention in scholarly texts is to render the receiving instance as transparent as possible, resulting in the forceful impression that the narrator addresses us directly.

In most cases, we are invited to read as if we are the intended recipient of a given scholarly text. There are two important contexts, however, where this is not the case, where the text reads as if it were for someone else. First, texts written in 'another' language, even when they are translated, often read, unsurprisingly, as if they are for a native speaker of that language. And second, 'white', canonical, philosophical texts often read as if they are written *for* a white reader. George Yancy explains:

When a white hand reaches for Kant's text, that hand is extended through a white social intendment that speaks to the definitive structuring of the white self and the world of white philosophical texts. Hence, reaching for, grasping, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is the fulfilment of a promise. (Yancy 2015: 10)

In its assertions, presumptions, and occlusion, the white, canonical texts call forth a particular reader and exclude others. This is especially the case when they explicitly denigrate

non-white potential readers, or appear to ignore completely considerations that are important to non-white potential readers. For example, when Kant says something like, ‘this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid’; or when Hume says that ‘the negroes’ are ‘naturally inferior to whites’; or when Hegel says ‘Negroes are to be regarded as a race of children who remain immersed in their state of uninterested *naïveté*,’ the intended addressee is evident (in Yancy 2015: 11–12).

And finally, the narrator might indicate ‘the source of his information’ (2015: 256) in order to establish some authorial credibility in the eyes of their addressee. Consider, additionally, that the difference between what we commonly refer to as first- or third-person narration, as Genette explains, is not ‘between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures’ (2015: 244) with epistemological import. The difference is not simply grammatical, because in either case the narrator may refer to themselves, and in doing so would use the first-person pronoun. Considered more critically, a ‘first-person’ narrator, so to speak, is one who participates in the story and consequently bases their information on their personal experiences. A ‘third-person’ narrator remains more of an observer and usually draws upon information beyond their personal experience. Whereas a first person narrator can believably convey their own thoughts and feelings, a third-person narrator generally attains a greater degree of objectivity. In either case, however, a particular voice orients the discourse.

Establishing authorial credibility is what we would describe in literature as cultivating the suspension of disbelief, which is the mechanism by which the narratee accepts the story as true within the space and conditions of the narrating situation. Whether or not a story claims to be factual, the narrator must use the ‘real’ world of the narratee as a premise. The nature of human relationships, the laws of time and space, or the consistency and apparent determinacy of history may all be distorted in the narrating situation, but there must be a traceable progression from the ‘real’ world of the narratee to the new reality of the story. Similarly, the author-narrator of scholarly texts implicitly considers the persuasive potential of the narratee-implied reader as a premise in their arguments. This includes using an idiom that is familiar to the narratee-implied reader. It includes using arguments that unfold in a ‘natural’ order, which means employing standards of proof that the narratee-implied reader accepts. It also includes conveying trustworthiness; in other words, the narratee-implied reader should believe that the narrator believes their claims, and respects the intelligence and moral worth of the reader.

The persona of the narratee/implied reader thus emerges as critically important to the shape of the story/argument, since the narrator must craft their presentation to suit their intended recipient. In this sense, as Genette notes, ‘the real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it’ (2015: 262).

The Consequences of Addressing a ‘White’ Narratee

Let us now examine the contours of the narrating instance in Africana texts. The first peculiarity of Africana prose is that the narrator is oftentimes rather conspicuous. It is quite common to find the liberal use of the first person pronoun, as well as the disclosure that the ‘I’ refers to a particular kind of body. For example, in ‘The Forethought’ of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois inquires rhetorically ‘need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of theme that live within the Veil?’

(1996: 100). Or consider a more contemporary text, Tommy Curry's *The Man-Not* opens hauntingly with the following words:

I see dead Black male bodies, Black men and boys, in the streets. Dead Niggers made into YouTube sensations. I see their execution on the Internet: the corpses of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, little Tamir Rice cycled for eternity. I hear Jordan Davis's music and Sean Bell's vows. I feel Black male death all around me and I am scared – scared that one day I will be forced to not speak. (2017: 1)

While Curry's disclosure is not as explicit as Du Bois's, it is just as clear. His fear of being silenced (by death) follows from his identification with those Black male bodies that have been rendered corpses.

As noted above, the epistemological import of this narrative posture is that subjective experiences contribute to the author/narrator's authority as a knower. Arguably, one cannot credibly write about race and racism without an embodied narrator. To speak entirely abstractly about race through the voice of a third-person narrator, aspiring to a sense of objectivity, would omit a crucial aspect of the phenomenology, namely the 'subjective character of experience' (Nagel 1974: 436), or to employ Sylvia Wynter's riff on Nagel, the 'what it is like to be "Black"' (Wynter 2001). For example, in George Yancy's analysis of the 'elevator effect', he claims that he *knows* that the white woman has done something racist when she clutches her purse as he boards. He *knows* because, *as a Black person* he has 'a privileged take on things' (Yancy 2016: 23). His knowledge is not based on an objective quality of the context that someone might observe directly; yet, neither is his judgment 'simply subjective' (2016: 24). Yancy explains that 'the evidence for her having enacted a racist gesture is a form of commonsense knowledge among Black people ... determinable through intersubjectively shared experiences' (2016: 24). Accessing this 'epistemological community' (2016: 24) requires, 'a form of writing that is not meant to be simply cerebral, but to impact the body and to weave a narrative that captures something that is profoundly familiar and intensely mundane' (2016: 17). In terms of narrative posture this means employing a 'first-person' narrator for some portion of the analysis, maybe even all of it.

The second peculiarity of Africana prose is that in contrast to a conspicuous narrator, the narratee is almost pathologically underthematized. Ideally, this would mean that the narrator addresses a general audience. In practice, however, in a cultural context such as ours – characterized by anti-Black racism and white supremacist ideologies¹ – the normative, 'white,' Western subject – namely 'MAN,' construed in the Wynterian sense² – implicitly fills the discursive void. Some of us, of course, intentionally engage a 'white' interlocutor with the hopes of confronting and ultimately refuting claims that denigrate non-white people. Nevertheless, it is my contention that there are pernicious consequences to adopting this discursive orientation toward whiteness, whether intentionally or not.

First of all, recall that the persona of the narratee very much determines the shape that our arguments will take. In addressing a 'white' narratee, we are compelled to negotiate the significantly limited persuasive potential of an interlocutor who is unsympathetic – if not simply hostile – to research questions that pertain to race and racism. Consider Du Bois's remarks in his prefatory address 'To The Reader,' in *Black Reconstruction in American* (1935). He says, if the reader

regards the Negro as a distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully take part in modern civilization and whose emancipation and enfranchisement were gestures against

nature, then he will need [in order to be persuaded] more than the facts that I have set down. (1996: xix)

Consequently, Du Bois notes that he is ‘not trying to convince’ (xix) this intractable reader. He deliberately calls forth other interlocutors and proceeds to provide the reader with an avalanche of ‘facts’.

One further thought: while the use of a conspicuous narrator has some epistemological advantages, a conspicuously *Black* narrator in dialogue with a white narratee introduces some disadvantages. Quite simply, if the reader is disinclined to trust a Black speaker, this sort of narrator will serve as an additional obstacle.³

Those of us who persist in engaging a hostile interlocutor are compelled to incorporate ‘irrational’ argumentative tactics in the hopes of forcing the reader to respond; or more precisely, in the hopes of dislodging them from their posture of discursive non-engagement. Consider an analogy from Plato. *Republic* begins famously with Socrates and Glaucon’s attempted departure from the Piraeus where there had been some festivities. Polemarchus, however, intercepts them on their way home. Here is the subsequent exchange:

Polemarchus said, ‘Socrates, I guess you two are hurrying to get away to town.’

‘That’s not a bad guess,’ I said.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘do you see how many of us there are?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, then,’ he said, ‘either prove stronger than these men or stay here.’

‘Isn’t there still one other possibility,’ I said, ‘our persuading you that you must let us go?’

‘Could you really persuade,’ he said, ‘if we don’t listen?’

‘There’s no way,’ said Glaucon.

‘Well, then, think it over, bearing in mind that we won’t listen.’ (1991: 2–3)

We take it for granted that Polemarchus’ provocation is actually in jest, since ultimately he wants Socrates and Glaucon to return to a party. Nevertheless, if we take him at his word, Socrates and Glaucon must resort to irrational means of ‘persuasion’, namely, a physical fight.

The white, unsympathetic narratee/IMPLIED-READER is like a sincere Polemarchus who, in advance of arguments and without jest, declares that they ‘won’t listen’. They will not ‘listen’ to words, at least. How, then, do we incorporate non-linguistic persuasive tools into a text? The simple answer is that contrary to the childhood adage that ‘words can never hurt you’, we know that many words and phrases are also *actions*.⁴ ‘Speech acts’ with persuasive potential include appeals, provocations, illustrations, and even insults. The problem, however, is that while these strategies may alert the reader to our voice, they rarely alter the belief of one disinclined to be moved. As Glaucon laments, there is no way to really persuade them if they will not listen.

Furthermore, the presentation of our arguments to a possibly hostile narratee compels us to incorporate unnecessary *prefatory* justifications of our philosophical projects. Kristi Dotson calls this institutional tendency, which disproportionately affects ‘diverse

practitioners,' a 'culture of justification' (Dotson 2012: 6), "Typified in the question, "how is this paper philosophy?" (2012: 5) A culture of justification, Dotson explains,

will include at least three components. It will (1) manifest a value for exercises of legitimation, (2) assume the existence of commonly-held, justifying norms that are (3) univocally relevant. That is to say, a disciplinary culture of justification is driven by the creation and/or discovery of papers and/or projects that fall within the purview of a certain set of commonly held, univocally relevant justifying norms. Compliance with these justifying norms, in turn, confers positive status on those papers/projects. (2012: 7–8)

On the surface, the question, of course, is one that all philosophical statements might implicitly ask. The subtext of this question, however, is a disciplinary demand for methodological and ideological congruence with 'white' supremacist ideologies.

More pointedly, Tommy Curry argues that this tendency to adapt Africana ideas and arguments for a racially hostile reader contributes to what he calls the 'derelictical crisis' in Africana philosophy. Curry explains:

Sustained by an academic reward system (publications, conference papers, books, etc.) that reinforces the tendency of Black scholars to make historic thinkers *safe for white consumption* by reading the importance of racism, the systemic critiques against white supremacy as a function of white economic and social existence and the centrality of culture out of Black thought, African-American philosophy functions primarily as academic racial therapy committed to changing the racist disposition of whites, rather than advancing the self-understanding of African/a peoples. (Curry 2011a: 143)

Whereas philosophers that implicitly endorse the status quo are accepted uncritically, those that are, as Lee McBride notes, 'associated with denouncing America as such ... especially those who proffer bellicose means of liberation' (McBride 2013: 30) must continuously justify the right to even ask certain questions.

The second major consequence of a discursive orientation toward whiteness is that even if we presume that our 'white' narratee is a *sympathetic* interlocutor, they will need to be disabused of their 'structural group-based miscognition,' that is, their 'white ignorance' (Mills 2007: 13). This is a form of non-knowing that 'fights back' (2007: 13), by systematically sustaining the illusion that they are *not* ignorant. Famously in *The Racial Contract*, Mills characterised the sustaining mechanism of white ignorance as an 'epistemology of ignorance', which is:

a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world that they themselves have made. (Mills 1999: 18)

The unfortunate consequence of those afflicted with white ignorance is that they often defend their position with the certainty and confidence of one who sincerely believes that they *do* know. Characteristically 'white' mis-cognitions include, Mills explains,

the concepts favored (e.g. today's 'color blindness'), the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it to achieve racial justice. (Mills 2007: 35)

Addressing a 'white' narratee will thus compel us to incorporate preemptory (il)logical contortions, anticipating, for instance, the denial that racism and/or white privilege exist,

white frustration and impatience with historical accounts that highlight American racial violence, and the fallacious conflation of racism – which is institutional and systemic⁵ – with prejudice – which is individual and psychological.⁶

Talking to White People: The Public Efforts of George Yancy and Reni Eddo-Lodge

Briefly consider two recent examples of texts that adopt a discursive orientation toward whiteness. On 24th December 2015, George Yancy culminated a series of philosophical interviews with scholars who study race with the publication of a letter titled ‘Dear White America’. Therein Yancy writes:

I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love ... This letter is a gift for you. Bear in mind, though, that some gifts can be heavy to bear. You don't have to accept it; there is no obligation. I give it freely, believing that many of you will throw the gift back in my face, saying that I wrongly accuse you, that I am too sensitive, that I'm a race hustler, and that I blame white people (you) for everything.

As the title suggests, and as the parenthetical ‘you’ makes unambiguously clear, Yancy is intentionally and explicitly addressing a white interlocutor. The ‘gift’ that Yancy offers is the ‘revelation’ that that ‘you’ are racist. He says,

What I'm asking is that you first accept the racism within yourself, accept all of the truth about what it means for you to be white in a society that was created for you. I'm asking for you to trace the binds that tie you to forms of domination that you would rather not see.

Yancy then makes an argument by analogy, publicly reflecting on his own revelation that he is sexist, and suggesting a parallel, psychological journey for his readers. He closes with a provocation:

If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child's face. Smell your child's hair. Count the fingers on your child's hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.

Rhetorically, Yancy's argument incorporates three ‘illogical’ movements in the hopes of dislodging a hostile reader. First he appeals to ‘love’. Second he makes a sympathy appeal, sharing his political and psychological vulnerability *as a sexist*. He closes with a provocation intended to incite anger and fear, by asking white readers to imagine that their children – their most beloved – were Black.

As noted above, these rhetorical strategies will certainly incite responses, but they are unlikely to alter beliefs. The responses Yancy received included horrible racist vitriol and even death threats. For example, in a follow-up piece in the Times entitled, ‘Should I Give Up on White People?’ (April 2018), Yancy shares a characteristic response:

You deserve to be punished with several fists to your face! You're nothing but a troublemaker! I've had enough of your Racist talk! You'd better watch what you say and to whom you say it! You may just end up in the hospital with several injuries or maybe on a cold slab in the local morgue! You've got a big mouth that needs to be slammed shut permanently!

In the foreword to *Backlash* (2018), the book that Yancy's ‘Dear White America’ developed into, Cornell West appropriately describes the responses as a ‘cowardly and

vicious white supremacist backlash against Yancy's letter' (viii). Yet, given the racial history of the US, many readers, I imagine, were horrified but not surprised. Again, were any white readers 'awakened', so to speak, by Yancy's letter? Suggesting that we are inclined to answer in the negative, West remarks:

My major challenge to Yancy's powerful and insightful text is that we get only small glimpses of what white maturity or white courage looks like. The supportive remarks of white readers for his brave words don't do justice to a long yet too thin tradition of white radicals who, like Yancy, risk their lives and careers for truth and justice. (Yancy 2018a: viii)

In brief, it is unlikely that any white readers were moved to change any of their beliefs.

In order to appreciate some of the additional rhetorical limits of 'Dear White America', consider the three movements *as a Black reader*. First, love in the absent justice seems simply dangerous. With regard to Yancy's confession that he is sexist, West, again, remarks:

Yet these crude and rude times have little patience for self-critique or irony. Instead, the avalanche of white hatred and contempt overflows and overwhelms Yancy's bid for understanding. His hermeneutical humility is toppled by hermeneutical breakdown. (Yancy 2018a: viii)

In other words, the subtlety of this argument by analogy is not forceful enough to move those who are not already persuaded. And finally, as a Black reader, the concluding provocation borders on offensive. The white person who would be angered or horrified by the thought is not someone whom I wish to engage.

Yancy is, of course, aware of these rhetorical limitations, as well as the real dangers of 'failing' to persuade. In *Backlash*, he reflects:

It is strange to offer a gift when white people have already taken everything. Indeed, what is there to give? I don't know, perhaps the truth about themselves. Moreover, there is an inner voice that continues to haunt me: "Why give white folk anything? *They* don't deserve anything that you have to offer." Also, given their history and vile treatment of Black bodies, how can you ask for *love* in return for the *gift* of the letter? I ask all of this knowing that we as Black people should not (*must not*) play the role of "superhuman" moral actors in the face of white violence within a country that continues to find ways of niggerizing us. (2018a: 32)

If, by his own admission, Yancy recognises that his 'gift' in exchange for 'love' is most likely to be perceived as ironic, facetious even, and our role is not to save white America from white supremacy – since it is unlikely that it wants to be saved – then we must give Yancy the benefit of the doubt that 'Dear White America' was intended to serve a second purpose, if not simply an alternate one. The gift of 'the truth of themselves' was not the (primary) goal. Perhaps Yancy aspires, rather, to be a racial gadfly, and like Mrs. Biona MacDonald from Derrick Bell's anecdote in 'Racial Realism,' simply 'lives to harass white folks' (Bell 1991: 378). Direct confrontation is, ultimately, one of the coping mechanism of dealing with stereotype threat and racial battle fatigue.⁷

The second example is the recent book by the British journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge entitled, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017). The premise of the book is a blog post that Eddo-Lodge wrote in February of 2014. There she declared, provocatively,

I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the legitimacy of structural racism and its symptoms. (Eddo-Lodge 2017: ix)

Her reasons include the difficulties of overcoming white ignorance and white hostility to anti-racist efforts. Eddo-Lodge says, 'I just can't grapple with the bewilderment and the defensiveness' (2017: ix); 'Amid every conversation about Nice White People feeling silenced by conversations about race, there is a sort of ironic and glaring lack of understanding or empathy for those of us who have been visibly marked out as different for our entire lives' (2017: xi–xii); 'Their intent is often not to listen or learn, but to exert their power, to prove me wrong, to emotionally drain me, and to rebalance the status quo' (xii). In response to this post, Black and brown readers expressed gratitude, solidarity, and sympathy. White readers, however, surprisingly expressed 'heartbreak' and regret, claiming that in 'deciding to stop talking to white people about race, I was taking something away from the world' (2017: xiii). Eddo-Lodge reflects, with disappointment, that 'there seemed to be a misunderstanding about who this piece of writing was for. It was never written with the intention of prompting guilt in white people or to provoke any kind of epiphany' (2017: xiv). Eddo-Lodge laments that since publishing the blog post, ironically 'I now spend most of my time talking to white people about race' (2017: xv).

If we attend for a moment to Eddo-Lodge's narratee, we can see that in spite of her apparent dismissal of white interlocutors, she *implicitly* adopts a discursive orientation toward whiteness. At the moment of her address, she has *not yet* ceased speaking to white people about race. Rather, with this post she is, effectively, giving them notice. Consider her words again. As early as the second line, the qualifier 'Not all white people' includes the subtext, I will continue to engage with 'you, the sympathetic, white, implied reader', who is, at the moment of reading, an exception to the general dismissal. 'You' provisionally accept the legitimacy of structural racism. Since 'you' do not actually speak in the space of the narrating instance, 'you' (provisionally) do not try to prove her wrong, emotionally drain her, or attempt to rebalance the status quo.

While Yancy engages a hostile reader in 'Dear White America', Eddo-Lodge appeals to a sympathetic one. She betrays this presumption in her efforts to anticipate and negotiate white ignorance. Most evidently in the concluding chapter, 'There is no Justice, There's Just Us,' she responds to a number of characteristically white misunderstandings and concerns. For example, white interlocutors ask when we will get beyond racism. In reply, Eddo-Lodge says that we 'can't skip to the resolution without having the difficult messy conversation first' (2017: 213). She notes this 'white' question is characteristic of a kind of voyeuristic privilege, born of a life that is not directly or obviously affected by issues of race. Another example: Eddo-Lodge reflects that 'when I talk about racism, the response from white people is to shift the focus away from their complicity and on to a conversation about what it means to be black, about "black identity"' (2017: 214). On the pain of being overly reductively, there is a sense in which *Why I'm N. Longer Talking to White People About Race* is a prime example of this sort of evasion. The premise of the book is Eddo-Lodge's *experience* of having tried to have a conversation about race, rather than a defence and explanation of this rather common anti-racist coping strategy of not talking to white people about race. A third example: Eddo-Lodge notes that 'Often white people ask me, very earnestly, what I think they should do to end racism'

(2017: 215). Eddo-Lodge replies with few proposals: engage in antiracist actions rather than ‘wallowing in guilt’, and advocate ‘for anti-racist causes in all white spaces’ (2017: 215). Eddo-Lodge adds the qualifier: ‘don’t be anti-racist for the sake of an audience’ (2017: 216). This third question, ironically, is precisely an example of this sort of insincere performance. Eddo-Lodge explains that she finds these sorts of questions frustrating, since they are primarily just expressions of white guilt and white anxiety. Nevertheless, Eddo-Lodge obligingly answers them, and allows the *incisive* questions to remain only partially addressed if not entirely unasked.

Conclusion: The (Re)Turn to Black Readers

I propose that we explicitly reorient our discursive voice toward a non-white narratee. We need to cease to address a white reader, and leaving the identity of the narratee unspecified fails to accomplish this.

Similarly, Dotson declares that we should not be ‘concerned with appropriate answers to the question, “how is this paper philosophy?”’ (2012: 5). Such a concern ensnares us in a methodological trap, a fallacious double-bind that disguises an institutional double standard of authorial credibility. Instead, Dotson proposes that we adopt, in lieu of a culture of justification, a ‘culture of praxis’, which consists of at least two components:

- (1) Value placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the differing issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations and (2) Recognition and encouragement of multiple canon and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation. (2012: 17)

In effect, we need to democratise and pluralise our justifying norms. The main limitation of Dotson’s proposal is the classic problem of the ‘tolerance of intolerance’. We are not necessarily rejecting the problematic justifying norm, since we implicitly retain the hostile, white interlocutor as a possible narratee.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò argues more forcefully that we should actually disengage with some interlocutors; and we bear some of the fault for continued re-engagement. Táíwò says, ‘It matters little how much we excoriate Hume, Kant, Hegel, and the rest of them; they remain our preferred interlocutors’ (2017: 20). Instead, we should

simply dismiss, yes dismiss Hume as an uninformed bigot rather than confer respectability on his rubbish by arguing with it as if there is some way, outside of prejudice, that it might be worthy of another look. (2017: 22)

Rather than dialoguing narrowly and exclusively with these ‘white’, unsympathetic, ‘canonical’⁸ figures, Táíwò suggests that we invest in ‘the excluded moderns [who] prove to be better moderns than their racist problem modern fellows’ (2017: 22). These excluded moderns, Táíwò notes, include, among others, Du Bois, Robeson, Fanon, and Césaire. Absent figures such as these, Jacoby Carter argues, the ‘canon’ is ‘simply missing [extant] informed rigorous theoretical conceptions produced by non-white men and women’ (Carter 2017: 75).

And even more radically, Curry proposes ‘a possible methodological alternative’ in light of the incompatibility of Black thought and white supremacist ideologies (2011a: 162). Curry explains:

Simply stated, European thought cannot simultaneously be criticized as the myth of white supremacy while concomitantly valorised as actual knowledge about the world and the capacity of humans in it. Black scholars either have to accept its foundational anti-Black disposition and create new systems of thought or continue to remain mired in futile attempts to save white thinking from itself. (2017: 156)

Curry's methodological alternative seeks to study Black figures and their ideas on and in their own terms, almost completely ignoring white contributions and interlocutors.

The two examples analysed above – Yancy's *Backlash* and Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White people About Race* – are arguably both 'attempts to save white thinking from itself' in a way that I believe is representative. Of course, in some important ways, these two books are, in fact, atypical. For instance, they were both developed out of the experiences of writing a popular public text – a newspaper op-ed and a blog post. Yet, in spite of the peculiarities of Yancy's and Eddo-Lodge's books, there remain some productive similarities between them and Africana philosophical scholarship more generally. These books have the virtue of being *obvious* cases of a discursive orientation toward whiteness, providing us with clear examples of the pernicious consequences.

The role of the narratee/implied reader in general plays a significant role in the contour and content of our prose, and its under-thematization simply means that we are not attending to an important aspect of the text. When writing on race and racism in particular, these unattended aspects of the text simply yield to the cultural pressures of racism. Rather than attending fully and most rigorously to our research questions, we become pre-occupied with justifying our right to pose them in the first place. And even if we are able to articulate the questions, white guilt and white anxiety derail them.

With more space, we might turn our analytic tools toward any of the articles and books that I have cited in this paper. For example, who are Mills, Dotson, Táíwò, or Curry addressing? What are the characteristics of their narrators' personas? Who is implicitly included or excluded, and by what mechanism? What rhetorical and conceptual accommodations have they been compelled to incorporate? In literature, these questions are as natural as punctuation; we should ask them as well in philosophy. And most importantly, we need to actively displace the normative, white subject that has colonised the rhetorical space in order to fully explore 'a possible methodological alternative'.

Notes

1. Charles Mills explains:

white supremacy is (1) a particular kind of oppressive social system, sub-national or national or international, coming into existence (2) in a time period in which race has emerged as a significant social category and social reality, and (3) whiteness and nonwhiteness are recognized racial identities, and (4) whites have and exert differential power in creating and controlling the evolution of the social system in question, and/or in blocking changes to it that would substantially reduce their domination, whose end is originally (5) the systemic, significant, and illicit differential advantaging of all or most whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group in various important social spheres. (2017, 475–456)

2. See, Wynter 1995 '1492: A New World View,' and Wynter 2006, 'On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, or Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project.'

3. See Holbrook et al. 2016, 'Looming large in others' eyes: racial stereotypes illuminate dual adaptations for representing threat versus prestige as physical size'; and Livingston and Pearce 2009, 'The Teddy-Bear Effect: Does Having a Baby Face Benefit Black Chief Executive Officers?'
4. see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (1975)
5. See Faegin 2006, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*.
6. *Racial prejudice*, which is an institutionally sustained psychological phenomenon, is only one manifestation of racism. Two other examples of well-documented manifestations of racism are the racially disparate incarceration rates in the US (see Alexander 2012, *The New Jim Crow*) and the racially correlated wealth disparities (see Chetty et al., 2018, 'Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective').
7. On 'stereotype threat,' see Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi* (2011); on racial battle fatigue, see Smith et al. 2011, 2016.
8. See Jacoby Carter 2017, 'Race-ing the Canon: American Icons from Thomas Jefferson to Alain Locke,' for a critical analysis of the limits of the white American philosophical canon.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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