

Don't Talk to White People: On the Epistemological and Rhetorical Limitations of Conversations With White People for Anti-Racist Purposes: An Essay

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Abstract

Productive dialogue with white people for anti-racist purposes is precluded by the political limits prescribed by the “principle of interest convergence,” occluded by the epistemological conditions of “white ignorance,” and disincentivized by the psychological burdens of “racial battle fatigue” borne by You and me, the Black would-be interlocutors. Nevertheless, much popular effort is spent—dare I say *wasted*—in attempts to talk white people out of their racism; or as I will define them in this paper, following James Baldwin, “those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white.” Consequently, I propose that we stop “talking” to those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white about racism, or at least adopt an attitude of extreme wariness.

Keywords

antiracism, rhetoric, whiteness

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Productive dialogue with white people for anti-racist purposes is precluded by the political limits prescribed by the “principle of interest convergence” (Bell, 1980), occluded by the epistemological conditions of “white ignorance” (Mills, 2007), and disincentivized by the psychological burdens of “racial battle fatigue” (Smith et al., 2011, 2016) borne by You and me, the Black would-be interlocutors. Nevertheless, much popular effort is spent—dare I say *wasted*—in attempts to talk white people out of their racism; or as I will define them in this paper, following James Baldwin, “those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white” (Baldwin, 1998). Consequently, I propose that we stop “talking” to those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white about racism, or at least adopt an attitude of extreme wariness.

“Talking,” in the relevant sense, means any form of communication that implicates You *as a Black person*, which is to say, speech that is *personal and racial*. Thus, talking would include, but is not limited to, recounting your first-hand experiences of micro-aggressions or racially correlated vulnerabilities, or your associated feelings. While not explicitly thermalized, this is what Reni Eddo-Lodge means in her recent book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Eddo-Lodge says:

I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour [sic] *articulates their experience* [. . .] I just can’t engage with the bewilderment and the defensiveness as they try to grapple with the fact that not everyone *experiences the world* in the way that they do [. . .] Even if they can hear you, they’re not really listening. It’s like something happens to the words as they leave our mouths and reach their ears. The words hit a barrier of denial and they don’t get any further. (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, pp. ix–x emphasis added)

Articulating our experience of the world, as a Black person, for the presumed education and/or edification of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white characterizes the interpersonal dynamic of “talking” that Eddo-Lodge finds frustrating and emotionally exhausting. In light the ideological and epistemological obstacles, as well as the psychological burdens, I contend that interpersonal engagement for anti-racist purposes should primarily take other forms. For example, if you are generous, you may redirect “allies” to resources for *self*-edification and reorientation, such that they might appreciate the limits of their capacity to “talk” to Us productively about racism.

Anecdotally, as You know, my would-be-Black-interlocutor, this prescription to stop talking to those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white is neither radical nor novel; Black people have avoided this sort of engagement to some degree for the entire history of the United States. Of course, there are many who have attempted the contrary. A different project from what I will present

here, might have entailed a rhetorical study of various historical attempts to talk those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white out of their racism, with suggestions on how the speakers might have been more effective. Nevertheless, that project, namely, an analysis of *how* to talk to those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white is not only beyond the scope of this paper, but contrary to the epistemological and methodological goals of the current project.

For reasons similar to the difficulties associated with interpersonal engagement with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white, texts and figures that adopt what I characterize as a discursive orientation toward whiteness limit the range, rigor, and impact of their philosophical questions and conclusions (Jaima, 2019). Furthermore, much of the recent scholarly research under the penumbra of Africana Philosophy implicitly directs its narratorial voice toward a readership-who-thinks-of-themselves-as-white, ultimately contributing to our “derelictical” and “methodological” crises in African American Philosophy (Curry, 2011). Consider how W. E. B. Du Bois implicitly identifies as his “Gentle Reader” in his 1903 meditation *The Souls of Black Folk* (1996). Or more recently, consider George Yancy’s epistolary address in the *New York Times* column *The Stone*, entitled, “Dear White America” (Yancy, 2015).

Consequently, in this piece, I explicitly call *You*—the Black-would-be-interlocutor—to the fore as my intended addressee. Of course, the nature of public discourse is such that those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white will inevitably eavesdrop on our conversation, perhaps indifferent to their displacement, perhaps resentful. One of the most notable historical precedents to this rhetorical strategy of explicitly addressing *You* is from 1830, when David Walker famously penned his *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World*; he called upon us, the Black-would-be-interlocutors, to assert our humanity in the face of racial tyranny, by violent means if necessary (Walker, 1997). Another example, by 1935, Du Bois no longer presented his arguments to a “gentle reader.” In the preface to *Black Reconstruction*, he says, “

If, however, [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 something more than the sort of facts that I have set down. But this latter person, I am not trying to convince [. . .] I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience. (Du Bois, 1998)

Similarly, as a precondition of telling *You* the “truth”—about our people and about our enemies, following Vincent Harding’s prescriptive distillation of

Mari Evans' poem, "Speak the Truth to the People" (Harding, 1974)—I adopt a rhetorical attitude that may seriously curtail my audience.

This paper has two main sections. First, I explain who I mean by "white people." Then, I present the three main difficulties that emerge from engaging in conversations with them for anti-racist purposes.

Part I: Those-Who-Think-of-Themselves-as-White

Next, who falls within the purview of this precluded demographic? Who are these so-called white people to whom we should not speak? You already know them, my Black would-be-interlocutor, but to ensure that we are on the same page, so to speak, allow me to proffer a definition. Whiteness is not as an *identity* per se, but a social ontology characterized by a conviction. I base this definition on the historical and sociological insight that people have and continue to *become* white, not primarily as a function of their physiognomy or ancestry, but by the endorsement, implicitly or otherwise, of a set of beliefs and attitudes that translate into (in)actions, actions that include the cultural production and maintenance of *salient* physiological distinctions (Allen & Perry, 2012a, 2012b; Brodtkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 2009; Painter, 2011; Roediger, 2007).

The conviction consists primarily in the belief that they *are* white, or more precisely, following Naomi Zack, that they are *absolutely not* Black (1994, pp. 9–11). This particular self-ascription presumes what Zack calls the "ordinary concept of race," which follows the cultural logic of the infamous "one-drop rule." Zack explains: "According to the one-drop rule, an individual is racially black if he or she has one black ancestor anywhere in her genealogical line of descent, and this holds regardless of whether, or how many, white, Asian, or Native American ancestors were also present" (1995, p. 121). Consequently, Black and white racial identities in the United States are construed as mutually exclusive categories. According to this model, there is no such identity as "mixed race"; our identities are literally Black or white. In the case of those of us who might be able to "pass," so to speak, we are *alternately* Black at one moment and white at another, but never both at the same time. Therefore, those who believe that they are white are saying that their family, ancestry, and cultural identity are completely devoid of Black members and contributors.

Additionally, and more importantly, this *identification with* whiteness entails a sense of superiority and the adoption of a particular orientation toward state sanctioned violence. With regard to the sense of superiority, Du Bois famously describes the sentiment in *Darkwater*: it is the "assumption that of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than

brownness or tan” (1920, p. 30). Or to borrow Marilyn Frye’s term, it means performing “whiteness” (Frye, 1992), which Paul Taylor paraphrases as “the ways of interpreting, navigating and inhabiting the world that are consistent with or that follow from white supremacist ideology” (2016, p. 48). It follows then, that if whiteness is born out of a set of convictions, as I argue, then we can appreciate that while there are no white *people* essentially, there remains nevertheless a class of persons who, as James Baldwin observes, “think of themselves as white” (1998, p. 179) and “who call themselves white” (1998, p. 180).

Some might object that it is precisely those who think of themselves as white with whom we should be most inclined to converse on questions of racism. They are the ones who are at least *aware* of their whiteness; they *see* “race,” including, most importantly, their own. Otherwise, whiteness is invisible, the ironic condition of race-lessness. By way of reply, indeed, those who are aware of their whiteness may be among those who have begun to glimpse the limits of their capacity to talk to us. Yet, since whiteness is a different sort of identify, one that is no more than a conviction, as long as they still *believe* in their whiteness, I contend that they still implicitly endorse a form of white supremacy. A more precise characterization of those who hold this conviction would be, after Naomi Zack, those-who-think-of-themselves-as-*NOT*-Black. If being white presumes the ordinary concept of race, where absolutely no Black ancestors or cultural contributors comprise their identity, then this self-identification is an indirect endorsement of white supremacy. What is needed is not someone who white and woke, but one who has actually renounced their whiteness (see Ignatiev & Garvey, 2014).

In *The Future of Whiteness*, Linda Alcoff cautions against this “fatalistic” definition of whiteness that “cannot be separated from this foundation in white racial dominance” (2015, pp. 7–8). It forces those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white to confront a dilemma—or as some might object, a “false dichotomy”: either embrace their implicit white supremacist ideology, or “disavow their white identity” (2015, p. 8). Alcoff contends that “whiteness is not coterminous with dominance, but with a particular historical experience and relationship to historical events” (2015, p. 9). Alcoff explains further that “There is a facticity to whiteness, whether or not it factors into a person’s self-ascription. Whiteness is lived, and not merely represented [. . .] Whiteness should not be reduced to racism or even racial privilege, even though these have been central aspects of what it means to be white” (2015, p. 9). In short, people are complicated, and even those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white have histories that, while probably profoundly shaped by white supremacist ideology, are not reducible to it. Thus, to characterize those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white as exclusively, or even primarily, a

function of this “single vector” is “ahistorical, and based on a wrong understanding of how meanings operate as well as how social identities are formed” (2015, pp. 9, 20).

Additionally, Alcoff suggest that an ontological openness of the sort modeled in her book is necessary for any possibility of an anti-racist future that includes those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white. Lest white supremacy remain a self-fulfilling prophecy, “those *marked* as white” (2015, pp. 38, 161; emphasis added)—to use Alcoff’s formulation, rather than Baldwin’s—need a way out of the dilemma. Alcoff has two basic proposals. First, we need to tell these other white histories—without ignoring or apologizing for the racist components. If we can understand concretely how those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white became “white,” we might also glean some mechanism by which they could untether themselves from white supremacy. This will “make whiteness ordinary”; rather than an implicit norm disguising a hierarchy, it will take a democratizing “place in the rainbow” of ethnicities (2015, pp. 189, 188). And second, those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white need to “find a way to make peace with one’s white identity with a clear-eyed understanding of its difficulty and painful history”; this includes finding personal reasons for engaging in anti-racist activism, rather than aspiring “to be allies” (2015, pp. 188, 204). Offering resources to this end, Alcoff presents two historical exemplars, the names of whom I will only mention. Bob Zellner was a civil rights activist in SNCC who “modeled a way to be an anti-racist white”; and C.P. Ellis was an “Exalted Cyclops of the Durham North Carolina Ku Klux Klan, who came to change his understanding of race and class” (2015, pp. 189, 196).

I have two replies to Alcoff’s appeal. First of all, Alcoff’s audience consists primarily of those who are struggling with the dilemma of whiteness, which does not include you and me, the Black-would-be-interlocutor. Moreover, as Alcoff herself concedes, their struggle is difficult: “the obstacles to achieving such modest goals [as a multiracial, decentralized society] are, admittedly, legion, given how different white identity is from other forms of ethnic and racial identities that have come to the United States never expecting to rule it” (2015, p. 24). In other words, the uncertainty of the future of whiteness is a question for those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white to contemplate primarily on their own, especially since it is by no means evident that they will find anti-racism desirable, much less translatable into actionable concerns. And second, prior to a rigorous self-reflective exercise—part of what historian Abena Ampofoa Asare calls, “an exorcism of racecraft” (Asare, 2018)¹—the results of which, while promising, remain uncertain, conversations with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white for anti-racist purposes will be significantly limited in their effect (see also Yancy, 2004, 2005).

Finally, I recognize that given this definition of “whiteness,” some pale skinned folk will not be included, and some deeply melanated ones will be (see Wilson, 2007). Nevertheless, my goal is to foreground the problem of white supremacy rather than the politics of identity. Whiteness framed as a conviction enables us to articulate and analyze the moral imperative of committing ourselves to anti-racism.

Part II: The Difficulties of Conversing With White People

Racial Realism and the Principle of Interest Convergence

As we learn from Critical Race Theory, and perhaps also from experience, those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white often do not share our group interests. Notably, since the election of President Trump, many people who were content to be “unmarked” and “race-less” “normal” Americans are “coming out of the closet,” so to speak, as “white,” advocating for the exclusion of non-white others. The problem is compounded by the political and institutional tendency to prioritize, in the event of a conflict, the interests of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white over our ethical, political, and legal concerns. Derrick Bell calls this tendency the principle of “interest convergence,” which “provides: The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (1980, p. 523).

Bell bases this principle on the circumstances surrounding the landmark case of *Brown v Board of Education* (1954). Bell argues that given the historical fact that “blacks had been attacking the validity of [segregation] politics for 100 years [. . .] the decision in *Brown* to break with the Court’s long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites” (1980, p. 524). First, the decision won the U.S. some moral and political capital in the “struggle with Communist countries to win the hearts and minds of emerging third world peoples” (1980, p. 524). Second, it assuaged local, growing discontent, especially among Black veterans, by offering “much needed reassurance to American blacks that the precepts of equality and freedom so heralded during World War II might yet be given meaning at home” (1980, p. 524). And third, it enabled new economic development, as “segregation was viewed as a barrier to further industrialization in the South” (1980, p. 525).

Bell concedes that these “points may seem insufficient proof of self-interest leverage to produce a decision as important as *Brown*” (1980, p. 525). And indeed, there were some of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white

who objected to segregation on moral grounds. Yet, “the numbers who would act on morality alone was insufficient to bring about the desired racial reform” (1980, p. 525). Certainly it seems that *Brown* would not have been possible if no one who thinks-of-themselves-as-white had moral objections to segregation. Nevertheless, these incentivizing historical developments, Bell argues, made the crucial difference after a 100 years of similar legal objections.² And by 1980, when Bell penned these thoughts, he observed that recent court “decisions reflect a substantial and growing divergence in the interests of whites and blacks,” weakening many of the mandates of *Brown* (1980, p. 528).

Even though Bell makes this argument in 1980, drawn from events that occurred as long ago as 1954, the principle of interest convergence remains relevant as a tool for analyzing the difficulties encountered in anti-racist activism (see Alemán & Alemán, 2010; DeLorme & Singer, 2010; Jackson, 2011). Most importantly for our purposes, this principle serves as one of the constitutive elements of Bell’s later proposal to Black people, namely the “new movement [. . .] called Racial Realism” (p. 364). Given the intransigent commitment of American institutions to the principle of interest convergence, Bell explains that we need to accept the “permanence of racism” in the United States, and abandon the unrealistic goal of racial equality (Bell, 1993, 1997).

As evidenced at least by the fact of *Brown*, the group interests of Black Americans and of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white can, and occasionally do, converge, suggesting something like the possibility of progress toward racial equality. Yet, as history suggests, and as Bell catalogues in case law, any convergence is historically contingent, accidental, and unstable. The continued fact of a distinct, prioritized group comprised of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white maintains the possibility—moreover, the inevitability—of a conflict of group interests that will result in the subordination of the rights of Black people. Presented with a strong enough incentive, those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white might even sell Black American back into slavery (on case law, see Bell, 2008).

The acceptance of racial realism, Bell argues, will enable us to shift our anti-racist efforts *away* from the “self-defeating” (Bell, 1992, p. 363) quest for integration and formal racial equality, and *toward* more productive goals, such as *self-care*—which includes the reduction of various forms of naïve political vulnerability—and toward constructive means of self-affirmation. Additionally, racial realism suggests that conversations are an insufficient tool to overcome the ideological barriers that systemically separate Black Americans and those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white.

The Militant Occlusions of White Ignorance

The second barrier to productive conversations for anti-racist purposes follows from the epistemological condition of white ignorance. Charles Mills explains that white ignorance is “a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race—white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications—plays a crucial causal role” (2007, p. 20). It is “best thought of as a cognitive tendency” that manifests both in those with explicit racist motivations as well as those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white who but imagine that they are “not racist” (2007, p. 23). In *The Racial Contract*, Mills famously characterized this cognitive state 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 [those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white] will in general be unable to understand the world that they themselves have made” (1999, p. 18).

Basically, the conviction that characterizes those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white produces, as a component of its preservation, a profound misunderstanding about the nature of race and racism.

Superficially, there would appear to be a second type of “white” ignorance: a passive seemingly innocent not-knowing that manifests as an “implicit bias,” as opposed to an active, blameworthy “racial prejudice.” For instance, if those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white grow up and live in a relatively homogenous community, it seems entirely possible that they might have very little knowledge about us, Black would-be interlocutors. Following Lorraine Code and Sandra Harding, Linda Alcoff explains that this form of “white ignorance” is not necessarily due to their “whiteness” per se; rather, “groups will sometimes operate with different starting belief sets based on their social location and their group-related experiences” (2007, p. 45). We are all “situated in time and space,” and this situatedness makes an “epistemically relevant difference” (2007, pp. 42, 45).

Furthermore, actors will often remain unaware of the degree to which their social location and/or group-related experiences inform their actions and preferences. In their classic, seminal paper on implicit bias, Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji characterize this sort of non-knowledge that informs action as “implicit social cognition,” whereby “traces of past experiences affect some performance, even though the influential earlier experience is not remembered in the usual sense—that is it is unavailable to self-report or introspection” (1995, pp. 4–5). Lori Gallegos explains further,

“The term “implicit bias” describes a preference for one group over another that is not experienced consciously, but instead operates implicitly, that is, beyond the agent’s full awareness, and automatically, or in a way that is difficult or impossible to consciously control” (2018, p. 264).

This form of ignorance is innocent, seemingly, for two reasons. First, in principle, we all suffer from it. Since each of us are “located, partial beings,” we each necessarily lack knowledge about certain kinds of others (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007, p. 4). And second, we should not be held responsible for actions that betray “preferences” which are supposedly the result of variables and mechanisms beyond our control.

The basis of this innocence, however, is flawed. First, some forms of situated ignorance are not universal. Social identities characterized by power dynamics, like racism or sexism, often display a kind of ignorance that is asymmetrical “across the line of domination,” so to speak. Alcoff argues, via Harding, that women will generally know more than men about sexism (2007, p. 46). Similarly, Black people generally understand racism better than those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white. This privileged knowledge includes insights into the habits and tendencies of the respective actors—hence Du Bois’ claim to be “singularly clairvoyant” regarding the “souls of white folk” (1920, p. 29). The reasons for this epistemic asymmetry are more than a “general fact of our situatedness as knowers” (Alcoff, 2007, p. 40). Following Charles Mills, Alcoff notes that the social and political systems that construct, for example, the social identity of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white render Black concerns invisible, even when they are in plain sight. Therefore, Black concerns are not simply “out of sight and out of mind,” but *overlooked* by those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white. In *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, Du Bois attributes this particular “American Blindspot to the Negro and his problems” to the diminished value of Black life (Du Bois, 1998, p. 367). He says “it was the American Blindspot that made the experiment [of Reconstruction] all the more difficult, and to the South incomprehensible. For several generations the South had been taught to look upon the Negro as a thing apart. He was different from other human beings” (1998, p. 370). Basically, for reasons related to the principle of interest convergence, Black lives simply do not matter enough to those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white to register as “concerning.” There is no “white ignorance” because there is nothing not to know. By contrast, Black awareness of “white” concerns is often necessary for survival. Moreover, white concerns are presumed to be the only ones, overrepresented “as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernized (or conversely) global middle classes” (Wynter, 2003, p. 313).

The second and more concerning problem with this passive, seemingly innocent model of white ignorance is that it fails to account for the ways in which implicit biases and other forms of implicit social cognition associated with white supremacy are cultivated and maintained in American society. Lori Gallegos argues that the model of implicit bias

does not include an account of the incentives and motivations that those in positions of racial privilege have (consciously or not) for harboring racist attitudes and beliefs. . .[U]nconscious racial prejudice in whites is supported by unconscious desires and motivations that lead them to be resistant to changing racist attitudes and beliefs. (2018, p. 267)

Gallegos continues:

Prejudice is not merely the result of a trick that the mind plays or merely the result of exposure to pervasive racist messages, but is protected via a motivated, persistent defensiveness. . .through psychological mechanisms of resistance, particularly in individuals who stand to benefit from such resistances. (2018, pp. 270–271)

Consequently, white ignorance, even this seemingly passive manifestation, is the result of an active mechanism; it is, ultimately, a form of ignorance that “resists [. . .] that fights back” (Mills, 2007, p. 13), that renders Black concerns invisible because, like Ellison’s narrator notes in *Invisible Man*, “[white] people *refuse* to see [them]” (Ellison, 1995, p. 3 emphasis added).

Briefly consider two characteristic misunderstandings maintained by those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white:

- 1) The first characteristic misunderstanding involves the denial that racism persists today, and the attendant denial that those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white are less vulnerable as a function of their social ontology.³ One of the problems of providing evidence of racism is that it is often anecdotal. Since racism is systemic—that is, a sociological generalization operating at the level of institutions—any single data point, such as a personal anecdote during a conversation, cannot function on its own as definitive proof. And more generally, as a form of inductive reasoning—technically speaking, an “invalid” argument form—an alternate explanation to even the most cogent generalization will always be possible.

For example, in *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008), George Yancy describes the racist behavioral tendency that he calls “the elevator effect”:

Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. . . . Over and above how my body is clothed, she ‘sees’ a criminal, she sees me as a threat. . . . Her body shifts nervously and her heart beats more quickly as she clutches her purse more closely to her. (2008, pp. 4–5)

As you know, my Black-would-be-interlocutor, Yancy’s experience is quite common; and the interpretation of this as an expression of racism in America is relatively uncontroversial. One of the most famous historical examples of the “elevator effect” are the circumstances that sparked the Tulsa Riot of 1921, where, in the alleged defense of an afeard woman-who-thought-of-herself-as-white, a mob-who-thought-of-themselves-as-white killed or injured hundreds of Black residents, and decimated the thriving Black business district known as the Tulsa Black Wall Street (Krehbiel, 2019). Nevertheless, those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white have difficulty accepting interactions like the elevator effect are evidence of racism, and will take great pains to avoid this conclusion. Alternate explanations include, as Yancy catalogues:

- a) Perhaps we are being too sensitive, reading “racism into the situation where it simply does not exist” (Du Bois, 1920, p. 221; Yancy, 2008, p. 6).
- b) Perhaps her body language was provoked by something else, such as a personal trauma; perhaps the woman is a survivor of sexually assaulted and Yancy’s presence is triggering (Yancy, 2008, p. 10).
- c) Related to (b), Perhaps the woman is responding to Yancy’s *maleness* rather than his *Blackness*. Thus, she is not “racist” per se; rather she is appropriately cautious, as a woman (Yancy, 2008, p. 12).

My goal here is not refute these alternate explanations. I merely mean to point out that conversations characterized by this kind of misunderstanding tend to involve interlocutors-who-think-of-themselves-as-white eagerly playing Devil’s Advocate, even when presented with evidence that meets our current scientific standards of evidence.⁴

2) The second characteristic misunderstanding involves conflating racism and prejudice. Racism is a function of power. It describes a background social and political current. It manifests in a number of ways: institutional tendencies; political (in)vulnerabilities and (in)capacities; *patterns* of feelings, actions, motivation, or beliefs. Leonard Harris forcefully describes racism as,

a polymorphous agent of death, premature births, shortened lives, starving children, debilitating theft, abusive larceny, degrading insults, and insulting

stereotypes forcibly imposed. The ability of a population to accumulate wealth and transfer assets to their progeny is stunted by racism. As the bane of honor, respect, and a sense of self-worth, racism, surreptitiously stereotypes. It stereotypes its victims as persons inherently bereft of virtues and incapable of growth. Racism is the agent that creates and sustains a virulent pessimism in its victims. The subtle nuances that encourage granting unmerited and undue status to a racial social kind are the tropes of racism. Racism creates criminals, cruel punishments, and crippling confinement, while the representatives of virtue, profit from sustaining the conditions that ferment crime. Systematic denial of population's humanity is the hallmark of races. (1999, p. 437)

In short, racism is systemic and pernicious. Most importantly for our purposes, racism is not “personal,” which is to say, it is not *produced* at the level of the individual. By contrast, prejudice *is* personal; it is an individual cognitive incapacity, the converse of which—being *unprejudiced*—is an intellectual virtue (see Kant, 1987, pp. 161–162). The prejudiced person is someone who comports themselves poorly toward their own lack of knowledge, prejudging—according to the etymology—in advance of evidence or argument, and occasionally holding on to those judgments in the face of controverting claims. Things get a little messy when we consider *racial prejudice*. Though it appears to be a cognitive incapacity produced at the level of the individual—that is, a “prejudice”—it is actually a *pattern* of “comporting oneself poorly toward” the lack of knowledge about racial matters, and produced at the social and political level; in other words, racial “prejudice” is one manifestation of racism, not the personal cognitive vice per se.

Consequently, conversations characterized by this misunderstanding often involve two related confusions. First, interlocutors-who-think-of-themselves-as-white try to convince us, the Black would-be interlocutors, that they are not “racist” because they do not exhibit prejudice. Second, interlocutors-who-think-of-themselves-as-white try to convince us, the Black would-be interlocutors, that they are good persons because they are not “racist” in this way.

The first confusion misunderstands anti-racism. Since racism is systemic, insofar as we participate in a racist system, we are implicated in the force and direction of the current. Individual actions are potential sites of resistance, but do not absolve individual participants. Anti-racism involves resisting all manifestations of racism, only one of which is the pattern of not-thinking-well described as racial prejudice. The second confusion misunderstands the relationship between racism and an individual's ethical status. While the choice whether to engage in anti-racism does have ethical value, we are racist because we participate in a racist system, not because we are ethically blameworthy. “Good” people can still be racist.

One final thought, in principle you and I—Black would-be interlocutors—can suffer from white ignorance as well. As Mills appropriately clarifies, “the ‘white’ in ‘white ignorance’ does not mean that it has to be confined *to* white people” (2007, p. 22). The social ontology characterized by the conviction “I-am-white” is not *causally* linked to the social identity associated with having pale skin; though, it does correlate strongly for cultural and experiential reasons. Therefore, prior to a comprehensive self-education and a rigorous effort to dismantle the epistemological habits associated with the conviction that characterizes those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white, conversations with them for anti-racist purposes will be significantly limited.

The Dis-Incentivizing Burdens of Racial Battle Fatigue

There is a third set of difficulties associated with engaging those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white in conversations for anti-racist purposes. By doing so, You and I, the Black would-be interlocutors, risk incurring an “emotional, psychological, and psychosocial distress, or *racial battle fatigue*” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 64 emphasis in original). Symptoms include “frustration, sadness, shock, anger, defensiveness, apathy, academic disidentification, hypersensitivity, hypervigilance, anxiety, irritability, depression, and feelings of helplessness or hopelessness” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 1190).

The concept of racial battle fatigue emerged from two recent studies on the experiences of Black men at historical white colleges and universities (HWCUs). These studies test aspects of psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce’s theory that regardless of “income level, educational attainment, occupational status, [or] gender,” all of us in the U.S., that is, the Black would-be interlocutors, suffer from a mundane extreme environmental stress (MEES) (Pierce, 2014, p. 27). Paraphrasing Pierce, sociologist Grace Carroll explains that a “mundane extreme environment” is one “in which racism and subtle oppression are ubiquitous, constant, continuing, and mundane and one in which African Americans must daily suffer the annoying ‘micro-aggressions’ such environments breed” (1998, p. 4). Pierce explains further that in spaces historically occupied by those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white, we are each compelled to negotiate

three major confusions. . .which have stressful psychosocial sequelae: (1) Blacks are confused about whether they are being tolerated or being accepted. (2) Blacks are confused about the supportive efforts of individual Whites versus the destructive actions by Whites as a collective. (3) Black are confused about when, where, and how to resist oppression, versus when where and how to accommodate to it. (2014, p. 27)⁵

The first study examines “the role that racial microaggressions, societal problems, and education attainment have in predicting MEES in African American males” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 75). The authors found that MEES as a result of societal problems was similar across education levels, but MEES as a result of microaggressions significantly increased “for African American males as they moved up the educational pipeline” (2011, p. 75). Building on this finding, the second study gathers responses from Black male college students in order to examine the “*cumulative* psychosocial-physiological impact of racial micro and macroaggressions” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 1192 emphasis added). This cumulative impact, which extends Pierce’s concept of MEES, is called “racial battle fatigue.” The authors found “four Black misandric stereotypes”: a criminal/predator, a possessor of ghetto specific knowledge, an exclusive non-student athlete, and an anti-intellectual (Smith et al., 2016, p. 1197; see also, Holbrook et al., 2016; and, Livingston & Pearce, 2009). The persistence of these stereotypes precipitated, in the best cases, six “adaptive coping strategies”: processing, self-care, confrontation, counter spaces, and public responses (Smith et al., 2016, p. 1201).

Notably, coping does not entail engaging in conversations about racism with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white. Many of the strategies listed imply various degrees of isolation. Confrontation suggests a form of engagement with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white; but the goal at the interpersonal level is to mitigate the effects of the psycho-social stressors. Additionally, Chester Pierce makes three recommendations in order to reduce stress. First, resonating with Bell’s racial realism, Pierce explains, “We must accept that [. . .] Blacks will continue to work harder and longer for less”; second, we “must have a strong theoretical grasp of racism in order to dilute its crippling effect”; and third, we need “to be educated in propaganda analysis” in order to view ourselves and our surroundings “without erosion of self” (Pierce, 2014, p. 33).

Finally, while the concept of racial battle fatigue emerges from the study of the specific experiences of Black men—born from the practical, programmatic need to understand the differences between racial misandry and racial misogyny—the adaptive coping strategies are pertinent to us all, the Black would-be interlocutors.

Conclusion

There have been several recent public attempts to engage in conversations with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white for anti-racist purposes. I am reminded of Trevor Noah’s conversation with Tomi Lahren in 2016—then, a vocal Trump supporter—on *The Daily Show*, where Noah hoped that they

might discuss their political and ideological differences. Or consider the circumstances leading up to Rene Eddo-Lodge's publication of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017). Ironically, Eddo-Lodge's initial declaration published on her blog in 2015 precipitated even more conversations with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white, ultimately yielding the publication of her book. I also reminded of Yancy's op-ed, "Dear White America" (Yancy, 2015). He received a barrage of hate mail and racist vitriol (see Yancy, 2017, 2018). While my arguments do amount to condemnations of these efforts, an analysis of these examples confirms that many will disagree with our objectives on principle; others who are sympathetic will misunderstand the basic sociological facts of racism and resent our anti-racist interventions; and You, Yourself, my Black-would-be-interlocutor will incur a physiological and psychological stress beyond the baseline mundane-extreme-environmental-stress of being Black.

I have argued here that we should refrain from engaging in conversations with those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white on issues of race and racism. If you *must* converse with them on such topics, then you should understand the difficulties and the personal stakes; furthermore, prior to a rigorous self-reflective exercise on the part of those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white—an "exorcism of race craft" (see Asare, 2018; Fields & Fields, 2012)—you should recognize that the effort is more for You, as a coping mechanism, than for your interlocutors-who-think-of-themselves-as-white. Many scholars already evade a discursive orientation toward whiteness, often in attempt to humanize their subject, or at least not to pathologize them (see Carter, 2017; Curry, 2017; Curry & Utley, 2018; Harris, 2018; Johnson, 2018). You and I—the Black would-be interlocutors—can bear witness to their potential transformation, but it is not clear that such a transformation is possible for many, much less desirable.

And finally—and I mean this literally rather than idiomatically—*Black people, take care!*

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Notes

1. Asare proposes a form of critical pedagogy that prepares students—both Black and those-who-think-of-themselves-as-white—for the possibility of engaging in productive anti-racism. They need to be re-educated on three aspects of racism. First, they need to understand how ideas of race and the mechanisms of racism have varied temporally; they need to learn how racism was constructed and how it changed *over time*. Second, they need to understand how racism varies geographically; they need to compare racism in the U.S. with racism in other parts of the world. Third, and perhaps most importantly, they need to appreciate how they are personally implicated in the mechanisms of racism; they need to understand the role of racism in their own family histories, and how their families' choices and motives are consistent with a systemic understanding of racism. See also, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Fields & Fields, 2012).
2. Occuring 100 years prior to *Brown v Board*, Bell cites the legal case: *Roberts v City of Boston* 59 Mass. (5Cush.) 198 (1850).
3. For a short list of examples of historical racial vulnerabilities, see Mills (2004, pp. 43–45).
4. Ok, I lied. Here are some brief replies: A) While You, the Black would be interlocutor, and I are generally more *sensitive* to racism, perhaps even hypersensitive, it does follow that our evidence is imagined. As Helen Ngo argues in *The Habits of Racism*, “being wrong in a particular instance does not in itself invalidate the epistemological frameworks in place supporting the judgment” (Ngo, 2017). B) Racism does not refer to personal motives and feelings. Even if the woman is acting entirely unconsciously, her actions are consistent with a *pattern* of responses to Black men. Motives and feelings can be mitigating factors, but they do not exempt her from the epistemic context that gives her actions a racial/racist meaning. C) It might be interesting to explore the counter-factual where a *man-who-thinks-of-himself-as-white* enters the elevator. Nevertheless, there are no un-raced men in the American psyche; in the white imaginary, the stereotypical criminal is essentially Black, regardless of their actual physiognomy. As Yancy argues, insofar as she is afraid, she perceives Blackness; and insofar as Yancy presents as Black, she perceives criminality (2008, p. 14). There is a further irony, that most cases of sexual assault are committed by someone the victim knows; so, while fear is not rational, statistically speaking, a stranger is less dangerous. D) And finally, as Yancy notes, even if we are being oversensitive, given the stakes, it is better to err on the side of caution, and anticipate racism more often than is necessary than to overlook the possibility and risk being unprepared.
5. Pierce adds the following insightful observation: “This basic rule is intensified by two basic factors which compound the stress for a Black worker, regardless of class or social attributes. The first corollary to the rule is that the collective majority constantly finds ways to minimize, trivialize, and attenuate Black males relative to Black females. For instance, compared to their majority group counterparts, Black females compared to Black males probably are found in much more

favored numbers in such ‘middle-class’ occupations as executive management, tenured professorships, and membership in the learned professions. Another corollary is that the majority group collective constantly finds ways to promote inter-ethnic and intraethnic rivalries among minority groups” (2014, p. 27).

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