

Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism

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This paper examines six different modes for declaring whiteness used within academic writing, public culture and government policy, arguing that such declarations are non-performative: they do not do what they say. The paper offers a general critique of the mode of declaration, in which 'admissions' of 'bad practice' are taken up as signs of 'good practice', as well as a more specific critique of how whiteness studies constitutes itself through such declarations. The declarative mode involves a fantasy of transcendence in which 'what' is transcended is the very 'thing' admitted to in the declaration (for example, if we are say that we are racists, then we are not racists, as racists do not know they are racists). By investigating declarative speech acts, the paper offers a critique of the self-reflexive turn in whiteness studies, suggesting that we should not rush too quickly beyond the exposure of racism by turning towards whiteness as a marked category, by identifying 'what white people can do', by describing good practice, or even by assuming that whiteness studies can provide the conditions of anti-racism. Declarations of whiteness could be described as 'unhappy performatives', the conditions are not in place that would allow such declarations to do what they say.

1. It has become commonplace for whiteness to be represented as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance (Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997). But of course whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard not to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere. Seeing whiteness is about living its effects, as effects that allow white bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which black bodies stand out, stand apart, unless they pass, which means passing through space by passing as white. Writing about whiteness as a non-white person (a 'non' that is named differently, or transformed into positive content differently, depending on where I am, who I am with, what I do) is not writing about something that is 'outside' the structure of my ordinary experience, even my sense of 'life as usual', shaped as it is by the comings and goings of different bodies. And so writing about whiteness is difficult, and I have always been reluctant to do it. The difficulty may come in part from a sense that the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible.

2. This difficulty might explain my reluctance to embrace whiteness studies as a political project, even in its critical form. At the same time, I am aware that we can construct different genealogies of whiteness studies, and our starting points would be different. My starting point would always be the work of Black feminists, especially Audre Lorde, whose book *Sister Outsider*, reminds us of exactly why studying whiteness is necessary for anti-racism. Any critical genealogy of whiteness studies, for me, must begin with the direct political address of Black feminists such as Lorde, rather than later work by white academics on representations of whiteness or on how white people experience their whiteness (Frankenburg 1993, Dyer 1997). This is not to say such work is not important. But such work needs to be framed as following from the earlier critique. Whiteness studies, that is, if it is to be more than 'about' whiteness, begins with the Black critique of how whiteness works as a form of racial privilege, as well as the effects of that privilege on the bodies of those who are recognised as black. As Lorde shows us, the production of whiteness works precisely by assigning race to others: to study whiteness, as a racialised position, is hence already to contest its dominance, how it functions as a 'mythical norm' (1984: 116). Whiteness studies

makes that which is invisible visible: though for non-whites, the project has to be described differently: it would be about making what can already be seen, visible in a different way.

3. Whiteness studies is after all deeply invested in producing anti-racist forms of knowledge and pedagogy. In other words, whiteness studies seeks to make whiteness visible insofar as that visibility is seen as contesting the forms of white privilege, which rests on the unmarked and the unremarkable 'fact' of being white. But in reading the texts that gather together in the emergence of a field, we can detect an anxiety about the status or function of this anti-racism. The anxiety is first an anxiety about what it means to transform whiteness studies into a field. If whiteness becomes a field of study, then there is clearly a risk that whiteness itself will be transformed into an object. Or if whiteness assumes integrity as an object of study, as being 'something' that we can track or follow across time and space, then whiteness would become a fetish, cut off from histories of production and circulation. Richard Dyer for instance admits to being disturbed by the very idea of what he calls white studies: 'My blood runs cold at the thought that talking about whiteness could lead to the development of something called 'White Studies' (1997, 10). Or as Fine, Weis, Powell and Wong explain: 'we worry that in our desire to create spaces to speak, intellectually or empirically, about whiteness, we may have reified whiteness as a fixed category of experience; that we have allowed it to be treated as a monolith, in the singular, as an "essential something"' (1997, xi).

4. The risk of transforming whiteness into 'an essential something' might be a necessary risk, for sure. We have to choose whether it's a risk worth taking. But the risk does not exist independently of other risks. The anxiety about transforming whiteness into 'an essential something' gets stuck to other anxieties about what whiteness studies might do. One of these anxieties is that whiteness studies will sustain whiteness at the centre of intellectual inquiry, however haunted by absence, lack and emptiness. As Ruth Frankenburg asks 'why talk about whiteness, given the risk that by undertaking intellectual work on whiteness one might contribute to processes of recentering rather than decentering it, as well as reifying the term, and its "inhabitants"' (1997, 1).

5. Another risk is that in centering on whiteness, whiteness studies might become a discourse of love, which would sustain the narcissism that elevates whiteness into a social and bodily ideal. The reading of whiteness as a form of narcissism is of course well established. The 'whiteness' of academic disciplines, including philosophy and anthropology has been subject to devastating critiques (see, for examples, Mills 1998; Asad 1973). For example, a postcolonial critique of anthropology would argue that the anthropological desire to know the other functioned as a form of narcissism: the other functioned as a mirror, a device to reflect the anthropological gaze back to itself, showing the white face of anthropology in the very display of the colour of difference. So if disciplines are in a way already *about* whiteness, showing the face of the white subject, then it follows that whiteness studies *sustains the direction or orientation of this gaze*, whilst removing the 'detour' provided by the reflection of the other. Whiteness studies could even become a spectacle of pure self-reflection, augmented by an insistence that whiteness 'is an identity too'. Does whiteness studies function as a narcissism in which the loved object returns us to the subject as the origin of love? We do after all get attached to our objects of study, which might mean that whiteness studies could 'get stuck' on whiteness, as that which 'gives itself' to itself. Dyer talks about this risk when he admits to another fear: 'I dread to think that paying attention to whiteness might lead to white people saying they need to get in touch with their whiteness' (1997, 10). Whiteness studies would here be about white people learning to love their own whiteness, by transforming it into an object that *could be* loved.

6. Dyer is right, I think, to feel such dread. Whiteness studies is potentially dreadful, and scholarship within the field is full of admissions of anxiety about what whiteness studies 'could be' if it was allowed to become invested in itself, and its own reproduction. We should I think, pay attention to such critical anxieties, and ask what the enunciation of such anxieties is doing. In terms of the constitution of the field, for example, the anxiety is not so much that the borders will be invaded by inappropriate others (as with traditional disciplines), but that the borders will themselves be inappropriate. But at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, the anxiety about borders works to install borders: whiteness becomes an object through the expression of anxiety about becoming an object. The repetition of the anxious gesture, that is, gestures toward a field. Fields can be understood, after all, as the forgetting of gestures that are repeated over time. Is there a relationship between the emergence of a field through the enunciation of anxiety and the emergence of a new form of whiteness, an anxious whiteness? Is a whiteness that is anxious about itself – its narcissism, its egoism, its privilege, its self-centeredness – better? What kind of whiteness is a whiteness that is anxious about itself? What does such an anxious whiteness do?

7. Such an anxious whiteness would be different to the 'worrying' whiteness that Ghassan Hage critiques in *White Nation* (1998) and *Against Paranoid Nationalism* (2003). This worrying whiteness is one that worries that 'others' may threaten its existence. An anxious whiteness would be one that is anxious about such worrying: this white subject would come into existence in its very anxiety about the effects it has on others, or even in fear that it is taking something away from others. This white subject might even be anxious about its own tendency to worry

about the proximity of others. So let's repeat my question: is an anxious whiteness that declares its own anxiety about its worry better, where better might even evoke the promise of "non-racism" or "anti-racism"?

8. Before posing this question through an analysis of the effects of how whiteness becomes declared, we could first point to the placing of 'critical' before 'whiteness studies', as a sign of this anxiety. I am myself very attached to being critical, which is after all what all forms of transformative politics will be doing, if they are to be transformative. But I think the 'critical' often functions as a place where we deposit our anxieties. We might assume that if we are doing critical whiteness studies, rather than whiteness studies, that we can protect ourselves from doing – or even being seen to do – the wrong kind of whiteness studies. But the word 'critical' does not mean the elimination of risk, and nor should it become just a description of what we are doing over here, as opposed to them, over there.

9. I felt my desire to be critical as the site of anxiety when I was involved in writing a race equality policy for the university at which I work in the UK, where I tried to bring what I thought was a fairly critical language of anti-racism into a neo-liberal technique of governance, which we can inadequately describe as diversity management, or the 'business case' for diversity. All public organisations in the UK are now required by law to have and implement a race equality policy and action plan, as a result of the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000). My current research is tracking the significance of this policy, in terms of the relationship between the documentation it has generated and social action. Suffice to say here, my own experience of writing a race equality policy, taught me a good lesson, which of course means a hard lesson: the language we think of as critical can easily 'lend itself' to the very techniques of governance we critique. So we wrote the document, and the university, along with many others, was praised for its policy, and the Vice-Chancellor was able to congratulate the university on its performance: we did well. *A document that documented the racism of the university became usable as a measure of good performance.*

10. This story is not simply about assimilation or the risks of the critical being co-opted, which would be a way of framing the story that assumes 'we' were innocent and critical until we got misused (in other words, this would maintain the illusion of our own criticalness). Rather, it reminds us that the transformation of 'the critical' into a property, as something we have or do, allows 'the critical' to become a performance indicator, or a measure of value. The 'critical' in 'critical whiteness studies' cannot guarantee that it will have effects that are critical, in the sense of challenging relations of power that remain concealed as institutional norms or givens. Indeed, if the critical was used to describe the field, then we would become complicit with the transformation of education into an audit culture, into a culture that measures value through performance.

11. My commentary on the risks of whiteness studies will involve an analysis of how whiteness gets reproduced through being declared, within academic texts, as well public culture. I will hence be reading Whiteness Studies as part of a broader shift towards what we could call a politics of declaration, in which institutions as well as individuals 'admit' to forms of bad practice, and in which the 'admission' itself becomes seen as good practice. By reading Whiteness Studies in this way, I am not suggesting that it is a symptom of bad practice: rather, I think it is useful to consider 'turns' within the academy as having something to do with other cultural turns. The examples are drawn from the UK and Australia, as the two places in which my own anti-racist politics have taken shape. My argument is simple: anti-racism is not performative. I use performative in Austin's (1975) sense as referring to a particular class of speech. An utterance is performative when it does what it says: 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action' (1975, 6).

12. I will suggest that declaring whiteness, or even 'admitting' to one's own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be 'evidence' of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says. In other words, putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist. To put this more strongly, I will show how declaring one's whiteness, even as part of a project of social critique, can reproduce white privilege in ways that are 'unforeseen'. Of course, this is not to reduce whiteness studies to the reproduction of whiteness, even if that is what it *can do*. As Mike Hill suggests: 'I cannot know in advance whether white critique will prove politically worthwhile, whether in the end it will be a friendlier ghost than before or will display the same stealth narcissism that feminists of color labeled a white problem in the late 1970s' (1997, 10).

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