

Performing Philosophy of Education “Whitely”: Reliable Narration as Racialized Practice

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So often covering our¹ tracks
 In case someone,
 One day,
 Looks back,
 Talks back,
 Walks back
 Over our history
 Of complacency
 And oppression.
 In case someone,
 One day,
 Tells a different story,
 Teaches a different lesson
 Than the ones in our books.
 We want off the hook.
 We want to hide our tales
 Of obsession
 With willing the world pale²
 Through repression

We want to hide,
 Deny,
 Our aggression,
 Regression,
 Under the guise
 Of a need to “civilize”
 We try to sanitize
 Our dirty deeds
 Wipe our hands and souls clean
 But old wounds that still bleed
 Betray where we’ve been.
 —Helen Marie Anderson

In this essay, building upon Audrey Thompson’s analysis in “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,”³ I am interested in exploring how reliable narration lends itself to the performance of “whiteness” through the creation and policing of racialized borders that dictate what can be said and by whom. That is, I wish to ask: how might reliable narration function within some philosophy of education discourse as part of a project of white⁴ identity formation? Furthermore, what might be the investments in and effects of structuring philosophy of education scholarship in such a way as to eliminate or assimilate the unpredictable, the “unruly,” the unknowable, in an attempt to claim civility and rationality for oneself? How might philosophy of education be narrated in a way that more adequately avoids the reproduction of racist discourses?

I set out to analyze some possible racial investments in the following three features of reliable narration that I identify through Thompson’s work: univocality, unidirectionality, and dispassion. I wish to trouble the unproblematic uptake of these narrative strategies within some philosophy of education scholarship and propose alternative strategies for performing philosophy of education discourse. Rather than focusing specifically on narrative content, I am more concerned here with narrative form. This is because disentangling philosophy of education from its racist history requires more than simply writing about racism, I think, but requires also that white scholars perform philosophy of education scholarship antiracistly, moving away from expectations of univocality, unidirectionality, and dispassion.

In the logic of philosophical argument, I first need to clarify what I mean by whitely and white in order to smoothly transition to a claim about their relationship to reliable narration (realizing that I need to perform reliability to some extent, I hope that by speaking the stage directions of scholarly performance out loud, I can highlight my reliability as performance). There are two key notions of white identity that I wish to use. The first I borrow from Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, who offer an explanation of whiteness as an identity premised on difference and subordination, inextricably intermeshed with other social identities such as class, sexuality, gender, and ability. Fellows and Razack write,

Identity, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is derived from the Latin word *idem*, meaning the same. Its various dictionary meanings focus on sameness. Yet in our social, political, economic, and legal worlds, the word identity is far more likely to be heard and read as connoting *difference*... White people need not and do not define themselves as members of a race; heterosexual people do not define themselves as having a sexual orientation. Thus identity comes to bear an intrinsic relationship to subordination. Identity boxes contain those excluded from the dominant group. Conversely, to be unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group. The marking of subordinate groups and the unmarking of dominant groups leaves the actual process of domination obscured, thus intact. Subordinate groups simply *are* the way they are; their *condition* is naturalized. To be unmarked or unnamed is also simply to *embody* the norm and not to have actively produced and sustained it. To be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others.⁵

Taking up this idea of whiteness as that which remains unmarked while marking difference, I want to suggest that reliable narration can be put to use as a practice of white identity formation as it seeks to subordinate and mark as unreliable any competing narratives, while remaining unmarked as narrative itself.

Fellows and Razack expand upon their explanation of identity formation in the following assertion:

The dominant group *makes* itself through imagining itself as everything the Other is not. As David Roediger has commented about race, there is no content to whiteness outside of domination: whiteness is “an empty and terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back.”⁶

I want to look at how reliable narration might function as a way of creating white identities through the process of marking Otherness, as well as by determining what voices get to count as rational and intelligible. To help clarify how reliable narration may be seen as a racialized practice, as a process that one takes part in, I draw upon Marilyn Frye’s notion of whiteness.

Like Fellows and Razack, Frye wants to talk about race as socially and relationally defined rather than as a biological category. However, looking for a way of thinking about whiteness that “is not essentially tied to color and yet has some significant relation to color,” Frye introduces the terms “whitely” and “whiteness” to refer to race as a “way of being in the world.”⁷ The distinction I draw between the terms whiteness and whiteness as used by Frye is a distinction between the racial grouping in which one is placed/places oneself based on physical characteristics, versus the performance of that racial classification; that is, whiteness is a performance of the category and character of whiteness, a performance of domination. Frye likens whiteness to masculinity, in the sense that the biological category of

“maleness” (that is, possessing certain physical characteristics) is separate from the ways in which the traits associated with those characteristics are taken up or performed. It is these notions of whiteness as a practice of domination, put forth in the work of Fellows and Razack as well as by Frye, that I wish to keep in mind as I contemplate the role of reliable narration in philosophy of education scholarship. How might reliable narration sustain systems of oppression based on race? What sort of body is articulated through reliable narration? Conversely, what sort of body is marked as inarticulable?

Yet before diving into my argument head first, inattentive to the dangers that may lie hidden beneath the water, I want to flag two points (and I am sure there are more) of caution. As Daniel Coleman points out in his book *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*,

My project to denaturalize the categories of privilege...poses difficult questions about the effects of this kind of endeavour. For is there not a danger that in describing how norms were created, one inadvertently reaffirms their normative status? How can a description of White privilege avoid reaffirming the privilege accorded to whiteness...? At the very least, does one not re-centre whiteness within critical race studies, confirming once again its pivotal position?⁸

These questions arise in my own project as well, and though I have no innocent response, I hope that by storying whiteness and marking the ways in which the reliable narration of philosophy of education can reproduce and reinforce dominant white identities, philosophy of education as a discourse may become less about whiteness. I hope that white scholars may take up new ways of performing philosophy of education that avoid a reinscription of the same racialized identities and power relations. While much has been written about the content of philosophy of education scholarship and the ways in which some content may participate in or fail to challenge systems of oppression, as long as scholarly form and methodology remain unmarked, natural, occurring as if in the only possible way they can, then narrative form will continue to be a site in which racialized identities are negotiated, where distinctions are made between what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say it.

In the hope of exploring new/alternate ways of performing philosophy of education that allow for greater inclusivity, greater variance in terms of the issues and methods deemed relevant to the discipline, my interest in this essay is to explore how reliable narration within philosophy of education may function to limit what methods and topics are deemed acceptable, what bodies are deemed welcome. Paradoxically (perhaps incoherently or unconvincingly), I focus in this essay on whiteness and performances of whiteness in order to take the focus away from whiteness. Hopefully by exposing racialized investments in reliable narration, I can produce a disruption to the ways in which whiteness operates in and through a text. As Toni Morrison observes in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, “The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act.”⁹ To literary discourse I would here add philosophical and pedagogical discourse as well. Returning to the work of Audrey Thompson

momentarily, I would like to look at how reliable narration becomes raced in the assertion of its racelessness. However, I first have another caution flag to throw.

A colleague recently suggested to me that unreliable narration is akin to deception, giving the example of George W. Bush as an unreliable narrator. This idea left me puzzled for a few days, though I eventually came to the conclusion (or opening premise, depending on from where one is starting), that it seems to matter *in important ways to whom* one seeks to be reliable. I imagine that Bush is a very reliable narrator to those whose interests he is serving. The issue then came to be for me not just about being untrustworthy or unreliable, but rather about being unreliable to particular people in particular contexts. I think that only in performing whiteness unreliably might one even begin to establish reliability as an ally to scholars and students of color (this is not to say that s/he will be reliable or trustworthy, only that performing whiteness reliably ensures one's unreliability in coalition across difference). So as I speak of reliable narration in this essay, I use the term with a sense of irony, in that if the performance of reliable narration can be seen as a performance of white identity construction and maintenance, then it is one's reliability in this context that suggests one's unreliability as an antiracist scholar. Conversely, in performing philosophy of education scholarship unreliably, in addressing rather than attempting to erase the tensions and paradoxes inherent in white antiracist scholarship, one may be performing more reliably.

Now to return to an earlier point. Perhaps you think I've gotten us lost and that we need to begin again. Perhaps you think this has just been a waste of time. But journey with me a little longer, please, and perhaps we will come upon some scenery that we may both find agreeable. I would like to turn now to the questions about reliable narration that came to me out of Thompson's essay. Using Charles Taylor's essay "The Politics of Recognition" as an example, Thompson identifies what reliable narration can look like in the context of philosophy and what might be some of the dangers associated with it. She explains that, "In traditional philosophy, the narrator is not dramatized but conventionalized: like a television news anchor, one learns to speak in the soothingly authoritative tones of a reliable guide."¹⁰ Citing Taylor, Thompson identifies a number of features of the reliable narrative — features, I contend, that are tied to the practice of creating and maintaining white identities that are premised on a relationship of domination. The elements of Taylor's reliable narrative that I wish to focus on here are again univocality, unidirectionality, and dispassion. Though listed here as discrete categories, they seem to operate through, on top of, and in conjunction with each other as part of a larger project of white domination.

I use the term univocality to refer to the way in which Taylor's voice tells a universal, singular story as he erases differences between voices and leaves only his own voice in place. On this issue, Thompson remarks of Taylor's work:

No doubt creeps into the *text* as to whether Taylor is an adequate spokesperson for indigenous or colonized peoples, blacks, and women...paradoxically, given the enormous weight he attributes to being heard and known on one's own terms — he subsumes all subaltern voices under his own. Although we hear from Jean-Jacques Rousseau often, and in the original

French, there is not a single quotation from a gay or lesbian scholar, a feminist, and/or a scholar of color.¹¹

Implicit in Taylor’s use of univocality, the one speaking for the many, is a paternalism characteristic of the colonial relations of liberal modernism. That is, in assuming a universal human subject, equal by virtue of a shared capacity for reason, the One Voice of reliable narration becomes that of the liberal individual — the rational and free white male. Again, he who has the power to take up a voice unmarked by social particularity is he who has the power to extract benefits from others while denying these benefits and their costs.

As Taylor writes about “the politics of recognition” in a singular voice, subsuming all other voices under his own, he defines for others what it means to be recognized as well as the limits of their recognition. He uses univocality, in the words of Achille Mbembe, to “take possession, not of a particular individual, but of a collective subject,” in order to “circumscribe this collective subject’s connections with itself and with the world.”¹² In Mbembe’s terms, Taylor assumes the position of a monotheistic divinity who speaks others, and himself, into existence. That is, while Taylor speaks in place of or “on behalf of” historically marginalized groups, he attempts to speak them into being — that is, through his speech he attempts to define the limits of their existence — at the same time that he attempts to negate the possibility of their existence, or the possibility of an existence outside the parameters he constructs. Like the violence and arrogance of univocality, the unidirectionality of reliable narration can also pose problems for the white scholar seeking to dismantle systems of racial privilege and oppression.

In regard to unidirectionality, I am referring to the expectations of a reliable narration to take up a singular vision or project, with an argument progressing linearly through a beginning, middle, and end toward an unambiguous conclusion. This unidirectionality is evident in Taylor’s work, Thompson suggests, by the way in which

Taylor enlists disciplinary expectations of philosophical coherence and intelligibility to suppress competing frameworks. The seamlessness of Taylor’s analysis means that readers are not positioned to read between the lines or against the grain, or to wonder if another narrator might tell the story differently. Ignoring arguments and analyses by feminists, lesbians, gays, and people of color that would muddy the clarity of his claims, Taylor’s smooth summary never hints that many members of marginalized and oppressed groups create spaces specifically to escape from gestures of “recognition” by members of the dominant group.¹³

The unidirectionality of Taylor’s work and other reliable narratives necessitates an erasure of alternate projects and seems to imply a modernist notion of civilization that places progress on a single, linear timeline used to determine the level of a society’s advancement as human beings. Upholding one’s reliability as a narrator often means that one cannot go off on tangents, cannot stray from her/his course, cannot admit to the possibility of multiple projects in conflict with each other.

Paraphrasing Stuart Hall, Coleman explains that

European colonial expansion... was premised on an isochronous [i.e. single timeline] idea of progress. [Hall] observes that colonial-era Europeans tended to believe that “there was *one*

path to civilization and social development, and that all societies could be ranked or placed early or late, lower or higher, on the same scale.”¹⁴

As Coleman explains, this modernist notion of progress and civility is linked to what Ruth Frankenberg terms “a white cultural practice,” or as Coleman further notes,

the idea of progress itself is deeply informed by a central value of whiteness that Richard Dyer calls “spirit” or “enterprise.” According to Dyer, enterprise is often presented as the sign of White spirit — that is, to a valuation of energy, will, discovery, science, progress, the building of nations, the organization of labour, and especially leadership.¹⁵

What I am hoping to show is that the expectations of linearity, coherence, clarity, conclusiveness, and so on placed on scholarly writing are not necessarily innocent expectations free of any social or political motivations, but rather that these expectations can participate in racialized discourses that have been used to justify racialized violence for centuries. Here I am suggesting that in offering a reliably seamless linear argument, one might participate in maintaining and policing the borders of civility. Coleman writes,

The idea of civility [or here I would suggest *reliability*] as a (White) cultural practice not only made it a mode of internal management and self-definition, because it distinguished the civil from the uncivil, but it also made it a mode of external management, because it gave civil subjects a mandate for managing the circumstances of those perceived as uncivil.¹⁶

Reliability in terms of linearity, seamlessness, and coherence serves as a method of self-discipline in that it structures what can be said within a discourse, and also serves as a method of disciplining others, in that it structures what must be excluded or is unintelligible within the discourse. Reliability then, if understood as concerned with the linear progression of an argument, seems to appeal to modernist ideas of civilized white conduct.

The final aspect of reliable narration that I wish to address here is dispassion, a concept that, like unidirectionality, also seems tied to liberal modernist ideals. By dispassion, I mean to refer to a lack of emotion in Taylor’s work, of his appeal to pure reason as the basis and proof of his argument. As David Theo Goldberg argues with reference to Zygmunt Bauman, central to liberal modernist ideology

lies a concern with order. This concern is expressed through the domination of Nature by Reason; through the transparency of Nature to Reason in the Laws of Nature; through the classification of Nature in rational systems of thought; and through the mastery of Nature, physical and human, by way of “design, manipulation, management, engineering.”¹⁷

Within this ideology, emotion, contrasted to reason, signifies a failure of reason, signifies an inability to control oneself and one’s environment, and as such, sheds doubt on one’s claims to full inclusion in the category of persons. Goldberg points out that,

it is a basic implication of Locke’s account that anyone behaving irrationally is to that degree a brute and should be treated as an animal or machine. Hence, rationality is a mark of human subjectivity and so a condition of the necessity to be extended full moral treatment. Rational capacity, in other words, sets the limits upon the natural equality of all those beings ordinarily taken to be human.¹⁸

While Taylor can afford to write dispassionately, having so little at stake in how his work is taken up (having little social, economic, and political vulnerability), his

appeal to pure reason rather than emotion marks passionate voices with more at risk as less rational, less coherent, less intelligible. Thompson writes,

Whereas Gloria Anzaldúa or María Lugones might not so much betray or even express passion as specifically call it into play (for it may require courage, deliberation, and discipline to sustain a voice that will be dismissed as subjective or unintelligible), Taylor can wield a highly invested performance of dispassionate argumentation as aesthetic proof of his trustworthiness as a guide through the intricacies of his argument.¹⁹

Within a dichotomous understanding of identity, of the self versus other, dispassion, like univocality and unidirectionality, serves to construct and police the borders of rationality along what I argue are racialized lines. While Taylor, as a reliable white male philosopher, can afford impartiality and disembodiment, it is a luxury granted to few. The reliable narration of hegemonic philosophy of education by white scholars, requiring a racialized univocality, unidirectionality, and dispassion masquerading as neutrality, serves then to delineate the limits of discourse and to delineate the limits of white identity. Being a reliable narrator implies a certain predictability, orderliness, a following of the rules.

Quoting from Minnie Bruce Pratt, Frye remarks that “[Whitely people’s] morality is a matter of ‘ought-to,’ not ‘want to’ or ‘passionately desire to.’ And the oughts tend to factor out into propriety of good manners and abiding by the rules.”²⁰ Furthermore, Frye notes that,

By believing in rules, by being arbiters of rules, by understanding agency in terms of the applications of principles to particular situations, whitely people think they preserve their detachment from prejudice, bias, meanness and so on. Whitely people tend to believe that one preserves one’s goodness by being principled, by acting according to the rules instead of according to feeling.²¹

By following the rules of reliable narration, by struggling to “get philosophy right,” white scholars may assume that we/they are performing the role of “good philosopher,” without recognizing the ways in which the rules that are being followed are rules which can function to reinscribe racialized identities and to render particular bodies inarticulable within philosophy of education discourse.

Oh yes, here we are again. We’ve returned from whence we came. Looks familiar, doesn’t it? What’s that you say? Yes, I suppose it does look a bit different later in the day. Building upon Thompson’s 2005 essay, “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,” I have explored some of the ways in which reliable narration can lend itself to the performance of whiteness through the creation and policing of racialized discursive borders that dictate what can be said and by whom. It appears to me that up until now it seems that I have been maintaining a fairly clear distinction between reliable versus unreliable, “good” versus “bad” narratives. Yet maintaining such distinct dichotomies, I believe, is part of a practice of creating and reinforcing boundaries between included/excluded, acceptable/unacceptable, coherent/incoherent, intelligible/unintelligible, and so on. So I wish to make clear that my aim here is not to undermine the potential for reliable narration to be used resistantly, nor to undermine the great risks involved for scholars outside “dominant” social groups to take up alternative narrative voices. Indeed, often the only way for scholars who are

insiders to oppression to be heard and to practice resistance within philosophy is to adopt the familiar voice of the reliable narrator.

I do not think it is necessary, or even desirable, for philosophers to do away entirely with reliable narration. My aim instead is to draw attention, as Thompson does, to philosophical scholarship *as narration*, as a project or practice that involves the repetition of disciplinary expectations and decisions, as a practice that can be performed whitely as a form of domination, particularly in the act of insisting against its whiteness. This essay is not intended to function as a stop sign, reading: "Stop! Do not use reliable narration!" but rather as a yield sign, reading: "Proceed with caution, road work ahead, you/me/we/they might get stuck in potholes or puddles, so drive carefully, watch where you/me/we/they are going." Or perhaps it is meant to be read as a detour sign: "You can't go this way right now. Try another way. Maybe this way will be clear tomorrow, maybe not." Though I may not know necessarily where my final destination is, and though in fact I want to avoid this notion of a place to rest after arriving at the truth, I do think we need more than one path to travel on, more than one understanding of what it means to be reliable or intelligible. Because sometimes bridges break, sometimes roads are washed out, sometimes you need another way of moving on.

1. Here I use the term "our" to refer to white people as a group of which I am a part, though I recognize this carries with it problems I am unsure of how to resolve. While I wish to call upon those who benefit from the violence of racism to take responsibility for it, I realize that the term "our" in this sense is exclusionary, or assumes a homogenously white audience. I have chosen to use the terms "our" and "we" here because I think that to use the terms "their" and "they" deceptively suggests a lack of complicity on my part. Furthermore, to subsume all races under the terms "our" and "we" in this passage is to suggest that everyone shares a similar responsibility for racism. I think this is a problem which cannot be resolved here, but I hope that by pointing out the difficulties inherent in my use of the terms "our" and "we," I can at least denaturalize the terms and the assumption that one voice can speak for all.

2. I borrow this notion of "willing" others "pale" from Olive Senior's poem "Colonial Girls' School," in *Uncommon Wealth: An Anthology of Poetry Written in English*, eds. Neil Besner, Deborah Schnitzer, and Alden Turner (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1997), 646–7.

3. Audrey Thompson, "Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).

4. Though I considered capitalizing the term "white" to trouble the apparent naturalness of its use as an identifying category, I decided to leave it in lowercase letters in order to undermine some of the currency of the term, to question "whiteness" as a monolithic, self-contained category.

5. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women," *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, no. 1 (1998), 341 (emphasis in original).

6. *Ibid.*, 343 (emphasis in original).

7. Marilyn Frye, "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1992), 151.

8. Daniel Coleman, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 40–1.

9. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 46.

10. Thompson, "Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators," 62.

11. Ibid., 63.
12. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 213.
13. Thompson, “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,” 63.
14. Coleman, *White Civility*, 12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 12–3.
17. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 3.
18. Ibid., 27.
19. Thompson, “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,” 63.
20. Frye, “White Woman Feminist,” 155.
21. Ibid.

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