

Discounting Sheep: Authority, Arrogance, and Particularity in Whiteness Discourses

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Following Audrey Thompson's previously aired incitement to unreliable narration, I have not generated a seamless response to her analysis of the absence of sheep in poststructuralism. Rather, I illustrate here some ways Thompson's work resonates with me, emphasizing in particular the performances of materiality she advocates and enacts. First, I cast Thompson's present essay in solidarity with two of her previous works, "Tiffany, Friend of People of Color," and "Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators" (*TFPC* and *PUN*, respectively), construing each as advocating, to decenter whiteness, resistance to conventional scholarly practices related to authority.¹ Second, I deploy María Lugones's work on arrogant perception to amplify Thompson's implicit but important focus on relationality.

ANTIRACISM, UNRELIABLE NARRATORS, AND RACE AND CULTURE

Thompson's persistent attempt to problematize authority across the aforementioned essays is revealed by her interest in "destabiliz[ing] the whiteness of our intellectual and pedagogical practices." Consider the following formulations, each a quotation or close paraphrase:

1. "Regarding ourselves as authoritatively antiracist, we keep whiteness at the center of antiracism."²
2. Regarding (performing) ourselves as authoritatively philosophical, we (risk) keep(ing) whiteness at the center of philosophy.
3. Regarding ourselves as authoritative poststructuralist whiteness theorists, we keep (reinstall) whiteness at the center of poststructuralist whiteness theory.³

TFPC, the source of the first formulation, problematizes the desires for comfort and authority evident in many of the transformative projects advocated by white feminists.⁴ Thompson writes:

The tendency to keep white projects and understandings at the center of antiracist research also characterizes much of antiracist education. Implicitly, many antiracist and multicultural pedagogies accept white students' comfort with white ways of knowing: new understanding will not require new ways of engaging.⁵

Later in the essay she writes, "Giving up the desire to define ourselves unproblematically as good whites is a necessary step in pursuing an emergent sense of what it might mean to be an antiracist white."⁶

The second formulation recasts Thompson's unreliable narrator project as significant not only for philosophers but also whiteness theorists. To be clear, Thompson does not make this claim directly; nonetheless, I read the effects she aims to resist in *PUN* — namely, the soothing, trust-inspiring performance of a philosophical voice that is seamless, universalizing, and putatively dispassionate — as

overlapping significantly with those she problematizes as central to white-referenced intellectual practices in both *TFPC* and the present essay, “There Are No Sheep in Poststructuralism” (“Sheep”).

The third formulation recasts Thompson’s argument in “Sheep.” I have inserted the reference to “authoritative poststructuralist whiteness theorists” to gesture toward Thompson’s account of the trust whiteness theorists often place in their capacity to name race and culture by studying the “play of meanings that can be made to signify race.” I don’t think it is misleading to animate this gesture by emphasizing authority even though Thompson explicitly troubles the tension between the generality of poststructuralist principles and the particularity of sheep. She writes:

In the article to which Deb was responding, questions of race did not begin from a standpoint steeped in the particulars of Cree or Inuit culture. Rather, they were framed in terms of white identity formation rooted in “the workings of desire” around and against “an unconstructed alterity.”

Contrastingly, in “Sheep,” Thompson arguably performs a version of an unreliable narration, insofar as she resists offering either an authoritative account of sheep, or a definitive refutation of poststructuralist theorizing strategies.

My hope in connecting Thompson’s project in “Sheep” with her previous work, highlighting her resistance to definitive, authority-conferring analyses, is to emphasize a counternarrative to any reading of Thompson’s position vis-à-vis “starting with the sheep” as an essentializing authorization of particularity.

RELATIONALITY AND ARROGANCE

Thompson’s theorizing in these essays highlights the relationality of her argument. In *TFPC* she asserts: “In textual encounters with other communities and individuals, we can maintain our distance. Face-to-face involvement, on the other hand, calls for a complex, immediate, and at times uncomfortable kind of responsiveness.”⁷ It is just such responsiveness that is missing in the account of white teachers working with Cree and Inuit communities.⁸ Critiquing the means Helen Harper identified to “rearticulate white female teacher identity,” Thompson writes:

All of these solutions assume that critical realignments of discursive values will serve as the engine of a new possibility. The people, places, animals, tools, politics, natural resources, and languages that make up the Cree and Inuit cultures where the women teach are mere backdrops against which the women prove themselves insufficiently critical and self-aware.

Thompson’s analysis of the authority, positive self-regard, and self-sufficient self-referentiality of the whiteness narratives in Harper’s essay profoundly resonates with Lugones’s notion of arrogant perception. Thompson notes that, “Kay and the whale are the only eruptions of the particular into the story of the white woman and the Inuits” and thus rearticulating whiteness does not require revisiting or rethinking race so that it can be understood in any terms other than those that referenced “one’s own fears and desires.” Now consider Lugones:

You are in part what we make you up to be and we are in part what you make us up to be. You may not “identify” with that self, but you can’t help animating it. You may not want to think about that self, but not thinking about that self leads you not to know what U.S. women of color know: — that self-knowledge is interactive, that self-change is interactive.⁹

Lugones, citing Marilyn Frye, argues that to perceive arrogantly is to perceive that others are for oneself and to arrogate their substance to oneself.

[White/Anglo feminists] ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this *while we are in their midst*. The more independent I am, the more independent I am left to be. Their “world” and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity. But they rob me of solidity through indifference, an indifference which they can afford and that sometimes seems studied.¹⁰

I do not have space here to explore how Lugones’s accounts of relationality offer alternative frames of reference for studies of race and culture that “begin with the sheep,” though it is important to note the direction of her remedies for arrogant perception. Consistent with Thompson’s critiques, Lugones maintains with Frye that relation is key to the “loving eye” that stands in opposition to arrogant perception.

Frye says that the loving eye is “the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination”...Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother’s “world,” that I see both of us as we are constructed in her “world.”...Only through traveling to [my mother’s] world could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her.¹¹

Consultation of a troubling¹² sort is also a key to Thompson’s advocacy:

Sometimes the question of race is taken to point to the need for change in ourselves — a need for more humility, say, or more self-reflexivity. But rarely is it taken to mean that we might need to think and feel our way into other rhythms, other relationships, other ways of going out and going forward.

MATERIALITY, PARTICULARITY, AND “STARTING WITH THE SHEEP”

Thompson starts with the sheep in more ways than one. Indeed, the paragraphs devoted to sheep launch a bold counternarrative to the abstraction and distance of some poststructuralist whiteness theories specifically and philosophical discourse generally.¹³ There is a straight-ahead materialism involved here — warning theorists away from false generalization and ethnocentrism. Beyond this, her account starts with sheep in a more far-reaching way, as my comments have tried to amplify.

Thompson’s reflections are those of a professed unreliable narrator; they give an account that, like faint praise, damns itself as partial, nondefinitive, the inquiry of a novice outsider, albeit one with connections — to sources highly saturated with conventional credibility.¹⁴ In that damning, however, I read an incitation to engagement significantly alien to much contemporary theoretical study, postmodern or otherwise, an incitation not to incorporate others’ examples of race and culture into arguments or course syllabi, but to encounter and “live with” others with sufficient attention and humility so that the materiality, spatiality, and temporality of unfamiliar worlds can fill gaps in our understanding and challenge our terms of reference.

1. Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany, Friend of People of Color: White Investments in Antiracism,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003); and Audrey Thompson, “Philosophers as Unreliable Narrators,” in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 60–68.

2. Thompson, "Tiffany, Friend of People of Color," 8.
3. I constructed the second and third formulations with some literary and philosophical license, and Thompson bears no responsibility for them. I take responsibility for any errors or misdirections.
4. See also, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relationships Among Women," *The Journal of Gender and Justice* 1, no. 2 (1998): 335–52.
5. Thompson, "Tiffany, Friend of People of Color," 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 23.
7. *Ibid.*, 14.
8. For those interested in studies of whiteness and Inuit interaction, see Dennis Rasmussen, "Qallunology: A Pedagogy for the Oppressor," in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003).
9. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 83.
10. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).
11. *Ibid.*, 80.
12. I use "troubling" to refer to a kind of epistemic work central to situated knowledges. See Maureen Ford and James Lang, "Troubling Knowledges" (paper presented at the annual conference of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, Dayton, Ohio, September 2008).
13. In correspondence with Thompson, I noted my resistance to associating such distancing and the deployment of "predefined principles" with poststructuralist strategies. Thompson's assertion that "an absence of sheep is not distinct to poststructuralism" comes later in her essay than I would prefer.
14. Reading "Sheep" with *TFPN* and *PUN* enabled me to imagine that the decision to cite only academic sources might bear a connection to an unreliable narration rather than to a merely suspect narration. The difficulty and political ramifications of just such choices remains to be explored as "starting with the sheep" gets carried forward.

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