

Racing (for) Social Justice: Performing Apologia and Accountability in Dialogues About Race

Ellen Correa, Liliana Herakova & Dijana Jelaca

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Abstract: This performance fuses ethnographic data from dialogues about race with the authors' reflections on their experiences as facilitators for these dialogues. The dialogue project was conceived as an activist move in a context in which race is rarely talked about. In this performance we consider how each of us heard and perhaps articulated both a discourse of apology (the language of self-defense) and a discourse of accountability for racial privilege. We perform and re-member moments from the actual dialogues and our experiences facilitating them—what we heard, what we said, and what we thought—as they may work toward and against activism for equality.

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1. Prologue

"Apologetic discourse may be defined as a 'speech of self defense' ... not so much on an individual's policies or ideas, but on her/his character or 'worth as a human being'." (DOWNEY, 1993, p.42)

"I mean, you do know, like, I have noticed the privilege that comes with whiteness and at times we do feel some type of resentment towards it, but it's not like ... This is society, this is the way it's structured, you kind of gotta deal with it. You just gotta buck it and just work harder, that's what you gotta do." (Black male college student, 2009, speaking during dialogues about race and privilege in the U.S.¹)

1 The student quotes are from participants in social justice/race dialogues the authors facilitated as a part of a campus-wide project in the Fall of 2009; students' racial self-identifications are used.

"I have all White friends and one Iranian friend, but I am friends with him not because of his race, but because of who he is, because he just fell into place." (White male student, 2009, speaking during dialogues about race and privilege in the U.S.)

"I argue that individuals' accountability regarding whiteness ... is one's willingness to deconstruct the conceptual construction of white supremacy by both whites and non-whites striving for accurate understanding [of] their own positionalities for an ethical solution for the whiteness problem." (McCANN, 2008, n.p.)

"I believe just talking about it [race and privilege] makes a gradual change because you cannot escape awareness since it has been made, however you can make a choice to make a difference when the time comes." (Student, 2009, written reflection on participating in dialogues about race in the U.S.)

1.1 Context and questions for conversations about race

In Fall 2009 we were part of a team of facilitators that met in small groups with over 500 U.S. college students in a series of dialogues titled "How does race matter?" The experience of facilitating these sessions, sometimes rewarding, sometimes frustrating and painful, was and continues to be transformative for us, in ways that reflect our different standpoints and perspectives, our different approaches to anti-racist scholarship and to living our anti-racist commitments. So, as we keep moving, we ask: What might these experiences mean to conceptualizations of social change as mundane, affective, institutional, structural, and ideological? This performance also arises from our sense that where we were/are before, during, and after the dialogues is quite different, metaphorically speaking, and that when we think about race and discrimination, we continue to move among those spaces. Although we cannot speak for others who participated in the dialogues we perform here, we suspect the experience of movement, subjective as it is, was and is also true for at least some. [1]

Because of this movement which at once destabilizes and complicates race/ethnic categories and relations, this text and the possibilities it performs become relevant in social contexts, globally, where discourses of opportunity, (in)equality, human rights, and difference bump against one another. What would audiences in countries "welcoming"/"flooded by" Syrian refugees hear in the words below? Whose voices would be recognized by different readers in Western European countries fearing the influx of Romanian and Bulgarian "vultures" under the new employment opportunities legislation? These are just a couple of examples from the multiple and dynamic global contexts where macro-level politics have deep and intimate implications on the micro-levels of identity and relationships. [2]

We discuss here apologia and accountability, defined below, as we heard them in conversations with students in the U.S. We perform their implications in relation to our own on-going experiences of immigration and identity formation. We don't seek to be definitive in this performance. We invite the audience to read *with* the

text and the voices in it, not to read *about* some reality, someplace far from their worlds. How do you hear apology and accountability? What else do you hear? [3]

1.2 Methodology: Dialogic performances

As stated above, this text is invitational. It grapples with and invites the reader to consider many of the methodological challenges and possibilities of performance, discussed in the *Performative Social Science* Special Issue of FQS (JONES et al., 2008). It includes "voices" and recounts stories—not as representations, but as points of/for reflection—ours and the readers'. Some of the experiences performed here come from the dialogues we facilitated with U.S. college students on the topics of race and social justice. Where students' voices are heard in this performance, they usually emerge from transcribed recordings of the dialogue sessions, or from students' written reflections at the end of our sessions. Sometimes, the voices performed here are memories of commonly heard responses to our prompts to talk about experiences of being always already raced and the assumption that we are always living in a racialized culture. We see this text as a "narrative collage" (DENZIN, 2003, p.87) of transcriptions, memories, experiences, and reflections that do not follow time/space linearity, but rather crisscross in performing and, thus, creating (BUTLER, 1990) temporary, fluid, and relational subjectivities. Borrowing from Norman DENZIN's (2003) notion of "*reflexive, dialogic, or performative* interview" as a method and ethics of social science, we think of the conversations performed herein as "things that belong to everyone (...) part of the dialogic conversation that connects all of us to the larger moral community (...) They transform information into shared moral experience" (p.79). [4]

The dialogue project received University IRB approval and students signed consent forms for their participation. Additionally, each dialogue session began with information on informed consent and a reminder that, with that consent, sessions will be recorded and conversations may be used in future research projects. However, performance scholars (DIVERSI & MOREIRA, 2010) complicate the issue of consent as others' stories inevitably live in our performances. Protecting the research participants is no longer a logistical act, but an ongoing engagement with voice that cannot be accounted for by institutional frameworks alone. [5]

Eschewing a pretence for a singular truth, we recognize that whether transcribing from recordings, remembering, or reflecting, we are writing both originals and copies that are becoming originals in the process of reading the text (DENZIN, 2003, p.94). As writers and readers, we are listening to and are telling stories in which voices enter ...

re-membered
re-arranged
re-heard
voices

re-corded
to/with
experiences
hopes and fears
and our stories. [6]

In this article we use performance as "a method of inquiry; a condition of possibility for 'producing' different knowledge and producing knowledge differently" (RICHARDSON & ST. PIERRE, 2005, p.969). Much quoted BENJAMIN (2007 [1936]) wrote that "[t]he storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (p.87). Being part of the dialogues was an experience we shared with others and, in this text, we continue to share it, making the reading of the text a performative experience in itself. In linking and telling our stories of voices heard, re-corded, and re-membered, we hope to open up a space for other reflexive re-cordings and re-memberings, for other links. According to CONQUERGOOD (1985), performance is a way of "deeply sensing the other" (p.3), imbued with ethical responsibility and interpersonal morality that also demands continuous self-reflexivity and the linking of the personal and the political. Performances, and narrative performances among them, allow us visceral experiences and understanding—not one for which we can claim exclusive authenticity and objectivity, but rather one that demands the engagement of the structures that shape our experiences of the stories themselves. What (hopes, ideals, schemas, etc.) brings these disparate voices together in this particular moment of the story? What makes us imagine and, sometimes quite literally, construct the bodies that go along with the voices? [7]

In the narrative collages here, sometimes students are intertextually dialoguing—in these instances voices from one dialogue group are (put) in conversation with voices from other dialogue groups. These students may never have met. But in this performance they dialogue through/in the multi-voiced and multi-vocal experiences articulated here—they are our experiences, but also, in different ways, the experiences of other dialogue participants and of readers of this text. Sometimes these are dialogues we imagine could never happen face-to-face, sometimes these dialogues perform our desire for such encounters to take place. We see the dialogues, the real as well as the imagined ones, as doing the work or what MADISON (1998) calls the performance of possibilities, "a movement culminating in creation and change" (p.278). What that change might be beyond the space of our dialogue sessions is something we might only be able to speculate about, but, nevertheless, we hope that movement and change are lasting effects for at least some participants in projects like these. [8]

We sometimes speak "poetically" and sometimes assume a more authoritative analytical voice—performing tensions (of expectations) that we felt (were placed on us) as facilitators and participants in dialogues on the topic of race in the context of academia. We believe that cognitive and affective experiences are intertwined in performances of accountability and apologia. The possibilities of

multiple outcomes in-between these two—apologia and accountability—are likely countless and Stuart HALL's (2008) "no guarantees" perspective would mean that "outcomes" themselves are changeable, moving, uncertain, and open to continuous re-interpretation. As some parts of our own histories, experiences, and contexts change, while others stay stable, an (auto) ethnographic performance of the kind that we enact in this piece allows us to make sense of our experiences in a dialogic fashion, one that does not reduce subjectivities and narratives to singular denominators, but rather embraces loose ends and im/partial answers. [9]

Performance is a space where social justice lives. It is a space where we are dialectically capable of, as MARTIN and NAKAYAMA (1999) say, "letting go of the more rigid kinds of knowledge that we have and entering into more uncertain ways of knowing about others" (p.19). Furthermore, performance is a space in which MADISON's (1998) politics of possibility become an embodied articulation, rather than an abstract notion. We narrate and perform tensions that we heard and sometimes articulated, in our dialogues about race. Although the individual meanings and significance of these tensions are open to re-interpretation, we offer one possibility of how they may work discursively to build an overarching dialectic of apologia-accountability. [10]

Scholars of rhetoric define apologia as a discourse of self-defense against explicit or presumed attacks upon one's character (WARE & LINKUGEL, 1973). MARTY (1999) argues that "much antiracist rhetoric ironically takes the form of an apologia, the speech of self-defense ... as [White people] deflect any recognition of wrongdoing or of the need for accountability" (p.52). She explains that, "[d]espite our antiracist commitments, many white people often opt to protect our moral reputations and our versions of progressive politics rather than recognize and change our unfair and unearned racially based advantages" (ibid.). On the other hand, it may be said that rhetorical accountability for racial privilege involves resisting the impulse to defend one's character from charges of racism in order to see ourselves as we are seen by underprivileged others as we forego the "privilege of unknowing" (ibid.5). In different forms, we heard the articulations of apologia and accountability from both White students and students of color, in different contexts and with different implications. As such, we see this dialectic as a part of the dominant discourse on race, racism, and social justice and we imagine how it works variously

to construct

and support

and re-imagine

and resist

dimensions of inequality. [11]

2. Performance

2.1 Scene I: Introductions

Narrator's voice: Three women, Lily, a Bulgarian, who mostly identifies (herself) as White ...

Lily: Except sometimes ... Like the other day. My two-year old son was so amused by listing the colors of objects he sees around the house. And then his dad asked him, "What color is mommy?" Sammie, our boy, looked at me thoughtfully, putting his little finger on his chin, as he now does, tilting his head slightly to the right, and then he smiled and said "Brownt" (his version of brown). Daddy, who is of Polish decent, blond and blue-eyed, was "Pink," and Sammie himself was "Yeeelow" (yellow). And I wondered... is two years of age too early to start talking about how skin color is nuanced by factors other than pigment?

I mostly identify (myself) as White and mostly as Bulgarian ... Except sometimes ... when I hear and am reminded that *да живея като бял човек* [to live like a white person] is more than a clichéd phrase in Bulgaria. It's an aspiration. Unreal. It's a definition of what I am not—at the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality, and social class. [12]

Narrator's voice: Three women, Ellen, a U.S. Latina of Puerto Rican descent.

Ellen: When asked "what are you?" I used to say simply "Puerto Rican." But now I've added the qualifiers and thereby avoid needing to explain, "no I've never lived in Puerto Rico (U.S.), and no Spanish isn't my native language (descent), and yes, I identify and ally myself with the struggles of people from or descended from other Caribbean and Latin American countries (Latina)." And yet, I too must acknowledge and struggle with a childhood nurtured by aspirations to live like a white person. [13]

Narrator's voice: Three women, Dijana, a ...

Dijana: A Yugoslav; Bosnian; Serbian; born and raised in Croatia; an officially documented U.S. resident alien; female; average height; dark hair; brown eyes; married; a mother; add-your-pick-here ... and the list of qualifying epithets can go on, but it is never completely sufficient.

It ends with a hyphen— [14]

Narrator's voice: Three women, three dialogue facilitators, sisters, daughters, friends, and people who stubbornly care, but sometimes probably just as stubbornly fail. Histories and echoes that cannot be summed in numbers. Facilitating "How Does Race Matter?"_

Lily: Hearing—then and now—a language of apologia—attempts at self-defense,

Ellen: self-defense against racism and charges of racism,

Dijana: self-defense against knowing how race matters,

Lily: discriminated and discriminating.

Hearing—then and now—a language of accountability—

Ellen: attempts to be accountable for a system of racial hierarchy that is not of our and not of their making

Dijana: and which has had a hand in shaping our and their lived realities, and to which we in turn contribute. [15]

2.2 Scene II: Love on a road paved with good intentions

[A White male student sitting on a chair, hunched over, elbows on his knees, almost confidentially close to the darkness that now veils his dialogue partners; the light is on him as he says in a loud and clear voice, piercingly audible among the other voices in the background, as if from a recording]

Student: If people just love each other, everything will be fine. [16]

Lily [whispering, internal dialogue]:

too stiff in its simplicity, this cliché

i read the story of the Lovings²—

the family whose public love

changed marriage

between races

it sticks

between

moving

Lily [out loud, remembering]: I recognize the voice—White, male, authoritative, but somehow tender and wistful. I know this guy, I remember him sitting next to me. I rewind over and over, hoping to hear his partner's response ... [17]

Student: If people just love each other, everything will be fine. [18]

Lily: I am easy, easy to love

Being White, educated, and heterosexually married in the U.S. often allows my heavy accent to actually *accent* an (assumed) appropriately interesting personality, making me, for some, *the encounter of the diverse kind* that serves to prove "acceptance" and "tolerance," fending charges of the dreaded "racism." Sometimes it's as simple as the cashier at the store asking "Where is your accent from?"

(I can't help but notice that she's young, perhaps one of the high school kids who get seasonal jobs at the local grocery store; I can't help but notice that she's smiling brightly, just cheerfully chatting with the young guy who bagged the groceries of the customer ahead of me; I can't help but notice that her skin is a

2 The Loving family was the first interracial family to successfully challenge a state ban on interracial marriages in the U.S. (in *Loving vs. Virginia*).

warm fallow deer shade of brown and his is very pale pinkish contrasting a raven hair; I can't help but notice that in their chit-chat this all does not seem to matter, at least not right then and there; and I enjoy watching two "kids" laughing together as I wait in line.)

She: Where is your accent from?

Me: Bulgaria

She: That is soooo cool, I'm jealous

Me: [I smile] not sure what else to do in this exact moment as I gather my receipt. Not sure what warrants "jealousy" in this person ... maybe I should ask ... I get my bags and wrap my arm around my son, "Have a good day."

In books I've often encountered the possibility of someone smiling "apologetically." In that moment I feel a little apologetic. But why? For the "origin" of my accent? For having an accent notably different from the standard one? For having a "cool" accent? For feeling a tingle of pleasure at being (recognized as) exotic in a good way? For being implicated and silently participating in a system of othering? For clearly being recognized as not quite falling into place, but proclaimed that's a cool kind of outside-ness?

For knowing

I come from a place	I came to a place
where I belonged to a	where you belong to a
dominant ethnos	dominant ethnos
entitling me to	voluntarily
not have to	instantaneously
think about race	becoming an-other

As I leave the store, I hear the voice of one of the White students in the dialogues who said the following in verification of his fair treatment of others: [19]

White male student: I have all White friends and one Iranian friend, but I am friends with him not because of his race, but because of who he is, because he just fell into place. [20]

Lily [to herself]: Yet, it is the Iranian friend "worth" mentioning in the context of talking about race in the U.S. [21]

Ellen [to herself]:—I am wondering if this student was asserting good intentions? VAN DIJK (1992) says that "good intentions are seen as implementation of good attitudes, and hence as characteristics of good social membership or good citizenship" (p.91). [22]

Lily [to herself]: Like my smile? [Do you] Like my smile? [23]

Dijana: So asserting good intentions may be seen as a defense against the charge of racism? [24]

Ellen: According to VAN DIJK asserting good intentions is one form of the discourse of apologia. It superficially resolves the tension of having to be held accountable. I mean well, therefore, I need not be accountable. [25]

Lily: In "The Everyday Language of White Racism," Jane HILL (2008) also talks about the "folk psychology of personalism" (p.103) that allows us to have/produce racist talk without racism—good intentions excuse racists slips of tongue. Being good at heart demands forgiveness. It can't be hurtful, discriminatory, constructing or sustaining structures of inequality if the speaker asserts it wasn't meant to do all that. [26]

Dijana: In our dialogues, we asked students if they see and/or experience racial discrimination on our campus (which is more than 70% White), and although students of all colors talked about noticing a culture of segregation, good intentions were always there to shield and excuse segregation from accusations of discrimination. [27]

White male Student: It's almost like you have a tendency to gravitate towards your own, like people that look like you, people that dress like you, people that talk like you, whatever ... So, if you want to make a change or whatever, you basically just have to go out and, like, associate and minnngle [sic] with other people from different groups and just like kind of do it really on purpose ... [28]

2nd White male student: Which kind of defeats the whole point of the argument 'cause then you're only meeting up with that person because they are of that certain race ... [29]

Lily: If people just love each other, everything will be fine.

Just love me!

Ok, I know, I'm a foreigner, too strange sometimes.

Love doesn't always come easy ...

And what if I had grown up here, and my parents had, too, and their parents ... and what if still when I should feel right at home and one of the "natives," I were reminded over and over that I somehow don't quite fit in the bill? [30]

Black male student: I mean, you do know, like, I have noticed the privilege that comes with whiteness and at times we do feel some type of resentment towards it, but it's not like ... This is society, this is the way it's structured, you kind of gotta deal with it. You just gotta buck it and just work harder, that's what you gotta do. Like I felt it when applying to schools. People ask me what schools I'm applying to get into and it's like 'Oh, wow, you got in there. I'm not expecting you to get in there, how did you get in there?' And it's like, you just look at them and it's like 'What do you mean ... Am I not supposed to get in there just 'cause I'm Black?'

But honestly, even though it's there, we've gotten accustomed to it ... like you just kind of ... I mean at least for me, I'm kind of past it and don't really feel it anymore. [31]

White male student: Well, I feel like the suburbs and all that like it's 'cause of lack of like opportunity for like minorities of any race, like they don't have as much opportunity as White people, like that's a given, but at the same time, like, they, some of them know that and they still don't go, like obviously it will be harder for them, but they just don't go the extra distance to get that opportunity. They're just like 'Whatever, it's not gonna work for me, like that's how society is, so I'm just gonna deal with it the way it is.' I feel like, like that contributes to like racial profiling and stereotypes, like that builds to it, too. [32]

White female student: I feel like a lot of times when we talk about race we just keep saying the same stuff ... and it doesn't really change anything. [33]

Lily [looking at student]: Like what? [34]

White female student: Like ... all this talk about White privilege, like we all know it's there and we all talk about it, but no one does anything about it. [35]

Black male student: I mean I don't think you can do anything about it, though, it's just kind of there, 'cause the way it's, the way it's set up ... we can try to change it, but you can't, you can't honestly tell me that if you have a privilege, you're not just gonna, you're not gonna be like 'Alright, just take my privilege away now!' 'Cause if I had privilege, I'm not gonna be like 'Yo, take it away from me, let's make everything fair ... I don't know, just how it is. [36]

White male student: Be happy for what you have and it sucks for people who don't ... [37]

Lily: "Buck it,"

hold on to your privilege,

be happy for it ...

Individual action of "bucking it" and "happy-ing it" on a universal, all-human scale?

Individualism meets universality

Every

Body

does it? [38]

Dijana: All too often, individualism serves as a means to avoid talking about whiteness and privilege in its more obscure, but more powerful iteration: as that which permeates the very structures on which society builds its multi-culti worlds. [39]

Lily: Precisely, Ellen and I talked about this, too. Sure, we can (and ought to) be accountable as individuals in our daily lives, make the small changes, a trickle-up effect, etc. But emphasizing individual responsibility obscures the structures that shape enactments of such responsibility. And, paradoxically, emphasizing individual responsibility in the abstract seems to obscure how our conversations above are actually performing, and, following BUTLER (1990), constructing those structures in which "bucking it" apparently does not count as "doing anything about it" or for it, for that matter.

Yet, there is something optimistic in the promise of taking responsibility even in the face of "that's how society is." Do you remember this from one student's written reflection? [40]

Student: I definitely enjoyed the dialogue and did not see it as something that was time consuming or pointless. I believe just talking about it makes a gradual change because you cannot escape awareness since it has been made, however you can make a choice to make a difference when the time comes. [41]

Lily: I don't know that student's sex or race but in my mind she's a White girl ...
... I tell myself I need to interrogate and challenge my categories and just then, a friend reminds me of my own category-ability [42]

Dijana: I wonder how making a difference materializes in interaction ... Was the cashier you talked about earlier making a difference? Were you? What difference?

[Lily gets up and moves toward the back of the stage with Dijana and Ellen takes the seat Lily vacated. The student remains in the same seat.] [43]

2.3 Scene III: "When the time comes"

Ellen: [looks at student] You can make a choice to make a difference when the time comes.

[pause, Ellen looks at audience] I decided, in middle age, to pursue a Ph.D. in Communication. Among the reasons for this life change was the need to better understand the layers of my racial and ethnic identity, and my own ambivalence about what it means to be Puerto Rican. I am a third generation mainland Puerto Rican; the descendent of poor and working class island Puerto Ricans. I was a toddler when my parents moved us from a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York City to a rural, upstate, White community. They decided to speak to me and my younger brothers only in English. Later they said they wanted to spare us the prejudice and lack of opportunity they experienced growing up in New York City. I don't think they realized how complete their children's disconnection from Puerto Rican culture would be. But I don't know if it would have made any difference. There were only a few other Puerto Rican families in our small town, although I never thought about that. For me, assimilation was not chosen but an invisible reality. I thought I was just like the White kids in the neighborhood. [44]

Dijana: MARTIN and NAKAYMA (1999) say, "[m]any times, it may not be clear who or how one is privileged or disadvantaged. It may be unstable, fleeting, may depend on the topic, or the context" (p.18). [45]

Black male student: For me, back in high school, I was never with the Black people. I never had classes with them, I was like ... Not to say Black people are stupid, but I was always in the high-end classes that even if my friends were smart enough to get into, they would avoid them just because they were harder. So, instead of chillin', I was usually doing work and stuff like that. So I was always told I acted White. Why do I always act White? I mean, it sounds bad that way, but I don't know any other way to explain it. But ... it's a state of mind. There's no set rules, or definitions. [46]

Dijana: Ellen, I think that when your student says that he was accused of "acting White," he brings up a very important aspect through which apologia and accountability often work: the framework of performance. It's not about *being* a certain way, it is about acting a certain way and, in acting, becoming a certain being. I act, therefore I am? [47]

Ellen: Yes, performance and in particular the assumption that there is something "false" about performance here ... There is a question here worth asking: how might our performances reflect, construct, or destabilize processes of making meanings of/for race and creating race as a meaningful concept? [48]

Lily: What are authentic performances of race? And how do you see this linking back to accountability and apologia? [49]

Ellen: Well, it has to do with ascribed and avowed identity and they're both important. I too, like that Black student, often act White or am told I act White and yet I want to and do avow my Puerto Rican identity. [50]

Lily: Is it a form of apologia when we claim we "exploit" the dominant structures we have mastered, but (don't recognize that) in doing so we continue to perform them into existence? [51]

Ellen: How do I do this—reap the social benefits of being able to act White and survive and thrive—and remain accountable for the negative experiences of a whole group of people who don't act "White enough?" What does all this mean for my relationships with these groups of people, as well as with White people? In other words, how do I remain accountable for the power I have because I have been socialized to "act White"? [52]

Dijana: But the sheer attempt to act a certain way does not necessarily and immediately resolve inequality, otherwise it would all be so simple: we could all collectively *act* as if we have agency and power (through whiteness and otherwise), and that would *give* us agency and power. It doesn't always work like that, and this might be where we reach the limits of our performance framework. Some inequalities are inscribed on bodies in ways that often preclude an

individual from reversing them simply by attempting to act *otherwise*. This does not necessarily entail that we need to dismiss performance altogether, but do away with the more idealistic approaches which assume that performance=change, and always necessarily in some kind of guaranteed fashion. [53]

Ellen: In other words, where does an individual's agency or accountability begin and end? [54]

Dijana: But let's not forget performativity in BUTLER's [1990] sense of the word ...), a more hidden, subtler process if you will, one by which we gently reiterate the status quo simply by perpetuating that which has been deemed generally and unquestionably ... true. Perhaps an individual's agency and her relation to accountability can be traced down to performativity, and acted upon by the process of un-learning that which has been deemed generally and unquestionably ... true? [55]

Lily: For me, it comes again to this fine thread that connects resistance and re-iteration (BUTLER talks about that, too), the tension between transformation and affirmation when we dance with the structures of privilege. Do you see any of this in the following summary of a conversation during one of the dialogue sessions? [56]

Ellen: I remember this exchange vividly. The Puerto Rican kid, tall, thin, skin the color of café con leche, was sitting across from me. The Black kid, also tall, husky, dark skinned, sat right next to him. We were talking about driving-while-Black-or-Brown and the Puerto Rican kid, I'll call him Rafael, recounted a time when he was stopped on campus and the cop called for back-up. He charmed the cop. Smiled, called him sir. He knew not to be angry—play the game and it will be all right. He also knew, he said he was keenly conscious, that he could talk himself out of what could be a serious situation. And he knew that his light skin was an asset. Rafael looked right at the Black kid next to him—I'll call him Derrick—I don't think they knew each other—and Rafael said something like, [57]

Puerto Rican male student: Sorry buddy. I know it would have been different for you. You couldn't rely on your light skin to help you walk away. But I'm going to do what I have to do. I'm going to use whatever I have to save me from going to jail. Sorry, but I'm not going to jail for you. [58]

Ellen: Derrick smiled, seeming to say [59]

Black male student: I understand. [60]

Ellen: Or maybe he actually said it. I don't remember. I was struck by Rafael's candor. His slightly apologetic "every man for himself" epistemology. His sense that Derrick would understand that in the uneven racial playing field no one could be criticized for using their light skin advantage. [61]

Black male student: 'Cause if I had privilege, I'm not gonna be like "Yo, take it away from me, let's make everything fair" ... [62]

Lily: And so, it seems to me that's how apologia and accountability might work together to excuse racism on the systemic level—an "every man (and woman!) for himself" mentality makes the individual responsible for racist acts, but also excuses them, as we all just need to do whatever we have to in order to survive and prosper. The focus is on the individual and that makes invisible the many ways in which the system of racism affects all of us. [63]

Ellen: So it's not only cut and dry? Even when we're trying to be accountable sometimes we may be invoking a kind of apologia?

[Ellen moves to back of stage and Dijana takes her seat.] [64]

2.4 Scene IV: Original(ly) thinking

Dijana: Most commonly heard story during my co-facilitating sessions was a denial of having enough "racial experience" to be able to say anything meaningful about the subject of race. A device with which to mask inability to name oneself as always already a racialized subject: [65]

White student [*paraphrasing*]: Where I grew up, everyone looked like me so, race really wasn't an issue, we never thought about it. [66]

Dijana: I heard this sentence during the dialogues, in different versions yet always to the same end, over and over and over again. It was most commonly uttered by White students. They were usually describing their suburban childhoods, spent in spaces where homogeneity was so prevalent that it was erased from existence altogether. Apologia as an appeal to ignorance. Yet I'm not allowed to teach (that's our facilitators' pledge), instead I just try to nudge. So I usually say:

Dijana: So, when did you first become aware of the fact that race is an issue after all?

Usual answer: [*paraphrasing*] [67]

White student: I don't know, in college ...? I mean, I always knew there were people of other races, of course. It's just that I didn't have to think about *those* issues, so I don't have much to say now. [68]

Ellen: I think these interchanges might be interpreted as a kind of disclaimer. [69]

White student [*paraphrasing*]: Don't blame me for my silence. I'm innocent in my ignorance. I have nothing to say because I play no role in the structure of racial hierarchy. I'm an innocent outsider. [70]

Ellen: Exactly! [*looking at Dijana*] What do you do when this comes up? [71]

Dijana: Then I usually say: Do you think that the fact that you grew up not having to think about race at all, while that is not true for some other people here, also tells us something about race in this country?

Most common answer: [*paraphrasing*] [72]

White student: Well, no. My parents worked hard to be able to raise their kids in a nice neighborhood, what's wrong with that? It's not *my* fault that everyone there was White! [73]

Dijana: In my ideal scenario, at this point, a student of color would chime in and say: [74]

Hypothetical student of color: *But my parents worked really hard all their lives too, yet we were never able to grow up in a "nice" neighborhood.* [75]

Dijana: My ideal scenario never comes to be, really. Which is just as well, because, what kind of blunt assumption am I making on non-White students' behalf? Certainly, some students of color might have grown up in these "nice" neighborhoods too, and some White students might have grown up in "not-so-nice" neighborhoods and so on ... I shouldn't make assumptions based on my students' skin color—as the appropriate mantra for doing things nowadays go. But don't we all make assumptions all the time anyway? We are just better trained not to reveal that we do. That's what years of practicing *political correctness* bring. [76]

Lily: Yes, and of course institutionalized racism has created inequalities of wealth, for example, based on race (OLIVER & SHAPIRO, 2006). Some of the assumptions we make based on skin color are based in reality—it's the root causes of that reality that are unknown or unacknowledged by many. [77]

Ellen: At the start of each dialogue, facilitators introduce themselves and say why they are participating in the project. Dijana always says a version of this: [78]

Dijana: Hi everyone, my name is Dijana, I am a PhD student here on campus. I originally come from Bosnia. Bosnia used to be a part of Yugoslavia, and then there was a war and the country split up. I was able to experience firsthand how divisions among people along ethnic, or religious, or racial lines can bring about horrible violence and destruction. That is why I am a part of this project, because these questions of exclusion are important to me both personally, and as a part of my intellectual work.

Dijana [to audience]: I never dwell on the question of what the students make of the fact that I come from Bosnia. How could I account for all the possible reactions? They must be as wide-ranging as they are probably nebulous and non-discernible to their owners. What's important to me is that the students know where my experience with and desire to talk about exclusions traveled from to get here. From then on, it's where we go with it, not where we *stand* with it. [79]

Lily: That's right. Standing versus moving. Isn't that what this dialogue project is all about? [80]

Dijana: One word in my introduction hangs awkwardly for me: "originally." As in, "I originally come from here-and-there." It can be uncomfortably close to the notion of "core origin." But when I do away with "originally" altogether, the statement loses some nuance. Because "originally" gives it a history in which it is implied that I don't come *only* from Bosnia and *only* from everything that this geographical position implies. [81]

Lily: The historicity and instability of "originally" seems to connect to the dialogues ... [82]

Dijana: Exactly. Our students are also "originally" from somewhere, but that does not automatically imply that they have not moved to many other positions, places, attitudes. Indeed, some students might be actually saying ... [83]

Hypothetical student: I originally come from a place where race seemed not to be an issue, but currently, I am based in a place where I am trying to work through the realization that it is very much an issue after all. [84]

3. Epilogue

Lily: So, where do we go from here? [85]

Ellen: We have so much rich material for a dialogic performance. [86]

Dijana: Perhaps we can weave our responses to the race dialogues into a play in which many voices speak about their making sense of this uneven terrain of racialized existence? [87]

Lily: Bring voices together, have them speak for themselves, yet in us, through us, and with us; with each other, not against each other. Perform as we continue to experience what CONQUERGOOD, THAO and THAO cherish as

"mutually struggling encounters between self and other, where two world views, two voices are brought together in dialogue to test, challenge, and invigorate one another (...) We enlarge and enrich ourselves through dialogue with others—others whose differences challenge our complacencies and open to us new boundaries of human experience in our shared world" (1989, p.75). [88]

Hypothetical student: I am raced, therefore I am? A moment of reflection that can interchangeably designate the performances of apologia and accountability in equal measure. This moment is therefore not an endpoint, but rather a point of departure. [89]

Lily: A point of departure where as White people we sometimes invoke good intentions and love in order to defend against the perceived charge of racism. [90]

Ellen: And where as people of color we sometimes invoke individualism to defend against charges that we are complicit with a racist system. [91]

Dijana: A point of departure where dominant group members assert ignorance as a means to prove innocence. But sometimes a moment of accountability and hope where we assert our own agency to "make a choice to make a difference." [92]

Voices: In the end, we find that the performances of apologia and accountability, so often encountered in our own, as well as our students' words during the race dialogue sessions, cannot be frozen into static positions where they mean one and one thing only. Instead, they seem to designate ever shifting attempts to make sense of where one stands with respect to the vastly complicated nexus of vectors that come together to form each of our identities. Where does an individual stand then? If we concentrate on individual complicity too much, we risk erasing a seemingly much more urgent, structural, and collective mechanism through which racial inequality is exercised and perpetuated. Yet, if we do not speak about our own, individual accountability when it comes to racial inequality, we risk performing apologia through denying that our actions can and do make a difference (however big or small that difference might be).

Our individual accountabilities cannot be separated from the more collective economy of racial hierarchy, just as the collective accountability does not always neatly trickle down to every individual performance of accountability for racial privilege in equal measure.

While we're not at the same place with regards to the work of apologia and accountability in race discourse we are transformed and transforming because we hear

... Apologia and
Accountability
And search for our place in
Racing (for) social justice [93]

Hypothetical student: It's all messy and contextual ... I *do* have good intentions ... I *am* an individual ... I *do* start from somewhere ... but I can still make a choice to make a difference ...

... To move and stand ...
... walking away and into ...
... with questions raised, yet-to-be-answered. ... [94]

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Authors

Ellen CORREA is a doctoral candidate in the Communication Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on examining the ethical and relational implications of the discourse of cultural assimilation. As a third generation Puerto Rican, her dissertation will use dialogue and performance ethnography to explore her own family's experience of cultural assimilation.

Contact:

Ellen Correa
Department of Communication
University of Massachusetts Amherst
240 Hicks Way
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003-9278
USA

E-mail: ecorrea@comm.umass.edu

Lily HERAKOVA holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her work explores and performs the dialogic construction of knowledge, care, and identities in communication, particularly in health care and interpersonal contexts. Lily has presented at numerous interdisciplinary conferences and has published in various journals, including *Journal of Applied Communication*, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, and *Communication Studies*.

Contact:

Liliana Herakova
Department of Communication
Western New England University
1215 Wilbraham Rd.
Springfield, Massachusetts 01119
USA

E-mail: lherakova@gmail.com

Dijana JELACA holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her areas of specialization include critical cultural studies, cinema studies, critical ethnic studies and transnational feminist theories. Dijana's research interests center on the questions of how cultural production constitutes, limits and frames the uses of collective trauma in the aftermath of catastrophe, particularly wars. Her work has appeared in *Camera Obscura*, *Communication Studies*, *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, and elsewhere.

Contact:

Dijana Jelaca
Department of Rhetoric, Communication and Theater
St. John's University
8000 Utopia Parkway
Queens, New York 11439
USA

E-mail: ddj514@gmail.com

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