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Racists like us...

Posted By [james arvanitakis](#) and [dinesh wadiwel](#) on 23 Feb 2008 @ 6:56 pm in [2-Race/Matter \[Feb 08\]](#), [Issues](#) | [No Comments](#)

This contribution is a reflection, conversation and debate between two people struggling to understand their own prejudices and interrogate the meaning of anti-racist politics. Acknowledging our own positions of privilege, we see ourselves as embodying whiteness: Dinesh as an Indian *velakaran* (Tamil expression for 'white man') and James as a 'white-wog' (being ethnic in name and heritage only). In the process of self-acknowledgment, we ask each other to answer four questions honestly (and brutally): How do we embody whiteness? How do we embody racism? How do you do anti-racist politics? Can we be free of racism?

We conclude by reflecting on how anti-racist politics might be possible, even when guided haphazardly by 'racists like us...'

How do we embody whiteness, even if we are not?

DW: Race is not merely peripheral to the surface of the body, but is subcutaneous. We are enfolded by race, in an inescapably fleshy way. Race is translated, not merely by words or logic, but through a woven fabric that simultaneously binds others, the world and myself. This is the world that Maurice Merleau Ponty imagined as continuously connected between apparently autonomous corporeal entities: "between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is an overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we pass into things."¹ This fleshy interconnection is coloured. Race gives meaning to the deep tissue, the structure of the bones and skull, it construes the deportment of the body and its inescapable connection to the world of others. It offers signification to the food that is digested by this body, the way it is digested, the way it is shitted out. It deciphers smell and touch. In this regard, we all share something with Klaus Theweleit's fascist males: whiteness is not merely an idea, but comes to metamorphose the body.²

It was for this reason that in my life, avoiding sunshine, applying talcum powder or using a skin whitening cream was never going to completely obliterate the stain of race. More drastic measures were taken. A program was initiated, beginning from the earliest point of self awareness, comprehensive albeit intensive in scope, aimed at reorganising the physical self in order to systematically extrude the dark stain, and navigate the interminable path to the bodiless transparency of whiteness.

For example, learn quickly that there are good blacks and bad blacks. Decide which one you want to be. I remember with curious shame the first time that I, a child of Indian descent, was accused of "acting like a savage." It is a curious shame, because it reflects a shame within a shame on the margins of whiteness. And although it is with shame that I now recall my almost childhood shame, I can also recognise what this absurd shame signified: namely the aspiration known by all - yet unspoken - within the economy of whiteness to become already whiter than you are. Confirmation, if you like, of Cheryl I Harris proposition that "becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being objects of other's domination."³

Avoid being called a curry muncher by not being seen munching curry.

JA: I grew up close to surfing beach and knew that I was never going to be a surfer. I hated myself for not having blond hair or blue eyes. I was crap at riding a skateboard and was told that, because of this, I could never surf.

So I compensated by making friends with the surfers and being 'just like them' in other ways. There were some wogs that were like me - white wogs - and that made us ok. Once I was told that you could not even tell I was a wog. This made my shame of not surfing or being good on a skateboard partially dissipate. But

there were bad wogs - the brown wogs - which must be avoided. I could not get too close to them in case I was confused with them. Everything made me different from them - a different accent, an Anglicised name, I did not play soccer (or wog-ball as we called it). I even had an Australian girlfriend.

Race defines who we are and who we want to be: and just as importantly, it provides us with a map of what we do not want to be. It defines the way we see the world, ourselves and others. It shapes the way we speak, walk, talk and our pastimes. Without even knowing it, it comes to shape everything about us. For those of us who are not quite white on the outside, we make ourselves as white as possible on the inside. Lurking underneath, however, is the fear that we are not as white as we think we are.

How do you embody racism - are we all racist?

JA: If race is not periphery in who we are but defines us, then we must understand any biases that we have as embodying racism. I, however, am a left-leaning, progressive, anti-racist activist, how can I be racist? If I am honest with myself, then I must say that I am.

But how is this manifested? One time while working in the Solomon Islands I took a short cut to get downtown and was confronted by eight young men - local boys - ranging in ages from 18-25 years. As they approached me I was terrified, convinced that I was soon to be attacked. As they harmlessly passed me, greeting me as they did, I understood how deeply ingrained racism is: here I was in a nation with black people and I was fearful when confronted by them.

I believe that we all embody racist tendencies - fearing the other that we may not understand. We are confronted with stereotypes of the other from the moment that we see our first advertisement, watch television, hear jokes about Lebs, wogs or Abos and, learn that we must distinguish ourselves from those who are different (the brown wogs for example). Racism enters our bodies through the signs that we read and the conversations that we have. We breathe it in and reproduce it in a multitude of ways such as holding our bag closer and a little tighter when the black kid walks past.

DW: If we are raised in the midst of whiteness, our thoughts and corporeality constructed by it, our deep fantasies and aspirations configured by it, then how can we imagine ourselves as non-racist?

We should of course be careful about what we mean by our declaration that "we are racist." Sara Ahmed's recent challenges to describing whiteness and racism⁴ suggest the inherent difficulty in placing ourselves within these discussions. In particular, Ahmed highlights the potential for the confession of racism to be used as a way to also distance oneself from being a racist. For example the institution that owns up to its racist past, simultaneously appears to remove individual responsibility: "to say 'we are racist' is here translated into the statement it seeks to replace, 'I am racist', where 'our racism' is describable as bad practice that can be changed through learning more tolerant attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, if the institution becomes like the individual, then one suspects that the institution also *takes the place of individuals*: it is the institution that is the bad person, rather than this person or that person".⁵

We are not letting ourselves off the hook. Rather we, or I, must declare the operation of race on my own body, the impossibility of stepping outside the field of its power, and therefore the impossibility of declaring oneself not racist. This does not preclude anti racism, but reframes the situation of anti racism as strategy.

How do you do anti-racist politics?

JA: I was confronted by Sara Ahmed's article⁶ and have spent a great deal of time reflecting on the themes she raised around the non-performativity of anti-racism. Do our claims of anti-racist politics merely make middle-class 'wannabe' whites feel better about themselves? I agree with Dinesh, maybe acknowledging the impossibility of being 'not racist' can become the first step in doing anti-racist politics.

Ahmed ends her article by arguing that we should not think in terms of 'what can I do' but, rather, asking 'what can be done?'

To answer this question, I begin with the belief that an anti-racist politics is both an individual and social matter. As an individual, it is an attempt to journey through the anti-racism while at the same time acknowledge my own motivations for this path. As an individual, it is important to note that the issue of

whiteness, like power, is everywhere around us. In the classes I run, to the way that train ticket inspectors target specific people.

I am attempting to do anti-racist politics by acknowledging that I am not colour blind - John Rawls' 'veil of ignorance'⁷ is not possible. I see skin tones including whiteness. While Rawls' discussion revolved around the distribution of goods, his position that an appropriate position of justice could only be achieved if the person judging removes specific knowledge of their actual situation - physical attributes, skin colour, educational background and so on - has relevance here. For Rawls, if the individual is placed behind this 'veil of ignorance', they would preclude any constructing of social arrangements tailored to benefit any one person specifically: this would include a hierarchy of whiteness. We, however, can not claim that we can hide behind this veil.

Even when I work with an anti-racist group, I see bias emerge with skin colour. Such tendencies cannot be fought in terms of John Locke's rational and liberal subject. It is only through a desire to confront the irrationality of prejudice on both a personal and social level.

On a social level, then, anti-racist politics is an attempt to engage in both formal and informal politics. One way to do this is to confront race issues where possible - from the class room, the stadium at the football to the ballot box. I have no road map how this can be done, however, and can only tread carefully attempting to engage rather than yell; maintaining outrage while balancing my own ignorance and motivations; realising that anti-racist politics can itself substantively add to racial tensions.

DW: I think there are some theoretical perspectives that may offer an alternative to John Rawls' fantasy of the liberal subject who is able to rationally dispose of their veil of ignorance. Anti racism should not be understood as simply an attempt to cleanse the mind through rationality, but rather as the difficult process of escaping the intractable department of the flesh of the self within the field of race. What is needed is an understanding of how we might become something that we are not - and may never in fact be - not as a process of imitation or false alterity, but as a genuine transformation towards a different state.

I am in part here thinking of the concept of 'becoming,' understood by Deleuze and Guattari as a process of movement from one state to another. This transformation begins at a point that has no essential connection to what one will become; further while the trajectory of one's movement may align with a point that resembles one's intended destination, the becoming inevitably achieves an entirely different state: "becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes."⁸

Thus, and to refer here to Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming animal," to run "like a horse" is not to transform to a horse, nor simply to imitate a horse, but to transport one's molecular self along a trajectory that is distinctly inhuman, a movement that in retrospect can only be described by the analogy "like a horse." To transfer this into our discussion here, anti racism necessarily proceeds through a path that propels the anti racist away from what one is, a transformation that we may wish to label 'anti racist' but which in fact is simply a process of change that defies the routine coordinates of the racist self. The anti racist subject must in truth be considered the racist subject who is becoming something else.

Can we be free of racism?

JA: No, we cannot. I return to Rawls' veil of ignorance and believe it is not possible. We will always judge people by their appearance - be it their skin colour or that their eyes are too close together. Levels of repulsion or attraction based on physical features are so embedded within us they have become - and probably always will be - part of human history.

In a way we must ask, 'do we want to experience this veil of ignorance'? For me, the answer has become increasingly 'no' - even if it was possible.

By saying this, I am not following a path that prejudice is acceptable, but that we will always experience prejudices. We can never be free of them, the challenge is to confront them and the way they manifest. On this journey, however, there is a desire for hope: the hope that others will continue to join in and that resistance to racism becomes a motto for our lives.

As a self-accepting racist then, how do I do anti-racist politics and attempt to deal with what is embedded within me? It is by not submitting to my own condition, but by confronting it and extending the personal into the realm of the political. Racists like us can move in this direction while humbly accepting our own limitations.

DW: If we follow to its conclusion Giorgio Agamben's statement that "Western politics is a biopolitics from the very beginning."⁹, then we might argue that racism is sewn deeply into the structure of politics in the west. Although Agamben's claim is extraordinary, it is not without justification. For example, if we take Plato's *Republic*, which is regarded as the cornerstone of western political philosophy, and consider the commitment by Socrates to the idea of breeding and cultivation in his utopia, in particular the intense regulation by the State of child rearing - a program for citizens to produce better children, who are "better able produce still better children in their turn, as can be seen with animals"¹⁰ - it difficult to escape from the conclusion that racism, the idea of race, has been the secret desire of politics all along. We might say that today 'racists like us' reside at the end of a very long, and very bad trip.

I acknowledge, like you James, that confronting racism may be a journey without end: anti racism considered here as a process of continual becoming. In this respect, Jacques Derrida's use of concept of the *aporia* - a logical contradiction that cannot be resolved through reason; an interminable experience - is potentially very useful for our discussion here. Derrida associates the *aporia* with gestures that demand the impossible: for example forgiveness necessarily demands that we forgive the unforgivable; similarly, generosity calls upon us to give when in truth there is no reason to give. Anti racist politics might also be thought of as *aporetic* in the same sense, in so far as it seeks to displace from politics that which might be considered inherent to its functioning.

I do however have a hope for existence beyond race. This would require either a profound break in the way in which we understand politics, or alternatively, a momentary suspension in the operation of racist biopolitics. I cannot yet say whether the former is possible; I do however believe the latter condition is within our lived reality. I am talking here of the rare moments in one's life where even momentarily it becomes possible to imagine relationships unmediated by the violence of race. This is the space where the most unlikely bodies break free from the hold of race and become something quite different. This is the moment of understanding, where it would seem two different worlds touch each other, like enemy soldiers sharing a cigarette. These moments are over within the space of a glance, but are heavenly, pleasurable, beyond measure. Perhaps for want of a better descriptor we might call this 'love.'

Notes

1. Maurice Merleau Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. p123. [[↩](#)]
2. Klaus Theweleit. *Male Fantasies, Volume 2 Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. pp143-270. [[↩](#)]
3. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*. 106.8 p1707 (1993). p1713. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=927850>. [[↩](#)]
4. Sara Ahmed. "[Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism](#)", *Borderlands e-Journal*, 3.2 (2004) [[↩](#)]
5. *Ibid.* para. 19 [[↩](#)]
6. *Ibid.* [[↩](#)]
7. John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971. [[↩](#)]
8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. p242. [[↩](#)]
9. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. p181. [[↩](#)]
10. Plato, *The Republic*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. p125 [424a] [[↩](#)]