

Chapter Three

“White Talk” As a Barrier to Understanding the Problem with Whiteness

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[3.0] *I have often wondered, and it is not a pleasant wonder, just what white Americans talk about with one another. I wonder this because they do not, after all, seem to find very much to say to me, and I concluded long ago that they found the color of my skin inhibiting. This color seems to operate as a most disagreeable mirror, and a great deal of one's energy is expended in reassuring white Americans that they do not see what they see.*
—James Baldwin¹

[3.1] *I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.*—Audre Lorde²

[3.2] *Being a good white is part of the problem, rather than the solution to systematic racism.*—Barbara Applebaum³

[3.3] FLUTTERING AROUND THE WHITE PROBLEM

[3.4] Quick: How does it feel to be a white problem? I want to hear what it's like for you. How do you think being white is a problem? Tell me in your own words. Tell me how you exist in your whiteness. What's so special about it? What's valuable about being white? Tell me, how does it feel to be a white problem?

[3.5] *What do you mean a white problem? You see this is really NOT my problem. I'm a good person. I'm not prejudiced. My ancestors never owned slaves. Anyway, that was a long, long time ago. I'm not responsible for the*

Indian Removal Act, Japanese internment, or the Black Codes. I wasn't even born yet. Yes, I know America has a history of racism and genocide, but our nation has come a long way. And, you can't dwell on the tragedies of U.S. history—that was in the past. We can't teach that to our children if we want them to be proud of this country. Things are much better now. And, anyway, I'm not the problem—it's only racists that are the problem. I'm not like my bigoted father. I don't care if you're black, red or yellow with polka dots everyone should be treated equally. The problem is that some people don't treat others equally. It's really not a white problem; I didn't choose to be born white. Anyway, I have black friends. I regularly contribute to the Dolores Huerta Foundation. My church does charity work in the Chicago barrios. I'm from a poor white family. We suffered too and you don't hear us complaining. The problem is that people of color make everything about race. I don't think of you as black. Right, I understand the problem; I've read James Baldwin and bell hooks. I'm a lesbian, so I know what it feels like to be oppressed. I feel so awful about my whiteness. I don't think of myself as white. I'm Irish, Dutch, and German. I've always felt as if I were an Indian in another life. It's not like I'm a member of the Aryan Nation or some Arizona militia group or something. . . . You can trust me! I'm on your side! I'm open-minded, fair, supportive, and empathetic. My heart is in the right place. I mean well. I'm innocent. I'm good! I'm a good white person! It's all good! There is no problem here.

It's no accident that these responses are often the first words out of white people's mouths when we talk about race, white privilege, and racism. They are not a random constellation of utterances. What Alice McIntyre calls "white talk" is a predictable set of discursive patterns that white folks habitually deploy when asked directly about the connections between white privilege and institutional racism.⁴ I used to believe that white talk was a welcomed response to the request that I examine my whiteness. I routinely (and very sincerely) made many of the above declarations. Sometimes, in moments of defensiveness, I still do. I used to imagine that my remarks would be interpreted as expressions of solidarity, compassion, friendliness, and support. I thought that by pointing to my goodness that people of color would feel safe around me, and see me as a trustworthy ally, one of the good ones, an exception.⁵ I was wrong. It's so much more complicated.

White talk has a long and annoying history. W. E. B. Du Bois alludes to it in the opening lines of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) where he reflects on his many conversations with white folks about what at the time was called "the Negro problem." He begins:

Between me and the other world there is an ever-unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly

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framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil. At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.⁶

[3.9] Du Bois’s exchange not only marks the burdens of blackness, but also points to white folks’ discomfort with the possibility that the so-called Negro problem’s origins are closer to home. It lies not in the character of some “problem people,” but in white folks’ general fears and anxieties. As Lerone Bennett Jr. later observed in his essay “The White Problem in America”:

[3.10] When we say that the causes of the race problem are rooted in the white American and white community, we mean that the power is in white Americans and so is the responsibility. We mean that the white American created and invented the race problem and that his fears and frailties are responsible for the urgency of the problem.

[3.11] When we say that the fears of white Americans are at the root of the problem, we mean that the white American is a problem to himself, and that because he is a problem to himself he has made others problems to themselves.

[3.12] When we say that the white American is a problem to himself, we mean that racism is a reflection of personal and collective anxieties lodged deep in the hearts and minds of white Americans.

[3.13] By all this we must understand that Harlem is a white-made thing and that in order to understand Harlem we must go not to Harlem but to the conscience of white Americans and we must ask not what is Harlem, but why have you made Harlem? Why did you create it? And why do you need it?⁷

[3.14] Du Bois’ interlocutors’ implicit queries can be traced back to these fears and anxieties. They flutter not only around the so-called Negro problem, but also around their whiteness. A century later, white folks rehearse this familiar chorus: “my best friend is black”; or, “I marched in the Not in Our Town anti-racism rally”; or “doesn’t the Treyvon Martin shooting in Sanford, Florida, make your blood boil?” We flutter.

[3.15] My project in this chapter is to explain why the question “How does it feel to be a white problem?” cannot be answered in the fluttering grammar of white talk. The whiteness of white talk lies not only in its having emerged from white mouths, but also in its evasiveness—in its attempt to suppress fear and anxiety, and its consequential [if unintended] reinscription and legitimation of racist oppression. For this reason it is ontologically impossible for white talk to answer the question “How does it feel to be a white problem?”⁸ White talk is designed, indeed scripted, for the purposes of evading, rejecting, and remaining ignorant about the injustices that flow from whiteness and

its attendant privileges. I want to suggest a new point of entry—a way to flip the script, so to speak.

I begin with some observations about the basic advantages and disadvantages of using white talk as a route into the white problem. My account develops an expanded version of Alice MacIntyre’s definition of white talk that is attentive to the racialized bodily scripts that accompany white talk. I argue that white talk persists because it has an enduring and powerful moral, ontological, and epistemic pay off for white folks. I explore each payoff with an eye towards clarifying how white talk functions to maintain the illusion that we are invulnerable beings. Next, I pause to reply to the popular objection that this particular critique of white talk silences white people in conversations on race. If we cannot address the question “how does it feel to be a white problem” in the fluttering grammar of white talk, then how shall we begin? In closing, I suggest that we might reduce fluttering by replacing white talk with a discourse of vulnerability, where vulnerability is defined not as weakness, but as a condition for potential. I offer some brief guidelines for how we might start this conversation.

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WHY START WITH WHITE TALK?

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I regularly use white talk as an entry point into classroom discussions on race. There are good reasons for this. First, white talk is a manageable artifact of the white problem.⁹ It offers an accessible and tangible illustration of white people’s resistance to understanding our complicity in maintaining racial inequalities. White talk is also a convenient point of agreement: it undeniably exists. Well-meaning white folks can’t explain away white talk with the same finesse as we explain away white privilege. No one says, “You’re making this up. Maybe we used to talk this way, but things have changed. White people don’t say these things anymore!” Instead, we blush. *Yes! I’ve said many of these things. I hear myself in these utterances.*

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There are also very good reasons for not using white talk as an entry point. With rare exceptions, the burden of patiently listening, educating, correcting, and explaining racism regularly falls on people of color. As a friend of mine once said to me after a three-day antiracism workshop: *No offense, but I’m so tired of having the race conversation with white people. It’s frustrating and it always leaves me feeling tired, depressed, and vulnerable. I don’t think white folks know how much courage it took for me to tell y’all what it’s like to go through the day in a black woman’s body. It’s hard to trust white folks to begin with, but sometimes, in settings like this, I just take a chance. I share my stories in hopes that someone will believe me when I tell them that racism is still very real for us. I always hope that white folks will be empathetic, and some people are, but most don’t listen. I know that*

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when I'm talking, that you are up in your head all that time trying to explain my words away. Then, you find some reason to tell me that it's all in my head. You say I'm just seeing things, that I'm too sensitive, or too angry, or that I'm not trying hard enough. White people always politely say to me, maybe it's this, or maybe it's that. But, they rarely ask: Are you okay? Does this frequently happen to you? Do you think you were given the run around because you are black and the white guy at the bank teller's window assumed that you were scamming him? I'm tired of white folks insisting that I must be mistaken about my own experience. I'm tired of them assuming that I'm the problem. You deal with them. I don't have the energy. Maybe they will get it if they hear it from a white person. You talk with them.¹⁰ I've heard folks of color say these things again and again. At some point in my journey I learned to hear what was being said. I stopped trying to explain away the harms by attributing them to individual character flaws, and started looking for patterns and asking questions. I ask that white readers hold these voices in our heads and hearts.¹¹ I ask that we attend to these voices with the same love and care that use to listen to our best friend's voice. I ask that we center these voices, engage them, and feel their weight during our conversations.

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WHAT IS WHITE TALK?

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White talk is the *lingua franca* of race talk among white folks. It is a privilege-exercising discourse that usually springs from our lips without notice. White people habitually fall into white talk as a strategy for steering clear of entertaining the possibility that many of our actions, utterances, and thoughts contribute to the perpetuation of racial injustices and that we bear some responsibility for these. As Alice McIntyre argues, white talk "serves to insulate white people from examining our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism. It is the result of whites talking uncritically with/ to other whites, all the while resisting critique and massaging each others' racist attitudes, beliefs and actions"¹² White talk is a family of verbal strategies that whites regularly deploy to excuse us "from the difficult and almost paralyzing task of engaging [our] own whiteness".¹³ We use white talk to derail conversations on race, to dismiss counterarguments, to retreat into silence, to interrupt speakers and topics, and to collude with other whites in creating a 'culture of niceness' that makes it difficult to critique the white world.¹⁴ White fear and anxiety drive these conversational detours, dismissals, and denials.

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White talk mirrors Elizabeth Spelman's remarks on boomerang perception—"I look at you, and come right back to myself."¹⁵ White talk is a 'boomerang discourse': I talk to you but come right back to myself. This boomerang process points to another interesting aspect of white talk. In

addition to its responsibility-evasive function, white talk also serves to construct the speaker as an imagined non-racist self. That is, it gives us a sense of ourselves as well-meaning white people to whom we can boomerang back when we feel that our perceived sense of ourselves as not racist is being challenged. When white talk is performed in front of others, especially among people of color, this public performance acts as a ritual of moral purification that seeks to evoke people of color's affirmation. Since we, as white folks, have become so adept at seeing only the self we want to see, we will either interpret our conversations as exchanges in which our goodness is affirmed—"See, LaKeesha thinks I'm a good person." Or, we interpret our exchanges in which we imagine that our goodness simply can't be seen—"Diego is trapped by his own oppression and victimhood to recognize that I'm a good white ally."

McIntyre's analysis is clearly directed at extra-discursive social change, yet its single-pointed focus on "the spoken" offers readers a narrow and disembodied account of white talk: one that privileges the content of the utterances and ignores the bodily performances that accompany them. I think this is a mistake. Attending to the bodily comportment of all speakers, regardless of race, during these conversations offers us a deeper reading of what's going on during these exchanges. It's important to cultivate mindfulness not only of white talk, but also of our bodily comportment during these conversations for the simple reason that what our words say and what our bodies do are not always in concert. Over the years, I've cultivated the habit of watching bodies while I listen to what students have to say about race. For example, I regularly hear white folks declare their goodness and offer examples of why they haven't a racist bone in their bodies. Yet I watch their bodies tighten and withdraw, their hands tense up and their eyes dart about looking for a safe place to rest their gaze. What I've learned is that most white speakers attribute their goodness to the content of our utterances even when those utterances spring from bodies that are ill-at-ease, restless, fearful or anxious. We must be mindful of this tension. Body language is a form of nonverbal communication: our posture, facial expressions, subtle gestures, and tone of voice provide additional cues about white talk's emotional content.¹⁶ How do people of color react when a white student responds, deploying white talk, to a Muslim student's story about being harassed by airport police? How do our bodies interact with one another when the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn? What fears and anxieties trigger those reactions?¹⁷

White talk—its utterances and accompanying gestures—mark our fluttering. The verb "to flutter" is etymologically linked to "float," which connotes the sense of remaining on the surface, failing to go deep. Hence, "white talk" might be construed as that which remains on the surface of things. We flutter when we resist lighting upon or dwelling in spaces where we feel unsafe and

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vulnerable. We flutter when we look for detours, distract ourselves, and pull into our bodies. We flutter when we blame others, become defensive, or treat people of color as our confessors. We flutter to avoid hearing people of color’s histories, experiences, and testimonies. We do everything imaginable to avoid confronting and owning our anxieties and fears. Cherrie Moraga’s description of white women’s fluttering clearly illustrates the embodied, affective, and relational nature of white talk that I have in mind.

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I watch white women shirk before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, “race,” the word, “color.” The pauses keeping the voices breathless, the bodies taut, erect—unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.¹⁸

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What I like about this passage is how Moraga observes white women’s fluttering while attending to its impact on *her* body. Learning to be mindful of these dynamics has taught me to tune into my own words and bodily responses, and to think carefully about white talk’s psychological costs for people of color. What must it feel like to hear the word “black”—a word that describes your core identity—stick in the white people’s throats? What must it feel like to watch white bodies tighten up in your presence? How painful must it be to politely listen to white folks constantly try to convince you that you must be wrong about your feelings? Returning mindfully to the problem of whiteness requires white folks to ask ourselves: What must it feel like to recognize, however dimly, our contributions to this pain, anxiety, and anger? Or, how can I recognize my contributions in ways that focus on the space in between us, on our interactions, and that don’t boomerang back to finding ways to restore my goodness?

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THE PROBLEM WITH WHITE TALK: MORAL, ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMIC PAYOFFS

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What’s the matter with white talk? Here’s the short answer. White talk distracts us from rather than engages us with the heart of the white problem: fear. The long answer is more complicated: white talk has a deep moral, ontological and epistemological payoff for white folks. It permits us to feel as if we are thoughtfully engaging race and racism, but allows us to do so from a place of imagined invulnerability, comfort, and safety. To understand this, I need to spell out more carefully how white talk bolsters white folks sense of moral goodness, well-meaning white identity, and epistemic authority.

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White talk has a strong moral dimension.¹⁹ As Barbara Applebaum clearly and convincingly argues: Its central aim is to convince listeners that the speaker is an innocent, well-meaning and good-intentioned person who bears little or no responsibility for the continuing harms of racism. We do this by dividing the world into two kinds of white folks—[bad] racist white people, and [good] well-meaning white people—and repeatedly offering evidence for our membership in the “good white people” group. Goodness is the magnetic north of white talk. It bolsters our sense of moral goodness by steering conversations away from discursive spaces that reveal our fears, anxieties, and vulnerabilities and into discursive spaces where our goodness is reified. When I say: “*My ancestors never owned slaves; I have black friends; I grew up in a mixed neighborhood; My father’s the bigot in the family; or, It’s not like I’m a member of the Aryan Nation or something,*” I am not making random claims about myself or family members. Words are never just words. Words are always doing things.²⁰ To understand this point, it’s helpful to make the distinction between the literal and the functional meaning of white talk. The utterance “I’m not a member of the Aryan Nation” is not meant to be taken literally in this context; that is, its function is not to alert listeners to an interesting factual aside about my political alliances, or about who I don’t hang out with after work. The actual content of the sentences uttered in white talk may be true, but that’s not the point. When asserted in response to the white problem question, these remarks do something else: they are offered as evidence of one’s innocence. One might also note that the extreme nature of these examples allows for a form of contrast that sets a very low threshold for goodness. Being good requires only that we not be moral monsters. When white folks make these claims we grant ourselves permission to flee the messy and unfinished business of racism by placing ourselves in the company of “good white folks,” who, because of our goodness, imagine that we have nothing further to think about on the subject.²¹ White talk redirects our conversations onto discursive terrain where white folks are innocent bystanders rather than part of the problem. Focusing exclusively on white moral goodness, as Barbara Applebaum argues, makes it extremely difficult to entertain the possibility that our words, actions, body language, thoughts, and beliefs make us complicit in systemic injustices.²² After all, if you think you’re good, then you assume that you are invulnerable to criticism. There is nothing more to learn.

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Next, the moral work that is done by white talk also performs a specific ontological function: it repeatedly directs us back to an imagined pure, uncomplicated, unproblematic understanding of what it means to be a well-meaning white person. In short, white talk reflects the ontology of whiteness.²³ To get at this, I need to say something about how the presence or absence of problems is tied to the social construction of racial identities. This becomes clearer if we return to Du Bois’s original question: What does it

mean to be a problem? The question, as George Yancy argues, is “directed at the ontological core of one’s being as in—how does it feel *to be* a problem?”²⁴ *To be* a problem is different than to *have* a problem. Having a problem means an obstacle has been placed in your path. I *have* a problem when I can’t find the keys to my car, or when I forget to bring my driver’s license to the airport. To *be* a problem means that your entire racial group is imagined to be an obstacle by their very nature. “Within the white imaginary, to be black means to be born an obstacle at the very core of one’s being.”²⁵ The process by which some groups move from defining themselves to being defined by outsiders as “problem peoples” is part of the machinery of colonization and nation building. For example, there is a predictable script that runs through U.S. history that positions and repositions so-called ‘non-white’ peoples as problems in this sense. Consider how the Middle Passage transformed African identities [plural] from Ashanti, Yoruba, Imbangala, and Nyamwezi into an artificially homogenized class known as “Negroes” [singular]. Consider how European colonization of the Americas turned the Quechua, Maya, Anazasi, and Cherokee into “Indians.” These classifications were tied further to the mission of colonization. If African labor was needed for agriculture, then Africans were understood as identical to beasts of burden. If colonial expansion required land and resources, then Native peoples and their land management practices were recast as wasteful and uncivilized. Consider further, how the new categories ‘Negro’ and ‘Indian’ rapidly morph into “Negro Problem” and the “Indian Problem.” Peoples are problematized when their very being is imagined to be defective, deviant, childlike, irresponsible, criminal, immoral, dirty, animalistic, culturally and intellectually inferior, savage, primitive, barbaric, lazy, hypersexual, predatory, violent, slothful, addicted, deceiving or untrustworthy. And it is their being that is understood to be fixed, permanent, eternal, and inescapable.

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The problem of whiteness can’t be engaged critically by extending this “the core-defines-the-identity logic to white folks.” Recasting the script does not mean re-imagining white people as racist-at-core in the same way people of color have been historically represented as lazy, childlike, or violent at core. Flipping the script is not the scholarly equivalent of an adolescent back-seat quarrel on a long road trip. It’s not... “*You’re the problem! . . . No, You’re the problem! . . . No! YOU’RE the Problem! It’s a black problem! No, it’s a WHITE problem.*” The construction of African and Native peoples as problems is part and parcel of the construction of Europeans as responsible, civilized, human, chaste, clean, trustworthy, citizens, hardworking, moral, pure, and good.²⁶ They are two-sides of the same ontological coin. Positioning some groups as problems invariably places other so-called ‘civilized’ groups in the position to ‘solve these problems.’ So, I’m not suggesting that we answer the white problem by flipping the ontological coin: that is, by making the problem-solvers the ontological problem, as if by “nature.” The

white problem is ontologically different from what has been historically called the Negro problem, the Indian problem, the yellow peril, the Mexican problem, the Arab problem, the Muslim problem, or the immigrant problem. When the script is flipped, the referent of “problem” is recast: the shift is from looking at the so-called “ontological problem of blackness,” to “the performative power of whiteness.”²⁷

White talk is one example of this performative power of whiteness. The conversational detours that characterize it reinforce the essential core of well-meaning white identity by repeatedly redirecting our gaze to goodness. The French root (*détour*) means literally to turn away. To paraphrase James Baldwin, white talk helps to manage white identity by allowing white folks to turn away from those “disagreeable mirrors” that reflect our whiteness back to us in its plurality. When we turn away, we convince ourselves that “we do not see what we see.”²⁸ Disagreeable mirrors show white folks as no other mirror can. María Lugones uses mirror imagery to highlight how white folks’ single-pointed focus on our goodness makes it difficult to see plurality of selves that disagreeable mirrors reflect back to us. For example, think about how white folks regularly appeal to our charity work in either poor countries or low-income neighborhoods as evidence of our goodness. Often in our rush to bolster our good works, we fail to consider how the residents of those communities sometimes resent outsider’s help. When outsiders impose their reform agenda on communities based on what they *believe* a community needs and not what residents *know* they need they act ignorantly and arrogantly. In these contexts, well-meaning whites are not simply “good.” They are “good-arrogant-innocent-imperious-well meaning, perhaps misguided” white folks. Considering the community perspective helps to reveal our plurality. When we are open to seeing ourselves as others see us, we become what Maria Lugones calls “plural selves.” We block plurality because learning to see ourselves as others see us is frightening and inconsistent with the view we have of ourselves as wholly good. White folks block identification with our arrogant or imperious selves because, as Lugones reminds us: “remembering that self fractures you into more than one person. You know a self that is decent and good, and knowing yourself in [that] mirror frightens you with losing your center, your integrity, your oneness.’ And, ‘you block identification with that self because you are afraid of plurality.’”²⁹ When we respond to the white problem question in white talk we block the possibility of seeing our plurality. Our whitely utterances reinscribe the contours of goodness, rather than reveal our goodness-arrogance-ignorance. Recasting the script means that white folks have before us the burden of identifying and problematizing whiteness in its plurality by learning to see what is not seen, and understanding how whiteness poses a problem for humanity.³⁰

Finally, white talk is an expression of epistemic resistance driven by fear and anxiety. I’ll have more to say about the epistemic consequences of white

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talk in my final section. At this point, I will mark the epistemic dimensions of white talk, and pause to consider a common objection.

[3.34] OKAY, SO JUST TELL ME WHAT TO SAY!

[3.35] *Okay, I get it. I can't engage whiteness critically using the fluttering grammar of white talk because these utterances bolster white privilege on moral, ontological, and epistemological grounds. So, what should I say? How should I have this conversation? Tell me what to say, I don't want to offend anyone! I feel silenced! I feel trapped! I feel as if everything I say is going to be wrong, and that I'll be called a racist, so why bother?*

[3.36] I want to make three observations. First, as some readers may have guessed, this objection follows the discursive contours of white talk by steering the conversation back toward white people's goodness and comfort. *I don't want to be seen as a racist, I don't want to offend anyone, so tell me what to say! I want to avoid discomfort at all costs!* Responding to critical accounts of white talk with “what do you want me to say?” is boomerang discourse—it repositions white subjects as fixers, missionaries, rescuers, and thus as outside of the critique of whiteness. Further, it suggests that white folks rely exclusively on members of oppressed groups for answers rather than trying to figure it out for ourselves. *White folks can fix this nasty racism business if we just learn to say the right things!* As Barbara Applebaum so nicely puts it, these objections “center the question on ‘what can I do?, rather than ‘what can be done?’ and this encourages moral solipsism, heroism, and white narcissism.”³¹

[3.37] Next, there is a strong connection between white privilege, goodness, and rule following. Marilyn Frye once observed that white morality was rule governed: “by believing in rules, by being arbitrators 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 rules instead of according to feeling.”³² We may take comfort in following rules because rules often minimize risk and bolster illusions of invulnerability. *If I follow the rules of the road, then I'll minimize my risk of accidents; and, I'll be a good driver. If I follow the rules for interacting with people of color, then I'll minimize the risk of being called a racist; and, I'll be a good white person. So, what are the rules? Don't call black folks “articulate.” Okay. Don't touch black people's hair. Check. Never say I don't think of you as black, Indian, Chinese, etc. Check. Rules act as insurance against slipping from goodness. What do you mean I'm prejudiced? I followed the rules. I said all of the things you told me to say!* Rules are a quick path to comfort. It's easier to memorize a

rule such as “Don’t touch black people’s hair,” than it is to work toward a deep understanding of the history and the politics of uninvited touching.³³ Rules can be used in place of genuine interactions and conversations. Following rules need not require a profound change of heart, deep self-examination, or risk taking. It’s easier to follow a set of guidelines than it is to interrogate whiteness deeply, to listen to people of color, or to read alternative histories that call into question everything we’ve been taught to believe about what it means to be white in the United States of America.

Finally, I find it interesting that this objection almost always gets framed as a choice between white talk and silence. White talk is so deeply rooted in the sense whites have of ourselves as essentially well-meaning that we assume it’s our only voice. It is not. It is the voice of insecure goodness, imagined invulnerability, ontological wholeness, and epistemic closure. Ironically these are expressions of invulnerability that are driven by a fundamental vulnerability at their very core. There are other voices-- vulnerable voices— that shake the boundaries of the white self, and that reorient our attention away from restoring goodness and comfort, and toward listening to people of color’s voices and questioning our own responses. What if we ditched white talk and retreated to what Pema Chödrön calls “the places that scare us” rather than to the places that comfort us?³⁴ What if we made a sincere effort to engage our fluttering? What if we touched down and spent some time in uncomfortable spaces.³⁵ How might we start thinking about this? How might we have these conversations in ways that recognize our plurality?

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WHITENESS WITH MINIMAL FLUTTERING: “VULNERABILITY-AS-POTENTIAL” AS A NEW POINT OF ENTRY

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Quick! Stop fluttering just for a moment! Touch down, even briefly. Be still. Breathe. Observe. Let’s talk about how it feels to be a white problem. Can you talk through this without falling back into white talk? Can you understand how white talk skirts the issue and silences those voices we’ve been asked to hold in our heads and hearts? Can you grasp how white talk privileges white folks’ comfort over people of color’s lived experiences? Can you acknowledge how white talk erases your plurality? Can you understand how retreating to white talk closes off opportunities for knowledge?

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I want to return to the epistemic dimensions of white talk. The question ‘how does it feel to be a white problem?’ can never be answered in the fluttering grammar of white talk. The detours and distractions of white talk promote epistemic closure by confining our discussions to discursive comfort zones where evidence of white innocence has greater epistemic weight than people of color’s own testimony. As such, it will not take us into Chödrön’s

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"places that scare us"; that is, the places where we can take risks and be epistemically open to seeing ourselves as plural and often contradictory.

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White talk closes off alternative ways of knowing. The epistemic closure I have in mind here is a form of willful ignorance. Ignorance [literally, "to ignore"] is a central feature of racism, and white talk is a means of willfully managing our ignorance in ways that keep white folks from feeling vulnerable. Nancy Tuana defines willful ignorance as the condition of "not knowing, and not wanting to know."³⁶ People with race privilege, she argues, commonly exhibit a "determined ignorance" of the lives, histories, and cultures of those whom we believe to be either inferior or unimportant.³⁷ Willful ignorance is not a *passive* form of ignorance. It is a complex result of endless acts of negligence and omission. It cannot be explained as a simple gap in our knowledge.³⁸ That is, it's not the product just missing information. As in, "*Hey it's not my fault, I was never taught about the Tulsa Race Riots, the Indian Removal Act, or the Chinese Exclusion Act.* White willful ignorance requires repetitive and diligent effort to resist knowing what is before you. Willful ignorance is *actively* produced: It is an achievement that must be managed.³⁹ Managing ignorance requires keeping the habitual detours, dismissals, and denials that characterize white talk in good working order. When we say: "*Why do we need to know about the Sand Creek Massacre? That was all in the past and things are so much better today,*" we opt for epistemic closure. We refuse to consider how current injustices are tied to the history of European colonization of the Americas. White talk is an expression of willful ignorance not because the speaker has a gap in her knowledge. Remember: Words *do* things. When we fall back on white talk we *actively* give ourselves permission to put racism and genocide in the past, dismiss historic atrocities as insignificant, dismiss people of color's very real day-to-day grievances, or to privilege our own desire not to talk about it. We opt to dwell in an imagined state of invulnerability, where past atrocities are conveniently severed from present realities.

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The epistemic effects of white talk remain powerful because willful ignorance, in a twisted way, has a huge pay off for white folks. Following James Baldwin, Elizabeth Spelman describes how white folks actively remain ignorant about people of color's contemporary grievances because we fear that they might be true. It's not simply that we *suspect* that they might be true and choose not to believe them. Her point is more subtle and unsettling: "[We] want the claim 'black America's grievances are real' to be false, but we know that if we treat [this claim] as something that could be false, then we would also have to regard it as something that could also be true. Better to ignore [the claim] altogether, given the fearful consequences of its being true. Better not to have thought at all than to have thought and lost."⁴⁰ Spelman's argument points to a powerful and astonishing conclusion: Not only is the whitely desire to parade oneself as good, pure and innocent driven by willful

ignorance, but also the costs of this ignorance to black, brown, Native, and Asian bodies is so astonishingly pervasive and enduring that it “drains off the moral capital” we imagine ourselves having accumulated!⁴¹ When bolstered by willful ignorance, white folks’ sense of our own goodness collapses into a form of solipsism and narcissism that negates any genuine form of respect and recognition for the “Other” that might reveal the plurality of white selves. Almost all of the evidence of our goodness offered by white talk collapses under the weight of our refusal to engage alternative explanations.

We need a new entry point into the white problem question: one that resists turning the conversation into either a forum about white goodness or into an ignorance management project. Remember fear is at the root of the white problem. But, what drives the conversation is not fear itself, but how vulnerable we feel in the face of this fear. We can either plaster over our fears with white talk, or we can humbly acknowledge that they make us feel vulnerable and learn to treat this vulnerability as a source of knowledge. What if we made a conscious choice to embrace that vulnerability and used that realization as an entry point into the question of what it means to be a white problem? What if we replaced white talk with a discourse of vulnerability?

[3.44]

Conventional understandings equate vulnerability with being weak, helpless, defenseless, dependent, or susceptible to harm or injury. This sense of vulnerability-as-weakness is not the one I want to use to ground the new entry point. The definition of vulnerability I have in mind is closer to Erinn Gilson’s account of vulnerability-as-potential. On this view vulnerability is not just what happens to some humans in particular circumstances. It is the basic character of human existence.⁴² In Gilson’s words:

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Taken . . . as a fundamental state, vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes possible other conditions. Being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and to find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. *Vulnerability* is not just a condition that limits us, but also one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn.⁴³

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The enabling features of vulnerability-as-potential surface when we stop fluttering.⁴⁴ Lee Mun Wah once said, “If you accept and acknowledge your mistakes, what I see is your goodness. If you cover up your mistakes with excuses, claiming your goodness, all I see are your faults.”⁴⁵ Naming our ignorance requires releasing our attachments to goodness and comfort, and recognizing fear and discomfort as sources of knowledge and connection rather than as sources of closure and flight. What if we treated fear, anger, shame, and guilt not as feelings to be squashed, escaped, ignored or reconfigured favorably, but as genuine sources of knowledge? What if we followed

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people of color’s lead into discursive spaces where we felt fragile, rather than into spaces where we felt comfortable? What if we attended to our feelings through our interactions with one another?

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I don’t want to define the exact nature of a discourse of vulnerability. I’m not interested in offering a new set of rules. Following Frye, I want us to “act according to feeling.”⁴⁶ However, I do think that a discourse of vulnerability demands that speakers cultivate an attitude of epistemic openness as we enter these conversations. If we carry that attitude into our discussions then alternatives to white talk may emerge. Discourses of vulnerability will no doubt take on the shape and the character of their epistemic communities. I want to offer the following guidelines as a way to begin:

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Begin where you are and not where you think you should be.

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If you keep falling back into white talk then mark these moments and cultivate a healthy curiosity about why these patterns persist. Ask yourself: What buttons were pushed for me to respond with white talk? Name the barriers, detours, and diversions you habitually use. Write them down. Keep talking. Don’t beat yourself up. If you don’t see the white problem right away, then remind yourself that white talk is an expression of privilege, so there is a reason that many of us retreat to this discourse when challenged.

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Actively listen to one another and hear what is being said.

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This requires being present when others are speaking, and not trying to map out a reply to their words while they speak. Talk *with* each another, not *at* each another. Notice what is and is not being said, and how it is expressed. Be mindful of key words and themes that repeat themselves. Ask yourself what emotional work these words and themes do, and why they continue to surface. Be curious about others’ stories and observations, and use active language to engage their words. If you are unsure about someone’s meaning then ask for clarification. Cultivate a reflective discourse of engagement: What I heard you say was... Why did you find that frustrating? What angers or frightens you? What makes you feel unsafe? Tell us more about that? How did that experience affect you? What do you need?⁴⁷ Don’t forget to listen non-verbally to the messages that are being physically communicated.

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Be mindful of what makes you shut down.

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Be attentive to what your words and body tell you and those around you about race, racism and whiteness. Observe the paths each conversation takes. Have you unconsciously changed the topic or shifted the focus? Are speakers being interrupted? How does your body react to what is being said? Where do you direct your gaze when the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn? Do you fidget or look at your phone? Cultivate an awareness of what makes you feel comfortable, or uncomfortable during these conversations. You

might try to write down the words and gestures that trigger strong feelings. Be honest, authentic, and forgiving. Trust yourself, but at the same time recognize that self-trust is slippery and can very easily collapse into white talk that re-centers white epistemic authority.

Take responsibility for your mistakes and learn from them.

[3.55]

Vulnerability requires letting go of the fear that you will make mistakes, offend people, and say foolish things. Most of us don't want to talk about race because we are afraid that we might say something offensive. As Lee Mun Wah once said: "Good luck. This country has five hundred years of a 'don't ask, don't tell policy' when it comes to diversity issues. More than likely you will say something that will hurt or be painful to someone. The important thing is to take responsibility for your mistakes and to be open to talking about them. Understand that taking responsibility does not mean beating yourself up. Be kind to yourself and others. This is difficult work. Period! There is no easy or correct way through these conversations. Take comfort in your courage and ability to take risks, rather than your ability to 'get it right.'"

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Treat discomfort as a source of knowledge.

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Treat anger, fear and anxiety as natural reactions to moving closer to knowledge. Crafting a discourse of vulnerability requires settling into our discomfort rather than continuing to flutter. You might practice moving toward the places that scare you by making a conscious choice to engage your fears and discomforts in ways that are not aimed at managing your ignorance or merely at protecting yourself from feelings of vulnerability.

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Focus on being open and curious.

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If white talk maintains the illusion of invulnerability through 'not knowing, and not wanting to know,' then a discourse of vulnerability-as-potential requires cultivating an attitude that is open to knowing. So . . .

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Quick: What does it mean to be a white problem?

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That is a really complex and difficult question. I wonder why it makes me uncomfortable? Why do I resist? Why do I become so defensive? I've never thought of whiteness as a problem. I wonder if this omission is significant? Perhaps having white privilege means not having to consider the possibility. What do you think? There must be something very big at stake for white folks to hang on to white talk so tightly. This is telling. What can we learn from this? It's so awkward. I'll admit that this question makes me feel fragile, angry, guilty, and defensive. Do you feel the same way? I am open to exploring what's behind these reactions. Can you say that again? I want to be sure I understood you clearly. It must be frustrating for people of color to have to

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listen to white folks continually dodge this topic. What's that like? I'm scared that there is a lot more riding on the white problem than I can see right now. What if it's really deep? What if collective white fears and anxieties have been the source of real life injustices and harm from the start! What if racism really is a white problem! This is immense. What if we took time to dwell together in our anger, fear and discomforts together? What if we listened patiently and carefully to one another's stories and to the connections between these narratives? Would a more complete picture emerge? Would the problem at least come into focus?

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NOTES

[3.64]

Many thanks to Kristie Dotson, Kyle Powys Whyte, Michael Monahan, and Lawrence Solum, and George Yancy for helping me puzzle through these issues with clarity and honesty.

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1. James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 409.

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2. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 113.

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3. Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 20.

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4. Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identities with White Teachers* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997).

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5. The fact that I understood white talk as an expression of solidarity rather than a conversational slight of hand is a perfect example of an epistemology of ignorance. As Charles Mills once asked: "How are white people able to consistently do the wrong thing while thinking that they are doing the right thing?" Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 94.

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6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 1.

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7. Lerone Bennett Jr. "The White Problem in America," *Ebony* (August 1965), 29–30.

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8. Many thanks to Michael Monihan for his clarification of this point.

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9. I'm grabbing onto one corner of the white problem. A complete understanding requires more time. As Charles Mills's once quipped about white ignorance: "It's a big subject. How much time do you have? It's not enough." Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 13.

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10. I've tried to capture the basic message of the conversation.

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11. Like many white writers, I struggle with the question of voice when writing on race. Sometimes I use third person plural to refer to white people. This keeps the question of audience open. Other times I place my whiteness front and center to mark my location. I realize that both strategies run the risk of misinterpretation. My understanding is that this collection is directed primarily, but certainly not exclusively, at white readers, who resist seeing themselves as a problem. For this reason I've decided to use first person singular.

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12. McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identities with White Teachers*, 46.

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13. McIntyre, 46.

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14. McIntyre, 46.

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15. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 12.

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16. Chinese American filmmaker and community educator Lee Mun Wah's teaches bodily observation as a central means of understanding conversational dynamics. I'm drawing on his use of this practice. See <http://www.stirfryseminars.com/resources/>. For a phenomenological account of the impact of fear on bodies see Sarah Ahmed's *The Affective Politics of Fear*, in her *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

17. I confine white talk to verbal communication and its accompanying gestures. This does not mean that white folks sometimes communicate our anxieties corporeally without uttering a word. We may clutch our bags when a person of color sits next to us on the Metro, lock our car doors when we drive through black or Latino neighborhoods, or flinch when young black men reach into their pockets. I recognize these as forms of communication. For the present purposes, however, I follow Lee Muh Wah's practice of focusing on bodily comportment *during* conversations on race, because they offer important affective information about these utterances.

18. Cherrie Moraga, "Introduction," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, 3rd edition (San Antonio, TX: Third Woman Press, 2002), xlvi.

19. My comments here are deeply inspired by Barbara Applebaum's careful discussion on the connections between whiteness and moral goodness in her *Being White, Being Good* (2010). I'm working with her basic argument and observations.

20. I have in mind here John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

21. As Barbara Applebaum notes, standard accounts of responsibility that tie culpability to actions and chains of causality define responsibility in narrow terms. This makes it difficult to understand how white folks perform and sustain whiteness and racism in our everyday ordinary actions. Applebaum does a remarkable job of clarifying the distinction between complicit as a matter of being, and complicity as a matter of doing, and argues for a new conception of responsibility that does not rely so heavily on blame and causal links between individual actions and institutional systems. See Applebaum, *Being White Being Good*, and Sandra Bartky, "Race, Complicity and Culpable Ignorance," in *Sympathy and Solidarity: And Other Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield), 2002.

22. Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*.

23. George Yancy, "Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness," in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–25.

24. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 86–87.

25. When we have historically imagined people of African descent to be brutish, Mexicans to be lazy, Jews to be stingy, Indians to be uncivilized, or Asians to be cunning we are not making remarks about particular individuals in these groups, we are making claims about the essential nature of that group. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 87.

26. James Baldwin offers one of the clearest accounts of the white practice of dumping our anxieties and fears into dark bodies for the purpose of shoring up our own identities. He says: "I know this, and everyone who's ever tried to live knows this. What I say about you, about someone else, about everybody else, reveals you . . . what I think of you as being, indicated by my own necessities, and my own psychology, my own fears and desires. I'm not describing you when I talk about you, I'm describing me." The historical invention, in his words, of 'the nigger' as a placeholder for white anxieties is central to the maintenance of white identity. He remarks, "But you [white folks] still think that the 'nigger' is necessary. But he's unnecessary to me." See Baldwin's 1963 KQED interview available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0L5fciA6AU>. See also George Yancy's discussion in *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 1–16.

27. Yancy, *Look, A White!*, 3.

28. James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," 409.

29. Now, people of color also see themselves reflected in white mirrors. The difference here is that survival under white supremacy requires a complex understanding and constant awareness of the plurality of one's selves; that is, a people of color regularly move between understandings of how whites seen them, and how they see themselves. White survival does not require a working understanding of our plurality in this sense, and so we focus on those selves that comfort rather than disturb us. María C. Lugones, "On The Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed., Claudia Card (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 73.

30. For a detailed account of 'flipping the script' see Yancy, *Look, A White!*, 1–17.

31. Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good*, 5.

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32. Marilyn Frye, "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992), 155.

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33. Unwanted touching smacks of ownership and entitlement to another person's humanity. It turns people of color into exotic objects of curiosity. Unwanted touching also *references* the psychological torment that Africans experienced during slavery—the invasive poking, prodding of auction block inspections. For example, in *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Related by Herself*, Mary Prince recalls, "I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or lamb he was about to purchase, and who talk about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than a dumb beast." Cited in Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes* 141. Amoja Three Rivers gives examples of these rules in a contemporary context. See her *Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well Intentioned* (Indian Valley, VA: Market Wimmin Press, 1991).

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34. Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 2001).

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35. Yancy describes this as tarrying. In his words, "[t]he unfinished present is where I want whites to tarry (though not permanently remain), to listen, to recognize the complexity and weight of the current existence of white racism, to attempt to understand the ways in which they perpetuate racism, and to begin to think about the incredible difficulty involved in undoing it." Yancy, *Look a White*, 158.

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36. Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: the Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance," in *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006), 1–19. Tuana's account of willful ignorance borrows from insights in Marilyn Frye (1992), Charles Mills (1997), James Baldwin (1963), and Elizabeth Spelman (2007). I am following the thread she has woven as I think it applies to white talk.

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37. Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance," 10.

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38. Frye, "On Being White," 118.

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39. See Mills, *The Racial Contract*, and Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance,"

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40. Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," 121.

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41. Spelman draws on the work of Carolyn Betensky here. I've revised this citation to emphasize how ignorance undercuts white folks efforts to be seen as good. See Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," 212.

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42. Recently scholars have explored this sense of vulnerability as both an alternative to the autonomous, independent subject of liberal philosophy and as a means of exploring the connections between the illusion of invulnerability and violence and oppression. See Applebaum's *Being White, Being Good*. See also Debora Bergoffen, "February 22, 2001: Toward a Politics of the Vulnerable Body," in *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003), 116–34; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004); Martha A. Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition," in *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (2008), 1–23; and, Erinn Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," in *Hypatia* 26, no 2. (2011), 308–32.

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43. Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," 3.

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44. The pivotal moment in Lee Muh Wah's documentary *The Color of Fear* (1994) illustrates this perfectly. The film documents a three-day conversation between eight men on race in America. About half way through the film Victor (an African American man) and David (a well-meaning white man) have a powerful exchange. Throughout the film David has repeatedly resisted, dismissed, and rejected all the evidence the men of color in the room have shared with him about the daily obstacles they face as black, brown, and Asian American men in the United States. David habitually refuted of the men's stories by insisting that the harms and fears each speaker described could be more accurately attributed to their actions, choices or attitudes, but not to racism. At some point the conversation between the two breaks down. Victor asks David point blank why he refuses to hear what they have been telling him. For some reason, instead of retreating to white talk, David replies, "Because I don't want to believe that America is like this." To which Victor responds, "From here on in, I can work with you." The conversation becomes productive, honest, and informative only when David stops fluttering and becomes vulnerable to the possibility that others don't share his lived experience.

45. Lee Mun Wah, *Stir Fry Seminars and Counseling Newsletter*, April 2012. Available: <http://www.stirfryseminars.com/pdfs/newsletter.pdf>. Accessed April 2012.

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46. Frye, "White Woman Feminist," 155.

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47. I'm drawing partially from Lee Mun Wah's list of "Nine Healthy Ways to Communicate." A complete list is available through Stir Fry Seminars: <http://www.stirfryseminars.com/pages/offer.php>

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