

Straw (Wo)men and Whiteness: On Having the Humility to Avoid the First and Face the Second

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Steven Mather's essay is both insightful and deeply disturbing. It is disturbing because he accuses other scholars of professional immorality; it is insightful because he calls us to attend carefully to the complex layers of student response to anti-racist pedagogy. Both insight and disturbance deserve more attention than I can give in this brief response.

Mather claims that Barbara Applebaum is incorrect when she argues, via Judith Butler, that "the self-same moral agency that educators draw upon to raise white students' awareness of systemic oppression conspires to camouflage the very complicity one is attempting to make visible."¹ The taken-for-granted notions of self and moral agency Applebaum challenges are rooted in individual choice and intentionality; for Applebaum, enacting the social reality of racism is rarely a matter of choice or intention but a function of the discursive conditions of whiteness. Students who deny complicity in racism rely on a moral discourse of intention, misunderstanding and masking racism's discursive reach. For Applebaum, there is a need to reconfigure our understanding of moral agency to account for this obvious injustice and the discursive moves that maintain it. Mather objects, insisting that *only* a view of moral agency based in intentionality enables one to uncover complicity.

On his own terms, Mather has to show two things to make his case that there is no need for a reconstruction of moral agency. He says he must first show that "A-type" whiteness theorists enact social experiments, and then he must demonstrate that A-type whiteness theory "is ontologically and epistemically flawed," in ways that yield flawed practice. It is not clear to me that these two premises lead us to Mather's conclusion. In fact, his absorption with the sins of A-type whiteness theorists seems to distract from the legitimate point he is making. Let me state his "*J'accuse*" baldly.

Mather maintains that A-type whiteness theorists — Applebaum, Kathy Hytten, Ameer Adkins, John Warren, and unnamed others — fail to obtain approvals from institutional review boards for the protection of human subjects for what Mather considers to be "inquisitorial" research, and they violate "the ethical compact" between teachers and students. They are, his title asserts, "wolves" preying on ethically minded and unwitting students. Using tools of analysis borrowed from critical realism, he argues that "much of what is suspect is discernible at the level of theory," and thus Applebaum and others should recognize the negative impact of their theory and practices regarding whiteness. Their intentional ignorance results in immoral action. I will leave it to Applebaum and the others to defend themselves if they think the charges warrant defense. Here I take up Mather's main points.

First, I readily, even happily, concede the point that A-type whiteness theory (and every other educational effort ever conceived) enacts social experimentation.

From a Deweyan perspective, all encounters with new ideas are “experimental,” and inescapably social. To say that these pedagogical, research-based, and theoretical efforts enact social experimentation is merely to claim that they are educational. To make the case Mather puts forth, one would have to show that the particular social experiments are destructive in their actual consequences. Mather gestures in this direction, for example, bemoaning the fact that Hytten and Warren do not maintain the trust that is central to successful teaching and learning, but his gesture is unconvincing. Among other things, he seems to misrepresent Hytten and Warren’s attitudes toward their students as documented in the essay he cites.² His use of “B-type whiteness theorists” Sherry Marx and Julie Pennington — who apparently *do* care — as counterpoint to the A-types is problematic because they were studying prejudice as a function of personal judgment in interpersonal relations, and not racism as a social system that privileged some and disadvantaged others.³ In truth, they are not whiteness theorists at all.

The problem with social experimentation for Mather is that it disrupts the moral underpinnings that make interaction possible. Social experimentation has to be done carefully. So does every pedagogical act in every classroom. But even a quick reading of the A-type theorists cited suggests that they know this danger and take it seriously. So what is bothering Mather? He is, I think, enacting the resistance Hytten and Warren seek to understand. Recall that their focus was resistance on the part of adult students who accepted the reality of racism and intentionally sought to understand it better, but who nonetheless displayed behaviors that might be characterized as “resistance,” reinscribing whiteness.⁴ It is naming whiteness as an “unconventional definition of racism” that disturbs Mather.

Second, Mather claims that A-type whiteness theory is ontologically and epistemically flawed, but he does so *with respect to an ontological and epistemological point of view that Applebaum explicitly rejects*. It is reasonable for Mather to disagree, but he never directly takes on Applebaum’s claim that moral theory and moral agency are themselves products of the discourse that brings subjects into being. Instead he sidesteps the fundamental disagreement between them, argues from a critical realist position rooted in a modernist worldview, and then claims that he has defeated Applebaum’s view. He has — on his own ground. But what he has *not* done is knock the ground out from under her. So both are left standing but, in my view, it is Applebaum left on solid ground because her position recognizes the limits of agency while acknowledging the goodness of individual actors.

I had the uneasy feeling as I read Mather’s essay that Applebaum and the others function as “straw (wo)men” for Mather. He props them up on his own ground in order to knock them down. But, as I suggested previously, they are still standing where they are rooted — in a perspective that takes seriously the discursive quality of moral and racial reality.

What happens, though, if we clear away Applebaum and Hytten and Warren? What is left if we remove the charges of moral wrong, philosophical error, and flawed judgment? I focus now on what I believe is the central claim of Mather’s essay — or at least it is the claim I think worth taking seriously.

Mather argues that “what Hytten and Warren identify as the discursive strategies of whiteness are merely examples of the hermeneutic movement of understanding, guided by aspects of a whiteness-oriented epistemology, which is the dynamic product of the students’ historicity.” He goes on: “their reconceptualization of racism is flawed. Student resistance to this redeption, and its consequent defamatory name calling, was warranted.” Here is something worth taking seriously, something I think the A-type whiteness theorists do take seriously, but perhaps not with the care that Mather — and I — deem appropriate.

Mather asks that we view student resistance as “warranted,” that we take students’ experience *and their interpretations* of their experience as central and worthwhile. I think that matters. Just as the physical phenomenon of light can sometimes be understood as particle and sometimes as wave, so can student “resistance” be understood sometimes discursively and sometimes hermeneutically. It is both/and, rather than either/or.

To confront whiteness is to face the reality of racism. For whites, this is unquestionably a disruption to one’s sense of self and one’s own goodness. It is also, as Mather suggests, a disruption in the conditions of conventional social interaction. These concurrent disruptions prompt — in all but the most defended or oblivious — emotion-laden interpretation and response. It is important that we investigate, theoretically, empirically, *and* pedagogically, the quality of emotion, the breadth and depth of interpretation and the range and fittingness of the responses generated, without denigrating or dismissing any of them. Mather’s essay calls us to remember that. But it is also important that we deconstruct the hermeneutic horizon against which the fittingness of any response finds meaning and value. Mather seems to be pointing us to the foreground, while whiteness theorists push on to the deep discursive ground of power and privilege in interaction.

What is going on when white students “resist” acknowledging complicity in racism? This is the question that Applebaum, Hytten, Adkins, Warren, Marx, Pennington, Mather, I, and countless others are posing and probing. And it is a question we have not yet fully answered. That is why Hytten and Warren did their ethnographic study. That is why Applebaum proposes a kind of “no fault responsibility” with respect to complicity in racism. That is, I presume, why Mather has joined the issue, defending students’ responses as understandable and, within the constraints of taken-for-granted social convention, defensible. In the absence of settled understanding about this kind of rich and controversial issue, it matters that we maintain humility about what we do know and how we must proceed to face truth in all its guises. The A-type whiteness theorists that Mather cites, in writing and pedagogical practice, display that humility. In his present essay at least, Mather does not.

1. Barbara Applebaum, “Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004): 59–72.

2. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, “Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 65–89.

3. Sherry Marx and Julie Pennington, "Pedagogies of Critical Race Theory: Experimentations with White Preservice Teachers," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 91–100.
4. Hytten and Warren, "Engaging Whiteness."