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## PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

### ‘Listen with love’: Exploring anti-racism dialogue in psychotherapy and counselling training

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#### ABSTRACT

The research reported in this article analysed letters written by a cohort of psychotherapy and counselling students, in response to an anti-racism letter by Professor George Yancy entitled ‘Dear White America’. Fifteen responses were written by students who don’t experience racism, with one written by a student who does experience racism. A thematic analysis was conducted that produced five themes: connection with participants willing to challenge their racism; disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism; anger; disappointment; and empathy. This article offers a discussion of these themes and also reflections on the interracial group processes that took place during the analysis. It concludes by considering the difficulties and challenges of speaking about racism, as well as exploring how this exercise could be better implemented in future.

**KEYWORDS:** racism; anti-racism; seminar; training; Yancy; counselling; psychotherapy; students

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, George Yancy, an African American philosophy professor, wrote an open letter entitled 'Dear White America'; it was published by *The New York Times* and in it he beseeches white Americans to examine the ways in which they are racist, and benefit from a racist society (Yancy, 2015; Appendix A, pp. 17-21 below, and reproduced with permission). He frames this introspection and acceptance of one's racism as a gift, and in return asks white readers to 'listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror' (Yancy, 2015, para. 1). This research analyses letters responding to Yancy, written by second-year students at the University of Leeds Psychotherapy and Counselling MA, with 15 responses from students who don't experience racism and one from a student who does experience racism. A thematic analysis of the letters was conducted, which produced five major themes: connection with participants willing to challenge their racism; disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism; anger; disappointment; and empathy. The initial intent for this research was based on solely analysing the letters, but through that analysis it quickly became apparent that the research team were unable to disentangle their own feelings from the authors' expressions. Every letter, perhaps even every sentence, revealed a wealth of complex and often contrasting feelings. Thus, in addition to using the letter responses as raw data for a thematic analysis, the group discussions conducted throughout the analysis and the underlying interracial group processes are also explored. Analysing these processes is particularly important in current times when psychotherapy is dominated by middle class women who don't experience racism, for how can the profession cater for all if we are not ready to acknowledge and talk about difference, privilege, and racism? The exercise of responding to Yancy's letter was done in preparation for an anti-racism session, and there are forthcoming articles that will explore that session and reflect further upon the process of conducting anti-racism research.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

Within this article, the chosen terms for denoting race are those 'who do experience racism' and those 'who don't experience racism'. These were chosen over various language descriptors found within the literature, such as 'people of colour (POC)', 'black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME)', 'minority groups', and 'diverse communities'. The aim of this choice is to avoid a binary paradigm that can be reduced to individuals being 'white' or 'non-white'. Such descriptors risk presenting white people as normal and those who experience racism as an alternative that isn't normal. Also, such terms present those who experience racism as a homogenous group, which reduces the differences between those with a wide range of ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds, who happen to share experiences of being discriminated against due to racism. A number of terms that describe the actions of those who don't experience racism, such as 'white privilege', 'white fragility', and 'white guilt', have

been included in their original form to better link to existing literature and also to improve relatability for readers who may recognise such behaviour. Thus, within this chosen terminology, the aim is to convey a reflective depth whilst also using language sensitively, and appropriately, to avoid repetition of othering. Inappropriate language will also be acknowledged and named, with a particular example being the word 'coloured' when making reference to direct quotes from the data.

## COMMENTARY ON SOME CURRENT LITERATURE

The literature on discussions of racism is vast and complicated, and it appears that discussions of racism can very quickly become segregating. Various aspects of such discussions create a dichotomy between the experiences of those who don't experience racism, the 'white experience', and the experience of those who do experience racism, which is dominated by the 'black experience'. While being somewhat reductive, it seems the 'white experience' literature explores white guilt, ignorance, shame, and a need for education. For example, DiAngelo's (2018) *White Fragility* explores these experiences in detail. Alternatively, the perspectives of those from minority ethnic groups or 'the lived black experience' are more often educational and instructive. They express the pain, frustration, anger, desires, and hopes of the author, as characterised within popular anti-racism books such as *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge, 2017) and *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of an Empire* (Akala, 2019).

Racism-based literature within the psychotherapeutic community has largely focused on how individuals of different races can more fruitfully work together, with a basis on psychotherapeutic training and eventual sessions with clients (Altman, 2000; Ellis, 2021). A familiar dichotomy between the 'white experience' and 'black experience' is maintained (Altman, 2006; Ellis, 2013), although there is a far greater emphasis on the experiences of psychotherapists who don't experience racism, and how they can work through their white privilege, white fragility, and white shame (Fu, 2015; Morgan, 2020). The white supremacy within psychotherapy is well documented (Turner, 2018), and while there are efforts to decolonise curriculums and offer effective spaces to discuss difference (Ellis, 2015; Simon et al., 2022), the literature gives the impression that the biggest challenge is opening the hearts and minds of psychotherapists who don't experience racism. There is extensive writing about how to bring racism into psychotherapy training in ways that prioritise the students who don't experience racism, by tackling the potential for them to exclude themselves from the conversation or offer only silence when students who do experience racism make them feel uncomfortable (Bartoli et al., 2015; Case, 2015; Fu, 2015; McIntosh, 2015). The literature does consider some minority groups, most often to share their experiences (Ellis, 2015; Turner, 2018), but also increasingly within the context of critiquing psychotherapy training (Ellis, 2015). In a new text entitled *Black Identities + White Therapies: Race, respect + diversity*,

Charura and Lago (2021) edited a collection of papers by over 20 authors writing about the importance of addressing the shortcomings of racial competency in psychotherapeutic training and professional practice. Many of the authors are from communities who experience racism and have the lived experience of discrimination. They are unapologetic in their call for accountability, challenging colour-blindness, and highlight implications for therapists, trainers, trainees, supervisors, and also society as a whole (Charura & Lago, 2021). While reviewing the current literature on anti-racist practice in counselling, it has been recognised that all accounts are perfectly valid in their exploration of racism discussions and the subsequent difficulties that arise. However, it seems there is a lack of literature that acknowledges the various overlaps in experience demonstrated within this research, where complex feelings of hope, disappointment, and even apathy were shared between all members.

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

The participants were students in the second year of the University of Leeds Master of Arts in Psychotherapy and Counselling. Sixteen students out of the overall cohort of 22 provided a letter. Fifteen were written by students who don't experience racism, with one written by a student who does experience racism.

### ***Researchers***

The researchers were volunteers from the same cohort as the participants, who had also taken part in the data collection prior to knowing about the research opportunity. There were six initial researchers who were present for data collection and analysis: four who don't experience racism, and two who do experience racism (four white, one black/mixed heritage, and one South Asian).

### ***Procedure***

As an exercise in the week before an anti-racism session, all the students in the cohort were asked to write a letter in response to an open letter entitled 'Dear White America', which was written by George Yancy, an African American philosophy professor (Yancy, 2015). The students were asked to post their letters to an online Padlet forum where they could be read by the whole cohort (see Appendix A). After a week, the available letters were downloaded for analysis, and one researcher anonymised any identifying information. This researcher had no further participation in the analysis process.

### ***Data analysis***

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, undertaken by following the steps according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) overview of the method. This was an inductive method whereby themes were drawn out of the letter responses, separate to existing models or expected results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of the process was to take turns reading the letters aloud, and afterwards each researcher would individually give their thoughts and express their emotional responses. Once each researcher had spoken, there would then be a group discussion to discuss and elaborate upon the individual responses. During these individual and group processes each emotional reaction to the letters was coded and it was noted if some responses came up repeatedly. Once all the letters had been read though, each researcher independently went through the noted responses and chose themes that felt significant and descriptive of the data. These themes were not strictly based on the frequency of a given response, but what the researchers felt were the overarching themes the codes could be grouped into. These felt themes were then shared and there was a final group process of arranging them into the major thematic results.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The main ethical consideration for this research was the dual role of the researchers, as they were both researchers and members of the participating cohort. This was a particular issue due to the small size of the cohort, with the researchers making up over a quarter of the total number. To help maintain anonymity and confidentiality, a single researcher anonymised the letters by removing any identifying information, and this researcher did not take further part in the analysis. In the eventuality that an author of a given letter was still recognised, it was agreed beforehand that this information would not be shared. Some of the letters were written by members of the research team, and in those cases, it was agreed that they would not disclose this until the group discussion, after the individual responses had been given. There was also a potential issue for the researchers, in that publication of this research meant revealing some of their subjective responses to letters written by their peers. To remediate this, it was decided that responses to the letters would be presented as a group opinion as much as possible.

With this research involving discussions about racism, there were potential emotional impacts for the researchers. For the researchers who experience racism it can be easily acknowledged that for them the topic of racism comes with traumatic elements, as they relive their past and current experiences. Within the research process there was also the potential for the researchers who experience racism to be faced with the often documented dynamic where their experiences of racism are met with silence or defensiveness from their peers who don't experience racism (Ellis, 2015). This dynamic is traumatising, and most likely retraumatising of previous occurrences where their experiences of racism were met with

similar dismissal. Responses like these play into the denial of truth poignantly described as the 'white mirror', which describes an unconscious defence mechanism to prevent group members who don't experience racism from having to face their links with historical or personal racism (Aiyegbusi, 2021). For all members of the research team, regardless of race, there was also the possibility of experiencing recognition trauma, which encompasses the strong emotional response to becoming aware of being a victim of racism or of belonging to a perpetrator group (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2016). To counter these potential emotional risks, the researchers were confident of being able to enter the necessary discussions of racism with sufficient openness and compassion for everyone to find value and fulfilment. If these efforts were unsuccessful, there was a risk of deeply distressing the researchers, for which they had the support of the research lead, personal tutors, and personal therapists.

### ***Reflexivity***

Although this article focuses on data drawn from the participants' responses to Yancy's letter (2015), it feels important to acknowledge that the research was conducted after the subsequent anti-racism seminar had taken place. While this study deliberately only references the responses to Yancy's letter, the session influenced the research team and therefore also the analysis. Prior to the anti-racism session, the responses to Yancy (2015) gave the researchers hope that the members of the cohort (participants) who don't experience racism were ready to open up (and indeed challenge themselves about their whiteness, racism, responses to discrimination, and their positioning in society and the counselling/psychotherapy profession, etc.). However, as researchers, we concurred that disappointingly, in the end, when it came to engaging face-to-face in the group to explore these matters and their reactions, the exercise was met with overall limited engagement and holding back. The unsatisfying nature of the session led most of the research team to want to sign up for the research opportunity, in an attempt to get more out of the anti-racism topic before moving on. This disappointment is significant as it was still felt when we conducted the analysis for this article, and the interpretative nature of this research leaves it based on our subjective, emotional experiences. We are aware that our own motivation to explore racism and feelings of disappointment in the engagement with this topic during the seminar may have an influence on our responses to the Yancy letters.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Analysis of Responses to Yancy's 'Dear White America' Letter***

A topic as sensitive and deeply personal as racism cannot be explored without subjectivity. The research team was immersed in this aspect of the research, pulling focus away from objective truth to explore interpretations and emotional responses to each of the letters. Therefore, any quotes used in demonstration of a particular theme are examples from letters

that aroused particularly powerful emotional responses or deep discussion. It quickly became apparent that such emotional reactions are rooted in defensiveness, highlighting the difficulty of engaging with the topic of racism. This also raised the question of whether it is possible or necessary to have such a discussion without emotional and defensive reactions. The complex nature of this work and the research team's dual relationships as peers to the authors of the letters meant there was much overlap in many of the themes. Some represented a spectrum of emotion, often with an edge of guilt and discomfort at casting judgement on fellow classmates. Nevertheless, responses have been unravelled into overarching themes that most strongly represent the researchers' experience of the letters, some of which present a juxtaposition of emotion. In doing so, the themes highlight the complicated nature of approaching conversations about racism and the tangled web of emotions that arise.

### **Connection vs. Disconnection**

Connection and disconnection are disparate emotions which can be viewed as an amalgamation of other, smaller factors such as empathy or disappointment. They resemble instinctual responses that mark an overall reaction to a given letter, which is shown often as a researcher's first emotional response, which could be 'I felt really connected to this letter' or vice versa. When examining this response closely, the critical element was whether a letter's author seemed either willing or unwilling to challenge their racism.

### **Connection with participants willing to challenge their racism**

With the vast majority of the letters having been written by members of the group who don't experience racism, a major factor that influenced felt connection with a letter's author was the authenticity and genuineness with which they approached the process of challenging racism. For example, if they were perceived to be genuinely engaged with their self-exploration, such as the writer below:

'I need to look at every attitude I hold, every reaction and response to every situation, every thought about another I have.'

In this quote, the participant demonstrates their desire to invest more time and attention to racism, implicit and explicit, on both an internal and external level. It seems by sharing their wish to engage more actively with the process, they in turn allowed the researchers to feel more open to them. There is this sense of hope in the participant showing a strong investment in their desire to change, which in turn caused the research team to feel connected with their process.

Interlaced with the notion that the participants' levels of engagement are an important factor in felt connectedness is the depth of acknowledgment the writer demonstrates in their letter. This includes acknowledgement of privilege, of the implicit benefits that whiteness provides, and of the part each individual plays in the maintenance of a systemically racist society. One participant's response below demonstrates this:

'To accept that I have been complicit in racist systems is easy but within my heart I know that my previously fervent "white innocence" is a masquerade for more direct participation.'

This quote is from a letter which elicited a positive response from all group members. The way in which the participant acknowledges their 'white innocence' demonstrates an awareness that is in itself engaging due to their willingness to look at their position from another's perspective. This quote is representative of some of the other participants whose similar responses suggested they were engaged in developing their racial awareness.

### **Disconnection from participants unwilling to challenge their racism**

For the researchers, disconnection from a given letter felt like an act of self-preservation; to switch off feelings and recoil from hurtful or painful words. The most obvious example of this disconnection defence is when faced with the use of inappropriate language, such as the word 'coloured' in the quote below:

'how does this manifest itself in the UK? Is this easily transferable, like every coloured or black person experiences the same situations cross-nationally.'

This participant's use of offensive language instantly made some researchers uncomfortable and defensive, meaning there was a sense of feeling unable to connect to what had been written. In addition to the specific language used, the question posed in this quote was poorly received within the group. The question itself came across as 'othering', with the inference that all people who experience racism do so in the same way, and that all people who experience racism are the same. It demonstrates how a perceived lack of understanding from the participant forced a wedge between the letter and the research group, increasing feelings of disconnection. This was exacerbated in those that felt hurt or offended by what was written, and who were unable or unwilling to push through their defences to understand the participant or to see any innocence in the question asked.

While honesty was an important factor in felt empathy and connection, there were instances where honesty caused disconnection. For example, the quote below was perceived as the participant being honest about their experiences, but resulted in the research group feeling as though they were displacing the burden of the topic:

'But you need to bring your hurt to me so gently so I don't get angry and defensive because I would rather not hear what you need to say.'

This participant expressing their difficulty in confronting racism was perceived as a lack of engagement. Though some members of the research group who don't experience racism could empathise with the participant's angry defensiveness, the insistence that people who experience racism need to bring up racism 'gently' was seen as an example of white fragility. There were a few letters that shared this notion, which felt particularly disconnecting for the researchers who experience racism and do not share the 'privilege' of experiencing racism gently. Participants that posed such dilemmas or a reluctance to engage with the topic were generally met with a negative gut reaction and rejection of their letter.

### Anger

The anger experienced by the researchers encapsulates a spectrum of emotions, of largely feeling offended, frustrated, disappointed, or hurt. While anger was experienced differently and at different times for each researcher, there was an overall response of anger and frustration when participants failed to acknowledge their privilege, such as in this quote:

'Due to my lack of knowledge and understanding, I feel it isn't appropriate for me to become involved in discussions regarding race. As what do I have to offer?'

This unrecognised white privilege of having the option to turn away from the problem is an example of a time when feelings of anger were triggered in the researchers. For the group members who experience racism, there was anger at the burden of responsibility being placed solely on their shoulders. There was a shared feeling of exasperation at the need to justify or explain the necessity for people who don't experience racism, who are not a 'non-race', to engage with this topic.

There were times where the members of the group who experience racism were angered by something that was not necessarily recognised by the members who don't experience racism. The quote below best demonstrates this divide:

'In these instances, I see how racism is improving significantly, as action is being taken against racist individuals.'

This is an example of a quote that left the researchers who experience racism feeling personally hurt and angered. They sensed the participant was dismissing the severity of racism and in response felt their experiences of racism were being invalidated. Inversely,

some researchers who don't experience racism, without the same experiences of racism, expressed empathic responses with having thought the same point the participant was making. These different responses highlight how feeling guilty in response to anger can be equally silencing for both those who don't experience racism and those who do experience racism. Some researchers who don't experience racism felt guilty for not realising the impact of this letter on the researchers who do experience racism, and expressed regret for giving what had been their authentic responses. The researchers who experience racism subsequently found this white guilt to be yet another barrier when trying to authentically express their responses to racism.

### **Disappointment**

Overall, the research team's feelings of disappointment came from a desire to have seen more engagement and openness from their classmates. There were various forms of disengagement in the letters, which seemed as though the authors were avoiding an active, head-on approach to tackling their racism. A frequent cause for disappointment was feeling defensiveness within the authors, such as from this quote:

'I feel it is unfair to say that if you are born into 'white privilege', you are a racist. Maybe this is down to the derogatory connotations associated with the word 'Racist' and that people should better educate themselves around the term.'

This participant felt defensive, as if they were shrugging off the accountability that comes with seeing that one's own privileged position in society is the result of structural racism. They are othering the responsibility of education onto other people and in doing so distancing themselves from personal liability.

Avoiding responsibility was common among the letters, as some participants did not own their personal role within a racist society and others simply avoided or denied personal racism. Others distanced themselves from racist behaviour by labelling themselves as a 'white innocent', such as in this quote:

'Who are these systems, processes, countries that perpetuate racism? They're white, but not my innocent liberal white, the bad oppressive white.'

The research group found this stance to be disappointing because it felt like the participant was trying to condemn systematically racist systems as something that happens far away, while they are benefitting from being a person who doesn't experience racism in a systematically racist society that is very much happening right here, right now. No matter how

innocent people who don't experience racism may feel, they are unwitting accomplices and beneficiaries of white domination of society.

Hopelessness was another response that felt like a disappointing way of avoiding engagement. It is easy to do nothing under the guise of actions being pointless, and this is shown in the following quote:

'And I know that it is quite little I can do. But I can be aware, I can just take notice. I can notice for example being served first when a person of colour stands in front of me in a coffee shop.'

This participant's hopelessness has pushed them into a state of apathy, and disappointment was particularly felt with their desire to only engage with blatant manifestations of racism, and even then, only engaging by 'noticing'. The researchers who don't experience racism were disappointed as they themselves were working hard to overcome their own defences in order to approach the topic of racism, and therefore it was disappointing to see some of their fellow classmates be less willing to do the same.

### **Empathy**

Empathy was an interesting facet of the research group's experience. It differed from 'connection' in that felt connectedness depended on a participant being ready to engage with their racism, whereas empathy was typically experienced towards those at the more fragile beginnings of their journey and whose statements the researchers did not necessarily agree with. At times the research group became split as the researchers who don't experience racism felt empathy towards certain letters that expressed a struggle to come to terms with racism, while the researchers who do experience racism found the same letters frustrating. More unanimous responses of empathy were felt when the letter seemed genuine and without defensiveness when faced with racism or white privilege, such as the following quote:

'It is hard... it is still hard to admit I can be racist...I am however finding it easier to acknowledge that my white heritage has put me in a privileged and lucky position, something I would have strongly denied before your letter.'

It was appreciable to all members of the group that suddenly becoming aware of having benefited from ingrained societal racism is a difficult process, even if at the same time it is frustrating that people who don't experience racism may not have had to realise this before. It seemed easier to feel empathy towards someone going through this process if it was perceived that they were doing so without attempting to dodge or minimise their personal role within such a system.

Due to the white majority within the cohort, most of the letters were the responses of people who don't experience racism being challenged to face their own racism, and the openness with which the participants engaged with this heavily influenced any feelings of empathy towards them. The researchers who don't experience racism were also aware of having felt some personal shame when confronted with the overall impact that white domination and racism has had on people who do experience racism, and similar shame was also expressed in the letters, such as in the following quote:

'This created a serious conflict in me, I found myself not wanting to be us white people and felt ashamed to be white.'

This is an example of an occasion where felt empathy was more divided among the group. The members of the research group who don't experience racism felt empathy because they could relate to the feeling of wanting to escape and distance themselves from the stigma of being the 'bad white people'. Prior to this letter writing exercise, it had been possible to try and escape personal responsibility for societal racism with the perception of being a 'white innocent', but Yancy's letter showed that this isn't possible. The researchers who don't experience racism could relate to the feelings of conflict and fear that this self-awareness brought upon them, whereas the researchers who do experience racism felt less moved.

There was a shared sense of empathy towards letters that showed consideration for people who do experience racism, such as in the following quote:

'I can only imagine how boring and frustrating and emotionally draining it is to have to witness white people talking about how hard it is to acknowledge their privilege.'

This acknowledgement gave a shared feeling of empathy because the author had been able to accurately encapsulate the experience of people who experience racism. The researchers who experience racism felt seen by this letter, and the researchers who don't experience racism could see similarities with their own realisations of what it might be like to be a person who experiences racism witnessing people who don't experience racism struggle to accept their privilege.

## **DISCUSSION**

This has been a multifaceted research project. What began as a rough analysis of the difficulty in approaching the topic of racism in educational establishments transformed into a deeply emotional exploration of the nuances and complexity of emotions that arise during discussions of racism. This research has been an experience that is unique to each individual

member of the research group. It has birthed the question: how do we approach the complex and emotional topic of racism? Through the thematic analysis of the responses to Yancy's letter it became evident that the highly emotive nature of this topic acts as both a helper and hindrance to such conversations. The defensiveness experienced in response to certain letters silenced individuals from feeling able to engage in the conversation, whereas feelings of empathy provoked a hopeful and encouraging response. In reality, none of the emotional responses were felt in isolation; the themes described in the results section of this article, though written about individually, were often felt all at once and sometimes upon reading the same sentence. Everything was entangled messily, and it was hard, if not impossible, to separate what the researchers were feeling in response to the letters themselves or in response to their own experiences and history.

In a way, the focus of this research shifted from the responses to Yancy's letter to instead examine the group and interracial process that it took to conduct this research. Although there were many letters which the research team were left feeling positive about, it was the discussions around the letters that left them feeling negative which seemed the most worthwhile. The letters that left members of the research team hurting, in turn, provided a degree of challenge that was otherwise distant in a group of individuals whose conversation may otherwise have consisted largely of agreement. Through a group process, the team were able to soothe some of the wounds that a letter caused, and, in that, any disappointment caused was at least to the smallest degree able to be softened. In turn, it could be seen that the process of conducting the research was able to partially make up for disappointment felt in direct response to the letters. The team's responses and discussions have not been shared with the participants, and it would be interesting to see how some of them would respond to reading their letter now over two years later. Would they be proud or ashamed of their words and how they were later received and dissected?

Negative responses such as disconnection, disappointment, and anger were all frequently experienced and often they went beyond the concept of racism or the society in which racism has been created, but were also felt towards the author. As these were the researchers' peers, friends, and future colleagues, it felt personal. As a result of this, at certain points the research team began to question whether it was necessary or even possible to detach emotions in order to have a productive conversation about racism. The accusatory and silencing nature of negative responses seemed paralyzing at times, particularly when defensive and protective reactions, namely anger, made it more difficult to thoroughly explore the intent of the participants. It was realised, however, that to ask this of anyone would be an exhausting and burdensome task. In actuality, this research has shown just how necessary and possible it is to meaningfully engage in such discourse even with a vast array of emotions that often differ from person to person. There were many times during this process that the researcher team was in disagreement, had differing interpretations of letters, and differing emotional reactions. Yet rather than silence each other, the team was able to persevere, and the

resulting conversations encouraged awareness of the sensitivity and delicate handling this topic needs. Throughout this research, despite the undeniable differences in the research team's life experiences, there was a sense of consolidation as a group that allowed each person to be authentic with their experience. After much reflection, this can only be described as what Rogers would call prizing one another (Rogers, 1957). This prizing of one another, having genuine curiosity and acceptance of each other's experience, despite challenge and negativity, enabled the conversations and the research itself to continue.

### ***Limitations***

When considering the limitations of this research, it can first be noted that the research group wasn't representative of the student cohort. It included two out of the three people who experience racism, and both men from the cohort as researchers. This means that the most common demographic, white women, were underrepresented as there was one white female researcher in the group, compared to white females being 77% of the cohort. The researchers also all volunteered to take part, which could mean that they were more comfortable or willing to engage with talking about racism. This means that the analysis most likely only represents a small slice of society, and the applicability is limited when considering how the results could be used to prepare for racism seminars in general. The data were also arguably compromised, as only 16 out of the 22 students in the cohort wrote a response to Yancy's letter. It could be argued that those students that did not write a letter were less engaged in confronting their own racism and therefore may be the most critical to hear from if the intention of such research is to suggest how future sessions could promote conversations about racism. The nature of the data collection also means that all the students were put into the same category, regardless of their race or gender. As most of the student cohort don't experience racism, the voices of the few students who do experience racism have effectively been drowned out and silenced. It is clear that race is a significant factor, as throughout this research the responses of the researchers who experience racism were very different to those of the researchers who don't experience racism, and the process of responding to a letter entitled 'Dear White America' would be different depending on the race of the author.

### ***Implications for future anti-racism exercises***

Yancy is an evocative, powerful writer and reading his honest admissions about himself it is hard to not feel touched and in turn be primed to be honest about oneself once he turns the spotlight onto his white readers. The members of the research group who don't experience racism all felt a desire to meet Yancy with his requests for them to bear their racism and their place in a racist society. This is a compelling experience and with the participants safely at home, maybe alone, it is understandable that this is a situation where it is probably easier for them to explore their racism than in a group setting that includes people who experience racism, who they may be admitting biases against. While many of the participants' letters

were reflected upon negatively, they are still evidence that individuals were inspired to respond at least somewhat honestly. There is a great spatial divide between challenging oneself at home and in a group session, and while responding to Yancy's letter at home may be an effective preparatory exercise to open the door to being honest about racism, it begs the question of whether it is a sufficient exercise to bridge the divide and allow an equally honest environment within a seminar setting.

A significant question that remains is whether there could be an effective way to reach the students who did not write a response to Yancy. There are obviously reasons beyond lack of engagement with racism for why they may not have written a reply, but having a quarter of the cohort not participating is a significant omission. Making responding to Yancy's letter a compulsory assignment could change the dynamic of the exercise, but at least then everyone would be included and prompted in some way to begin thinking about racism. Additionally, it can also be acknowledged that while responding to a letter entitled 'Dear White America' puts the focus on the students who don't experience racism, and they are who such an exercise is intended for, this means that students who do experience racism are relatively separated from the process. There is potential for those who experience racism to be more explicitly included in the process of examining their own racial biases.

## CONCLUSION

It is easy to point to racism as being exclusive to the likes of extreme nationalist groups, but the aim of Yancy's letter is to show that racism exists within all of us and society as a whole. It is possible to simply conclude that talking about our racism is hard, and while that is undeniably true, it is the research team's hope that this study shows the conversation does not have to stop there. Yes, talking about racism is scary when it's easy to cause offence, and yes, at times you might have to hold your hands up and say you made a mistake; but the research team's responses to the letters show that such mistakes are not conclusive and with engagement it is possible to work through them while acknowledging any offence caused. This exercise of responding to Yancy's letter was avoided by some, and the fact that this was intended as an exercise for trainee counsellors to begin to explore and tackle their own racism makes it doubly disappointing that this opportunity for self-reflection was avoided by so many. Yancy's letter asks those who don't experience racism to listen with 'a form of love that enables you to see the role that you play (even despite your anti-racist actions) in a system that continues to value black lives on the cheap' (Yancy, 2015, para. 21). The lack of several responses shows that some struggled to offer this love at all, and this study has shown that even for those who did respond it was often a particular challenge to engage with the personal responsibility that Yancy wanted to inspire.

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## APPENDIX

### **Appendix A: 'Dear White America' by Professor George Yancy**

Dear White America,

I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say. Did you hear that? You may have missed it. I repeat: *I want you to listen with love*. Well, at least try.

We don't talk much about the urgency of love these days, especially within the public sphere. Much of our discourse these days is about revenge, name calling, hate, and divisiveness. I have yet to hear it from our presidential hopefuls, or our political pundits. I don't mean the Hollywood type of love, but the scary kind, the kind that risks not being reciprocated, the kind that refuses to flee in the face of danger. To make it a bit easier for you, I've decided to model, as best as I can, what I'm asking of you. Let me demonstrate the vulnerability that I wish you to show. As a child of Socrates, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, let me speak the truth, refuse to err on the side of caution.

This letter is a gift for you. Bear in mind, though, that some gifts can be heavy to bear. You don't have to accept it; there is no obligation. I give it freely, believing that many of you will throw the gift back in my face, saying that I wrongly accuse you, that I am too sensitive, that I'm a race hustler, and that I blame white people (you) for everything.

I have read many of your comments. I have even received some hate mail. In this letter, I ask you to look deep, to look into your souls with silence, to quiet that voice that will speak

to you of your white 'innocence.' So, as you read this letter, take a deep breath. Make a space for my voice in the deepest part of your psyche. Try to listen, to practice being silent. There are times when you must quiet your own voice to hear from or about those who suffer in ways that you do not.

What if I told you that I'm sexist? Well, I am. Yes. I said it and I mean just that. I have watched my male students squirm in their seats when I've asked them to identify and talk about their sexism. There are few men, I suspect, who would say that they are sexists, and even fewer would admit that their sexism actually oppresses women. Certainly not publicly, as I've just done. No taking it back now.

To make things worse, I'm an academic, a philosopher. I'm supposed to be one of the 'enlightened' ones. Surely, we are beyond being sexists. Some, who may genuinely care about my career, will say that I'm being too risky, that I am jeopardizing my academic livelihood. Some might even say that as a black male, who has already been stereotyped as a 'crotch-grabbing, sexual fiend,' that I'm at risk of reinforcing that stereotype. (Let's be real, that racist stereotype has been around for centuries; it is already part of white America's imaginary landscape.)

Yet, I refuse to remain a prisoner of the lies that we men like to tell ourselves — that we are beyond the messiness of sexism and male patriarchy, that we don't oppress women. Let me clarify. This doesn't mean that I intentionally hate women or that I desire to oppress them. It means that despite my best intentions, I perpetuate sexism every day of my life. Please don't take this as a confession for which I'm seeking forgiveness. Confessions can be easy, especially when we know that forgiveness is immediately forthcoming.

As a sexist, I have failed women. I have failed to speak out when I should have. I have failed to engage critically and extensively their pain and suffering in my writing. I have failed to transcend the rigidity of gender roles in my own life. I have failed to challenge those poisonous assumptions that women are 'inferior' to men or to speak out loudly in the company of male philosophers who believe that feminist philosophy is just a nonphilosophical fad. I have been complicit with, and have allowed myself to be seduced by, a country that makes billions of dollars from sexually objectifying women, from pornography, commercials, video games, to Hollywood movies. I am not innocent.

I have been fed a poisonous diet of images that fragment women into mere body parts. I have also been complicit with a dominant male narrative that says that women enjoy being treated like sexual toys. In our collective male imagination, women are 'things' to be used for our visual and physical titillation. And even as I know how poisonous and false these sexist assumptions are, I am often ambushed by my own hidden sexism. I continue to see women through the male gaze that belies my best intentions not to sexually objectify them. Our collective male erotic feelings and fantasies are complicit in the degradation of women. And we must be mindful that not all women endure sexual degradation in the same way.

I recognize how my being a sexist has a differential impact on black women and women of color who are not only victims of racism, but also sexism, *my sexism*. For example, black women and women of color not only suffer from sexual objectification, but the ways in which they are objectified is linked to how they are racially depicted, some as 'exotic' and others as 'hyper-sexual.' You see, the complicity, the responsibility, the pain that I cause runs deep.

And, get this. I refuse to seek shelter; I refuse to live a lie. So, every day of my life I fight against the dominant male narrative, choosing to see women as subjects, not objects. But even as I fight, there are moments of failure. Just because I fight against sexism does not give me clean hands, as it were, at the end of the day; I continue to falter, and I continue to oppress. And even though the ways in which I oppress women is unintentional, this does not free me of being responsible.

If you are white, and you are reading this letter, I ask that you don't run to seek shelter from your own racism. Don't hide from your responsibility. Rather, begin, right now, to practice being vulnerable. Being neither a 'good' white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook. I consider myself to be a decent human being. Yet, I'm sexist. Take another deep breath. I ask that you try to be 'un-sutured.' If that term brings to mind a state of pain, open flesh, it is meant to do so. After all, it is painful to let go of your 'white innocence,' to use this letter as a mirror, one that refuses to show you what you want to see, one that demands that you look at the lies that you tell yourself so that you don't feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness.

I can see your anger. I can see that this letter is being misunderstood. This letter is not asking you to feel bad about yourself, to wallow in guilt. That is too easy. I'm asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist. I'm now daring you to face a racist history which, paraphrasing Baldwin, has placed you where you are and that has formed your own racism. Again, in the spirit of Baldwin, I am asking you to enter into battle with your white self. I'm asking that you open yourself up; to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that is inside of you.

Again, take a deep breath. Don't tell me about how many black friends you have. Don't tell me that you are married to someone of color. Don't tell me that you voted for Obama. Don't tell me that I'm the racist. Don't tell me that you don't see color. Don't tell me that I'm blaming whites for everything. To do so is to hide yet again. You may have never used the N-word in your life, you may hate the K.K.K., but that does not mean that you don't harbor racism and benefit from racism. After all, you are part of a system that allows you to walk into stores where you are not followed, where you get to go for a bank loan and your skin does not count against you, where you don't need to engage in 'the talk' that black people and people of color must tell their children when they are confronted by white police officers.

As you reap comfort from being white, we suffer for being black and people of color. But your comfort is linked to our pain and suffering. Just as my comfort in being male is linked to the suffering of women, which makes me sexist, so, too, you are racist. That is the gift that I want you to accept, to embrace. It is a form of knowledge that is taboo. Imagine the impact that the acceptance of this gift might have on you and the world.

Take another deep breath. I know that there are those who will write to me in the comment section with boiling anger, sarcasm, disbelief, denial. There are those who will say, 'Yancy is just an angry black man.' There are others who will say, 'Why isn't Yancy telling black people to be honest about the violence in their own black neighborhoods?' Or, 'How can Yancy say that all white people are racists?' If you are saying these things, then you've already failed to listen. I come with a gift. You're already rejecting the gift that I have to offer. This letter is about *you*. Don't change the conversation. I assure you that so many black people suffering from poverty and joblessness, which is linked to high levels of crime, are painfully

aware of the existential toll that they have had to face because they are black and, as Baldwin adds, '*for no other reason.*'

Some of your white brothers and sisters have made this leap. The legal scholar Stephanie M. Wildman, has written, 'I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see.' And the journalism professor Robert Jensen: 'I like to think I have changed, even though I routinely trip over the lingering effects of that internalized racism and the institutional racism around me. Every time I walk into a store at the same time as a black man and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege.'

What I'm asking is that you first accept the racism within yourself, accept all of the truth about what it means for you to be white in a society that was created for you. I'm asking for you to trace the binds that tie you to forms of domination that you would rather not see. When you walk into the world, you can walk with assurance; you have already signed a contract, so to speak, that guarantees you a certain form of social safety.

Baldwin argues for a form of love that is 'a state of being, or state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.' Most of my days, I'm engaged in a personal and societal battle against sexism. So many times, I fail. And so many times, I'm complicit. But I refuse to hide behind that mirror that lies to me about my 'non-sexist nobility.' Baldwin says, 'Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.' In my heart, I'm done with the mask of sexism, though I'm tempted every day to wear it. And, there are times when it still gets the better of me.

White America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege? Are you prepared to show me a white self that love has unmasked? I'm asking for love in return for a gift; in fact, I'm hoping that this gift might help you to see yourself in ways that you have not seen before. Of course, the history of white supremacy in America belies this gesture of black gift-giving, this gesture of non-sentimental love. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered even as he loved.

Perhaps the language of this letter will encourage a split — not a split between black and white, but a fissure in your understanding, a space for loving a Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Jones, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald and others. I'm suggesting a form of love that enables you to see the role that you play (even despite your anti-racist actions) in a *system* that continues to value black lives on the cheap.

Take one more deep breath. I have another gift.

If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child's face. Smell your child's hair. Count the fingers on your child's hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.

In peace,

George Yancy

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