



Whiteness at the abyss: reflections on a scene of attack

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Abstract This paper focusses on a series of online attacks that the author was subjected to after comments he had made in a closed lecture on the topic of ‘white anxiety’ were cut from the zoom recording and distributed widely online with the clear intent of causing outrage. The analysis of the material, which combines thematic, discourse analytic and personal reflections, yielded a series of core themes: 1) the role of the messages in consolidating an identity, 2) performative offensiveness, 3) perverse intimidations, 4) accusations/denials/expressions of racism, 5) the race-traitor as ideological dilemma, 6) antisemitism and 7) aggressive cordiality. The paper closes with a few reflections on the author’s enunciative position in respect of the attacks.

Keywords Whiteness · Online attacks · Discursive strategies · Intimidation · White nationalism

Introduction

This paper focuses on a discursive scene of attack. More specifically, it identifies and explores a series of themes and discursive strategies that predominated in a barrage of hate messages received between August and November 2021. On the 12 June that year I delivered a formal lecture on the topic of “white anxiety” to the American Association for Psychoanalysis in Social Work (AAPCSW), as part of a series of talks focused on the theme of “Deconstructing Whiteness to an Anti-Racist Clinical Practice”. Several weeks after I had delivered lecture, the Zoom recording

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was—with my permission—made available on the AAPCSW’s website. I had, naïvely, thought that few people apart from members of AAPCSW would find the remarks of any interest. A few days later, comments that I had made in the talk were cut from the recording and distributed widely online, with obvious malicious intent. The resultant Twitter storm was exacerbated by media attention and by an online Fox News story (Colton, 2021).

The contentious material focused on the notion of the “end of whiteness” and a misquoted note on the idea of “white suicide”. I had cited a South African scholar who, in respect of ongoing structures of white supremacy in that country, had referred to “white suicide as an ethical act” (see Hook, 2020a). My engagement with this idea—which quite obviously did not involve an endorsement of suicide in any literal form (Reuters Fact Check, 2021)—involved a questioning of what it might mean for a culture of white structural privilege to give way, or, unlikely as this might seem, to be willingly relinquished (see Hook, 2020a and 2020b, for published versions of this argument). The post-apartheid South African context is crucial in all of this. Despite ongoing racialized social asymmetries, the gradual decline of white cultural dominance is increasingly a historical reality in South Africa, as are debates on what whiteness might become if it is no longer synonymous with privilege. Just as clinical psychoanalytic work involves encounters with anxiety and castration—in one or more of its numerous forms—so, I suggested, whiteness, insofar as it represents a mode of structural privilege and cultural dominance, will presumably confront both anxiety and something akin to castration, as an era of white cultural ascendancy is increasingly questioned and contested.

These attacks, which took on a far more orchestrated form than I would have anticipated, took a variety of forms: threatening letters, calls, and emails; tweets and exponentially multiplying retweets; doxing (online publication of personal details, images of my family); attempts at hacking my email account; the attention of online trolls; and calls for the termination of my employment. As I have come to understand, campaigns of this sort are often well organized. The senior administrative assistant in my department at Duquesne University, who regrettably bore the brunt of many offensive and threatening calls, remarked that there were certain times when dozens of calls were made in rapid succession and other times of relative silence. It was not just the timing of the calls, but the similarity of what was said (“We’re coming for him”) that suggested to her that they had been coordinated. The same was true of the timing of emails: I would be subjected to a barrage of emails all within a few minutes of one another and then a pause of a few hours. It was as if a rudimentary set of protocols were in place; many of those calling and emailing me seemed well-practiced in the genre of the anxiety-inducing message: invariably obscene and threatening, but not so declarative of violent intent that it might open them up to possible police attention.

Such campaigns of intimidation are not, unfortunately, new—they are, today, the *modus operandi* adopted by those who wish to vilify and intimidate scholars with an ostensibly left-wing agenda. Nonetheless, it seems important to examine the particularity of both the contents and discursive form of the attacking messages I received, even though this campaign of intimidation was of a relatively modest



scale, certainly so compared to the extent of what colleagues such as Yancy (Yancy, 2018), Lara Sheehi and Donald Moss (Zeavin, 2022) have been exposed to in recent years.

A few methodological remarks are in order. Given that the barrage of messages involved was simply too large—and at times, too disturbing—to grapple with, I resolved simply to keep a record of the attacking emails received, such that I might refer to them later. I forwarded all the emails that I received at the time—in many instances without reading them—to my colleagues Anna Krienberg and Benjamin Strosberg who created a corpus comprised of this material. I read hardly any of the tweets—Twitter (now X) was invariably the means through which the worst of the threatening and derogatory messages were conveyed—although Anna, Benjamin and my partner did, so as to monitor for “actionable threats” to myself or my family.

There are lessons to be learnt following a close reading of the emails, lessons going beyond what many colleagues noted when the attack campaign was in full swing: that my original talk powerfully elicited precisely what it had attempted to analyze: the aggressive defensiveness of white fragility and/or white anxiety (D’Angelo, 2018; Hook, 2020a). My analysis of the material, which combines thematic, discourse analytic and—as seems justified in this case—personal reflections, yielded a series of core themes: the role of the messages in consolidating an identity; performative offensiveness; perverse intimidations; accusations, denials or expressions of racism; the race traitor as ideological dilemma; antisemitism; and, aggressive cordiality. I close by reflecting on legitimate criticisms voiced within the emails and upon my own enunciative position.

A chain of maligned signifiers

Let us begin with a representative example of the attacking emails, one which combines many of the basic reoccurring themes:

Subject: Kill Yourself Instead, Psychotic Democrat Nazi Professor From Hell, Derek Hook

You deranged piece of Democrat Nazi garbage, Derek Scumbag Hook, you need to kill yourself. Do it now, you fucking loser. Take your white guilt bullshit, you woke mentally disturbed piece of shit and get off my planet. ... No white person should feel even the slightest guilt about the lowlife [n-word] felon. They are beneath us and also should be dead. ... no white person should feel any guilt about them. It is your lowlife Black Lives Don’t Matter For Shit Terrorist Organization that deserves for every member to be exterminated and suffer the most painful and excruciating deaths possible.

And you Derek Hook deserve the same fate. ... You deserve getting your head chopped off ... If you have a gun, blow your brains out. If you don’t, go to the top of a large building and jump off of it. ... you are a malignant cancer that needs to leave the Earth ASAP!!!!



Aside from the horror B-movie schlock of the email's description of a "Psychotic Democrat Nazi Professor From Hell" what is immediately apparent here is how this attack allies itself with a hard-right political stance, one which opposes not only "Democrat ... garbage" but wokeness, Black Lives Matter, etc.. The circle of designated adversaries grew increasingly large as the emails came in, coming to including, amongst others: "screaming liberals", "revenge politicians ... the same as Ilhan Omar", "democRats", "waketard parasites", "woke academics", "libtards", those focused "on the demonization of white culture", "Marxist parasites", "communists", those who are "Vaxx compliant", and, predictably, proponents of critical race theory (the "CRT paradigm"), which, as one attacker informed me, "teaches African Americans to see themselves as a victim which they are not".

An entire "culture of wokeness" was being targeted: "You're part of a culture that is tearing this country apart with ideas, concepts, teachings ... hate is generated by so many people in 'learned' positions." The malign influence of liberal universities was frequently noted: "You and other insane professors are the reason our education system has turned into an indoctrination camp for young minds." Messages stressed "the stupidity of higher learning", that "universities are only interested in preparing students to become radical activists", warning that "when the great backlash against leftist indoctrination finally arrives, it will be people like you who suffer the most—and rightly so". I was attacked particularly insofar as I was a representative of the "waketard parasite dumbass bitch whores and bastard sons of whores in academia".

The danger that I was taken to represent to "our society as Americans" was often stressed, particularly so in claims that identified me as one of the "woke destroyers of our society" and in allegations such as "you are part of a culture that is tearing this country apart with ideas ... that have no relation to the world of the common man or woman". A type of American jingoism—or, perhaps more accurately, a type of white American nationalism—was a prominent feature in these attacks:

The only hope this planet is the white established ... logic and drive of the Ol' U.S. of A ... America is being deflated and devalued due to a selfish, greedy group of Caucasians ... and you are helping them ... Mr. Hook, you're [*sic*] entire existence and development is based on standards and practices created by whites. It's incredibly hypocritical to bite the hand that has fed you from birth and given you everything you have and are.

My remarks were also attacked as anti-Christian, as anathema to Christian values and Catholicism in particular ("you represent speak for satan", "your comments ... re: white people ... are abhorrent", "your comments ... offend me ... as a practicing Catholic). For many of those who emailed me, I seemingly embodied "absolute psychotic evil", "true evil", and I was as such deserving of appropriate forms of retribution ("I hope you burn in hell").

What I am trying to stress here is not only the polarizing terms at work in derogations of what I was alleged to have said, but also the attempt to position what I was thought to represent firmly in "the enemy camp" as the absolute antithesis of conservative Christian American values (hence me being attacked as "communist", "Marxist", etc. when there was no evidence for such claims). If this analysis holds,



then what the attacks were most fundamentally about was far less the assumed content of my talk than about how it might be utilized: as something to aggressively denounce as a means of affirming an aggrieved identity. The messages played a role in consolidating—performing—an oppositional political identity.

The stance of aggrieved attack evinced by the emails often rehashed standard Trump-era conservative/Republican anti-liberal, anti-Democrat tropes, even though, it must be said, they were clearly voiced in a more febrile register, one adopting the ad hominem route of personalized attack. Misrepresentations of my views were also seized upon by Republican politicians (and at least one Republican strategist). Larry Elder, for example, who, at the time running for the Governor of California, retweeted a post attacking my alleged statements. Repostings by conservative pundits like Ann Coulter and the subsequent Fox News story (Colton, 2021) presumably had a similar political motivation: reinforcing a politics of grievance and resentment that linked together a variety of much maligned signifiers (“screaming liberals”, critical race theory, “wokeness”, Black Lives Matter, etc.). This, moreover, was part of a broader tactics of outrage, one which stoked the feeling that ordinary white Americans were being persecuted, wronged by those, such as myself, holding extremist left-wing views.

There was something vaguely consoling about this. While the attacks I received were obviously personalized, these was nonetheless a sense in which this outrage, and these formulas of rebuke, long predated my “debut” on Twitter and Fox News. It perhaps helps to note here that the attacks against me came just a few months after a similar campaign of intimidation was launched against the psychoanalyst Donald Moss, and about seven months after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, which featured the participation of a series of hard-right groups (Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Patriot movement, QAnon, etc.). I was thus at the same time a focal point for a much larger program of rage and resentment, while being, in another way, incidental to it. Like the day’s residue in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1953), I became a point of transference, which provided a means of expression for something else which far exceeds it. This was reflected in the comments offered by a colleague with experience in such online attacks told me: “Your life will be hell for a month, then your attackers will all move along to the next target, and you will be forgotten.”

These observations point to the first general discursive theme to emerge from a reading of the emails. Their overarching purpose was to consolidate an oppositional hard-right political identity—often of a white nationalist sort—and, accordingly, to stoke a politics of grievance, and to do so by linking together a wide-ranging series of maligned signifiers associated with a progressive or leftist position. That the emails seemed so often to “talk past me”, to critique things that I hadn’t said, and to cast their net of disparagement so wide as to target topics and identities beyond the obvious remit of both me and my talk (“Marxist parasites”, “Bolshevik”, those who are “Vaxx compliant”, “revenge politicians”, etc.) proved instructive. While what is being attacked here is clearly something that has its coordinates in reality—an actual person—it is also a fantasy object. This fantasy object, moreover, is one which, in its various constituent parts, is the polar opposite of what an aggrieved subject identifies with and holds most dear (representing as it does the inversion of



their ideological ego-ideals). Hence the personifications of the sort: “You are everything that is wrong today’s society.” What was initially a rather vertiginous experience of being held to blame for a wide variety of stances, identities and values, started slowly to make sense. In this sense, the scene of the attack I am describing is very much a case of Freud’s Other scene of fantasy.

Performative offensiveness

A second general theme apparent within the emails was a type of *performative offensiveness*, by which I mean to refer to the demonstrative use of unreconstructed forms of racism, homophobia and antisemitism. The email cited at length above, for example, clearly resorts to a unreconstructed type of racism (use of the n-word, the wish that BLM advocates “be exterminated”). Disquieting as it was to receive such instances of racist hate speech, the contents of such messages were not surprising. Racist speech has long been connected to the tropes—and the enactments of—bodily violence, lynching, killing, and physical brutality. What accounts of large-scale campaigns of racist intimidation reveal (Yancy, 2018) is that while such language remains unacceptable within the broader public realm, the racist ideas continue to exert their force, and such sentiments are never that far from the surface even in more indirect, sophisticated (“reconstructed”) or symbolic forms of racism.

In many instances the use of racist hate speech was not linked to violent imagery, although there was an apparent relish in the use of forbidden or prohibited terms. The title of one representative email was: “professor, i am White. I hate [n-word] and [n-word]lovers like you”. There was a demonstrative quality to such messages; they showed me that, *yes*, this language can be used, and that *no*, despite the liberal hypocrisies of politically correct speech, the sender would speak, quite unrepentantly, in such terms, however much it might give offense. From a Lacanian standpoint, one would have to remark on the *jouissance* in question—that is, on the thrill of hate, the frisson of offensiveness (Hook, 2017, 2018)—incurred in those sending such messages and in enjoying the thought of their impact upon their recipient.

It was difficult at times to believe that all those attacking me were convinced that I had indeed endorsed a program of white genocidal suicide. Perhaps some did; others seemed intent on believing it, motivated more by what they wished I’d said than by what I had actually said. Many “haters” presumably didn’t care; the opportunity to be scandalized and furious, and to go on attack, was enough. In other words, the rewards of enjoyment—of experiencing oneself as victimized, as persecuted, as righteously indignant—by far exceeded the agenda of rational assessment. Many messages seemed performative also in another sense of the word. Not only did they perform *an act* in the terms outlined by speech act theory (an act of intimidation, disparagement, attack, etc.), they indulged in the performance of a role, they enacted a pretense of outrage. I frequently had the sense that many of my attackers were playing out an aggressive game of make-believe, in which willfully believing I’d said something was enough to justify attempts at doxing, getting me fired or hacking my email account. This performative quality was also evident in the



form of many of the messages I received. The voice messages often had a theatrical quality to them, as if the caller was doing their best to mime the formulas of horror movies in their attempt to be menacing (“Dr. Hook, the Jew professor”, warned one caller, in a caricature of a creepy voice, “We’re coming for you, believe it”).

Many of those attacking me appeared to be doing so on a cynical basis; they were well aware that there was doubt as to whether I had said what was being attributed to me. There was a discursive trace of this lack of conviction: even in some of the most vitriolic emails there were notable equivocations: “I understand that you were merely using another professor’s theory and that these are not necessarily your thoughts or are they your thoughts as well?”; “Curious, did you really call for white people to commit suicide?”; “Did you actually suggest that white people should kill themselves?”; “this was a serious statement?”.

We might again refer to Freud’s (1900/1953) ideas on dreams: when uncertainty or equivocation comes to the fore in the retelling of a dream, the analyst can be sure that they have hit upon a weak point in the dreamer’s defenses, that a suppressed thought is near the surface. Interestingly, Freud suggests that in such cases we take both sides of the equivocation seriously (“this is true”, “this is not true”). Not only then does this lend support to what I have argued above (that equivocations are indicative of knowledge contrary to what is being suggested), it also points to the role of disavowal. A posture of implicit disavowal seemed apparent in a great many of the emails: “Yes, we know very well that there is considerable doubt as to whether Derek Hook called for the suicide of the white populace, but no, that doesn’t matter, we are attacking him as if he did, nevertheless”.

It is also helpful to adapt a Lacanian formulation here: many of my attackers received their own message back from me, albeit in an inverted form—for Lacan (1978/1988) “one receives one’s own message from the other in an inverted form” (p. 51). That is to say, their belief in a type of militant left-wing radicalism bent on destroying a conservative American way of life was retroactively proved right in my alleged statements. Significantly also, many messages completely bypassed the content of my talk—as if to indicate that this was irrelevant—opting simply to highlight the fact of retribution: “Little white boy going to get fired hahahahaha”, “We are going to destroy you on social media”, and so on.

Perverse intimidations

Let us persist with the topic of the offensiveness of the emails and take up a related question: what were attackers *attempting to do with this offensiveness*? The demonstrative offensiveness of the emails noted above was also apparent in the amount of homophobia on display. I was initially surprised by this, given that issues of sexuality or sexual orientation do not feature at all in my original analysis of white anxiety. Comments such as “what does a male cock taste like?”, “I’m going to visit you ... Keep sucking Muslim [expletive] until I arrive”, “lefty pathetic faggot POS”, and “I bet you cry at night while being fucked in your ass!” were very frequent. One email, copied into half a dozen colleagues at my university read as follows:



Go to hell Hook. You do NOT think for me... The exact same b shit a few lesbian SW [social work] Prof's tried to indoctrinate us with, messages like: you are all homosexuals that are out of touch with your sexuality ... you really do represent ... satan.

Remarks pertaining to either my sexual humiliation (“Does your husbands boyfriend realize how much of a cuck you are?”) or my apparently evident perversity were commonplace (such as “next time you do your autoerotic asphyxiation masturbation rituals ... just leave the belt around your neck”; “you should stay away from children; you look like a pedophile”). There was also a series of grotesque racist rape fantasies sketched out, in which I—or my family as a whole—were subjected to various forms of attack. These were invariably racist and were often mixed with images of sexual abjection and bestiality which I won't repeat here.

It seemed significant that many attacks mentioned my family. This, of course, is a basic—which is not to say ineffective—intimidation tactic. (One of the most frightening aspects of the hate campaign was that one of my attackers zoomed in to the background of the room in which I had delivered my original lecture, enlarging pictures of my children, and then posting them alongside a thread of threatening tweets.) The implication of many of these messages was that my family was a stain to the white bloodline (“you can ... help your white evil BS by assuring America you will not contribute to the white gene pool in future”; “I propose [he] ... removes himself from the planet and from the gene pool”; I'll be ... waiting for [the] cleansing from ... [the] whiteness that you so deserve”). I was also advised to “trade in your wife and children ... to the first non-White person you meet today”. Not only was all of this linked to the antisemitic comments in many of the attacks (which I turn to shortly), it also resonated with racist notions of racial impurity, echoed colonial racism's preoccupation with the perils of miscegenation.

An idea from the clinic of perversion proved useful as a way of positioning myself in relation to contents of this sort. If such messages were designed to offend me, to cause intense negativity of affect, if, in other words, they acted, in Lacanian terms, precisely as perverse provocations (Hook, 2022; Swales, 2012), then it was important to bear this agenda in mind and, accordingly, to not take the bait, avoid succumbing to the outraged reaction that the emails hoped to elicit. While there were obvious limits to how much I could treat the material in a detached way—as research data—I found that this insight helped ground me. I did not, of course, respond to any of the messages I received, so such an attitude of detachment would have been lost on my attackers, but it proved nonetheless helpful as both a self-protective measure and as a methodological/analytical stance in respect of exploring the material.

Accusations, denials and expressions of racism

Many emails alleged that I was racist: “Your ideas are racist and just as bad as the KKK, The Nazi's et al.”; “encouraging people to commit suicide because of there [sic] skin color is just another form of nazism”; “very racist ... could be seen ... as



a call to hurt or kill white people”. These claims were invariably premised on an assumption of equivalence regards the social structures pertaining to whiteness and Blackness. Such an assumption clearly overlooks both the privileges that have typically accrued to white populations and the historical legacies of racism within countries like South Africa and the United States. The denial of such social asymmetries was a reoccurring theme, linked to the perceived injustice expressed in many of the emails: “There is NO systemic racism. Period”; “What’s next? Reparations? Again, punish those who never trespassed to aggrieve those who never suffered. Brilliant.”

Some attacks of this sort sounded more reasonable than others: “if this would be inappropriate to apply to ALL races, it is inappropriate for one particular race”; “How is that not racism to pass judgement on an entire race?”. The reasoning in attacks of this sort would often replace the signifier “white” with “black”, such that any attacks on whiteness *as structure of privilege* could be made to look blatantly racist when addressed towards Black people. For example: “Do you ... teach that to prevent black supremacy, blacks should kill themselves?”. Such a strategy—effectively a denial of structural racism assuming the guise of anti-racism—is, of course, nothing new. It parallels the riposte that “White lives matter”, and echoes contemporary attempts to downplay, sideline or effectively silence the roles that slavery and institutionalized racism have played in the history of the United States.

One reason that the “level playing field” argument featured so frequently was because, it provided a basis for the claim that whites are being unfairly persecuted and victimized: “[This] demonization of white culture seems indistinguishable from the early days of Nazi Germany ... [it is] potentially lethal”; “Your bigotry is disgraceful...you spew hatred against white people”; “Whites are the only group of people it is apparently acceptable to advocate self-harm for in the academic context”. The insistence on whites as victims was often accompanied by the claim that the real issue was the anti-white racism of Blacks: “racism today ... has been and continues to be a major phenomenon in among the Black population ... [it] predominates [there] more than in the White community”. Many anecdotal examples were forthcoming. I received one lengthy essay listing a litany of crimes perpetrated by Blacks against whites:

racial tensions ... [are] exacerbated by such groups as “Black Lives Matters” and “The Knockout” craze perpetrated by gangs of young Black men/boys against unsuspecting innocent White People ... [These gangs] converge on shopping malls attacking undeserving White shoppers and of course taking/stealing/shoplifting all the merchandise they can carry. Let us not forget “Rap Music”, and videos calling White People condescending names: honkies, rednecks, crackers, peckerwoods.

I was presented with statistics ostensibly proving that people of color were over-represented amongst violent criminal offenders, just as whites were over-represented as victims: “87% of all violent crimes are committed by the nonwhites per FBI and USDOJ data and studies ... [if that] 87% would commit suicide, it would be for the betterment of the collective as related to our society’s safety”. Another example of such an argumentative attempt to prove the superiority of



whites involved the appeal to IQ scores. One email asked: “Why would Gods chosen [race] and the savior of all other inferior, low IQ races kill themselves?”. Another cited an article by Lynn and Meisenberg (2010), “The average IQ of Sub-Saharan Africans” to justify their conclusions:

the average IQ of sub-Saharan Africans is about 80 ... The international studies of mathematics, science, and reading give a sub-Saharan African IQ of 66 ... data sets can be averaged to give an IQ of 68 as the best reading of the IQ in sub-Saharan Africa.

If, as a Lacanian perspective suggests, any intersubjective communication is always also an intrasubjective communication, one could ask of such oft-repeated “proofs” of white moral and/or intellectual superiority: “Just who are you trying to convince?”

Whereas some attackers adopted the rhetorical strategy of asserting that all races should be viewed equally—so, as we have seen, to maintain that my position was racist—others simply affirmed that whites are in fact exceptional and in fact deserving of gratitude from all other racial groups:

Do you realize that under British rule the population of South Africa increased dramatically, life expectancy doubled, as vaccines and modern medicine were introduced? Most children survived rather than died. Be honest and write about how black and brown people throughout much of the world owe literally everything to their former colonizers. Everything. They should express gratitude.

Such a defense of the merits of colonial rule occurred repeatedly. Similarly, many emails extolled the virtues of white European civilization:

Don’t you realize the Caucasian race and it’s [*sic*] reasoning is the only hope for this planet? There is so much talk about White Nationalists these days. Don’t you realize we’re all White Nationalists? You, me, Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama ... We all live in a civilization based on the collective history, experience and struggle of humans descended from Western and Northern Europeans influenced by the civilizations of Greece and Rome ... If you are capable of being honest with yourself, you’ll admit, maybe reluctantly, that there isn’t a successful Black government on the face of the Earth.

An important sidenote here concerns how whiteness was qualified and described in these emails. Interestingly, the above email, after praising the cultural achievements of Caucasians, goes on to specify that Europeans, while technically part of the same group,

are cultural and social Neanderthals compared to us ... Americans in the New World ... We Americans are the best version of this branch of the human family.

The narcissistic form of white identification on display is here unabashedly American; this remark was representative of far broader trend in the emails. This for me confirmed the importance of speaking about white nationalism rather than



merely about “whiteness” in describing the position of outrage and opposition that my attackers were writing from. This is not, of course, to say that they would necessarily identify with this term, it is just to affirm that it is an accurate way of describing both their discursive position and the interpretative repertoires they brought to bear in their attacks upon me.

Race traitor as ideological dilemma

The following email reiterates many of the themes we have discussed, offering, in addition, a speculative psychological diagnosis to account for my alleged remarks and a few intriguing notes exemplifying characteristics of “whiteness”:

[Hook’s comments] appear to me to be an intellectually sublimated form of self-hatred, a familiar species of institutionally-inculcated mental illness prevalent among “woke” academics ... So Hook’s emphasis is on cutting “whiteness” (work ethic, punctuality, correct grammar and spelling, mathematical skills, emphasis on individual accountability, individual justice and individual rights, and so on) ... Clearly it is the mass of “whites” in the US (read: European Americans) who are the target of this hybrid class warfare inflicted on them by virtue signaling white political elites.

Aside from the series of disqualifying remarks aimed at myself (self-hatred, being a virtue-signaling member of the political elite), what seems most interesting here is the list of characteristics of “whiteness”. Virtue signaling seems, in fact, an apt phrase to describe part of what is going on here: “whiteness” is couched in terms of moral exemplarity (“accountability, justice, individual rights”). “Whiteness” here, moreover, is harmless; it does not reside in power relations or privilege but is evinced rather in those small but important virtues (“work ethic, punctuality ... mathematical skills”). The reiteration of these attributes also codes for their opposites; the implication being that those who are not white lack such qualities. The strategy of reframing whiteness, such that it is not a question of structural privilege but rather a collection of benevolent, virtuous cultural traits shared by white people, is likewise apparent in the following:

I hope to hear that you get removed from the college and placed in a mental healthcare facility. Then you’ll learn being white is so magical and wonderful. White people believe in nice community’s [*sic*] and values. White people are great people and without white people, you never would have become a professor. So, your [*sic*] welcome.

Leaving aside the evident contradiction at hand—that despite apparently being “wonderful” and “great”, many white people were quite capable of some horrendous intimidation tactics—it is worth stressing again the idea that whiteness is *owed something*, that those who are not white (or those who critique it) remain fundamentally indebted to it.

What many of the cited extracts point to is an ideological dilemma—a paradox of sorts—that many of my attackers needed to try and explain: how was it that I, a



white person, would go about critiquing whiteness? This might not seem, at first glance, an intractable dilemma. Then again, if we consider the assumptions of race essentialism, which underlie so much racist thinking, we understand that however morally problematic and corrupt the figure of Derek Hook might be, he cannot summarily be rejected from the category of whiteness. One ready-to-hand response to this dilemma was the charge that I was “nothing more than a race traitor”. We have already been introduced to two further related responses: the contention, firstly, that I suffered from a type of self-hatred (“your intense public self-loathing”, “you have so much self-hatred for your own race”, etc.), and, secondly, that I suffered from some or other sort of institutional indoctrination and/or mental illness (“You should seek help ... for your mental disorders”). An even more frequently noted rebuke—which I discuss further on—was the attack of hypocrisy. In each of these discursive moves I remained within the fold of whiteness. True enough, there were attempts to separate me from Americanness (“You fucking limey pussy”; “I see you live abroad (not US)”; “You will now have ... to go back home permanently”), but it was not possible within the confines of essentialist discourses of race, to “excommunicate” me from whiteness, with one very significant exception.

Antisemitism

While I could have anticipated much of the racism contained within the barrage of hate mail I received, I was blindsided by the degree of the accompanying antisemitism. Consider the following:

You do realize that white people have literally created everything? And that white people have been the most enslaved race of all time? ... I’m just gonna go out on a limb here and guess your [*sic*] jewish ... I am certain I am right on this ... there is truth in your speech [it is that] jews ... and their jealousy to be ... the real chosen race ... the white race have yet again shown that everything a jew does or says is so massively inflated to make them look better ... the truth of their real goal [is] ... destroying white people ... But I’m here to tell you money changer ... you are a mut who has tried to claim you pure breedness ... Good day Mr Jewish Professor cause I know you probably trying to take some Palestinians house for your own and saying God gave it you ... Did you get your degree at Aushwitchs University? Double majors and 6 million lies?

A similar email arrived later the same day:

Subject: [External] The White Race Will Not Perish

You’re a loxist Jew aren’t you. The spirit of Hitler lives in many Whites and you kikes are going to pay for your loxism. Keep pushing us you fucking jew and you will be sorry.

The first of these emails interweaves a series of antisemitic stereotypes and slurs; both entail disturbing references to the Holocaust, which the first email implicitly



denies, even as the second draws on the “the spirit of Hitler” in its attempts at intimidation. (Loxism, incidentally, is an antisemitic term, the meaning of which is, apparently, the irrational hatred of white Europeans by Jewish peoples.)

My colleague Stephen Frosh (in press) has offered incisive commentary on the role of antisemitism in these attacks, so I will limit my comments here to just a few observations. Firstly, as any student of antisemitism will know, whenever anti-Black racism is present—or, we might add, any aggressive defense of “whiteness” is on display—then antisemitism is invariably present also. There is, as such, an important corollary to Frantz Fanon’s memorable remark according to which the Black man or woman, upon hearing an antisemitic remark, should be aware that this prejudice pertains to them also: “When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention; he is talking about you” (1952/2008, p. 101). To adapt Fanon: “When you hear someone derogating Black people, pay attention; they are derogating Jews also.”

Secondly, antisemitism appeared, at least in part, to offer a solution of sorts to the ideological dilemma noted above: how to situate someone who is both undeniably (visually) white, yet who nevertheless embodies a potent *internal* threat to whiteness? It is significant that the equivocations—and perverse disavowals—discussed earlier were particularly pronounced in respect of whether or not I was Jewish. Consider the following: “Do I have it wrong and you’re (((Jewish))) and therefore not White? You look white or are you a jewish white” and “You look white or are you a jewish white, which is apparently exempt”. Interestingly, the very suspension of certainty in this respect, the guessing of whether or not I (“Dr Hooknose”, “Rabbi Hook”) was Jewish speaks to one of the key tropes of antisemitism, the nervously uncategorizable status of the Jew (Strosberg, 2023).

The need to position me in relation to whiteness adhered to a certain logic, which took the following form. You are in some ways (visually) white, but you can’t be fully white—or, to spell out the logic in more detail, fully *American white*—because a) you are in some respects non-American, an immigrant, a foreigner; b) you are actually only a pathological or deviant (“self-loathing”, “self-hating”) white, an irremediable hypocrite, a “race traitor”; and c) you are Jewish and as such have never been anything more than an ambiguous or provisional inclusion in whiteness.

Aggressive cordiality

The two antisemitic emails cited above were signed off in the sender’s name (that is, they were not sent in a disguised form or from an anonymized address). Barring a few exceptions, the majority of emails that I received—including the many of the most extreme, expletive-filled and racist/antisemitic examples—were accompanied by the sender’s name and email address (and often included additional identifying information, phone numbers, residential addresses, etc.). What was most significant in this respect was not whether the contact information was always legitimate, but what the attackers conveyed to me by the gesture of including it: namely, we are unafraid to identify ourselves; we do not fear recrimination. As one of my attackers



put it: “And yes this is my real name I’m not afraid.” Identifying themselves in other words, was part of the point.

The prevalence of identity markers in the emails was notable: “I am conservative, a Texas rancher, 64 years old”; “I also have a PhD”; “I am a white guy, married to a Black professional lady”; “I am a former police officer and a veteran of the US Army”; “Afghanistan Combat Veteran”; “I am White, Southern, male (not Christian, but close enough), and am a raving maniacal Trump voter”. Some of the emails solicited a response. While obviously this was in many cases insincere, merely a rhetorical or threatening gesture (“May I ask Sir—are you a communist? ... I would like a clear response on this”; “I invite you to my house ... Bring friends ... Call for directions to the house”), in others it was apparently sincere (“Having lived in South Africa ... you will understand my interest in your comments ... Please respond when you get the opportunity”). An unexpected cordiality was sometimes evident. In addition to offering overtures to dialogue or further interaction (“I would like to say I am available to present, lecture, defend, debate”; “I welcome any feedback”), some messages sought to offer advice: “Read Matthew 22:37, that’s the ticket”; “I beg you to dig deeper into history”. Disingenuous or not, such messages called for a response; they implied the structure of a dialogue.

While a great many unpleasant things were wished upon me, and many implied threats were expressed, I did not receive a direct, unequivocal death threat, at not least via email (I routinely deleted telephone messages from unknown numbers without listening to them; such threats would have been far more likely in this anonymized form). This no doubt sets me apart from colleagues who have been subjected to similar campaigns of intimidation. There are many possible reasons for this. One pragmatic consideration is that a concrete death threat is “actionable”, it provides the basis to open a police investigation, which can create complications for the sender of the message. Yet this was surely not the only factor at play. The aggressive cordiality of the emails was, I think, a result of the fact that as a white person—admittedly of a deplorable sort—I might still be rescued, retrieved from the “woke indoctrination” to which I had succumbed. After all, despite being a “race traitor” I was still white, and from the standpoint of essentialist race/racist thinking (as already noted), once white *always white* (except, of course, in the case of Jewishness, where whiteness, so it seems, is only ever provisional).

This perhaps accounts for the many personal anecdotes shared with me by whites about their alleged experiences of what they considered to be Black anti-white racism (presumably not the kind of content necessary to share with someone whom one hopes only to intimidate). This consideration would also help explain the various attempts to show me the error of my ways—via crime statistics, pseudo-scientific studies, historical evidence, etc.—and thereby persuade me to come around to their way of thinking. The form of the emails was significant in this respect. Whereas around half were, admittedly, simply derogatory “fuck you” messages, which aimed only to insult or intimidate without any further communicative intent, approximately a third of the emails did take on a more dialogical form, they did, in other words, imply communicative intent. A potential overture to a further dialogue was being offered. One email reassured me: “Should you come to



your senses, this groups of Caucasians will welcome you back into the fold.” Now while, to be sure, only a very small portion of emails offered this option—a kind of olive branch of whiteness—it seems clear that had I not been white, such overtures and attempts at persuasion, would have been less present, just as there would be less hesitancy in respect of the threats issued. That is say, even during the worst phase of the attacks, I was still afforded a degree of protection, simply by being white.

Whiteness at the abyss

By way of conclusion, let me change tack and briefly reflect on some reasonable critical comments contained within the emails. This may sound a little odd, given the overwhelmingly aggressive and offensive nature of the messaging as foregrounded above. Nevertheless, there were a small minority of emails that were, I think, sent in good faith, by people with legitimate concerns, who felt it necessary to voice their position to me, often with sincere requests for further discussion or clarification. Bearing this in mind it seems important also to consider how my own enunciative position—surely an important factor for any psychoanalytically oriented approach—might be brought into question and reflected upon.

A first criticism concerned the apparent irresponsibility of the style of my presentation and the extremity of the language used. I was chided for making such polemical arguments, and for adopting an overly provocative rhetorical style, in such a public forum. While I have taken this criticism to heart, I will add that the style of my presentation was not unconsidered. It was appropriate for the professional psychoanalytic group—which, after all, had gathered precisely to consider the topic of deconstructing whiteness—for whom it was intended. One retort to this would be that in today’s always potentially online world, such remarks are never going to be contained within the bounds of a scholarly/professional setting. The implications of this situation and of the fact that a variety of online intimidation and canceling strategies can be enforced against academics at a moment’s notice, is deserving of a fuller discussion than I can offer here. Suffice to say, these new social media circumstances of public discourse (along with their accompanying potentials for censorship and attack) are not going away anytime soon. The above account might be read as a cautionary tale—one which begs multiple questions, to be sure, in respect of critical pedagogy, the risks of making of provocative arguments, the dangers of cynical populism and righteous relativism, etc. And yet it might also be taken as an invitation to think strategically, creatively, about what new possibilities for critique, social engagement and solidarity might now be possible.

A second stand of critique focused on the apparent hypocrisy of my position. This was frequently highlighted by my attackers. With regards to such claims, I am of two minds. I would suggest, as a first response, that I was more sympathetic to “whiteness”—understood here as a set of racial, historical, and cultural identifications—than many of my attackers realized. I argued that “the prospective end of an ego ... of a set of identifications ... [and] the potentiality of anxiety [this involves] ... entails the prospect of radical transformation” (Hook, 2020b, p. 108).



Moreover, “to speak of the end of an ego ... [in this case, the end of identifications of whiteness] is not to simply to speak of death, but of an event in which something new may emerge” (Hook, 2020b, p. 109). Transformation here, in other words, is not tantamount to eradication or extinction. While the prospect of radical change to a given set of (imaginary/symbolic) identifications may certainly feel like an end, may indeed be experienced as an instance of castration, it can in fact be the first step in a psychical process that involves making new identifications of a different sort. Or, to make the point in Lacanian terms: to traverse a fantasy—that is, to facilitate a reorientation in respect of a structuring fundamental fantasy (Lacan, 1973/1981)—involves the prospect of a crossing over, a relocation of the subject, a possible *working through*, not a kind of targeted demise.

True, these remarks are unlikely to assuage the concerns of those who are determined to insist that “whiteness”—understood as a nation of *white American people* as opposed to a *structural form of cultural privilege*—is being threatened with persecution and erasure. From such a standpoint, whiteness remains a master signifier of fantasmatic identity that must remain beyond the level of scrutiny. Incidentally, I was reminded, in the aftermath of the attacks, of a comment by the Žižek scholar, Tony Myers, who offered a warning in relation to any critical apprehension of another’s fantasy:

Each individual’s fantasy is the support of his or her being ... it is extremely precious and therefore sensitive to the encroachment of others ... [fantasy] is ... the tender nerve or raw ganglia of the subject’s psyche ... it is liable to cause grave distress if we probe it with insufficient care. (Myers, 2003, p. 103)

I am, surely, guilty as charged in respect of such an encroachment; an encroachment for which I paid the price. Contrary however to the above standpoint (whiteness as beyond scrutiny), I do, obviously, feel that the whiteness can be called into scrutiny, both at the psychic level (of narcissistic identification and fantasy) and at that of structural privilege.

It is perhaps telling that in the above lines I differentiate between forms of whiteness (psychical as opposed to socio-structural). One of my attackers made a relevant point, which, I would suggest, is worthwhile bearing in mind in respect critiques of whiteness more generally: “[As] his vague term ‘whiteness’ goes without specific definition, a listener would have to assume Asst. Prof. Hook means ‘white people’ as ‘whiteness’ but his phraseology is structured in a way where the definition is malleable depending on the argument.” Although I would want to stress that I did add a clear definition of whiteness as “white privilege ... as a structure of domination” (Hook, 2020b, p. 92), it is true that such a structure has—unavoidably perhaps—psychical correlates and that in utilizing the term critically there is a constant possibility of slipping between two interrelated but conceptually distinct terms of reference. This issue has been addressed in the literature via distinctions between whiteness (as form of structural privilege) and “whiteness” (a type of dispositionality enacted by those who have benefited from white privilege), yet this analytic distinction is not always taken into account in commonplace critiques of whiteness.

A further point was impressed upon me by the antisemitism contained in the attacks. There is often an assumption, in more totalizing critical references to



whiteness, that intersectional differentiations within this group—people who stand to benefit from structures of white privilege—do not particularly matter. As the foregoing analysis shows, this is too much of an assumption to make. As Strosberg puts it: “The idea of universal inclusion into privilege and Whiteness also contributes to contemporary forms of antisemitism which exclude Jewish particularity, culture [and] diversity ... from discussion” (2023, p. 52).

All of the above being said, I will admit that the many accusations of hypocrisy did touch a nerve. I am forced to concede that to critique white structural privilege from a position of white structural privilege is hypocritical. (This, I should note, differs from the type of hypocrisy that I was far more frequently accused of, namely, that of being a white person critiquing whiteness, that is, essentially a “race traitor”, which is a charge that I find less than necessarily hypocritical.) Why do I make this concession? Well, as the level of anxiety ratcheted up as the attack campaign against me grew and grew, my partner asked: “What are you most anxious about in all of this?” This was a suitably psychoanalytic question because what it was really asking was: “What is the *other* anxiety lying behind the anxieties that you are willing to admit to?” As the answers accumulated—the possibility of an actual attack, the risk to the security of my children, the prospective loss of my job, financial insecurity, etc.—I inched closer to a fear that I hadn’t quite admitted to myself. If enough people, with enough political clout had been angered by me, then my US visa, my freshly minted green card, could be rescinded and my family would be forced to leave the country. This would mean that we could lose the middle-class existence, the comfortable suburban American way of life, that we had spent years reaching for. In other words, what I was afraid of losing, was, in large part, privilege itself.

Whether this confession invalidates my critical remarks, my study of white anxiety, or my attempted exploration of whiteness at the abyss, well, this is something that remains for the reader to decide, although I would like to hope that the relevance of a critical argument—or an ethical dilemma—is not wholly contingent on the person who delivers it. And so, although in this respect the jury is still out, there is something of which we can be sure. The ethical dilemma involved in considering the end of white privilege ceased to be a merely intellectual for me. Even if only for a short period of time, and in a limited and sheltered way, this dilemma, and the choice it entailed, rebounded on me in an experience of vulnerability and anxiety, from which I have learnt a great deal.

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