

# Unlearning racism through transformative interracial dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

Presenting an empirical study of critical public pedagogy, this paper analyzes interracial dialogues on an internet forum run by conscious Black people who set the terms and challenge White participants who reflect a colorblind ideology. Drawing on Freire's education for critical consciousness and bell hooks' work on unlearning racism – understood as structural and interpersonal dominance relations – the paper shows how transformative interracial dialogues are possible despite difficulties. It proposes that epistemological change is required from White participants to cross the perception gap. Analysis of empirical examples shows how Blacks; who follow Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist epistemology, and show emotions, speak from experience, and demand rhetoric to be translated into action; challenge White people's detached, Eurocentric perspectives, and dominating communicative behavior. Honest confrontation and critical dialogue lead several White participants to acknowledge their subjectivity, become aware of White privilege, and examine and change dominating communicative behavior towards Blacks.

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## Introduction

This paper presents an empirical study of critical public pedagogy on an internet discussion forum that aims to empower Black people, and to educate Whites to unlearn racism through transformative interracial dialogue. Following Giroux (2000), public pedagogy understands political agency for social change in public spaces, social movements, and on the internet, as important sites of education and learning beyond the institutions of schools and classrooms. We are continuously involved in processes of learning and unlearning as we reproduce, criticize, and change, dominant cultural practices such as racism (Sandlin et al., 2010). In genuine dialogue, participants are willing to learn from others' perspectives and are open to change, in the absence of asymmetrical power relations where some participants can exercise power over others (Elias, 2017). Dialogue theorists (Bohm, 1996; Buber, 1970; Freire, 1996; Levinas, 1969) emphasize the transformative potential of dialogue among complete human beings who identify emotionally with another, develop awareness which they translate into practice, enhance self-knowledge, and achieve personal transformation.

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Critical scholars point out that this rarely happens in interracial dialogue between people who identify as White and Black. In interracial dialogue, power relations, biases, and discrimination, are obstacles to empathetic understanding and transformation (Barrett, 2013; McKee, 2002; McPhail, 2002, 2004; Simpson, 2008). Antiracist educator Christine Sleeter et al. (1997, p. x) argues that transformative interracial dialogues are necessary if we want to dismantle institutional racism, but she also acknowledges that such dialogues are rare and difficult to develop. McPhail (2004) even questions the transformative potential of interracial dialogues as a strategy to end racism, because Whites and Blacks are often unable to communicate in dialogical ways. Critical race theory suggests there is a 'perception gap' (Frankenberg, 1993) that prevents mutual understanding between White and Black. Speaking from a marginal position, women and minorities tend to be more successful at intercultural communication, but members of dominant groups often dictate the terms of dialogue (Barrett, 2013). Postcolonial and feminist theorists suggest that the barrier is epistemological. White people's disconnected and rationalistic approach to perceiving the world and communicating about it, including the 'colorblind approach' that seeks to end racism by ignoring race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), is an obstacle to understanding and empathizing with Blacks (Hooks, 1994, 1995; McKee, 2002; McPhail, 2002, 2004; Simpson, 2008; Sleeter et al., 1997).

## Aims and approach

Inspired by critical educator Paulo Freire's (1996, 2014) and Black feminist bell Hooks' (1994, 1995) optimistic attitudes to unlearning racism, this paper analyzes difficulties and possibilities for unlearning racism through transformative interracial dialogue, with a special focus on epistemological barriers theorized by Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Freire (1996) distinguishes between an authoritarian and anti-dialogical way of perceiving reality and communicating knowledge, and a dialogical mode of communicating, where human subjects construct knowledge together from personal experiences. According to Freire, dialogue defines reality in order to transform it, which implies unlearning dominant perceptions and translating awareness into praxis. Adapting critical pedagogy to interracial dialogue, Hooks (1994, pp. 105–110) observes that although it is difficult for Whites to unlearn racism, change is possible under certain conditions. Blacks and Whites need to find ways to communicate; and antiracist educators need to document how to break down these barriers and find evidence that gives hope and provides strategies.

This paper argues that unlearning racism through transformative interracial dialogue is possible if Whites abandon the Eurocentric epistemology's (Collins, 2000) detached way of perceiving reality and the authoritarian and anti-dialogical way of communicating (Freire, 1996). This implies that White people acknowledge their own subjectivity and privilege, and realize that knowledge is connected to experience, emotion and action (Collins, 2000). This study focuses on White people who are willing to do this. While they may not represent the typical White person, I aim to highlight the transformational potential and hope that the examples and analyses can serve as educational examples of a critical public pedagogy for unlearning racism.

More specifically, this paper examines epistemological barriers and proposes that transformative interracial dialogue is an epistemological struggle, which requires a change in the way Whites perceive reality and communicate. I use Collins (2000) as a theoretical framework, supported by Freire's (1996) education for critical consciousness. For the more detailed analysis of unlearning racism, I use Hooks' (1994, 1995, 2000) conditions for unlearning racism, McPhail's (2002, 2004) discussion of interracial dialogue, and critical race theory (Doane, 2003; Essed, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993). I define dominating behavior resulting from 'White privilege' as one important manifestation of racism. In successful interracial dialogues, Whites examine their complicity

in White privilege and change unconscious assumptions and dominating communicative behavior.

Collins (2000) distinguishes between a White, male (Eurocentric) rationalistic epistemology that perceives knowledge as disconnected from human subjectivity, split off from emotions, experiences, and action. In contrast, she posits a 'Black feminist epistemology' that sees knowledge as connected to emotions, experiences, and action. This theoretical distinction corresponds to empirical differences between how White and Black participants communicate and perceive reality in the dialogues analyzed in this paper. Collins' theory informs my thematic analysis, which is organized around four themes;

1. Changing disconnected perceptions of reality
2. Expressing anger and confronting negative emotions
3. Learning from transformative experiences
4. Aligning words and deeds in behavior change

For each theme, the paper analyzes two excerpts from online interracial dialogues. Theme 1 explores how Blacks and Whites perceive reality differently and how this makes communication difficult. Theme 2 focuses on emotional expressions and confrontation in bringing Whites to awareness. Theme 3 examines examples of Whites who speak from experience about how they gained awareness, and theme 4 investigates the translation of rhetoric into behavior change.

### ***The internet forum***

The empirical data is from one internet forum, *Africa Speaks* ([www.africaspeaks.com](http://www.africaspeaks.com)). The Trinidad-based *Self Empowerment Learning Fraternity* (SELF) set up the forum in 2001 to promote Black empowerment and educate people for social change, with unlearning racism as a central part of this. While the forum's primary aim is to empower Blacks, Whites are welcome to learn, and this Rastafari-oriented forum is among the internet forums with the most advanced discussions of racism and White privilege. All moderators and administrators are Caribbean and U.S. American Blacks, who set the terms for dialogue and consistently challenge Whites to examine their attitudes and behavior, thus providing a rare opportunity for those honest confrontations required for transformative interracial dialogues that lead to unlearning racism (Hooks, 1994, p. 105).

What makes this forum particularly interesting for studying the possibilities of unlearning racism is that there are about equal numbers of Whites and Blacks on the forum, but the moderators are Black. This reverses the asymmetrical power relations where Whites set the terms of dialogue, which is common in most mixed-race settings. Hooks (1994) and McPhail (2004) suggest that transformative interracial dialogue is more likely to happen when Whites cannot set the terms. While both sides need to develop a critical consciousness that supports changes in thinking and behavior (Hooks, 1995, pp. 218–223), McKee (2002) suggests that honest confrontations that lead Whites to assume responsibility for examining and changing their unconscious racist attitudes and dominating behavior towards Blacks (Essed, 1991, pp. 49–53), may be easier online than face-to-face. In face-to-face conversations, both sides often fear confrontation; Blacks hold back critical responses, whereas Whites express political correctness. McKee (2002) suggests that internet forums may offer a safe space for more honest discussions, where marginalized voices can articulate their rage and break with enforced politeness and rationalist communication. Online discussions provide good opportunities for learning, since participants can reread and analyze previous discussions.

## Limitations of the study

The White participants who join this forum may represent a particular demographic of White people who are attracted to Black culture, reggae music and Rastafari philosophy. This is a possible limitation of the study, since the 'typical' White U.S. American or European may not be as open to learn how the world looks from a Black cultural perspective and political standpoint. However, the particular setting where liberal Whites meet conscious Blacks provides a fertile ground for transformative interracial dialogue. Stokke (2005) provides a broader analysis of the cultural and political context of this forum, with a focus on Rastafari, while this paper limits the focus on examining epistemological barriers and possibilities for unlearning racism. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to say that moderators speak from a broadly defined critical or 'conscious' Black discourse that includes thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X, and social movements like Rastafari, Black Power and Pan-Africanism. This tradition of thought is compatible with the theoretical framework of Black feminism and critical race theory, which focuses specifically on relations between Black and White in the U.S. and Caribbean context. While findings may have broader relevance to intercultural dialogue and intercultural communication, for the purposes of this paper, I focus only on *interracial* dialogue between participants who identify along a continuum from Black to White, because these are the relevant categories in the empirical material.

## Methodology

My data collection for this paper combines online ethnography and naturalistic observation of a public online forum (Coughlan & Perryman, 2015). I started with participant observation, but shifted towards naturalistic observation after learning from forum discussions that observing was more appropriate for a White male 'newbie' than maximizing participation. Black participants express a fatigue from encountering 'typical' White attitudes and behavior, especially when Whites rely on Blacks to educate them. Blacks on this forum ask Whites to take responsibility for educating themselves by 'picking up a book' or reading previous discussions. I took this advice and immersed myself in studying the discussions, on a rational, analytical level, but also emotionally, like a reader of a novel would identify with its characters and empathize with them. This way, online fieldwork became a transformative experience, which raised my consciousness of racism and White privilege. I had similar dialogues with minority persons among close friends and family, and through experiences online and offline as well as studying Black literature, I gained insights into the possibilities and challenges of transformative interracial dialogue and the importance of personal involvement, emotional connection and empathetic identification.

Research on public internet forums is exempt from informed consent, which is not feasible to obtain from each forum participant (Coughlan & Perryman, 2015). As Sugiura et al. (2017, pp. 191–192) recommend in a discussion of online research ethics, I contacted moderators, and informed them about my presence by posting on the forum, which means that at least some participants knew there was a researcher present. I consulted the forum guidelines, which state that any posted information is regarded public. The question of anonymity is complicated in online research (Sugiura et al., 2017, p. 194). Given that forum moderators and core members have public profiles with pictures, and publish articles on the website under real names, I choose to cite them instead of anonymizing them, to acknowledge their authorship of contributions as I do when quoting public debate in traditional media. All quoted posts in this paper are either from moderators, or from other *regular* participants, who I present with their usernames, i.e. self-chosen pseudonyms.

For the qualitative thematic analysis, I used a purposive sampling strategy to select excerpts that were directly relevant to the paper's focus of exploring epistemological barriers and possibilities for unlearning racism. After selecting relevant dialogues, I started coding into themes

guided by theory. I carefully selected extracts from often very long dialogues that would best illuminate the theoretical issues presented in the aims and approach section. In all samples, I keep the chronological sequence of posts intact, but I leave out parts of posts, and entire posts, for reasons of clarity and space. I categorize the excerpts into four themes guided by Collins' (2000) theory, as discussed in the aims and approach section, and then analyze each dialogue in light of Hooks (1994, 1995) and critical race theory.

## Analysis

As a background for the thematic analysis, I discuss briefly how moderators' and key participants' way of perceiving reality and communicating, corresponds to the paper's theoretical framework of Black feminism (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1994, 1995). Collins (2000, pp. 257–270) points out that Blacks and women tend to connect knowledge to lived experience, emotions, morality, and behavior. When analyzing forum dialogues from this perspective, I found four themes that corresponded to Collins' definition of Black feminist epistemology:

1. Changing disconnected perceptions of reality
2. Expressing anger and confronting negative emotions
3. Learning from transformative experiences
4. Aligning words and deeds in behavior change

Moderators share Hooks' (1994, pp. 105–106) optimism that racism can be unlearned, and challenge White and light-skinned participants to engage in honest examination of unconscious racist assumptions and behavior. Ayanna, a moderator and Black woman from Trinidad, explains, 'Many of us who would not see ourselves as racist have elements of prejudice that we need to deal with in ourselves ... both black and white people and all the shades in between.' Ayinde, a Black man from Trinidad and senior member of SELF, writes, 'Often these are unconscious complexes ... I point it out ... because I hope others become aware of it and ... recognize the need to learn.'

Theme 1 explores epistemological barriers between White people's disconnected perception of reality, and a connected Black feminist standpoint (Hooks, 1994, p. 39; Collins, 2000, pp. 257–270). Tyehimba, a Black man from Trinidad associated with SELF, writes, 'Whites have difficulties understanding the full extent of white supremacy the same way that males have a hard time understanding the full extent of gender discrimination.'

Theme 2 deals with the role of emotions, one dimension of Collins' (2000) definition of Black feminist epistemology. Moderators focus especially on expressing anger and confronting negative emotions. Ayanna writes, 'We discuss issues very openly and plainly here, no eggshells to walk on ... Do not feel that African people must not then be angry and hard-hitting ... playing nice is not really a prerequisite.' This corresponds to Hooks (1994, pp. 105–110), who argues that transformative interracial dialogue requires honest confrontation, and McPhail (2002, pp. 78–94), who discusses expressions of Black anger as a strategy to make Whites listen.

Theme 3 discusses how White participants learn from personal experiences with Black perspectives, corresponding to Collins (2000) and Freire (1996), who argue that knowledge builds on personal experience. Tracey, a long-term White participant, notes that 'anyone can simply regurgitate vast quantities of info,' in contrast to when people 'step out with their own voice and speak authentically from ... personal experience.'

Theme 4 is about connecting knowledge with behavior, ethics, and political action, another characteristic of Black feminist epistemology. Ayinde writes they are 'observing the words and actions of others. If people claim to understand something, then their actions must reflect this.' Tyehimba writes that moderators observe 'how people act in relation to their words.' Tracey

acknowledges, 'It's not so much what you know that carries weight ... but how you share it.' Another long-term White participant, Rootsie, points out, 'Unless they [Whites] are willing to do the work and examine their assumptions, this superiority complex speaks through their actions.' This reflects Hooks' (1994, pp. 104–107) point that Whites tend to speak from a position of privilege, assert power and superiority, and show dominating behavior when communicating with Blacks, and that Blacks challenge Whites by exposing gaps between their words and deeds.

### ***Theme 1: changing disconnected perceptions of reality***

This theme explores how people using disconnected and connected epistemologies interact on the forum. The first excerpt is a dialogue between a White man, Iyah360, and Ayinde.

#### ***Excerpt 1***

- Iyah360: The republicans are excellent strategists. ... It is pure genius.  
 Ayinde: I don't see any of these corrupt people as intelligent, 'excellent strategists', or manifesting 'pure genius'. ... It is only excellent when people stand on integrity.  
 Iyah360: It appears that this is about my use of words then.  
 Ayinde: You were unwittingly celebrating White political deception. ... despite your attempted 'critique' of the system, it was quite easy for you, a White person, to attempt to raise the worst tactics used by this blatantly corrupt and dangerous U.S. regime to the status of 'pure genius' and 'excellent strategists'.  
 Iyah360: It is true, if I were suffering from the system at its worst, I may very well have not been afforded the privilege ... to see [it] from a distance, in the realm of a theoretical intellectual analysis, rather than direct impact.

This White man presents an abstract analysis that describes the Republican administration in the U.S. at that time in positive terms, disconnected from a moral judgement of its impact. When Ayinde points out that Iyah360 is unwittingly celebrating an oppressive system, he realizes that the disconnected perception of reality reflects a privileged position. According to Hooks (1994, p. 3, 155), White men typically perceive reality and communicate knowledge in an abstract way, as if it were merely neutral information, unrelated to their background and moral evaluations. Many Whites enter interracial dialogue on an abstract level, arguing 'as if they were citizens' as in liberal models for rational argumentation (Rawls, 1999). This detached mode of communication, where people believe that personal background is irrelevant and that they should not get involved, prevents dialogue from leading to personal transformation. Liberal rationalist models for communication between presumably free and equal citizens (Rawls, 1999), who keep an intellectual focus and disregard personal and social differences, reflects what Collins (2000) calls a Eurocentric epistemology. It presents knowledge as objective and universal, and detached from personal experiences, emotions, action, ethics, and politics.

Excerpt 2 shows how the colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) reinforces this detached epistemology and prevents liberal Whites from understanding Black experiences of racism (McPhail, 2004). A White man from Brazil calling himself 'Mandingo' discusses with Kelani, an African woman living in the U.S.

#### ***Excerpt 2***

- Mandingo: I don't see a difference between your prejudice and white people's one. ... Life is an absolute relativity.

- Kelani: I am a [Black] Nationalist ... you think it entails racism, discrimination? ... Don't accuse me of being racist, I cannot systematically charge you or your people higher interest rates ... make covert pacts to keep you from safe affordable housing ... lobby to have your jobs, colleges, or contract opportunities taken away ...
- Mandingo: I know it is important to reason about race and gender discrimination, to go beyond it and teach about equal rights and respect for differences.
- Kelani: Always when we Black people think against the white man or his own will, we are charged with being racist or anti-white. However, the historical record demonstrates clearly that racism or antiBlack has been the primary method by which your ethnic group (white or brown whatever you call it) has achieved and maintained power.
- Mandingo: I didn't really get it. ... Still difficult to me. I don't think I have to act like other racist people just because of the color of my skin. ... I have no intention of telling people what to do ... Why would anyone follow what I say unless one agrees with it?

This White man uses several common expressions from colorblind discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Doane, 2003; Frankenberg, 1993). First, he 'doesn't see a difference' between Black and White people's prejudice, indicating that he understands racism as individual prejudice rather than power relations between dominant and marginalized groups. Next, he wants to go 'beyond' discrimination and talk about 'equal rights,' asserting equality as an ideal, without sufficiently addressing current racism that prevents realizing this ideal. Last, he claims good 'intentions,' and that actions are independent of skin color, indicating limited awareness of how White privilege may unconsciously affect behavior despite good intentions.

As a 'sophisticated form of unawareness' (Chesler et al., 2003, p. 220), the colorblind ideology takes privileged Whites' perspectives for granted and assumes that their knowledge is objective and universal. Liberal Whites see themselves as innocent bystanders to racism, and while *talking about* dialogue, they use colorblind rhetoric, and accuse Blacks of bias and reverse racism (Doane, 2003; Essed, 1991) – anti-dialogical strategies (McPhail, 2004, pp. 215–216) that deny Black perspectives and make it difficult for Whites to *engage in* dialogue. McPhail (2004, p. 223) argues that the colorblind ideology makes transformative interracial dialogue difficult for Whites. This ideology proposes that not noticing race will make racism go away, but by refusing to see race, Whites become blind to Black experiences, deny the reality of racism, and fail to understand Black perspectives (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Doane, 2003; McPhail, 2004; Simpson, 2008).

## **Theme 2: expressing anger and confronting negative emotions**

This theme focuses on connecting knowledge to emotions, and discusses Black anger as a strategy to confront White ignorance of racism. In excerpt 3, Kelani discusses with a White U.S. American man, who calls himself 'Out of Zion'.

### **Excerpt 3**

- Kelani: The majority of whites ... don't want to hear anything that doesn't conform to their reality. So when you hit them with facts, they ignore them. ... However, I feel this communication has been highly beneficial to the member Out of Zion, he has learned a lot.
- Out of Zion: Yes ... I have learned a lot. ... I don't really understand what is expected from me in the area of 'racial politics.' I'm a 22 year old white man who's got along with blacks, whites, latinos, Asians, whatever, and has never thought much more of the matter. ... I think too much is made of the race issue. If you want racism



to disappear ... stop pressing the issue and allow the process of time to alleviate matters. What more do you expect?

[later]

Out of Zion: Your ton of bricks approach isn't too effective. ... you and others began to teach me ... I was very indolent when I first came here and you got very upset ... I know the typical white mindset angers you.

Kelani: My way of instructions worked with you. So, I am not going to waste my time feeding back Eurocentric ignorant attitude ...

Out of Zion: Well [Kelani] said it all when she said 'It worked with you.' ... I didn't run for the shadows when she called me out on things that I was flat ignorant on. I kept banging my head against the tree until I saw a few things around me.

When White participants ignore historical or ongoing oppression of Blacks, Kelani 'hit[s] them with facts' as she describes it. White people may find it difficult to sit in the necessary anger of Black people who respond to oppression, and often interpret Black communication as angry, militant, and confrontational – or, as Out of Zion calls it – a 'ton of bricks' approach. Both participants in this dialogue seem to agree that her educational style has worked to some degree to make him more aware and willing to learn. However, the depth of learning is unclear as he still expresses a colorblind view.

Studying online dialogues, McKee (2002) found that when Whites speak of racism as unrelated to themselves, Blacks respond with direct expressions of anger and refer to personal experiences. Black intellectuals have long discussed how rage, militancy and confrontation can bring Whites across this epistemological barrier (McPhail, 2002; Hooks, 1994). Malcolm X criticized Blacks who claim that rage has no place in antiracist struggle, who repress their rage to make Whites listen in dialogues where Whites set the terms. Hooks (1995, pp. 13–17, 108) argues that it is humanizing for Blacks to claim their emotional subjectivity, including militant rage, in the struggle against racism. She acknowledges that repressing rage may be appropriate in some situations where Whites hold power, but argues that general repression of anger against racism reinforces racism.

McKee (2002) suggests that Black expressions of anger and outrage at White people's colorblind premises and ignorance about racism, as well as aggressive and confrontational attempts to educate Whites, may be more constructive in producing conditions for dialogue than apparently polite posts that perpetuate racism. Confrontational communication means Blacks are willing to speak plainly and bluntly in circumstances where previously excluded voices articulate their pain and rage, and break enforced rituals of rationalist communication, political correctness and politeness. While McKee (2002) questions whether these emotional outbursts, which the sender intends to be educational, actually help recipients and audience to awareness, Hooks (1995) suggests that expressing anger may be liberating for Blacks. On this forum, Black participants express their emotions primarily to empower themselves, rather than for the benefit of White participants' learning. White people are responsible for educating themselves, and it is not up to Black people whether or not Whites learn from their expression of anger.

Both Blacks and Whites often hold negative emotions of fear and anger in interracial dialogue (Hooks, 1994, pp. 102–107). In excerpt 4, Tracey, a White U.S. American woman, discusses with Rootswoman and Ayinde.

#### **Excerpt 4**

Tracey: We are now being judged on the basis of our skin! ... You seem to dismiss any valid contributions that whites may have to offer.

Rootswoman: Your accusations are rather typical of white[s] ... accusations of us being too militant, ... angry ... reverse racism ... because we are naturally suspicious of



a people who have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt (as a collective) that the destruction of Africans is their priority.

Ayinde: It is understandable that some whites who are making an effort want to be seen as different from the rest. ... no one is obligated to believe someone at his or her word. We would have to wait for a new history of improvement before these attitudes can change. ... Making an effort is part of the journey and not the destination.

Tracey: Pon deeper reflection... I think part of my kneejerk reaction was ... I wanted to come to you but felt I wouldn't be received ... that my skin would be the barrier ... but today I see it wasn't the skin it was my attitude that became the barrier.

The White woman fears rejection and accuses Blacks of reverse discrimination and of being too angry and militant (Essed, 1991, pp. 180–181). After Rootswoman and Ayinde explain why Blacks are suspicious of Whites, and do not simply take Tracey's word for being an exception, Tracey recognizes that they did not react to her skin color but to her expectation to be accepted without questions (O'Brien, 2003) and her accusation of reverse discrimination (Essed, 1991). Whites who make an effort to improve interracial relations often expect Blacks to welcome them, and get angry when Blacks are suspicious and question their attitudes and behavior. When Whites demand acceptance without questions, Blacks see this as a reflection and assertion of White privilege (O'Brien, 2003). White fear of rejection often comes out as anger: Many Whites are shocked when they learn that Black people critically analyze their Whiteness, and become enraged, because this subverts their deep emotional investment in the liberal myth of sameness and colorblindness (Hooks, 1995, pp. 34–35).

Hooks (1994, pp. 109–110) points out that both Blacks and Whites need to move through negative emotions of fear and anger. She believes that anger can be transformed into a constructive, empowering and transformative energy to resist White domination in interracial relations and argues that both sides need to acknowledge how history shapes current interaction. We need to engage in honest confrontation and critical dialogue about our different experiences of racism without fearing emotional collapse. While people are often unwilling to address racial issues because they fear confrontations where emotions cannot be contained, Hooks (1994, p. 39) suggests that White women who have struggled against gender domination, have developed skills to deal with intense emotions.

### ***Theme 3: learning from transformative experiences***

Building knowledge on lived experiences is another theme of Collins (2000) and Freire (1996). This section analyzes how two White women learned from personal experiences in Black communities to acknowledge racism, develop accountability and 'examine and change attitudes and behavior towards blacks' (Hooks, 1994, p. 103). Tracey talks about her experiences in dialogue with IanI and Ayinde.

#### ***Excerpt 5***

IanI: Live in a community that is all a different skin colour from you self. ... It would be a very rare one that could achieve the true Awareness from a distance, with no significant experience.

Tracey: It wasn't until I had started to attend some purely black events that I began to feel what many of my black brothers and sisters feel constantly in this society... being judged by the color of one's skin. It ... gave me a new perspective and opened my eyes ... but it wasn't easy. ... I was ridiculed for being white in an all black arena ... It strengthened me to FEEL much of this anger ... it showed me to look at myself on a level I had never been challenged to do before. ... showed me why the distrust. It

also showed me ... a deep love ... from many a brother and sister that ... eventually welcomed me ... as we shared in varieties of things TOGETHER. ... Does that mean I am welcomed with open arms wherever I go now? ... Absolutely NOT. These things take time to build.

Ayinde: Your eyes are 'opened' so you are seeing and not just looking. Incidentally, I feel there are about four other Whites on these forums ... that can make a breakthrough on race relations.

Tracey talks about a transformative experience, which raised her awareness. Ayinde approves and comments that few Whites make such a breakthrough. Hooks (1995, p. 49, 151) suggests that Whites need to learn how to identify with the Black reality created by racism, a reality that is distinctly different from their own. As Hooks (1994, pp. 105–106) suggests, staying in a Black-dominated setting where she cannot assert power, enabled Tracey to identify with Black experiences of racism and to understand and empathize with Black anger and distrust towards Whites. Eventually, she gained acceptance from Blacks, but she knows now that building positive relations takes time. Tracey's other dialogues on the forum show that transformation is a journey with repeated setbacks rather than once-and-for-all. In excerpt 4, she felt dismissed and discriminated as a White person, but then she realized that it was her privileged attitude of expecting to be welcomed with open arms, that caused her disappointment. In excerpt 5, she is aware that she will not be welcomed with open arms wherever she goes.

O'Brien (2003) emphasizes the importance of personal relationships close enough to survive discussions of racism, where a White person acknowledges a Black friend's account of experiences of racism, and shows empathy rather than reinterpreting or minimizing her experience. For White antiracists, close personal relationships with Blacks serve as a reality check and help hold them accountable. Personal experience is important for Whites who cross the perception gap, acknowledge Black perspectives on racism, become aware of Black reality, and critically examine their own attitudes.

In excerpt 6, a White U.S. American high school teacher, Rootsie, who also uses examples from this discussion forum in her lessons to raise students' awareness of racism, tells her story.

### **Excerpt 6**

Rootsie: I was 19 and first started listening to reggae and learning about Rastafari. ... What I did was stick with it and learn and read and listen and grow. ... I read Malcolm X ... thinking now what does that have to do with me? ... There are many layers to this white privilege ... No white person can say with authority: I don't hold any racist attitudes. I'm 46 now, and still things come up and slap me in the face. ... It means work, and using the privileges we have been given and don't deserve to work towards the education of other whites ... I am a white one who came here and was challenged, and grew, and am most grateful for ... Listening to the lived reality of ... Afrikan[s].

Rootsie learned from listening to the lived reality of Blacks as expressed in reggae music, and from reading Malcolm X, she became aware of White privilege and connected this knowledge to her personal life. She acknowledges the reality of racist oppression, her own complicity and privilege, that Whites always have racist assumptions they need to deal with, and she uses her privileges to educate other Whites. These are all factors that according to Hooks (1994, p. 106) and O'Brien (2003) have a transformative impact on interracial relations. Rootsie accepts that when Blacks challenge her on the forum, it helps her growth, and she realizes that she needs to translate understanding into action.

While Tracey and Rootsie make a breakthrough, most Whites remain unaware of racism, do not understand how White privilege makes them act in the role of oppressor of Blacks, and are unwilling to give up privileges. Direct personal experiences in a Black community changed Tracey's way of perceiving reality to an epistemology connected to personal experience, emotions, and action (Collins, 2000). For Rootsie, mediated communication such as listening to music; reading books; and participating in online dialogues with Blacks who speak from experience, express emotions, and take action; also facilitates awareness of Black reality and transformation of behavior.

#### ***Theme 4: aligning words and deeds in behavior change***

Connecting knowledge to behavior, ethics, and political action, is another aspect of Black feminist epistemology. This theme discusses two examples where White and light-skinned individuals have difficulty translating awareness into behavior change. In excerpt 7, Mandingo discusses with IanI.

#### ***Excerpt 7***

- Mandingo: White people like me ... can help [Black] people transcend their inferiority complex by showing them how this exists and must be corrected and transcended. ... A black colleague was saying to me how I had a GOOD hair and his hair was BAD hair. ... I said ... you should love yourself more.
- IanI: If you de considered 'white', is truly not up to you to 'show' a black one how to overcome inferiority complex due to the skin colour. This is ... patronization ... you may feel that you only want to 'help'... yet ... the attitude that you de 'know more' and can help Blackman from his pit of ignorance and inferiority is ingrained in you psyche.
- Mandingo: I guess I didn't express myself clearly in the last post. ... If you think I'm still blind to see what you so kindly want to show me, please try it again and sorry if I pass the impression that I'm feeling difficultly to overstand this matter.
- IanI: Many white ones ... think they are doing the right thing when they try and 'correct' their black bredren... however, 'correcting' the black ones 'inferiority complex' is not up to you and is mostly taken as insult.

Mandingo suggests he can help Black people by showing them how to overcome their inferiority complex. IanI finds this patronizing. According to critical race theory, telling Blacks how to deal with racism represents paternalism, a form of dominating behavior (Essed, 1991, pp. 180–181; O'Brien, 2003; Vera & Gordon, 2003). Mandingo finds it difficult to understand: it contradicts his perception of knowledge as unrelated to who he is in relation to whom he speaks. While assuming to be objective and neutral, White males often behave as if they know the answers and as if they are intellectually superior (Hooks, 1994, p. 37, 155).

Excerpt 8 is a long dialogue in two parts, which shows how theme 4 relates to emotions (theme 2), and a disconnected perception of reality (theme 1). Oshun Auset, a light-skinned African American political activist, discusses 'passing for White' with Ayanna and Ayinde. The term colorism refers to U.S. American and Caribbean forms of racism where light-skinned people can pass for White and take part in White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, pp. 278–280; Hooks, 2000, p. 66).

**Excerpt 8, part 1**

- Oshun Auset: Most light-skinned people do not acknowledge and fight against the advantage they receive. I am not one of them. ... I often criticize ... light-skinned people that are comfortable with modern day 'passing.'
- Ayanna: Often ... light-skinned ones can be viewed as part of the group that suppresses darkskinned kinky-hair black voices ... lightskinned ones do not get these points
- Oshun Auset: Why are you insisting I do not get this? ... I find it insulting. ... I don't even remember a thread coming up where I had to mention that I was of partial European ancestry ... because it is not, and should not be anyone's focus.
- Ayinde: You are overly defensive about this issue of colorism, and that in itself shows you do have things to work on.
- Ayanna: You have taken points that were made in a general manner and responded as if they were directed at you. ... It is one thing to think that you have all the information, ... but ... also about how you, with all these possible privileges, may be seen by the same ones whose cause you are so trying to fight.
- Oshun Auset: I see I shouldn't be so free with my personal commentary ... I will keep most discussions ideological ...

Here, Oshun Auset claims to be an exception, saying that she often criticizes *other* light-skinned people for passing for White. Ayanna and Ayinde do not take her word for it, but observe her behavior, in line with Hooks' (1994, pp. 104–107) observation that Blacks remain suspicious of Whites because they tend to show dominating behavior towards Blacks, while Whites fear that Blacks will expose the gap between their words and deeds. Ayanna's strategy to expose inconsistencies between rhetoric and communicative behavior is to make a general statement about light-skinned people and see if it strikes a nerve and triggers a defensive response, which it does. Oshun Auset claims her racial identity should be irrelevant – a colorblind position. Despite the moderators' attempt to shift the mode of communication from political discussion to personal dialogue, she withdraws from dialogue into ideological discussion – a disconnected way of communicating.

**Excerpt 8, part 2**

- Oshun Auset: Colorism is entrenched in this global capitalist apologist, white supremacist society. The only thing that will change it is the organization of the masses ...
- Ayinde: Colorism is also entrenched in people of all colors and nationalities today ... light-skinned people 'telling' dark-skinned Blacks to organize. ... I would expect them to respect the right of the people most affected by the system to advocate the solution.
- Oshun Auset: The comment was directly taken from the AAPRP (All African People's Revolutionary Party) ... I am repeating these words from my ideological training in this organization.
- Ayinde: Many White and light-skinned ones do not get black issues ... They are often too eager to show that because they can use the words ... they are the exception.
- Oshun Auset: You came off as rude. ... your post (that was in direct criticism of my post) was very angered and negative. ... I don't like the tension that has developed between you and I. ... I am really curious as to your personal advice on this ... because it needs to be examined and discussed ... I am honestly trying to discuss and battle such things.

Ayinde: When 'some privileged ones' are challenged they often use terms like rude, angry and negative to describe the responses of ones who do not accept what they say and do.

In this part, Oshun Auset continues to discuss ideology. Ayinde responds that she shows dominating behavior when telling Blacks how to organize – a point found in critical race theory (Essed, 1991, pp. 180–181; O'Brien, 2003; Vera & Gordon, 2003). Ayinde points out that using rhetoric does not mean understanding the issue, corresponding to Hooks' (1994, pp. 141–142) observations that people with progressive politics often embrace new thinking but remain unaware of their conduct and practices. Oshun Auset is triggered and becomes defensive. She characterizes Ayinde's post as rude, angry and negative. Ayinde responds that when privileged persons are challenged, they often say it is rude.

In this regard, Hooks (1994, p. 187) writes that privileged people perceive heated exchange as rude and threatening, while marginalized people feel that discussion is deeper if it arouses intense responses. According to Moon (1999, pp. 192–194), bourgeois polite discourse privileges language form over content. Political correctness silences certain words and expressions considered rude, and does not challenge people's perceptions. Whites who have internalized color-blindness often perceive it as impolite simply to mention race. Talking about race and gender challenges the mind-body dualism, where privileged people deny their body and pretend they are only mind, which 'encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information' (Hooks, 1994, p. 139).

Eventually Oshun Auset acknowledges that the issues need to be examined and asks for advice. This indicates that confronting negative emotions (theme 2), rather than politely avoiding them, may help changing disconnected perceptions of reality (theme 1) towards transformative personal dialogue, and to align words and deeds in behavior change (theme 4).

### **Theoretical discussion**

I have discussed eight empirical examples, which illustrate how the opposing epistemologies used by White and Black participants make interracial dialogue difficult, but which also show possibilities of transformative dialogue. The four interrelated themes represent different aspects of Collins' (2000) theory of Eurocentric and Black feminist epistemology. Eurocentric epistemology presents knowledge as abstract, objective and universal, detached from personal experiences, emotions, action, and from ethics and politics. Historically, elite White men constructed this positivist model to claim that they had privileged access to objective truth, while defining women and minorities as biased (Harding, 2008). Today, rationalist ways of perceiving reality are widespread among privileged and dominant groups (Sprague, 2005), representing an epistemological obstacle to dialogical relations with others. Similarly, what Freire (1996) describes as the authoritarian mode, denies human subjectivity in knowledge construction and presents knowledge as if it were composed of neutral objective facts that one can simply transmit from one person to another, denying that it reflects the interests of those in power. Freire (1996) notes that 'many persons, bound to a mechanistic view of reality, do not perceive that the concrete situation of individuals conditions their consciousness of the world, and that in turn this consciousness conditions their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality' (p. 111). Both Collins and Freire emphasize emotional relations between humans and connect knowledge to experience and behavior.

Moderators on the *Africa Speaks* forum encourage transformative dialogue rather than rationalist discussion of abstract ideas, and request personal involvement, honesty and integrity. What Collins defines as Black feminist epistemology is common in the Black diaspora (Gilroy, 1993; McFarlane, 1998) and rooted in an African tradition where people become more human and empowered within a community. Individuals who speak from lived experience are more credible

than those who have merely read about something. Emotion indicates that speakers believe in the validity of their arguments, and we best understand ideas through empathy and sharing experiences that influenced those ideas. Assessing knowledge claims simultaneously evaluates the speaker's character, values, and ethics, because perspectives and actions derive from personal beliefs, and they are not divorced from political and economic reality. Evaluating knowledge claims in light of personal experience and behavior reveals that allegedly universal, abstract rhetoric reflects experiences and interests of the privileged (Collins, 2000, pp. 257–270). Under theme 1, excerpt 1 illustrates Collins' (2000) and Hooks' (1994, 1995) theory that White and light-skinned persons perceive reality through a detached and Eurocentric epistemology that separates emotions, experiences, and action, from knowledge. Excerpt 2 supports McPhail's (2002, 2004) point that the colorblind ideology makes it difficult to understand Black experiences of racism.

Acknowledging these communicative difficulties, critical Black scholar Cornel West argues, 'Dialogue is a form of struggle' (Lerner & West, 1996, p. 266). Interracial dialogue takes place in a fundamentally asymmetric situation: it is a struggle to transform Whites' perceptions of reality and communicative behavior, from an authoritarian to a dialogical mode. While privileged Whites tend to universalize their own perspectives and deny Black perspectives, marginalized Blacks have a double consciousness (Du Bois, 1969), aware of both dominant perceptions of reality and their own experience-based perceptions (Collins, 2000). For example, as domestic workers in White homes, Black women observed White culture from the inside and compared it to Black experiences (Hooks, 1994, p. 101). Double consciousness and experience-based epistemologies often enable marginalized people such as Blacks or women to understand members of the privileged group better than Whites or men understand themselves.

Due to this asymmetrical power relation, successful interracial dialogue requires that White people open up to learn from Blacks, which is difficult if epistemology prevents Whites from perceiving Black reality. Due to the perception gap (Frankenberg, 1993) and the colorblind ideology, Whites are often unwilling to listen to and empathize with Blacks (McPhail, 2004) and many Blacks have come to believe that Whites are incapable of transformative change (McPhail, 2002, p. 93). Frustrated with well-meaning Whites who still 'don't get it,' since Malcolm X, African American critical thinkers (DuBois, 1969; Hooks, 1994; McPhail, 2002) suggest that rage, militancy, and confrontation, may be appropriate strategies to challenge racism in interracial dialogue and make Whites aware of the need to change their behavior. McPhail (2004, pp. 211–215) rejects the idea that dialogue requires suspending judgment, and argues that it is necessary to engage dialogue partners dialectically. He suggests that expressing rage can be constructive to bring to the surface underlying and unconscious motivations that prevent us from understanding and reconciliation. Also Hooks (1994, pp. 109–110) suggests that anger can be transformed into a constructive energy to resist White domination in interracial relations; both Blacks and Whites need to confront and work through negative emotions of anger, rage, and fear. Under theme 2, excerpt 3 suggests that Black militancy can be an initial eye-opener to some Whites. Excerpt 4 gives an example of White frustration with not being welcomed by Blacks. The examples indicate that working through negative emotions can lead to a breakthrough. However, both sides may fear and avoid confrontations, especially in White-dominated settings, where Blacks often accept interaction on White terms (Chambers, 1998; Scott, 1985), because confronting racism may lead to ridicule, accusations of oversensitivity, or physical danger (O'Brien, 2003). Thus, internet forums may offer a safe space, as McKee (2002) suggests.

Under theme 3, two White women talk about how transformative experiences brought them to awareness. Both cases show that transformation is a journey with setbacks. Like Hooks (1994, pp. 93–110) writes, transformative interracial dialogues where Whites assume responsibility for examining and changing attitudes and behavior, are more likely to occur in settings where Whites cannot dominate. In excerpt 5, a White woman had a breakthrough when visiting all-



Black communities, while in excerpt 6, another gained awareness from studying and reading Malcolm X.

In Freire's (1996, pp. 106–109) normative theory, 'praxis' suggests that critical reflection and action should come together, but Hooks (1994, pp. 104–107) found that while Whites often felt they had changed, Blacks felt that little had changed: even when addressing race, most Whites still assert power and superiority and dominate Blacks in personal interaction. They may be tolerant and progressive in rhetoric and want to fight racism, but show contradictory behavior (Chesler et al., 2003). Blacks react to the authoritarian behavior of privileged people who prefer the oppressed to change rather than change themselves (Chambers, 1998). Excerpt 7 and 8 under theme 4 provide accurate illustrations of this point.

Transformative interracial dialogue requires that Whites listen to Blacks with compassion, and are willing to transform discourse into action, argues McPhail (2004, p. 224). Freire's (1996, pp. 68–69) concept of praxis, which criticizes empty rhetoric and unreflective action, suggests that speaking the truth in dialogue is an act that transforms the reality of domination. McPhail (2004, p. 215) notes that translating dialogue from words to action is difficult; Whites tend to talk about dialogue, but refuse to engage in dialogue. However, on the *Africa Speaks* forum, many White and light-skinned persons eventually become willing to change their behavior, lending support to the optimism of bell Hooks (2000, p. 66), who recounts an experience. A light-skinned woman 'became quite angry' when hooks told her that 'the ability to pass for white gave her a perspective on race totally different from that of someone who is dark-skinned,' and that someone without knowledge of her background 'probably assumes that she is white and relates to her accordingly.' Later, the woman contacted hooks and said she had 'gained new insights and awareness as a result of [their] encounter, which aided her personal growth.'

## Conclusion

Drawing on critical educators Paulo Freire (1996, 2014) and bell Hooks (1994, 1995, 2000), and aiming to provide educational examples for a critical public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000) for unlearning racism, this paper analyzed eight empirical examples of interracial dialogues with transformative potential. Where previous studies (McKee, 2002; McPhail, 2002, 2004; Simpson, 2008; Sleeter et al., 1997) found that asymmetrical power relations make interracial dialogues difficult, on this particular internet forum, Blacks set the terms and Whites are willing to learn; providing conditions that make unlearning racism more likely (Hooks, 1994; McPhail, 2004). The forum offers a safe space for honest confrontations where conscious Black voices can challenge dominant White ways of communicating (McKee, 2002).

The analysis shows a 'perception gap' (Frankenberg, 1993) between Black and White participants, where most Whites use a 'Eurocentric epistemology' (Collins, 2000) and authoritarian or 'anti-dialogical' (Freire, 1996; McPhail, 2004) ways of communicating. Using rationalistic argumentation disconnected from personal experience, emotions, and behavior, Whites are largely unaware of how they unconsciously exert racial dominance through imposing Eurocentric perceptions of reality and showing dominating behaviors. For Black participants, interracial dialogues are struggles to make White people aware of this and to challenge Whites to engage in honest examinations of unconscious assumptions of privilege and superiority, and to take responsibility for changing dominating behaviors that constitute everyday racism (Essed, 1991).

Conscious Black participants connect knowledge with emotions, personal experience, and behavior. This corresponds to a 'Black feminist epistemology' (Collins, 2000), whose four defining aspects guided my thematic analysis. The paper examined how White participants (1) change disconnected perceptions of reality, how both sides (2) express anger and confront negative emotions, how Whites (3) learn from transformative experiences, and how they (4) align words and deeds in behavior change. In these processes of learning and unlearning, White participants



acknowledge their own subjectivity, shift from a disconnected to a connected way of perceiving reality, and from an authoritarian to a dialogical way of communicating (Freire, 1996). Shifting from a Eurocentric to a Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000), White participants learn to connect emotionally with Black people, empathize and identify with Black experiences, develop self-knowledge, transform assumptions and behaviors, and develop personal relations between whole human beings, as suggested by theorists of transformative dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Buber, 1970; Freire, 1996; Levinas, 1969).

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