

Black Expression and White Generosity

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Black Expression and White Generosity: A Theoretical Framework of Race

BY

NATALIE WALL

King's College London, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Catalina, Cillian, and Nolan.

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About the Author

Natalie Wall is an interdisciplinary researcher focusing on black women's performance, activism, and antiracist praxis in the Caribbean diaspora. She is Research Impact Lead for Social Sciences at King's College London.

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Preface: Towards Black Expression

‘Are you from India?’

Living in Canada for most of my life, it is a question I was asked many times. However, I am thinking about one time in particular. It was during my undergrad and I was out with friends in a tiny little bar in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I offered to grab drinks and was accosted by a man at the bar.

‘Are you from India?’

Warily, ‘no’.

‘You look like you’re from India – which part?’

Oh no, it’s another one of these. ‘I am not from India’.

‘Yes you are – which part?’ Followed by ‘It’s okay. You can tell me. You do not need to be ashamed’.

Ashamed? Of my fictional Indian heritage/nationality? Oh, this was worse than usual.

‘Just tell me. Where are your parents from? It’s okay. It’s okay to be Indian’.

This man now believes that it is his job to make me acknowledge my race/nationality/something to him, as I am obviously ashamed of myself and my skin. He wants me to know he is safe and I can share my racialised self with him.

‘You do not need to be embarrassed’.

‘Ummm. ... I know it’s okay to be Indian and I am not embarrassed. I am not Indian’.

Thank God. The drinks are here. However, he sees me leaving and starts getting angry.

‘It’s OKAY. You can TELL me. What part of India are you from?!?’

At this point, I just try to leave and he responds by screaming ‘Fuck you!’ over and over at me. I become seriously scared now. I look around, but I cannot see my friends and no one else cares about the exchange. I wonder if this man will hurt me. He has become violent in his approach. His offer of safety has now become rage.

I walk away: terrified and ashamed. I look over my shoulder for the rest of the night. My friends that night were all white, so I did not even tell them about the exchange. I knew they would never understand; they would belittle the fear, thinking that would help. They would laugh it all away because, in the end, it does not affect their lives the way it does mine.

Years later, I still remember this incident. The need for strangers to know my race is not new, but this man showed me how that need to know is underpinned by the idea that the question itself is asked in the spirit of *generosity* – the desire to know somehow shows acceptance of you as a raced individual, no matter what

race, real or imagined. The refusal to acknowledge that generosity can only result in violence. I certainly have never had one of these discussions where I did not feel under threat psychologically or physically.

I think about this incident in tandem with the growing influence of such movements as ‘bring your whole self to work’. Where a healthy work culture is understood as one where all employees are their *authentic selves* at work, whatever that may be. The idea that exposing myself to strangers will somehow make me more comfortable is, frankly, baffling. However, the insistence on being authentic, genuine, sharing pieces of yourself with relative strangers is becoming more and more popular, and the implication is that those of us who feel the need to protect our private lives from the intrusion of public scrutiny are ungrateful, poor colleagues and bad team players. Again, intrusiveness poses as generosity with the implied threat of damage to your career if you do not comply.

As a black woman, I feel this threat every day. I am not free to bring my whole self to any space where black folk are not hired, promoted or developed. Where, in fact, we are discouraged at every turn, reminded that we are there under suffering and should be grateful for the fact. *Black Expression and White Generosity: A Framework of Race* is a book that examines this phenomenon, the giving that is not giving and the ingratitude that is self-preservation. In this book, I move through theoretical constructions of race, history of the black diaspora, my own experiences of race and racism and contemporary politics and arts in order to chat through this framework that I have named *white generosity*. There is an embedded and reciprocal relationship between generosity and violence, which is the thread that ties all of the following chapters together.

I am an antiracist feminist, a black woman, and this book pulls from my experiences as much as it pulls from history and contemporary theory and debates. This book is a story, and like most stories it captures only one piece of the whole. It is my hope that others think about the framework of white generosity and the possibilities of black expression and move the story forward, that they pick it up and create something wholly new. This is my story, but it is not the end. If my experiences resonate with your experiences, take that feeling and turn it into something positive in this world. Know that you are not alone, you are misunderstood but not misunderstanding, there is a truth beneath the lies of white generosity, a possibility for a different future, a new world of black expression.

But my experiences are not your experiences. I am a black woman, but I am also a mixed race woman; my experiences of whiteness are not just the violence of everyday racism but also the love of my mother, the embrace of family. One of the reasons that I have always been pulled towards critical race studies is because I needed to understand the ways that white people can hate racial groups and love raced individuals, how good people do bad things when race is involved. And while this is fascinating – and it is – I have learned over the years that it means nothing. Understanding white people will never result in black lives free of fear. This is a book about understanding *whiteness*, not white people, and only to the extent that theorising whiteness might help dismantle its power over black thought, black love and black creativity.

I am here to chat with black folk.

I was 12 when I decided I was going to write a novel for black people about black people. I was intrigued by the notion that if a character's race is not named in a novel, they are white, knowing this meant the author assumed that *I* was white too. I was fascinated/horrified by this realisation – *these books are not for me*. Television is not for me. Movies are not for me. But books, books live in your mind in a different way than visual media and it felt intrusive, this presumption of whiteness. So, I decided to write a black novel. It was going to be brilliant. It was going to be revolutionary. Please remember I was only 12 and was reading Nancy Drew or some such. It was another year before I read Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou. And still more time yet before I read Dionne Brand, nourbeSe Philip and Lillian Allen. And even more before I discovered d'bi.young anitafrika, Canisia Lubrin and Trey Anthony. Just to name a few.

Too bad I am a terrible creative writer.

I never wrote that novel because I could easily see I was not a creative writer. It has been a long time since 12-year-old me decided to write that book, but here I am. This is not a novel, and I am no longer 12, but here we are.

This is a book for black folx.

This is not to say that white people cannot learn anything here. I am not aiming to be exclusive, but inclusive to a community that has historically and contemporarily been excluded. Just like I could read Nancy Drew, white people can read this book. I am simply saying that this book is not written for, or about, white *people*. It discusses whiteness and its implication for black lives, sometimes at length, but this is not an instruction manual. There are no '20 top tips for being less racist' here. I have had too many conversations where white people suggest that it is our job to tell them how to fix their unconscious bias, microaggressions and ingrained racist turns of thought. We know that black folx, especially black women, are burnt out sitting on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) committees, operationalising action plans for companies that refuse to pay for dedicated support. Black folx did not invent the problem of institutional racism, but, somehow, we are expected to fix it.

'But how do I know what to do if no one tells me?' A colleague once asked me.

I certainly do not have the answers. I can only say that black folx are dying across the world, and antiblack violence harms us everywhere. We need to focus on safety, physical and psychological, as a group of people that have been suffering from a system created to harm us. I do not have time to tell white people how to feel.

This brings us to the vexed question of allyship. As I argue in the following chapters, white generosity is a powerful, even totalising, discursive system centuries in the making, which underpins the stories white institutions tell about their own history, and that in turn shapes the experiences of black folx in the black diaspora. It is ingrained in the fabric of society and is not something any individual can unlearn in a three-hour workshop. Any form of allyship that congratulates itself on its good deeds, on having bestowed a *favour* on black folx by making common cause with us, is steeped in white generosity and cannot be part of the answer to untangling its influence from our lives. We cannot spend anymore time telling white people what good allyship looks like, dealing constantly with the 'element of saviorism that creeps into identifying as an ally' (Kendall, 2020, p. 252). Allyship can only be defined so many times. When allies need a guide, a reading list, training, workshops and websites, in order to commit to not harming black folx, we have to ask how real that

commitment is. This book is about the real violence that performative allyship enacts in the world. When white people feel the need to highlight their generosity at the expense of black voices, black actions and black movements, we can only understand that to be an act of oppression.

I am writing this book as a black woman, blending my experiences with the framework of white generosity and a theory of moment that I will lay out for you in chapter one. I make use of autoethnography¹ throughout this book in small anecdotes that highlight the power of moments because I believe that we need to open ourselves up in these discussions of race. We need to honestly think about the harm that these moments cause us and the exhaustion we feel in enduring, resisting and articulating antiblack oppression.

This book is underpinned by the understanding that we are taking an intersectional² approach to discussions of race, sex, disability, religion, sexuality and other differences in identity. While I tend to focus on black women here, partly because of my own experiences as a black woman and partly because black women are subject to some of the most loathsome acts of race-based violence today, understand that black women are one group of many experiencing the violence of white generosity, as '[t]here is no set of years in which to be born Black and woman would not be met with violence' (Sharpe, 2023, p. 331). I hope that when you read this book, you take this framework and move it into new spheres of understanding not covered here. However, for now, we spend a lot of time with black women – writing, educating, agitating, pleading, working, working, working. Black women are speaking up and saying they are done with gratitude: '[a]nger can be cathartic, motivating, and above all else an expression of the innate humanity of any community. Demands that the oppressed be calm and polite and that forgiveness come before all else are fundamentally dehumanizing' (Kendall, 2020, p. 252).

This book is a call for ingratitude.

Being thankful has not made black lives safe, comfortable, happy.

Instead, let us embrace ingratitude.

¹Autoethnography is a method of articulating the self in the research, of using the author as the subject of ethnographic study, allowing for a centring of wider cultural and political analysis.

²Intersectionality is a framework enabling an understanding that different groups experience discrimination differently and when people belong to multiple oppressed groups, the discrimination they face is not additive, but completely reshaped. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, she describes intersectionality as follows: "Black woman can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experience with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women" (Crenshaw 1989:149).

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