On the "Blessed Assurance" of "White Male Ways of Knowing": Examining Confessional Discourses on Racism

Joel Woller
Carnegie Mellon University
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.03
On the "Blessed Assurance" of "White Male Ways of Knowing":
Examining Confessional Discourses on Racism

By Joel Woller
Carnegie-Mellon University

"Interrogate whiteness:" such is the order of the day. As Henry Giroux describes it, the task is to:

rewrite the politics of representation around race and difference by deconstructing in historical and relational terms not only the central categories of 'Otherness,' but also the dominant discourses and representations that secure 'whiteness' as a universalizing norm (9-10).

The position just described, which Giroux attributes to bell hooks, among others, is of a piece with recent calls for white self-critique—calls which seem to be at least partly motivated by a desire to avoid dynamics of political organization in which tokenized others bear the burden of reforming liberal whites. Thus, in a persuasive analysis of the contemporary identity crisis of the Left in Britain, Kobena Mercer proposes a narrative which emphasizes the importance of understanding the politics of identity in relation to questions of coalition and alliance.

The official discourse of anti-racism failed precisely because it imposed a one-dimensional view of racial antagonism in practices such as 'racism awareness training', which simply reinforced existing relations of minority representation. Problems of tokenism—in which the one black person on the committee or in the organisation is positioned, or rather burdened, with the role of a 'representative' who 'speaks for' the entire community from which he or she comes—were left intact. Black subjects historically marginalised from political representation by exclusionary practices reproduced within the Left were legitimately angry. But the encoding of such anger often took the displaced form of 'guilt tripping' in which potential allies were paralysed by the sins of their past. White activists recognised the untenable innocence of their conciliatory liberal pluralism, but without a common set of terms in which to share openly criticism and disagreements, alliance-building was inhibited by the fear of being seen to be 'incorrect' and not 'ideologically right on' (67-8).

As far as I know, however, no one has suggested that the proposed and I think salutary shift from "racism awareness" to white self-critique is in any
disClosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy

To be sure, it would seem that an element of guilt is built-in to the notion of white interrogation of whiteness; the question, it seems to me, is how such guilt is to be used and expressed. I will argue that the particular guilt-inflected form of knowledge associated with confession is radically inadequate to the task of white self-critique. Thus, any attempt to grasp the conditions of white anti-racist work and the particular responsibilities of Euro-American intellectuals must address, among other things, the dynamics of the confession as a genre. In the first portion of this essay, I will trace the confessional management of white guilt to discourses of Black Power, but I will also show that a significantly different, and much neglected, understanding of white guilt also inhabited the Black Power paradigm; to this extent I question prevailing assumptions about the necessary political inefficacy of white guilt. Likewise, in order to begin to set an agenda for a politically savvy engagement with white guilt, I will devote the latter portion of the essay to a reading of Allan Gurganis’ tale “Blessed Assurance.” A general discussion of the confession as a genre will serve to bridge my reading of Gurganis and my analysis of Black Power.

In order to preface my remarks on the relations between Black Power and white guilt, however, I cite a review of bell hooks’ Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics. The review, which will inform my entire discussion, concludes as follows:

And despite the obvious problems involved [in reading hooks’ ambivalence toward white allies], I want white men and women to read hooks. We won’t find our way through these problems if we don’t confront them, and reading hooks is a good place to start. I found that she pushed me to go beyond my tired and self-serving responses to racial issues. I’m pretty sure reading her work will do the same for others. Wrestling with the issues that hooks raises for white readers will propel us toward ways of responding to black authors that are not racist; ways of responding that move between criticism and self-criticism in an effort to expose, not bury, the problematic nature of reading and writing in black and white.

In his reference to “problems involved,” elaborated elsewhere in the review, the reviewer alludes to an important tension which is pervasive in Yearning and in much contemporary anti-racist work generally: on one hand, hooks affirms the importance of both the “interrogation of whiteness” and “persistent self-critique” (54-5). She thus implies the possibility of a white self-critique which might not exploit otherness—that is, the possibility of a white self-critique which might not simply “construct African-American culture as though it exists solely to suggest new aesthetic and political directions white folks might move in” (Yearning, 21). So, on the one hand, hooks affirms the possibility that we who inherit white privilege might nevertheless counter white supremacy—especially by means of principled initiatives toward coalition. On the other hand, hooks consistently construes the political potential of subject positions close to the hegemonic center in terms of empathy with the other, the marginal. This latter position is particularly clear in her essay “Representing Whiteness,” in which she quotes Gayatri Spivak to the effect that “the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other” (346). But it is far from clear that the two positions outlined above can be reconciled: hooks wants white people to remember who they are, and yet she contends that it is by taking the position of the other that those who are near the hegemonic center (for example, Euro-americans) may be able to bolster counter-hegemonic movements.

Thus, to the extent that the reviewer points out the paradox of empathetic white anti-racism, his is a laudable intervention into current discussions of whiteness in the US and related contexts. There are, however, some disturbing, if subtle, implications in the quotation from the review of hooks’ book. In emphasizing the need to avoid reading black authors in racist ways, the reviewer obscures the equally important task of reading white and other non-black authors in anti-racist ways. The reviewer not only configures race as what hooks terms “an otherness which is not white,” but he also (unintentionally, no doubt) reinforces the widespread impression that it is blacks who face the primary responsibility for producing anti-racist discourses; the only role for whites, according to this model, is to “respond” to the initiatives of “black authors,” others.

There is also something unsettling about the way in which the reviewer announces that he has learned his lesson, both in the quotation I just read and elsewhere in the review. (This sense of self-satisfaction is evident in the reviewer’s persistent recourse to formulations such as “Now I can see....”) The subtle but distinct hint of self-righteous satisfaction which can be detected in this tendency undermines, at least in part, the reviewer’s emphasis on the importance of confronting the problematic nature of white anti-racism with a degree of self-criticism. Furthermore, in addition to emphasizing the importance of practices of reading to such an extent that the existence of other social practices seems to be forgotten, the reviewer consistently associates the “empowerment” of the white anti-racist with making that person feel he can “make a difference,” thus suggesting, despite some no doubt well-intended disclaim-
ers to the contrary, that the possession of a heightened racial awareness or sensitivity is a sufficient condition for effective anti-racist work.

Mindful of the problems I've just mentioned, but hoping to contribute to the reviewer's project of mediating between criticism and self-criticism in the context of white identity, I want to emphasize that such a raised consciousness is perhaps necessary but certainly not adequate to task of undermining the invisibility and supposed naturalness of whiteness; a "new consciousness" is, at best, "the vital first step" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 39). More particularly, I propose that an adequate approach to the question of the possibilities for white anti-racist intellectual and other work must (at minimum) address the nature of the expressive forms through and in which racial and other identities are partially constructed. That is, I want to question the reviewer's assumption that confession as a genre is to self-criticism what the review as a genre is to criticism, and to suggest by way of Gurganis' story that an examination and strategic disruption of the confessional genre is a necessary component of the critique of white identity.

The conceptual opposition between criticism and self-criticism invoked by the reviewer of hooks' book runs deep in the Black Power paradigm that underlies a lot of contemporary discourse on identity in general and on race in particular (especially, perhaps, in the US). Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Toure) summed up some implications of this opposition very succinctly in his "Speech at Morgan State College:"

> What Camus says is that self-condemnation is impossible. And we in SNCC agree with that. Self-condemnation is impossible. […]

> White America is incapable of condemning that which it has done to black people as a total community inside this country. Therefore we must do it, we must condemn (Bosmajian and Bosmajian, 112).

The "we" in question here is "Black America." There is a great risk in Carmichael's position, for in asserting the impossibility of white self-condemnation—which I take to be more or less equivalent to hooks' notion of persistent self-critique and to her reviewer's concept of self-criticism—Carmichael tends to reduce the extent to which whites can be held responsible for countering white supremacy. Carmichael was well aware of this problem; thus, in a passage from the preface to Black Power which closely parallels the passage I just quoted, Carmichael and Hamilton insist, parenthetically and somewhat desperately, that they offer "ideas of what whites can do who want to be helpful" (ix). Carmichael is driven to conclude that white self-condemnation is impossible by compelling concerns about dynamics of coalition in which white attempts at self-criticism tend to shift responsibility for racism, in Carmichael's terms, "from oppressor to oppressed;" white power is thus turned into a "black problem." Thus in an earlier statement, "Power and Racism," Carmichael had contended that

White supporters of the movement […] are afraid to go into their own communities—which is where the racism exists—and work to get rid of it. They want to run from Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley. They admonish blacks to be non-violent; let them preach nonviolence in the white community. They come to teach me Negro history; let them go to the suburbs and open up freedom schools for whites. Let them work to stop America's racist foreign policy; let them press this government to cease supporting the economy of South Africa (Bosmajian and Bosmajian, 106).

In other words, the complicity of liberal whites in white supremacy is rendered most invisible precisely when Euro-americans identify (and attempt to join) with a marginalized racial other. What is lost at this moment is not simply a sense of where "the problem" lies, but also perhaps some important avenues of resistance that may be more open to whites than to "others." Such is the hypothesis or the promise of a white politics of identity, anyway: the idea that a politics of whiteness is neither the same old politics of white power, nor a direct analog to Black Power (since the strategy of "closing the ranks" which Carmichael and Hamilton claim for subalterns is obviously and entirely unjustified for a dominant group); (Carmichael and Hamilton, 44).³

Note that in an earlier version of this argument, in his essay "Power and Racism," Carmichael offers a more qualified summary of the thesis that self-condemnation is impossible.

Camus and Sartre have asked, can a man condemn himself? Can whites, particularly liberal whites, condemn themselves? Can they stop blaming us, and blame their own system? Are they capable of the shame which might become a revolutionary emotion?

We have found that they usually cannot condemn themselves, and so we have done it. But the rebuilding of this society, if at all possible, is basically the responsibility of whites—not blacks (Bosmajian and Bosmajian, 107).

The earlier formulation, which makes its way into the preface to Black Power virtually unrevised, leaves open possibilities for white self-critique, but at the risk of encouraging facile engagements with the task. On the other hand, Carmichael's later formulation—that self-condemnation is impossible—risks absolving whites from any significant responsibility for countering racism.
The paradox that I’ve drawn out of Carmichael haunts much of even the best work against racism. In “On Being White,” for example, Marilyn Frye emphasizes the need for whites to assume responsibility for white supremacy, and attempts to “set [her]self against Whiteness,” to “give [her]self the injunction to stop being White” (127). Since whiteness is a political rather than a natural category, “it can be resisted” (126); “it is in principle possible to disaffiliate” (118). Indeed, given that “race is a tie that binds women to men” (125) in the context of compulsory heterosexuality, a radical or lesbian feminism is, “whether or not we so intend it, disloyal to Whiteness” (126). Yet she argues (persuasively, in my view) that “it is an important breakthrough for a member of a dominant group to come to know s/he is a member of a group” (her emphasis; 117), and she seems to recognize that she and other queer feminists are still at least in part treated as members of the white group. Thus her provocative and insightful analysis of the ways in which women, particularly lesbians, are removed from the center of dominance goes only part of the way toward explaining how the recognition of one’s white privilege is compatible with the injunction to “stop being white.”

hooks grapples with and fails to entirely resolve a similar difficulty, as noted above in the context of a review of her *Yearning*. The review to which I’ve been referring appeared in the January 1992 issue of *Postmodern Culture*, and is titled “White Male ways of Knowing.” One might suppose that its title would be sufficient indication of its author’s positionality; nevertheless, in the fourth paragraph of the piece the review’s author, sociologist Clifford Staples, insists on presenting himself as openly white and male.

OK. What you’ve mostly gotten so far is the dust-jacket perspective of Anyreader—the sort of “view from nowhere” I was taught to write in graduate school. It’s also the kind of “review” I might have written before reading *Yearning*—before getting my lesson in racial awareness. hooks won’t let me forget who I am. So, as it turns out, I’m not Anyreader. I’m a white guy.

By using the timing of my revelation of the author’s identity to parody the particular “outing” technique he himself uses, I do intend to question the “me paleface” way in which Staples dramatizes his position. Yet I want to emphasize that I did not choose to base my polemic on Staples’ essay because I consider his views to be particularly retrograde; on the contrary, I like his work, and comment on it only because I believe it represents one of the better statements of what seems to be the consensus of contemporary Euro-American self-reflection on white male supremacy. That is, although his work is moving in the direction of white self-critique, it remains somewhat awkwardly situated within the paradigm of “racial awareness” described above by Mercer.

What worries me most is that Staples consistently equates “self-reflection” or “self-criticism” with terms like “self-disclosure” and “confession.”

[hooks] forces the white male reader in particular into self-consciousness and self-criticism. Her stance also raises the question of just exactly what a “review” of her work by me might mean. After thinking it over, I have found myself coming to rest in a problematic place somewhere between criticism and self-criticism. So my “review” is also, of necessity, something of a confession.

His tendency throughout the essay is to suggest that this space between criticism and self-criticism is a kind of mixed genre; yet, although he acknowledges the problematic nature of his position, he never considers the natures of the genres he’s mixing. (Nor does he state what exactly is problematic about his position.) Contrary to what appears to be Staples’ view, one can’t simply volunteer to create a mixed genre by force of will; so, in the interest of determining some conditions of possibility for the elaboration of that space which might mediate between criticism and self-criticism in the context of whiteness, consider the ambiguous character of the confessional form.

Confession is neither simply an act of self-disclosure nor an act of self-criticism (if that term is taken to be opposed to other-criticism). A reading of Staples’ own piece will suggest that what I will call a “successful” or “felicitous” confession hides as much as it reveals. A confession in the end represents an avoidance of self-condemnation: it is a means of self-preservation: the “I” who has sinned is an-other. This paradox follows in part from the temporal aspect of the generic confession, the fact that confession is equivalent to accusing a past self; the present self is always already absolved, simply by virtue of engaging in the act of confession. And as one of Carmichael’s main intellectual sources has suggested, the purging effect of confession also enables the sender of the confession to assume a morally advantaged position with respect to the receiver—to remind the receiver of his own guilt, to accuse: in The Fall, Camus’ narrator makes the accusatory function of confession quite clear.

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shame without losing sight of the effect I am producing, and saying: “I was the lowest of the low.” Then imperceptibly I pass from the “I” to the “we” (140).

A felicitous confession (such as Staples’, perhaps) is in this way a form of criticism which masks itself as self-criticism; it is a speech act which already, to return to Staples’ terms, partakes of both criticism and self-criticism.
Moreover, the paradigmatic confession does not tend to produce that sense of shame which can, according to Carmichael, become a "revolutionary emotion." On the contrary, confession seems to be one of the preferred genres of those who continually emphasize the immobilizing character of guilt. The apparent paradox is resolved when one remembers the absolution that accompanies the acknowledgment of complicity. Confession is a way of passing guilt on, not of producing something from it. Confession can work to project the guilt of the sender of the confessor on to the receiver because the communication roles of sender and receiver are both stable and reversible within the confessional form. The sender of the confession projects his (or her) guilt on to the receiver, whose job is to make the sender feel better. It is the receiver who absolves the narrator of the confession—who, by hearing the confession, validates that the sinner is other than the sender of the confession; it is the receiver who establishes the truth of the confession, according to a code which establishes that someone who ("sincerely") asks for forgiveness must be other than a sinner. The receiver can then become sender and pass the guilt along. I'll call this means of distributing guilt the production of a "confession effect."

It seems to me that a lot of white discourse on racism relies rather uncritically on the propagation of this confession effect; this is, in my view, one of the reasons that "liberal guilt" has quite justifiably gotten a bad name. Complicity is invoked routinely, and serves as a great equalizer; the speaker confesses to a certain awkwardness about his (or sometimes her) positionality, and thus accuses those assumed to be "on deck": an underlying message of this discourse is, "We're all racists—the best we can do is say so (and thus feel superior to those who refuse or neglect to admit that they too are racists)." And if what I've been saying about the nature of the felicitous confession is more or less valid, it might be supposed that the unsuccessful confession might be a good place to look for the kind of shame to which Carmichael alludes. Allan Gurganis' "Blessed Assurance" provides a hint of the form such an infelicitous confession might take, for it arguably promotes what I am almost rash enough to call "radical," as opposed to liberal, guilt. That is, Gurganis' narrative tends to provoke a sense of shame in the reader who recognizes his (or her) white privilege; at the same time, his tale does not encourage the strategy of the complicitous accuser, the tendency to divest oneself of responsibility even as one confesses. Gurganis promotes this particular sense of guilt by denying the reader the assurance of the confession effect, and, in particular, by disrupting the basis of said effect, the stability and reversibility of communication roles.

Thematically, "Blessed Assurance" concerns the conflict between "heart" and "business"—the former being linked to a very particular forms of regional, moral, and class consciousness, the latter being clearly associated with loyalty to family, the American dream, and whiteness. Gurganis' melodrama is about the guilty conscience or "moral insomnia" (266) of the narrator, Jerry, a self-described "career-oriented," "hyper-Caucasian," working-class kid from Falls, North Carolina (290). From Jerry's point of view, even crying about his relative deprivation "seemed a luxury luxury people like me couldn't afford" (260). Jerry makes his way through college and to eventual prosperity by selling funeral insurance to black people. "I only did it to put myself through college. I knew it wasn't right. But my parents worked swing shift at the cotton mill" (232). The job requires a complete commodification of social relationships: everyone must remain a "client," because, as his boss Sam points out, "once they smell heart on you, you're finished." In a moment of need, however, Jerry finds himself befriended by one client in particular: one Vesta Lotte Battle, a former slave who by 1949 is invested in funeral eventualities to the tune of $4,360.50.

I worried: accepting tea might be my first client-collector mistake. I hadn't asked for her tire help, either. Sam had warned me: "Take nothing from anybody." But a person can't consider every kindness a form of bribe, can a person? Maybe I was a night-school Business Major, but I wasn't always counting. "Tea sounds great, ma'am" (246).

But it turns out that he is always counting—he must. "I sold funeral insurance to North Carolina black people...Here lately, worry over this takes a percentage of my sleep right off the top" (232). Jerry feels guilty whether he does his job or not, because his sense of morality is divided between loyalty to his family and to his own career potential, on the one hand, and to his heartfelt if problematic affection for Vesta Lotte Battle, on the other; for him, business is a moral issue:

I lied for them. I paid. And this stupid generosity made me feel ashamed, not good like it's supposed to. I told myself, "You're just too weak to give her up. No Princeton pre-law ballplayer would be such a sap. You're helping losers, clod, because you are one" (260-261).

His fleeting moments of insight into the sense in which both his parents and Vesta Lotte Battle "belong" to the mill are not enough to extricate him from the deeper structures of whiteness, in part because these moments of awareness are generally accompanied by the recognition that acts of charity do not fundamentally challenge the power of the cotton manufacturers. Thus, although Jerry is unable to share his employer's cynical attitude toward "the world," he blames himself—even as he commits the good deed which he hopes will absolve him of his guilt. The alcoholic Sam feels guilty, but is able to continue to rationalize his selling funeral insurance.

You want to be all things to all people, but you can't. Nobody
confession and the embedded confessions is that none of them are felicitous in the
sense outlined above; none of them produce the much-desired confession
effect. That is, there are always subtle signs that the sender of the confession
(Sam or Jerry) doesn’t really feel absolved. Hence, for example, the bitter irony
in Jerry’s certainty that he’d feel better once he’d confessed to Sam that he’d
been protecting his backsliding clients: “I knew I’d feel better,” thinks Jerry
(273). There is a parallel irony in Sam’s comment to Jerry: “My job? I’m here
to make you feel better” (304). Like Jerry, Sam seems to be unable to do his job—
for Jerry does not seem to feel better after confessing to Sam: he wakes up in a
cold sweat, and guilt still taxes his sleep forty years after the event.

There is a kind of Brechtian irony at work here, for with respect to
Gurganis’ tale judgments about the characters’ actions are clearly meant to take
place on a conscious plane (Brecht, 91). That is, Gurganis alienates what he
shows; this white reader is consistently left with the feeling that I’ve been shown
what I wanted to see, and that yet something is “wrong.” Brecht summarizes
the technique to which I have alluded as follows:

The Threepenny Opera deals with bourgeois conceptions, not only as
content by representing them, but also by the way in which they are
presented. It is a sort of summary of what the spectator in the theatre
wishes to see of life. Since however he sees, at the same time, certain
things that he does not wish to see and thus sees his wishes not only
fulfilled but also criticized (he sees himself not as a subject, but as an
object), he is, in theory, able to give the theatre a new function (43).

Likewise, in Gurganis’ tale the blessed assurance of whiteness, which is
supposed to emerge from the confession effect, is constantly promised but
never delivered.

Gurganis produces this Brechtian effect by disrupting the stability of the
division of communication roles. A reader of a narrative such as Staples’ can
easily identify with him, the narrator-protagonist who becomes more and more
heroic the more that narrator faces the difficult task of confronting his own
defects; such a reader is not, I would argue, put into any significant crisis of
consciousness.” I am reminded of Brecht’s critique of the audience’s reception of
a performance of Oedipus which had impressed him: “Plunged in self-
identification with the protagonist’s feelings, virtually the whole audience
failed to take part in the moral decisions of which the plot is made up” (28).

Gurganis’ text, on the other hand, tries to force the reader to take a decisive
role in the action of the narrative (Brecht, 37). To this end, it tends to put its

I’ve never credited any type of heaven. No way. But I still worry for
the souls I kept from theirs. —Even now I know the names of my nine
clients I squealed on. They are:

Betty Seely
Easton Peel
‘Junior’ Turnage
Carlisle Runyon
Mary Irene Tatum
Leota Saiterwaite
P.M. Hilton
Minna Smith
Vesta Lotte Battle

I still try and imagine her—on hold, rocking between this world and
the next. I want to either bring her back or send her on toward her
proper reward. I can’t.
Vesta Lotte Battle owed me $12.50.

There, I’ve told you. I’ll feel better. Thank you very much (305).

But he won’t feel better. What is most significant about both the framing
readers into crisis, to divide us, to put us at odds with ourselves. The reader’s self-alienation is encouraged initially by means of a direct second-person address. This formal device works to hail the reader quite unmistakably, and then to recast that reader’s identity in terms of the subtly alien character of the narratee; or rather, this device works to simultaneously remind the reader that he (or she) is in fact reading, and to encourage that reader to place the act of reading on the same moral and epistemic plane as the action represented in the narrative. That is, the reader is rather forcefully asked to combine, the familiar and the slightly strange—to recognize himself (or herself) as at the same time self-authorized reader and as a particular character whose range of action is being written by another. (Empirical readers might to one degree or another resist the tendency of this device, but it is difficult to see how one could make much sense of the story without participating in this process of self-alienation.) For the framing narrative’s direct second-person address also serves to commit the narratee (and to some extent any reader who identifies at least partly with the narratee, which is to say so much anyone who reads the story) to a very specific role within the narrative. Gurganis’ piece might for this reason be called a “contractual confession,” if such a term is not simply redundant, since in the very first paragraph the narrator, Jerry, places a certain responsibility upon the narratee of the framing discourse.

I still feel bad about what went on. My wife says: Telling somebody might help. Lately, worry over this takes a percentage of my sleep right off the top. So I’m telling you, OK? (232)

In other words, the reader’s job, like Sam’s, is to make Jerry feel better. Gurganis thematizes the nature of the confession effect brilliantly, as Jerry consistently reminds his “good listener” (279) of the confessor’s duty: “And hey, I appreciate your listening” says Jerry (305). “I’m telling you everything. That’s our deal” (278).

My wife says: for somebody like me, somebody with a strong head for facts, it’s even more important to empty out that head from time to time. So I am, okay? Clearing the books (274).

“Clearing the books”: by comparing his discourse to the reader and his betrayal of Vesta Lotte Battle, Jerry identifies the reader and Sam: Sam, the one who accepts Jerry’s burden, and then passes the names on to the company headquarters in the North. The reader is being asked to share the burden which knowledge of that list of names brings.

Of course, being compared to Sam can hardly make the reader comfortable. But the reader is denied access to the confession effect, which is the usual means of discharging the kind of anxiety in question. The narratee always fails to uphold his end of the contract; thus the reader who identifies at least in part with the narratee feels a sense of participation with respect to the failure of the confession effect. Since Jerry’s narration consistently signifies a kind of equivalence between the framing confession and the embedded confessions, and among the embedded confessions themselves, distinctions among communication roles (distinctions between characters and readers, and between narrators and narrates) are blurred: as shown above, for example, Jerry as narrator of the frame is equated with the Jerry who as character confesses to Sam. The reader whose identification is split between the narrator and the narratee is for this reason never able to settle on any single communication role within the confessional context; he or she is never able to identify in any simple way with either the receiver or the sender of a confession, so the guarantee of moral superiority which a confessed white liberal reader assumes for himself (or herself), the assumption of morality which as expressed in confession shored up white identity—this sense of oneself fails to obtain. Once communication roles are destabilized, the reversibility of the confession effect is called into question, and the reader can no longer be sure that he (or she) is participating in an ongoing chain of successful confessions. Normally, after consoling someone by hearing a confession and absorbing the guilt which the confession projects on to the receiver, the receiver of that confession can then assume the role of sender and pass the guilt along. The general failure of confession in “Blessed Assurance,” however, removes the guarantee of consolation which is implied by representations which imply the working of a smoothly functioning communication circuit—representations such as Staples’ essay. I imagine the white reader of Staples’ essay to emerge with a bolstered ego; there is something self-congratulatory about the way in which this essay provokes and then manages feelings of guilt. “Blessed Assurance,” on the other hand, stirs up similar feelings of guilt, but because it removes the usual means of dispensing with such feelings, it tends to place the reader in a state of crisis; the white reader is thus encouraged to create new identities and new ways of engaging with guilt, though of course no text could guarantee the outcome of such experimentation on the part of its readers.

None of this is to say that Gurganis provides a ready-made alternative to the generic confession; nor do I want to suggest that white supremacy can be destroyed by means of a little Brechtian irony. I see no formula for elaborating Gurganis’ essentially literary project in more concrete political terms. My argument that Gurganis’ novella represents a successful intervention into the construction of white identity is intended simply to provide a less negative complement to my more critical remarks with respect to Staples. Gurganis demonstrates that it is possible to engage with white guilt in such a way as to avoid both denial and reification: that is, the reification of whiteness as a given about which we can do nothing, and the denial of the effective reality of whiteness as a relational and historically contingent social and political con-
Second, accent, of Color Caucus at the People's Progressive Convention (in Ypsilanti, Michigan, August 21-23, 1992), one participant stressed the importance of distinguishing between an educational session and a caucus—a caucus representing the interests of groups deserving and requiring such representation, an educational session being a signal that those not represented by a particular caucus nevertheless ought to address their own relation to issues faced by members of the caucus in question.

In order to substantiate my claim that Staples' piece is very much worth considering, I simply offer the following quotation:

Initially I was feeling proud of myself that I had [sic.] stepped out from behind the Anyreader persona to proclaim my status as “white guy”...[But] acknowledging one's status is only meaningful as a result of what comes after it. In my case, I came to see this essay as an occasion for self-reflection and analysis. Stating that one is a “white male” won’t in itself do that more difficult work. In fact, it might inhibit it to the extent that it serves as a sort of politically correct gesture....

For example, during the “Educational Session on Racism” at the People's Progressive Convention (in Ypsilanti, Michigan, August 21-23, 1992), one participant who spoke against the format of that meeting argued both (1) that we who are not people of color should focus on taking action rather than on “cleansing” ourselves, and (2) that racism will remain no matter what we do. In other words, he asserted the ineffectivity of shame and at the same time made the confession/accusation that we are all racists; the latter claim, of course, seemed in its context to imply that all we can do is learn to live with white supremacy, and thus tends to undermine his vague and arguably naive (but nevertheless admirable) call for “social revolution.” Although I share the speaker’s concern that such discussions may become too focused on matters of consciousness per se, I conclude, for reasons that I hope I have made clear, that the overall dynamic of these comments is deeply racist in the context of the debate over whether we “need” meetings in which white people are asked to think about racism. Indeed, in the end these comments seem to represent an attempt to change the subject of the discussion, not an effective means of undercutting an overemphasis on states of mind.

Camus’ narrator again makes the point:

I’ll agree with you, despite your polite silence, that the adventure is not very pretty. But just think of your life, mon cher compatriote! Search your memory and perhaps you will find some similar story that you’ll tell me later on (65).

“Blessed Assurance” was first published in Granta. In my citations I will refer to the pagination of the reprinting which appears in Gurganis’ White People.

Given my concern with the issues raised by Staples’ essay, my reading of Gurganis is particularly concerned with the role of the white reader. Readers do find interesting ways to resist the main tendencies of particular messages, however, so it is impossible to guarantee much of anything about the ways in
which "Blessed Assurance" is actually received; for me, Gurganis’ story is an opportunity, not a guarantee. Likewise, it is important to remember that little or nothing can be said about the actual activities of empirical readers on the basis of the kind of evidence I have offered. I make no predictions about what particular white, black, or "other" readers will do with Gurganis’ tale, nor do I accept, ultimately, the validity of the misleadingly definite terms "black" and "white." My aim is rather to indicate some of the things that condition the messy subjectivities which generally are accounted for ideologically and struggled over politically in terms of rigidly defined racial difference.

Perhaps I should also point out that in this essay I have consistently worked within the confines of a code in which racial otherness is black (and specifically African American). This is not because I believe that racial conflict can be reduced to a black-white paradigm, but rather because in the context of the contemporary US the black-white nexus provides a particularly good opportunity for an examination of white guilt—an opportunity not afforded, for example, by the relation of whites to the so-called "model minorities."

It seems to me that the premises of an effective identity politics have been worked through most clearly in feminist, and especially queer feminist, projects. See, e.g., DeLauretis; Fuss.

A version of this essay was presented at the conference “Rediscovering America, 1492-1992: National, Cultural and Disciplinary Boundaries Reexamined” (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; February 26-29, 1992). I thank everyone who participated in the conference, especially panel chair Prof. Nancy Caraway (Government, American University) and conference co-chair Prof. Joseph V. Ricapito (Foreign Languages and Literatures, Louisiana State University). Thanks are also due to Prof. R.A.T. Judy (English, University of Pittsburgh), Prof. Julian Markels (English, Ohio State University), and Prof. Marlene Longenecker (English, Ohio State University), who read early drafts of this essay; needless to say, they bear no responsibility for the limitations and deficiencies of my work.

Works Cited


