Response Essays

Optimistic Pessimism:
A Response to Matthew Jackson

Vorris L. Nunley

To Gramsci's borrowed maxim—that politicians who are "active" and "realistic" and invested in societal transformation possess "pessimism of the intelligence" to act and "optimism of the will" to believe the act will produce meaningful change (173–75)—I would add scholars and intellectuals. A certain optimism has served me well in both my academic and extra-academic endeavors. Yet, when it comes to Whiteness, I must admit to a certain pessimism in the desire, investment, or ability of most White folks to disinvest from White privilege or from what Matthew Jackson refers to as White supremacy. I am not alone in this.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose public pedagogy of non-violent resistance and civility has fetishized him into a trope of tolerance, had this to say about the centrality of White privilege to American life in general and White life (humanness) and normalcy: "It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic." Seemingly, many Whites not only are not invested in knocking down the fortress of White supremacy, but too many are also interested in using terms of resistance and openness emerging out of the post-American Civil Right’s Movement to refortify their racial mansions. Rhetorics of tolerance, civility, neutrality, color blindness, political
correctness, race card, and individual survival of the fittest narratives camouflage White supremacist mansions behind gated tropes of "rational" discussion or fair debate.

Nevertheless, I want to begin my response from the optimism of my will. "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" energizes my optimism of the will for at least three reasons. First, the piece recognizes the prevalence of White supremacy, its seeming intractability, and Jackson is willing to struggle against it as well as against the Whiteness entwined in his own subjectivities to ameliorate its effects. This is no small feat. The personal anecdotes move the work beyond mere theoretical, aesthetic elegance, shifting "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" into the messy, protean domain of the everyday. As such, "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" avoids simplistic views of racialized practices tethered to considerations of whether a particular person is good or bad, well intentioned, or educated. Second, Jackson makes explicit the importance of rhetoric in both hardening and cracking the discursive, epistemic, and material ideological mortar of White supremacy. Finally, Jackson's scholarship provides a useful example of applied rhetorical criticism. However, throughout this response, the pessimism of my intelligence will attempt to occupy some of the fissures in Jackson's work/project around White supremacy and the following: postmodernism, rhetorical listening and the enthymeme, the privatizing or individualizing of resistance, and the nation-state. I want to push, elaborate his project and make visible the tensions/contradictions that not only haunt his project or analysis, but also trouble other antiracist projects anchored in a liberal humanist investment in the individual.

Jackson does not attempt to soft pedal the complicity of other Whites or of himself. Pleas of race neutrality, color blindness, and other defensive, guilt-absolving "I am not racist" claims do not persuade him. To the contrary, his discussion "places us [Whites] firmly on racist ground" (602). In keeping with Peggy MacIntosh's germinal "White Privilege and Male Privilege," Jackson bores through the strata of his emotions and defenses to the bedrock of his own privilege. Jackson's gesture splinters the psychological and discursive plates shoring up his own Whiteness and its attendant subjectivity. No one escapes the pervasive heat of Whiteness
un-singed, not Jackson, not his friends, not the reader. Splitting and grinding into conceptual dust the simple racist/not racist binary, Jackson attempts to make Whites politically and ethically responsible for dismantling White supremacy in “a racist society” (602). For Jackson, White supremacy can be defined as material and discursive sites where “whites are overwhelmingly in control of power and material resources, where notions of superiority are widespread, and where relations of white dominance and nonwhite subordination are daily reenacted across a wide array of institutions and social settings” (Harris, qtd. in Jackson 604). He goes on to argue that what makes Whites uneasy is how their “privileged positionality comes at a cost to nonwhites and, further, that whites are ethically and politically responsible to do something about that inequity” (602; emphasis added).

Before going forward with my response, I want to pause here to push a bit on Jackson’s definition of White supremacy, its limits as public pedagogy and cultural rhetoric, and its function as a form of public pedagogy and cultural rhetoric. What Jackson productively understands as White supremacy, I want to identify as White privilege to force the discussion beyond the agency of White bodies, nation-state and civil institutions, and the control of material resources. Borrowing from several conversations and e-mail exchanges with Dylan Rodriguez, I understand White privilege as a “a relatively autonomous modality of power that itself can, itself, own and operate other bodies and subjectivities (including non-Whites).” Jackson’s definition overlooks a vital element of how Whiteness circulates. Whiteness is more than about bodies; African Americans can be it staunchest supporters. As with gender, Whiteness is both agent and object of practice. White supremacy as a term and as public pedagogy is limited as a cultural rhetoric. Henry Giroux’s concept of public pedagogy recognizes “that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings in society” (Public Spaces 129) through the “educational force of the entire culture” (Border Crossings 4). Steven Mailloux describes cultural rhetoric as “the political effect of trope and argument” in culture (59). White supremacy as a trope in public pedagogy closes down the opportunity for critical ethical, political reflection for most Whites because it is so associated with and through violent, vulgar, extreme practices related to organizations such as the Ku
Klux Klan, to mob behavior like that linked to the dragging-lynching murder of James Byrd, and to the individual violence often affiliated with hate crimes. Therefore, the political effectivity of White supremacy as an explanation of White normativity and privilege is impeded.

"The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" does not stop at critique of White supremacy or stall around White unease: Jackson has a project. He envisions that "whites accept a racialized positionality" where they "cannot remain ignorant, silent, or inactive regarding our complicit relationship with white supremacy" (602). Jackson’s strategy for enabling Whites to make legible and to recognize such a "racialized positionality" is to "provide some different ways of seeing whiteness, white supremacy, and racism that are rhetorically and pedagogically useful in doing antiracist work" (602). Jackson’s primary advice to Whites invested in seeing Whiteness and White supremacy differently is (1) to read White supremacy enthymematically, and (2) to understand audience and its reception of the enthymeme through a postmodern lens. Unlike the structure of reasoning of the syllogism with its explicitly expressed premises and conclusions emerging from the logic of the case, the enthymeme, with its implied premises/conclusions, is, according to Edward P.J. Corbett and Rosa A. Eberly, "of much more use than the syllogism in understanding and conducting reasoning and argument among other human beings in day-to-day life" (38). Aristotle himself thought the structure of the syllogism was artificial and unnatural. Reading against Aristotle, Enlightenment rationality, and modernist conceptions of audience, Jackson deploys Carol Poster, Barbara Emmel, John T. Gage, Jeffrey Walker, and others to move away from the movement toward a definitive definition of the enthymeme as a term or a structure of argument to the recognition of it as a process or as ideological. Understanding enthymemes ideologically illuminates how they function as the very terrain upon which White supremacy can be posited and understood. Jackson utilizes Lawrence D. Green to argue that "enthymemetic reasoning runs throughout all discourse so completely that we are apt to see right through it and follow the way it patterns our thought without being conscious of the patterning itself" (qtd. in Jackson 610).

For Jackson, Whites, due to formal laws and unofficial sanctions, can no
longer make the explicit argument for their supremacy embodied by the syllogism. As a result, the hegemonic enthymeme of White supremacy serves as a substitute for more explicit racialized utterances. For example, President George W. Bush embraced a common enthymematic argument for White supremacy and against affirmative action when he argued that while he is for "diversity of all kinds, including racial diversity, in higher education . . . the method used by the University of Michigan to achieve this important goal [was] fundamentally flawed" (qtd. in Jackson 619). The method was, of course, quotas. According to Jackson, President Bush’s implied enthymemes are that "points" or "unearned privileges" will go to undeserving nonwhites instead of "deserving" Whites (619). It is important to note that neither Jackson nor I claims that any White person who supports affirmative action is a White supremacist, although to avoid providing undue comfort in this response, I would provocatively argue that most Whites (and others for that matter) who oppose affirmative action uncritically support both White privilege and White supremacy. That is, such arguments, despite the intentions of the individual subject, participate in the enthymemes of White supremacy. Therefore, the enthymemetic difference between David Duke and more "reasonable" Whites such as President Bush who argue against affirmative action is a difference in tactics, not necessarily a difference in investment in hegemonic Whiteness.

Addressing Whiteness enthymematically will compel Whites to come to grips with, identify, and make visible their own silences and practices around enthymemes of White supremacy. However, tackling racial reasoning enthymematically is not new. Krista Ratcliffe, to whom I will later return, does so in Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness, winner of the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication outstanding book award. However, specifically understanding White supremacy enthymematically through a postmodern lens unsettles positivistic, rational, unidirectional concepts of communication and of "real" audiences as monolithic, stable entities to which the rhetor appeals to come to a moment of understanding where the audience "‘gets’ it [the rhetor's argument]" (614).

Yet . . . my pessimism remains.

My intellectual pessimism of Jackson’s scholarship and project
emerges in relation to the following topics I alluded to earlier: postmodernism, rhetorical listening and the enthymeme, the privatizing or individualizing of resistance, and the nation-state. Further, White supremacy is too bound up in subjectivity and individualism for Whites to opt out due to ethics, a sense of responsibility, or the desire not to hurt others. Indeed, given the bio-politics of life, and Giorgio Agamben’s distinction between bare life or zoe, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings,” and bios, “which indicate[s] the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” (1), it could be argued that in a White supremacist context, to opt out of White privilege is to opt out of the normative category of the human. Contrary to Jackson’s claim, at least in this historical moment, it is not their “privileged positionality” and their “ethical and political” responsibility to end White supremacy that concretize White unease (602). Instead, it is precisely Whites’ sense of and investment in an ethics and responsibility to their own White subjectivities entwined in uncritical liberal humanist versions of meritocracy, individualism, civility, and equity that not only enable the enthymemes of White supremacy, but also cause White unease.

In terms of its modern/postmodern distinction, Jackson’s “The Enthymematic of Hegemony of Whiteness” is oblivious not only to the racialized nature of modernity writ large, but also to an African-American iteration of modernity that, as Kimberly W. Benston theorizes, understands audience as multiple, fragmented, and much more active in creating the moment of understanding (18). Interestingly, these are the elements Jackson argues are postmodern and what make postmodernism superior for understanding audience. Benston is not the sole scholar whose scholarship problematizes Jackson’s modernity/postmodern binary. “The Enthymematic of Hegemony of Whiteness” overlooks significant scholarship by Madhu Dubey, Patricia Hill Collins, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and others who, while not dismissing it out of hand, have expressed various kinds of pessimisms toward postmodernism’s limitations. For example, Toni Morrison refers to how the fragmented subject of the postmodern was not new to African Americans. Black women had to deal with postmodern dilemmas prior to the nineteenth century and, “as a consequence of slavery, African-Americans have been confronting postmodern dilemmas long before the term was coined” (Dubey 21). And
while postmodernism values difference, just as it was with Enlighten-
ment philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Jefferson, the resources for
hegemonic postmodern theory remain mostly White, male, and Euro-
pean: new bosses same as the old bosses. Jackson’s take on the limits of
modernism in relationship to understanding audience and reception
offers another example. While his critique is rigorous in many respects,
it fails to ask a question that might challenge the hidden premises/
conclusions of his own critique of modernism: for whom (what audience)
does a modern view of audience reflect a relatively static entity, partici-
pating in a relatively unidirectional logic of reception? More broadly, as
Corbett and Eberly ask of all enthymemes, for what audience is a premise
or conclusion missing? (41–43). While a scholar cannot be expected to
possess an awareness of all critiques of a theoretical lens in which she or
he might be invested, a project concerned with dismantling White
supremacy through arguments for making its privilege visible certainly
needs to substantially take into account legitimate critiques by scholars
interested in provincializing Eurocentric theorizing. To not do so is to
inadvertently reproduce the very epistemological ignorances and ethno-
graphic exclusions that sustain and buttress the social innocence of White
supremacy. The editors and philosophers in Race and Epistemologies of
Ignorance point out that such epistemic ignorances, what philosopher
Charles Mills refers to as inverted epistemologies vis-à-vis White privi-
lege, are not inadvertent fissures; they are actively produced to maintain
White privilege as an epistemic site that sustains domination and
oppression.

Reconfiguring Whiteness as enthymeme may, as Jackson believes,
facilitate the resistance of Whites undermining White supremacy. Still,
I have two concerns. First, Jackson needs to further elaborate the
difference his approach makes, or more broadly, the difference rhetoric
makes as a lens in disrupting White supremacy. For example, Jackson’s
call to excavate the enthymeme of White supremacy resembles a racialized
version of what Antonio Gramsci might refer to as a call to excavate the
assumptions of common sense (Prison Notebooks 422–24). Critical race
studies scholars might view Jackson’s reconfigured enthymeme as an-
other version of what they refer to as a racial (rhetorical and pedagogical)
formation. As a rhetorician, even I would like to hear more detail from
Jackson about what makes his approach distinctive. Second, Jackson pushes Whites to explicitly challenge and voice the implied or hidden premises/conclusions of enthymematic White supremacy. In my view, there is an important practice White folks need to reconsider, then reconfigure, prior to productively unsettling or making hearable the enthymemes of White supremacy—that of rhetorical and pathos-oriented listening.

Given the "fallacious" reasoning around White supremacy, Jackson feels that it is Whites' "rhetorical and pedagogical responsibility to learn to recognize and work against, as best we can, postmodern enthymemetic arguments for white supremacy" (618). Such responsibility cannot be seized or properly articulated until Whites learn to listen differently. Krista Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as "a trope for interpretive invention, that is, as a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (25). Rhetorical listening theorizes hearing as a rhetorical strategy that is indispensable to what Jacqueline Jones Royster identifies as a "code of cross-cultural conduct" (qtd. in Ratcliffe 34). Further, Deborah Tannen and Ratcliffe expose the gender bias against listening. In a public forum, speaking is gendered masculine, listening gendered feminine (Ratcliffe 20–21). Listening is devalued. Listening, then, is not merely a physiological/physical phenomenon. Hearing is always already ideological through-and-through. Listening/hearing occurs through what Kenneth Burke refers to as a terministic screen—laden with cultural, communal, and individual values—that is a "reflection of reality," a "selection of reality," and therefore is also a "deflection of reality" (45). Interestingly, rhetorical listening suggests that Whites cannot reread or dislodge enthymemes of White supremacy without first listening to the very subjects normalized Whiteness constructs as excess beyond the requirement of listening—an excess upon which their very Whiteness and Whiteness studies depend. So if Whiteness studies is going to destabilize White supremacy, and if reading White supremacy enthymematically is going to produce traction in the realm of the everyday, then what Gemma Corradi Fiumara characterizes as a "philosophy of listening"—that is, "an attempt to retrieve the functions of listening which may allow for truer forms of dialogue" (qtd. in Ratcliffe 24)—is necessary. Ratcliffe's
rhetorical listening is not a utopian fix for all the world’s racial problems. But neither is, as she provocatively points out, “Aristotle’s enthymeme” (Ratcliffe 26). One approach to the kind of rhetorical listening that Jackson and other Whites could utilize, allowing them to more accurately discern the hidden premises and conclusions of the enthymemes of White supremacy, would be what Jon Cruz refers to as pathos-oriented listening.

Jon Cruz’s *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* offers a useful taxonomy for listening/hearing differently. He identifies three types: incidental, instrumental, and pathos-oriented listening/hearing (Cruz 59–63). The first two serve and reproduce White supremacy in that the rhetoric and hermeneutics of Black others are heard as noise—outside of the frequencies of White episteme and interpretation—and are therefore to be ignored (incidental), trivialized, or used to serve hegemonic White interests (instrumental). In the context of Jackson’s piece, this would not only include the enthymemes of the David Dukes of the world, but also those reasonable Whites (and others such as Ward Connerly) who would, under the guise of equality, color blindness, or fairness, derail any attempt at social justice that does not make room for the normalization of Whiteness. Cruz values the kind of listening/hearing that intersects with both Jackson’s and Ratcliffe’s projects: pathos-oriented listening, which challenges gendered and racialized assumptions about listening. It compels the listener to hear from the epistemic, cultural, and normative assumptions of those raced, gendered, classed, and queered as other who challenge White supremacy—to listen in a manner that values the “hermeneutic dimensions” of others. Additionally, pathos-oriented listening requires Whites to take seriously the hermeneutic dimension of their own hearing, their own episteme, exactly when a moment of understanding is most difficult to achieve.

“The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness” is productive in part because it carves out a space for a rhetorical listening that could allow individual Whites to take responsibility for struggling against White supremacy; it is also problematic for the same reason. White supremacy within the nation-state is not merely a symptom of individual will or of individual ignorance to be ameliorated by individuals. White supremacy
is not epiphenomenal of the modern nation-state; rather, White supremacy is arguably the very condition of possibility of and for the nation-state. In his germinal *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson refers to Aristotle and his concept of natural law as part of the racialist conceptual ground of Western civilization and domination, anterior to the development of nation-state formations. As a result, "Race was its epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce, and power" (Robinson xxxi). For Robinson, race is an underlying condition of truth that both precedes and exceeds modern nation-state formations. David Theo Goldberg posits that race is an ordering and organizing principle of the modern nation-state. The state becomes modern through its governmentality and the deployment of various racial technologies. Goldberg seeks to "comprehend the co-articulation of race and the modern state" (4), demystifying the notion of the supposed neutrality of nation-state operations and procedures. For Goldberg, "The modern state, it might be said, founds itself not just on exclusions, those absences that render invisible, but on the internalization of exclusions" (9).

"The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" erases the intersection of nation-state racialized governmentalities, the state-as-being (nation-state procedural subjectivities), and White supremacy. Liberal humanism vexes a kind of Whiteness studies in general and "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness" in particular. Both tend not to link their theorizing to emancipatory or liberatory configurations intervening into specific regimes of the nation-state. Both seem to be invested in a privatized, individualized, feel-good notion of antiracist struggle that too often relies on a theoretically and empirically untenable assumption that if good, well-intentioned, responsible individuals change attitudes and do not engage in overt racist practices, White supremacy will dissipate. As a result, Jackson disarticulates rhetorical critique from the macro-politics of nation-state or local formations when he offers that while he hopes his paper will benefit others who read it, it is "written primarily for and to [him]self" (607). Jackson's gesture begs the question—a question of audience, normalized subjectivities, and White supremacy—who is privileged enough or able to write a paper primarily
to himself or herself in attempting to subvert White supremacy? Frankly, I do not think it is possible for me. Of course, Jackson can write for whomever he pleases, but once again, this gesture privatizes resistance. The popularity of the movie Crash and the musical Wicked is due in part to the privatizing of racial resistance. The aforementioned erasures and privatization subvert Jackson’s goals for White individuals. As a result, arguments against Affirmative Action, quotas, and minority set-asides can be read as attempts to smuggle in through the back door of public discourse a critique that the state is becoming too Black, too other, in its procedural neutrality.

Reading White supremacy enthymematically is a useful and optimistic tool to pry open its rhetoric. However, leaving such readings on the register of individual exchange, not explicitly linking readings of the enthymemes of White supremacy to their manufacture and support by nation-state formations such as the media, limits Jackson’s project. For example, Jackson rightly critiques CNN’s no nonsense Joe Cafferty for his racist enthymeme buttressing White supremacy (606). However, Jackson does not account for what organizations such as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting reveal as the limited range of public debate due to the increasing centralization and commercialization of network and cable news and their cozy relationship with corporate interests. CNN and Cafferty are able to market themselves and their ethos as liberal or moderate precisely because they are, for the most part, situated in establishment hermeneutics, status quo politics, and the limited range of debate. Their enthymemes are legible and rhetorically listenable because they occupy the same limited rhetorical terrain as so-called more conservative pundits. What I would like to hear from Jackson, then, is an analysis of how Whites (and by extension others) might read David Duke and Joe Cafferty as occupying the same epistemic grid, the same enthymematic territory. How do we read that territory bidirectionally in terms of nation-state discourse and individual exchange of and resistance to such discourse?

During the American Civil Rights Movement, when Dr. King took the struggle to the institutional and rhetorical ground of White supremacy and the nation-state, even some prominent African-American organizations and individuals abandoned and critiqued him. Yet, despite these and
other setbacks in post-1965 America, he remained optimistic. How? I do not know. In post-Vincent Chin, Rodney King, and Jena 6 protests America, White supremacist enthymemes circulate with the authority of disinterested and reasonable argument. Most White folks and many subjects classed, raced, queered, and disabled as others support nation-state driven, White supremacist arguments. My pessimism of intelligence remains. Yet, despite my reservations, Matthew Jackson’s "The Enthymematic Hegemony of Whiteness: The Enthymeme as Antiracist Rhetorical Strategy" reveals that there are always individuals who are willing to go against the grain of common sense, who are willing to offer a public pedagogy of emancipatory possibility. Lines of flight such as the American Civil Rights Movement, the dismantling of South African apartheid, Tiananmen Square, and the WTO civil unrest allow individual, communal, and multitudinous subjects to, as Negro spirituals advise, make a way out of no way. In these reservoirs of possibility both my pessimism and optimism find sanctuary.

University of California
Riverside, California

Notes

1. Thanks to Dylan Rodriguez, a colleague and friend in the Ethnic Studies department at the University of California at Riverside. Our numerous conversations about White privilege and related issues have been invaluable to my thinking. In the discussion that follows, I do not argue that White privilege is a more productive term; it is what Jackson’s definition leaves out that concerns me, as does the reception and circulation of the term White supremacy in United States popular culture.

2. Ethnographic exclusion refers to two gestures—one conceptual, the other linguistic. Conceptually, what counts as knowledge is often based on a structured ignorance, where the very criteria of definition or evaluation tacitly reproduces the exclusion or trivialization of certain cultures, disciplines, or approaches for its legitimacy. Rhetoric and Philosophy’s historical antagonism is an example. Linguistically, the very terms ethnic or alternative rhetoric inadvertently remarginalize as they disrupt hegemonic rhetorical taxonomies (see Ramsey, Jr. 25).


Rodriguez, Dylan. E-mail to the author. 27 Aug. 2007.
