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Proleptic Strategies in Race-Based Essays:

Jordan K. Thomas, Rita Banerjee, and Durga Chew-Bose

In her 2016 essay, “Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay,” Amy Bonnaffons suggests that the lyric essay is an especially effective form for slippery subjects. She claims that the strategies of the lyric essay—“its associative logic and its openness to visuality as a tool of meaning-making”—make it “more suitable than other forms for expressing embodied truths—especially those previously neglected, those experienced in the gaps between sanctioned ‘facts.’” While this statement appears in the section of her essay that discusses women writing about gender, her argument gestures towards race as another kind of embodied, marginalized experience that would work well not only in the lyric essay, but in other forms of nonfiction more broadly. On reading this essay, I became especially interested in the effectiveness of this craft for writing about race, and, more specifically, how writers of color anticipate audience response to racial topics. I began to consider how writers of color anticipate critique and looked to essays as models for maneuvering around, despite, and through white fragility, defined by sociologist Robin DiAngelo as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.”

The term “prolepsis” is relevant here: “the action of anticipating a possible objection or counter-argument in order to answer or discount it, or to deprive it of force.” If Black, Indigenous, and other people of color were already using proleptic strategies in everyday situations at school and the workplace, for example, how would this look like on the page? I wondered especially about writing that explicitly discussed race and racism, as opposed to writing where race is a more subtle or minor thread. What

strategies were writers of color using in race-based essays to anticipate critique, and what did these strategies say about the act of writing about race? In the three essays I will examine here—Jordan K. Thomas’ “The Murder of Crows,” Rita Banerjee’s “Mano a Mano,” and Durga Chew-Bose’s “Tan Lines”—the proleptic strategies—facts and statistics, polyvocality, self-implication, childhood experiences, questions, and specific placement of claims/climactic moments—appear more or less depending on the essay, and none of the essays use the same combination of strategies in the same order. But some patterns can be drawn. Strategies like using statistics and outside references rely on a writer’s credibility in terms of knowledge; the BIPOC writer should appear knowledgeable and the essay well-researched, so that the essay’s argument about racism rises above the personal. The strategies of invoking childhood experiences, self-implication, and questioning, especially self-questioning, require the narrator to be—or at least appear—vulnerable on the page, which reflects the vulnerability with which a person of color moves through society in the US. Lastly, the strategic placement in the essay of bolder claims implies a writerly hand, one that knows how tension and momentum operate in a text and how they affect an audience; the BIPOC writer strikes a balance in tone, between when and how much to show their cards.

Many of the moments across the three essays work twofold: to provide content and to anticipate critique. This suggests a sophisticated sense of audience that BIPOC writers must engage as they also write compelling material. I think of the vulnerability and ingenuity required for the task, and I worry that racism has been so firmly reinscribed in the acts of reading and writing, so that—even in writing that resists dominant white narratives—white fragility still exacts a cost of labor from writers of color. I have questions for the future, but for now, I’m celebrating BIPOC writers for the strategies that put them steps ahead of their audience.

Jordan K. Thomas’s essay, “The Murder of Crows,” originally published in *Indiana Review* and republished in *The Toast*, is a 22-section meditation on associations of the word “crow.” The essay begins with a

personal connection to crows, where the narrator has moved from his hometown to a city where he realizes he misses crows. Here in the beginning, readers learn basic information about this bird, the way we categorize them, their behaviors and mythologies. As the essay continues, stakes deepen as the narrator excavates racial meanings accrued from Jim Crow laws, racist stereotypes, and the derogatory ways Black people have been conflated with crows. Crows become a metaphor for Black bodies—but while racist laws, art, and media used it to oppress Black people, Thomas uses the metaphor to bring to light the violence exacted on Black bodies today and over time, to address anti-Black racism and police brutality in particular.

The essay begins in first person, but moves quickly into third person and stays there until the “I” resurfaces in the fourteenth section, providing a major prolepsis of the essay. It’s in third person that the narrator offers facts, sources, scientific and historical context, and examples from media and texts; this depersonalization allows the Black writer/narrator a way out from performing his personal experience and suffering on the page. The narrator refers to outside sources to anticipate a general audience who might feel they need more “proof” of racism than a personal experience would offer. Thomas’s narrator calls on the polyvocality of historical texts and other experts—for example, lawyer and civil-rights advocate Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*, on mass incarceration—to build meaning between the sections.

The fifteenth section of the essay, after the “I” has been reintroduced, includes a moment of self-implication from the narrator:

I lower the volume of my headphones to listen for footsteps from the black men I just passed and I walk a little faster. I cross the street, away from them, and my muscles loosen. When I realize what I am doing, what my body is doing, I am filled with shame, anger, self-loathing. I have fallen for the lie we’ve been sold that blackness means danger. ... Here I am, quickening my step past

black men, away from men in jeans, jerseys, hooded sweatshirts, Nike sneakers, away from men that look like me.

Here, Thomas uses self-implication as a proleptic strategy that builds the narrator's ethos; this vulnerability and admission of racist behavior—even as the narrator is more a victim of racism—builds credibility and trust with a general audience. Not only that, this act of self-implication offers a model for white readers to reflect on the ways they also perpetuate racism. Thomas, in this moment, pushes against a liberal white desire for wokeness and the idea that a white person isn't—couldn't be—racist if they already know a lot about racism or care about racial justice.

It's also significant that this self-implicating scene comes more than halfway through the essay, after the narrator has built credibility by asserting knowledge through facts and statistics. The narrator's claim about how racism works (even that he participates in racism himself) is more powerful because it comes after the narrator has demonstrated his knowledge of the subject, itself a traditional form of ethos-building usually ascribed to white male writers. It's as if now, after showing proficiency in a game, the underdog decides it's time for a power move of his own.

Published in *Nat. Brut* in 2017, Rita Banerjee's "Mano a Mano" follows two filmmakers making a documentary in France on issues of race and power. Through the perspective of the Indian-American narrator, we go back and forth in time, dipping into the narrator's life outside of the documentary, into her own experiences with racism—layers of meta. As the essay opens, the narrator, Rita, asks her fellow filmmaker,

"So Michael, we've been talking a lot about the racial tensions and distances between Black and white communities in America. But what about people of different ethnicities? Where do they fit in the spectrum, and what are their encounters with racism or othering in the United States?" I

wanted to know because in a weird way, being of an ethnic minority, being neither Black nor white, it felt too often that our communities were being regulated to the bleachers without our consent.

In this brief paragraph of dialogue, Banerjee establishes the preoccupations of the essay, identifies the narrator as a non-Black person of color, and explains why she's even talking about race in the first place. The directness of this explanation—the very presence of it—hints at a white audience, an audience who might need explanation for why someone wants to talk about racism. As a proleptic strategy, explanation works as a kind of rhetorical handholding and navigates a white reader through a discussion on race. It's important, also, that the narrator describes her questions to Michael as a “[launching of] my assault.” The word “assault,” which seems to refer to a yet unidentified tension between the two characters, also anticipates a kind of violence a general audience may perceive in race-based discussions—the feeling of being attacked. At the same time, “assault” also acts as overstatement. The intensity of word choice serves to deflate reader expectations of a race-based discussion, so that the reality of it doesn't seem as bad in comparison.

Michael, who we learn is Asian-American, follows up a bit later with “his [own] assault” on the narrator:

‘You’re just a privileged kid from the suburbs.’ He would accuse me later of being born with a silver spoon. He was chagrined that I had mentioned Harvard during the orientation of the workshop we were both teaching at. He said that I always took the higher, moralistic position on things. That I was some sort of truth-seeker. That basically, I didn’t want to get my hands dirty. That I essentially pooh-poohed any discussion on race and instead went for the safe, predictable PC route.

As readers, we arrive in this moment to an intersection of race and class. Michael erases Rita's race from his perspective of her (“you’re just a privileged kid from the suburbs”), but the explicit identifying of both characters as “ethnic minorities” earlier in the essay complicates his critique of her privilege. While on one

hand, Michael's critique of Rita could anticipate a general audience's critique of that same privilege, the fact that he doesn't acknowledge her race here also operates as a gap to point readers to the intersectionality they might also miss. Either way, this moment builds ethos by putting readers in the hands of a narrator who's not only willing to be vulnerable, but who can also play devil's advocate.

Banerjee's essay is polyvocal like Thomas's—three paragraphs of poet Jaswinder Bolina's essay "Writing Like a White Guy" is cited—and self-implicates in a list of "prickly things about race." Most items on the list are about racist actions towards Rita, but one describes once when Rita perpetuated, or at least participated in, racism toward others: during a fender-bender, she "got a kick out of" the police "[chiding] the family with rambling words and heavy accents." The juxtaposition of Rita "speaking perfect Jersey-girl Americanese" feels extra prickly; an example of white authority in the form of language pitting marginalized people against each other. The list of prickly things recalls an earlier pair of questions in the essay, "Are we all affected by racism in the United States? In this joke, are you the pot or the kettle?"

Both Thomas and Banerjee incorporate personal anecdotes, but Banerjee pulls in childhood and adolescent experiences while Thomas doesn't. In one instance, Rita describes the "equally eye opening and uncomfortable" meetings of Origins, an afterschool group she joined in high school, where members debated affirmative action and "how all those kids of immigrant parents, who were neither Black nor white, could learn to talk about themselves." The experience is described as an idyllic and necessary space for young people of color, but Rita closes this section on Origins by acknowledging, "[the club] also helped to categorize and separate us." "The problem was," she describes, "I wasn't sure if I agreed with the identity being assigned to me." Banerjee asserts a messy understanding of racial belonging during adolescence, when safe spaces were needed to speak openly about "traumas of race and racism," but also when, in middle school regardless of race, "everyone wore flannel and cried over Kurt Cobain." In these moments, invoking adolescence works as prolepsis by inviting readers to reflect on the kinds of racial understandings internalized in the narrator, her young companions, and perhaps most importantly, in

themselves. Since young people are generally seen as authentic, vulnerable sources, Banerjee strengthens rapport with readers and creates a more receptive environment for a discussion on race and power, both for her audience and herself as the facilitator of a difficult conversation. Of her high school self, the narrator says, “Nothing was so cut and dry. And moreover, why should I just be one more pattern?”

Questions like this appear in the essay in a range of forms: interviewing (filmmakers interviewing subjects for the documentary), the “assaults” mentioned above, rhetorical questions, and self-questioning. The final section of the essay, “Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds,” relies primarily on questions and begins with a quote from documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee, “When are we caressing? When are we exploiting? Are they the same? Maybe it’s impossible not to do both. Maybe that’s the truth of human relationships.” The quote informs the rest of the narrator’s wonderings as the essay comes to a close. She extends with her own questions, “Where else does a caress turn into exploitation? ... Is it in that moment when a fan watching the tension escalate between two teams on a basketball court, decides to throw a drink at the player he most loves? Most despises? Could care less about?” In the essay’s last few paragraphs, Rita asks,

So what’s in a gaze, friend, foe, lover, rival?

There’s intimacy, intimidation, surprise, sure. But in that moment, in that brief connection of eyes, is something more primordial, something sidereal and unknown.

In that moment, is a caress an exploitation? Or is a caress a fucking privilege?

That this essay, and especially the last section, relies so heavily on questions reflects the slipperiness of racial experiences and an expansiveness that could include both exploitation and privilege. In terms of prolepsis, questions allow for a range of audience responses, while tonally, they land more softly than declarative statements, which is helpful if a reader isn’t initially receptive to Banerjee’s argument.

Durga Chew-Bose's "Tan Lines," from her essay collection *Too Much and Not the Mood*, identifies the narrator's race at the beginning like Banerjee's essay does. Describing her skin tone as "winter pallor" even at the hottest point of summer, the narrator asks, "How might I describe my brownness, my very fair brownness, that following winter appears even more fair? What's the opposite of *glowing*? Dull? Drab? Run-down? Blah?" (179). In the next paragraph, she explains that "these questions are not as good-humored as they seem but are fixed instead to [her] tendency for self-scrutiny, activated long ago when [she] came to understand [her] sense of belonging—[her] *who-ness*—as two-pronged" (179). The stack of questions here operates like Banerjee's, welcoming readers into a dialogue around race as opposed to making a direct stance towards readers who might not know. The narrator offers "self-scrutiny" as the reason for why she thinks about race; this asks readers to think about race themselves while diffusing white fragility, a way to say, "It's me, not you."

Chew-Bose also invokes adolescence when, in the beginning of the essay, the narrator describes her "two-pronged" sense of belonging as "a running start toward blending in among mostly white childhood friends who were rarely curious about [her] olive-brown skin, the dark shine of [her] hair, [her] chestnut eyes" (180). A few pages later, she says,

I became more aware of my skin, as most of us do with our bodies, in adolescence, and especially when summer arrived. ... I tanned fast. Brown to dark umber in a matter of hours. But what struck me was this: it was as if my white friends were wearing their tanned skin—bathing in it—as opposed to living in it. The thrill of becoming temporarily dark was, for them, an advantage. (183)

Though not comprehensive of the adolescent experiences in the essay, these moments allow the narrator to characterize the conflicting experience of her childhood—both marginalized and like all other childhoods. Childhood experiences like this demonstrate with evidence where and how racial power is accorded, in this case, to white girls. This particular instance ends in the narrator's acknowledgement of

relative privilege, “how [her] relationship to [her] skin is further complicated by how fair it is and the access it allows me” (183).

Chew-Bose’s most direct claims about race appear on the sixth and seventh pages of a 10-page essay. “Since the average white person’s spectrum of darkness is limited,” she writes, “the language of tanning is appropriative at best,” and “Growing up brown in mostly white circles means learning from a very young age that language is inured to prejudicial glitches (184, 185). These claims appear after the halfway point of the essay, after the essay has established rapport with the audience through childhood anecdotes and introspective questioning. In the same paragraph, the narrator quotes Wesley Morris, “For people of color, some aspect of friendship with white people involves an awareness that you could be dropped through a trapdoor of racism at any moment” (185). In an essay that doesn’t cite other outside sources, this polyvocal moment stands out as proleptic, the narrator’s claims supported by a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist. Also interesting is the fact that in these claims about whiteness, Chew-Bose locates racism in language—rather than in people—which allows the narrator to anticipate readers’ white fragility and, ideally, sidestep it altogether.

In the summer of 2020, Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* returned to bestseller lists. Behaviors caused by white fragility, she writes, “function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.” While the cyclical nature of white power scares me, I find comfort in DiAngelo’s term that names both the distress I experienced as a nonwhite child whenever race came up around white people, and the facility with which I learned to omit the word “white” from conversations. As I began to write about whiteness as an adult—a new nonfiction writer myself—feeling like I’d broken every rule of whiteness I’d learned from school, TV, and my Chinese family, DiAngelo’s language helped me understand the audience I had been imagining as my readers all along—white readers who, more often than not, had expectations about what I would write about and how.

This conversation isn't new and continues to grow: in 2014, Cathy Park Hong's "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" decried the avant-garde as a racist gatekeeper to poets, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* powerfully used second person to complicate the white reading experience. I think of Elissa Washuta's essay, "Apocalypse Logic," published in 2016 in *The Offing*, which preempts audience fatigue of her subject by naming it from the get-go: "Actually, I'm not tired of writing about this, and I may never be, but sometimes when I say once more that *my great-great-great-grandfather was hanged by the U.S. government* I can feel someone thinking, *God, she's back on that.*" I think of "Duluth" by Ira Sukrungruang in a 2019 issue of *Cincinnati Review*, whose first paragraph alone mentions some form of the word "white" thirteen times. "They were everywhere with their whiteness," he writes, flipping the traditional us vs. them opposition, "doing white things, playing white games, cooking white food, which by then I had begun to savor, especially the ketchupy meatloaf and anything concocted in a casserole dish." The eponymous essay of Tressie McMillan Cottom's 2019 collection, *Thick*, directly calls out writing as part of a racist system, "For us [black women writers], the personal essay became a contested point of entry into a low-margin form of public discourse where we could at least appeal to the politics of white feminist inclusion for nominal representation. We were writing personal essays because as far as authoritative voices go, the self was the only subject men and white people would cede to us." Like with many things these days, I don't know how I should feel about progress, but innovations in essays like these give me hope.

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