

An Aspirational Rhetoric of Anti-Racism: A Participatory Study of Responsive Engagement

A dissertation submitted in partial completion of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric.

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Abstract

Dismantling racism in the U.S. is as important today as it has been since our country began. Following many scholars of race and whiteness, I understand racism to be an action of closing oneself off and controlling, and anti-racism to be a contextual process of putting oneself in uncertain situations, receiving people's guidance and critique, and correspondingly acting. From this understanding, this dissertation argues that a process of responsive anti-racist action is also in part language skills; anti-racism is rhetorical. In particular, when white people talk about wanting to act against racism but not knowing how, it shows the limitation of anti-racist approaches centered on people's beliefs, suggesting instead that we should develop rhetorical concepts to address people's deep-seated habits around race. This dissertation analyzes rhetorical strategies adopted by a group of mostly white people in their efforts to act more strongly against racism, developed in the context of a three-year participatory study with local people from two progressive churches.

I expand and use an analytic framework in which the core of anti-racist rhetorical practice is a process of seeking exposure, receiving people's guidance and advice, and acting. Three practices are developed in collaboration with participants for their potential to maintain this rhetorical process: call-and-response, debriefing, and a strategy for researchers of participation. I find that the scripted, community-authorized nature of call-and-response makes participating a way of speaking so as to be shaped. People's willingness to participate creates habit, teaching them to yield control and stay exposed. Debriefing is a strategy for white people to support each other, by talking through day-to-day stories that might otherwise make them feel stuck. Debriefing gets people out of their own interpretive ruts, opening themselves up to insights by others that can support continued and new action. Finally, participation addresses researchers' need to also learn to maintain exposure to others. Participation yields the researcher's control to people in and around a project, and exposes ethical calls that would otherwise remain hidden.

Ultimately these three strategies contribute to a responsive anti-racist engagement, which builds on emerging directions in rhetorical scholarship that emphasize vulnerability. In contrast to much of rhetorical theory focused on how effectively a rhetor changing the audience, responsive anti-racist engagement attends to how effectively rhetors respond to others. This is particularly important when responding to systems of injustice. Theorizing and practicing responsiveness may facilitate more robust, thoroughgoing, transformative anti-racist ways of being in the world.

Transcription Conventions

Hesitations

Um, uh retained unless otherwise noted. Restarts indicated with a dash (—). Cut off words indicated with a hyphen(-). When a word is cut off, and then restarted, an extra space is added to separate the hyphen from the dash. Pause length not indicated. Accidentally mispronounced words indicated with *.

Punctuation and format

All punctuation is my own, to give a sense of the flow and intonation. Quoted speech is often given interlinearly and backchannels are omitted. Some extended passages are formatted with reference times, backchannels, and line numbers, in order to have easy reference, and to show the beauty of people's everyday speech (see Denzin, who conceives of a "reflexive" or "performative" transcript that highlights the drama and dance of speaking).

Other

Uncertainty about what someone says from the recording is indicated with double parentheses, e.g. (()). Additional contextual information is indicated when necessary with brackets ([]).

Table I.1 Participants and their roles in this project, by race and church

	<i>First Church</i>	<i>Second Pres</i>
<i>Black participants*</i>	Ms. Di - planning, inter-church meetings	Charley (female)- single inter-church meeting
	Ms. Esther, Ms. China - inter-church meetings	Mr. Sparkle - guest facilitator to affinity group
	Ms. Rose, Terron, Shèniya - single inter-church meeting	
	Nakita, Kim - guest facilitators to affinity group	
<i>White participants*</i>	Nikki - inter-church meetings, planning, affinity group co-facilitator	Aviva - planning, inter-church meetings, more planning, affinity group
	Anthony - affinity group co-facilitator	Lena - inter-church meetings, affinity group
	Johanna - single inter-church meeting, FCF advisory board	Ryne, Mark - inter-church meetings
		Gwen, Jim, Sky, Bob, Turbo - affinity group
		Allison, Pastor Alex - FCF advisory board, planning
		Nick - single inter-church meeting, FCF advisory board
		Greg - single inter-church meeting, prayer group
		J.B., Kyra, Elya, Joseph, Lena L., Lexi - single inter-church meeting
		Gustave, Bethany, Maggie - FCF advisory board
		Jane, Ariana - prayer group
	Pastor Robert - planning	
<i>Asian participants*</i>		Steven - single inter-church meeting

*Racial designations follow participants' self-identifications as they emerged through interactions Roles. Inter-church meetings: summer/fall 2015. Affinity group: summer 2016 - spring 2017. Prayer group: fall 2016. Planning: throughout.

Ages. Mostly in late 20s/early 30s. Exceptions include people with Ms. or Mr. (60s, black); Lena (50s); Pastor Robert, Pastor Alex, Bob, and Johanna (40s/50s); and Terron and Shèniya (early 20s).

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Introduction

White people are astounded by Birmingham, black people aren't. They are endlessly demanding to be reassured that Birmingham is really on Mars. They don't want to believe, still less to act on the belief, that what is happening in Birmingham is happening all over the country. They don't want to realize that there is not one step morally or actually, between Birmingham and Los Angeles.

—James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition to the Documentary Film*.

Baldwin's commentary on police brutality in Birmingham was situated in a media environment that helped many white Americans have moments of discovery and exposure about race and whiteness in America. In the early 1960s, over 90% of American homes had TVs. And motivated by Cold War fears, federal pressure for TV networks to educate citizens had led to the creation of the prime-time news documentary genre, and would lead in 1963 to the nightly news format (Bodroghkozy, 44; see also Dudziak). This meant that the core of the civil rights movement, from sit-ins, to the Birmingham campaign, to the March on Washington, was the "first major, ongoing domestic news story" that television networks reported on (Bodroghkozy, 44). Through the nightly news and through images in magazines (Gallagher and Zagacki), then, some of what had been hidden about racial injustice in people's day-to-day lives was now popping through. It is these moments of people's exposure to systemic injustice that I'm interested in.

This dissertation, almost 60 years after Baldwin, takes place in a similar cultural moment: Black Lives Matter. Like Birmingham, in 2014 Black Lives Matter was galvanized by disclosures of racist structures disseminated through new media. This time it was videos taken on people's phones that showed Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and other black people being killed by the police (Gilmer and Chester; Poniewozik), and it was social media that allowed the videos to easily spread and enter public debate under the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. While for many people, this was a chance to close back up (often under the counter-slogan All Lives Matter, or more pointedly, Blue [i.e. Police] Lives Matter), for others it was a new awakening. As Turbo would speculate, maybe America's tenuous relation to black people had "always been apart and it's just been my ignorance, I'm seeing it more now." Based on a three-year participatory study with people from 2015-2017, this dissertation examines how the US's legacy of racial injustice prompts us to complement rhetorical theory to focus on how people develop their responsiveness to others.

This dissertation does two things. First, at a theoretical level, this dissertation provides a three-part rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist engagement. Second, it provides several practices to support such a process.

A PROCESS OF RESPONSIVE ANTI-RACIST ENGAGEMENT

1. A rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist engagement involves white people putting themselves in places where they can/will encounter uncomfortable situations, ideas, stories, and people. This is important because scholars of race and whiteness show that racism qua structure hides its injustice. Thus, people who benefit from white privilege need to be exposed to the injustices that complement and make possible their benefit, rather than coming up with these injustices themselves. This perspective is that people on the receiving end of oppression often understand it better than the people dishing it out.

By situations, ideas, stories, and people, I mean to get at a whole range of things that white people need to learn in order to act out anti-racism. In this project, that range included critique and guidance that was more reactive (“you shouldn’t have prioritized calling people back who sounded white”), as well as critique and guidance that was more proactive (“you might gentrify Familyfield if you move there as a white person”). Sometimes it was solicited (“what do you think?”), sometimes it was unsolicited (“I have to tell you...”). Sometimes it was tailored to individual action (“please volunteer at the food bank”), and sometimes to structural action (“divest yourself of white supremacy”). Sometimes stories and situations were personalized (e.g. through relationships) and sometimes they were public (e.g. through a Cornel West book). Sometimes this was from a contemporary source (“mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow”), and sometimes it was historical (“Du Bois said that...”). Sometimes it came from people of color, and sometimes from other white people. Sometimes it was aimed at people’s ideas/beliefs (“don’t think people of color can’t advocate for themselves”), and sometimes it was aimed at people’s actions (“put your body on the line for justice”), and sometimes at people’s feelings (“don’t be so preoccupied by your own guilt that you don’t actually do anything”), and sometimes even at people’s habits (“how are you unsegregating your own life?”). Uncertain and vulnerable situations, moreover, took people out of their comfort zones in one way or another, whether that was cooking for people of color, attending a challenging talk, or attempting to build a relationship to learn about that person’s experiences. It includes exposure to the realities white people normally don’t have to confront.

This part of the process is both passive (something that happens to a person) and active (something they choose). It’s active from the perspective of people putting themselves in these situations, but passive from the perspective that they can’t control what they will actually hear; what they hear may push beyond what they were expecting, and vice versa. For instance, at the start of

this project in 2014, I went to a conference for Black Urban Growers (BUGs). In doing so, I was putting myself in a position to hear some kind of critique and guidance about farming and food production and race, but I was not expecting to be drawn into national grocery chains as “black wealth extraction sites.” This was a moment of being in an uncertain situation, exposed to critique of the stores I shopped at, that I both chose and had thrust upon me. This both/and is important because it means that being exposed (seen passively) is also a rhetorical choice, concerned with how people change in the interaction. Rather than audiences being taken as a given, this process examines deciding to be part of an audience as itself rhetorical: who are people putting themselves in a position to hear from? Who are they being an audience to?

2. The second part of a rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist engagement is for white people to **receive uncertain situations, people’s guidance and critique, and the truth in people’s stories when exposed to it.** Seen in terms of persuasion, this reception means allowing oneself to be persuaded to do/act/feel/think something new regarding race and racism. Seen as a continuation of becoming exposed (see above) to what hadn’t been encountered before, this part of the process is to **remain** exposed, practicing vulnerability.

Receiving people’s critique and guidance is complex. It means seeking ways to engage with it rather than focusing first on judging, arguing or defensiveness. For instance, people at First Church asked me to volunteer at their monthly food bank, and even though at the time I disagreed with the food bank’s triage approach to addressing Splitsville’s hunger needs, I said okay. My assent and my reception of their call came before my intellectual agreement with it. This dizzying yielding of control is particularly useful for white people who have been culturally raised to always be in control.

Receiving people’s critique and guidance also means not demanding closure (i.e. resolution, finality, certainty) in one’s interpretation. Different people’s critique and guidance will differ, so demanding closure reinscribes uniformity from people of color. Moreover, people’s critique and guidance often goes beyond what we can fulfil (see below), so demanding closure misconstrues anti-racism as something that can be completed or fully satisfied. Finally, waiting for closure can be an excuse for not doing anything.

Receiving people’s critique and guidance also means acknowledging when critique and guidance goes beyond one’s capacity to respond. That is, it’s healthy to feel a little overwhelmed at critique and guidance. Calls to “divest yourself of white supremacy” should be lamented as something that we aren’t able to fully do.

Finally, receiving people’s critique and guidance means desiring to do what is recommended. This is in conjunction with the above, of acknowledging when what is recommended goes beyond one’s capacity. In our group, desiring to act was mostly assumed, but this is the focal point of much anti-racist scholarship (i.e. those who seek to create a “willingness” for people to take action).

For Christians, this desire to respond well might be understood as part of repenting from racism. In this study, desiring to do what is recommended was often emotionally difficult when there was disagreement or uncertainty about what is asked (i.e. when there isn't closure).

Like with the first part of seeking opportunities to hear critique and guidance regarding race and racism, then, this second part of receiving uncertain situations and the critique and guidance that can come along with them is taken to be a rhetorical skill: an (in)ability to help people change (in this case, it's oneself that is expected to change). That is, having become an audience, skill in reception means making themselves open cognitively, affectively, and otherwise to acting out the recommendation.

3. The third part of a rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist engagement is for white people to act **in response to people's critique and guidance**. In other words, people need to enact the actions, feelings, ideas, beliefs, and habits that people have been persuaded they should do/feel/think/believe/be. This responsive action creates material change for people of color. It also affects one's own future tendency to act, i.e. one's habits. This dissertation treats acting responsively as part of being persuaded (i.e. if people don't act out the consequences of their new beliefs, then they have only assented to a proposition), rather than as a follow-up to being persuaded.

Overall, then, this three-part process can be summarized as: 1) show up; 2) say yes; and 3) act accordingly. Or, equivalently: 1) seek to be exposed; 2) allow yourself to be vulnerable when exposed; and 3) act responsively.

This dissertation makes several arguments related to this three-part theoretical process of responsive anti-racist engagement. First, it argues that this is **ongoing** work. In the process described above, anti-racism does not consist of a limited set of propositions that, once learned, are sufficient. Rather, anti-racism is an ongoing process of responsiveness, with one part feeding into another. This follows from arguments made by scholars of race and whiteness that racism is deeply sedimented into white people, and requires lifelong anti-racist work to undo and reconstruct. As an ongoing process, anti-racist responsiveness is well worth rhetorical scholarly effort to address and scaffold.

Second, this dissertation argues that this process of responsive anti-racist engagement is **progressive**. Each of the three parts of the process can be done clumsily or with sophistication. For instance, in the beginning, many of the people in the project didn't know about the US's history of discriminatory "redlining" housing. (That is, it wasn't something they knew how to seek out; they didn't know they didn't know it.) When Lena learned about redlining at a local anti-racist workshop, and passed her notes on to us, it gave us new sources to put ourselves in a position to be exposed to a structural housing reality shaping our own lives and those around us: we could talk to Lena, we could go to similar workshops, we could research more about the practice now that we knew the term "redlining," etc. As people understand the lay of the land, they

can seek out being exposed to critique and guidance in more effective, sophisticated ways. Receiving guidance and acting it out are similarly progressive. For instance, Gwen began our small group by taking small actions, and ended the group talking about anti-racist actions that would develop it into a “lifestyle.” This is a progression of her ability to enact anti-racism. As a process that’s progressive, anti-racism deals with people’s **capacities**: their ability to seek exposure to challenging new situations, stay responsive to what emerges in those, and act responsively. Part of the task of a rhetorical practice of anti-racism, then, is to build people’s capacities for these three rhetorical tasks.

Finally, and most importantly, this dissertation argues that this process of responsive anti-racist engagement is malleable and **can take many shapes**. In other words, the three parts above are often taken as a linear order: 1) show up, then 2) be willing to change, then 3) actually do it. But this dissertation identifies some people who talk about being stuck in taking action. With regard to this theoretical process, this “aspirational rhetoric” shows a willingness to change (i.e. a vulnerability, a staying-exposed) without a corresponding capacity to easily, adequately enact that change. This dissertation suggests, then, that especially in this case, taking anti-racist action in the midst of/despite uncertainty (3) can have a significant role in shaping that interpretation (2) and seeing what’s present in the first place (1). Acting responsively can jumpstart people’s interpretation; it can dislodge people’s stuckness. These alternative orders, in which responsive action leads reception, were something that people in the project aspired to. Sometimes they quoted their favorite Christian writer, “act your way [3] into a new way of thinking [2].” Sometimes they critiqued their overreliance on receiving (2) by calling it “overthinking.” This isn’t to dismiss thinking, but seen from this dissertation, a process of anti-racism expects people’s action to take place before they really make sense of it. It suggests that capacity-building interventions should be focused on people’s actions, and teach people to be attentive to how those actions are themselves affecting and enacting their reception of critique and guidance.

This also adds a new aspect to people’s rhetorical skill of being persuaded—namely, that taking action is intimately tied up with the cognitive and affective reception of uncertain situations, and people’s critique and guidance. Being exposed, remaining vulnerable, and acting responsively are thus intermingled.

PRACTICES OF RESPONSIVE ANTI-RACIST ENGAGEMENT

The second goal of this dissertation is to identify three rhetorical practices that support this rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist engagement. Each practice engages with each of the three parts of the process and treats them as ongoing, progressive, and malleable. That is, it treats responsiveness as a lifelong skill that can be developed and that can (in some cases) be useful to interpret through the lens of actions already taken.

The first practice is “call-and-response,” which was used unself-consciously in this project and is therefore simply a possibility to develop into a more explicit anti-racist practice. Call-and-response subordinates receiving critique and guidance to being exposed to it and responsively acting. One person (or a group), acts to “call” people into speech (1). (In the anti-racist application, this is a call that relates to race, like a call to confess participating in racist structures, or to denounce police shootings of black men.) The people who show up have a script that makes it easy for them to act responsively (3): simply read aloud. Call-and-response thereby somewhat defers the receiving part of the anti-racist process (2) and provides some guiderails. That is, in a very literal sense a scripted response comments on and helps interpret the call’s critique and guidance; participating in the call-and-response can go some way toward receiving the critique and guidance vulnerably (without being defensive), with an openness and “yes.”

The second practice is “anti-racist debriefing,” in which a group of people begin by representing some action they’ve taken (or are considering taking) (3). Through collaborative interpretation, they then consider together how that action exposes them to things they hadn’t confronted before (1) and work to actively listen (especially emotionally) to the truth of those stories/experiences (2), sometimes building plans for how to act in the future. Here, responsive action is at the forefront of anti-racist engagement, charting what critique and guidance are being made available, and how that’s being received.

The final practice is “participation,” meant for researchers who want to practice responsive anti-racist engagement as part of their scholarship. To use participation as a methodological anti-racist practice, scholars view participants as offering critique and guidance (1), receive that (2), and design a research project that adjusts accordingly (3).

Overall, then, these three practices help develop people’s capacities to enact a rhetorical process of anti-racist engagement.

RELATED WORK

Examining a responsive rhetorical engagement vis-à-vis systemic racism contributes to three interdisciplinary bodies of intellectual work. First, it contributes to the study of race in the U.S. In the immense body of work in this area, scholars of race and whiteness have examined how racism emerges as everyday interactions (including from scholars) and articulates structures of injustice (Yancy, Coates, Bonilla-Silva, Nakayama and Krizek, Wanzer). For many scholars, this leads to a focus on unrepentant white people, who react defensively with “white fragility”/“white tears” (DiAngelo) and “white rage” (Anderson). This study builds on this by investigating what’s next for people after they begin to acknowledge white privilege.

Second, this study contributes to rhetorical theory that emphasizes expo-

sure and vulnerability. Scholars have recently begun to conceive of rhetoric as involving more than just persuading others (Burke; Young, Becker, and Pike; Foss and Griffin; Bone, Griffin, and Scholz; Ratcliffe), to the extent of seeing rhetoric defined by interconnectedness between beings and the world (Davis; Gries; Bennett; Rickert). This new materialist turn has often been criticized for its lack of attention to pressing issues of social concern (Ahmed, “Some Preliminary Remarks”; Harding; see Rickert, “Afterward,” 231). This study works to bridge these two areas, as well as to provide concrete practices that people can use to act on and develop such theoretical knowledge. What critical race theory brings is questions of racialized perspective; and what new materialist rhetorical theory contributes is a strong attention to the movement between discourse and action. Race has structured our country so closely (Kendi; Painter; Mignolo; Coulson) that it takes great imagination to pursue right relations. And more than other systems of injustice, talking “about” race is also “talking race.” In other words, people’s discursive explorations of race are connected to anti-racist work itself.

Finally, this dissertation extends participatory research methods used by scholars in communication studies and community literacy. Communication scholars have developed “participatory critical rhetoric” (Middleton et al.), while community literacy efforts have focused on ways that scholars can enter into real-world problems with groups of people and use communication (including written communication, i.e. literacy) to address those (House, Myers, and Carter). This study contributes new ways to bring people together to address anti-racism. Moreover, by examining a group of white people who are about ten years out of college, we can gain insight into how older adults can comport themselves emotionally and rhetorically regarding systemic issues: namely, over several years and with jobs and kids. This complements many studies of undergraduates’ semester-long anti-racism efforts.

In addition to these three primary areas, this study’s work with people from two progressive Christian churches naturally gives scholars an opportunity to glean rhetorical insights from religious practices, moving toward a *rapprochement* between rhetorical study and religion (DePalma and Ringer; Vander Lei, et al.; Jost and Olmsted).

OUTLINE

This dissertation is divided into four parts. In each part, the first chapter is more empirical, and the second chapter goes over the same ground in a more theoretical way. This structure is meant to show how empirical work can support theoretical contributions, and vice versa. Close textual analysis in the first chapter of each pair invites readers into a sense of loss and confusion, and also (when appropriate) into small transformation. Theory-building in the second chapter links to wider philosophies of race and language use.

Part I develops the three-part rhetorical process of responsive anti-racist

engagement outline above. Chapter 1 introduces the group of people who this dissertation is focused on: people from the mostly white church of Second Pres and the nearby mostly black church of First Church. In talking about their life stories regarding race, their institutional efforts, and their day-to-day situations, many of the white participants felt at a loss for reacting well to their role in racist structures. They spoke with commitment to acting against racism, but diagnosed themselves as unable to carry it out—or as I call it, they spoke with “aspirational rhetoric of anti-racism.” In contrast, the black participants expressed nuanced, confident stances toward anti-racism. This chapter argues that aspirational rhetoric fractures the sense that a person’s belief that racism is real is sufficient for them to enact anti-racism. Aspirational rhetoric also shows in a very practical way the necessity to investigate people’s racial affect. Chapter 2 continues to examine aspirational rhetoric from a more theoretical perspective. As many people of color argue, systems of injustice not only distribute benefits to some people at the expense of others, but also hide those benefits as unjust. Thus, whiteness (as an action) is a process of staying closed off, invulnerable, blissfully unaware. This agrees with recent rhetorical work that frames rhetoric itself in terms of people’s (in)vulnerability. This chapter moves to combine these threads, arguing that white people’s anti-racism involves developing increasing capacity to stay exposed to people’s (especially people of color’s) critique while also taking action.

Given this general framework, Parts II, III, and IV together describe three strategies for practicing the exposure side of rhetoric and for working through aspirational rhetoric of anti-racism. Part II corresponds primarily to a set of inter-church meetings from 2015; Part III corresponds to a white affinity group in which members debriefed day-to-day stories about race together from 2016-2017; and Part IV backs up to an in-between time in 2016 of collaborative reflection to develop the white affinity group.

Part II describes call-and-response as a way that people can speak so as to be shaped themselves. In the inter-church meetings, call-and-response was a strategy of racialized *imitatio*, an approach to rhetorical training in which people repeat models in order to scaffold creating their own compositions. In Chapter 3, people from Second Pres practice call and response weekly in church. They adapt this liturgical call-and-response spontaneously to inter-racial, inter-church communication as well as to prayer about race. This chapter argues, then, that call-and-response can be a racialized strategy for scripted rhetorical invention in which white people can listen, participate without dominating, subordinate themselves to a common spiritual goal, and encounter their interdependence. Chapter 4 extends this by articulating a set of assumptions inherent in call-and-response regarding what language does. This means supplanting a typical set of assumptions with an alternative that centers on people’s attention rather than intention. Such an attention-based language ideology may be useful pedagogically as scholars seek to lead students into similar anti-racist rhetorical action.

Part III explores debriefing as a way to practice the exposure side of rhetoric. If call-and-response is a strategy for interracial speaking, debriefing is a strategy that white people can use with each other. Chapter 5 examines how debriefing helps people stay vulnerable without remaining stuck regarding day-to-day situations; Chapter 6 pulls back to see how, over the course of 10 months, people were able to conceptualize their recent life history regarding race in a way that was vulnerable but not stuck.

Finally, Part IV examines how researchers themselves can practice exposure. In other words, scholarly work is not exempt from racist structures. As Wanzer argues, “we all (regardless of whether we are interested in discursive con/texts explicitly marked by colonialism or imperialism) must seek to become decolonial rhetoricians” (654). Participation is explored in this Part as a methodological way for researchers themselves to remain exposed. Scholars have the chance to be shaped themselves when they actively participate with people in some activity. This yields control and also draws them into the process. Chapter 7 shows this in action by describing five ways to yield to participants while developing new action together. In this case, it examines the contours of the process of imagining and planning the white affinity group explored in Part III. Chapter 8 develops this idea of a researcher’s participation more theoretically, by examining how participation impacts our sense of research ethics. The chapter argues that a paradigm of ethical “accountability” is misleading in its drive toward justifying ourselves. Rather, it advocates for ethical “interdependence.”

Overall, these three strategies for practicing a responsive anti-racist engagement join other work in attempting to help people in privileged social positions act toward a more just world.

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