

2009

White People

Kathryn LeClair

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev



Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

LeClair, Kathryn (2009). White People. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 108-112.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/22

White People

KATHRYN LeCLAIR

Kathryn is a senior majoring in English. Her research paper was created under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis in her English senior seminar Encountering Whiteness.

J. T. Rogers has carefully constructed his play, White People, to concentrate on the issue of communications between races, to talk to the audience, and to address them in order to make them understand their own shortcomings in approaching the topic of race. Both Alan and Martin, two of the three main characters in this play, have difficulty with the ways in which they communicate their feelings about race and their positions as white middle class men. They argue with themselves about how to communicate while externally showing the audience the struggle between what they both believe to be morally right and wrong. Martin may be an extreme; how much of what he says does he actually mean? He is a hypocrite because what he says and what he actually does are not the same. Alan tries to sympathize with different races; he wants to reach the multitude to explain how we should handle bad situations, but he comes up short and seems helpless in the face of the large number of people whom he has to reach. Both of these situations apply to the audience's concept of how much they should be trying to communicate their views on race in the real world. Rogers' characters confront the white audience and force them to look at their own flaws in their treatment of racism.

Communication between races is an important aspect of overcoming racism and understanding each other. *White People* seeks to show its audience how important their communication methods are and their shortcomings in communication in the hope of improving them. Rogers develops a dialogue between character and audience by only allowing each character to address the audience, not each other. In her article, communications scholar Jennifer Simpson suggests that “dialogue at its best is an interaction among people that produces something greater than the sum of its parts and leaves participants changed by that interaction” (139). Indeed, the audience members are meant to be changed by the interaction they receive with these characters; they are meant to participate in their share of the interaction by spreading a new perspective to others after the performance. While Simpson clearly defines dialogues, the functions of communication, and the relationship to whiteness, her argument comes up short when applied to this play. She states, “[McPhail] argues that White racism and the blinders it produces significantly and perhaps irreparably inhibit the possibility of meaningful interracial dialogues about race” (139). Instead, Rogers can be seen as trying to breach this line; his dialogue within the play aims to expand the horizons of interracial communication and teach his audience to accept

people different from themselves. By depicting whiteness in his play, Rogers actually forces the audience to examine their own communication in everyday life and question their own effectiveness in erasing a color line.

Martin is deeply concerned with the functions of communication and how they affect his life and the lives of those around him. In him, the audience finds someone who brings forth the importance of communication, showing the audience how important it is to listen to the issues within the play. As Martin says, "Here there is definition: *Words are things*" (Rogers 15), and it is the audience's responsibility to pick up on the importance of the meaning behind the words that Rogers is presenting to them.

Martin is an interesting character in the way he grapples with the idea of race and communication. He wants to show the audience members the essence of language, the ability to communicate, and how that affects our actions towards a different race of people. Martin first explains that he feels words have lost meaning for people; he says, "We open our mouths, we spew things out but we are saying nothing!" (Rogers 15). If we are saying nothing, as Martin suggests, then we are also doing nothing to further the cause. However, underneath his personal vendetta against meaningless words, Martin also becomes a hypocrite. In Ben Brantley's review of the play, he states, "Martin [...] is more of a textbook study in dramatic irony, with the audience clued in on what he doesn't understand himself" (Brantley). The hypocrisy Martin shows in his speech becomes apparent to the audience and Rogers invites them to see some of the same hypocrisies in their own lives. Martin tries to group the audience with him as a collective "we" by saying, "We are not thinking about what we are saying! We are not listening to the words we – (*He stops abruptly mid-sentence. He looks outward. Then...*) This is all relevant. What I am saying has a point. If you listen... maybe we can find sense in this" (Rogers 15). While Martin preaches to the audience about having definition behind their words, he is losing the definition behind his own. He gets lost in his rampage of words, pauses to look at the audience, to confront them with his thoughts, and then tries to persuade himself and the audience that what he is saying is important. He is powerless in the face of what he is trying to describe; since his words are becoming nothing, his actions are nothing, just as he suggested earlier in the play.

Another example of Martin's hypocrisy is in his dissection of the new popular music his co-workers and son listen to versus his idea of good music – classic opera. Describing his own music, Martin says, "the best part is I can't understand a word! Totally clueless! [...] You listen to this, you escape. Just for a moment, language isn't important. Words, actions – choices

– don't matter" (Rogers 12). Martin is directly admitting that he does not follow his own rules about words; he can listen to music without finding definition behind the words he is listening to. He takes his own music for granted, not caring what the operas are actually about. In contrast, when he speaks about hip hop, he says, "Wax out of your ears and listen to what they are saying! These words! [...] Are you listening to the words?" (Rogers 21). The words in these new songs are offensive to Martin; he refuses to listen to any message beyond the swearing that is taking place. But therefore, he is also missing the meaning these people may have behind their words. Again, Martin is hypocritical; his words are nothing, his actions are non-existent, while he ignores the meaning behind what those around him listen to and find meaning in. This idea also resonates with the audience members by showing that if they are too focused on the meaninglessness in which they believe, they may miss the hidden meaning behind what others find important. Rogers is calling for us to look outside of our own ideas and our own predetermined racism to come up with new solutions.

Martin's critique of his secretary, Diane, furthers his abuse of language. It may be best explained in the words of Peggy McIntosh, who argues that "whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (292-3). Martin declares that his way of talking is better than the way in which Diane speaks because she does not understand the meaning behind what she is saying. He says, "These words: this is who she is. How can she not understand that? Sometimes they matter, sometimes not? No! You're either lazy or you're not. You can't be both" (Rogers 17). Martin believes that Diane's character lies in how well she can communicate and her deficiencies in communication hinder who she is. However, who is Martin to criticize someone who does the same thing he does? Martin thinks of himself as superior to Diane, possibly because of the color of her skin, and also because he believes himself to be the "ideal", though he clearly shows the audience he is not. Martin is creating a sense of white privilege through his control of language; though he also does not have meaning behind his words, his are more important, and have more meaning because he is white. Rogers is purposefully using this example of Martin trying to make everyone become who he is to show the negative aspects of white privilege and how they may be hidden unless they are being watched for.

Another example of how Martin does not put meaning behind his own words is when he attends the PTA meeting at his children's school. The group of parents is following what Naomi Wolf describes as the conditions of 'Well-Meaning

White People'. Wolf states, "[This racism] means spending so much time trying to clear the scrim away – and hoping to convey that one is indeed trying to clear it away – that the Other in question is still dimmed and obscured" (Wolf 46). The parents at this meeting are so engrossed in trying to be socially correct and trying to appease the black race, i.e. 'clear the scrim away', that they can not acknowledge the other race for who they are. Martin recognizes the absurdity of the 'Santa of Color' and 'Day of Forgiveness', but tries to approach the issue of being politically correct by dismissing it. His inner monologue tells him to yell at the other parents, saying, "Are we listening to each other? Are there any brain cells working here? What are we talking about? No, no, no – What are we doing?" (Rogers 25) and also, "No? No? NO? THEN SHUT YOUR MOUTH" (Rogers 26). However, Martin does not actually say either of these things to the other parents. He admits that, "I toe the line. I keep my mouth shut [...] Oh, I'm part of the club now" (Rogers 26). He is as powerless as anyone else behind his words. Though he feels bogged down by the meaningless ideas that these other parents have presented, ideas only meant to assuage the guilt they feel and not to actually help others, he cannot fix it either. Martin also may not confront these ideas because he is less of a Well Meaning White Person and more of an inherent racist in his thoughts. Instead of trying to merge with the parents, he is inwardly fighting against them, suggesting that he would not like to deal with race in any way, but rather ignore it. This incident confronts the audience again with their own lives, their own situations that they may encounter in everyday life, and their own inability to speak up against what they know is wrong instead of inwardly harboring racist thoughts.

Martin is finally confronted with his own ignorance when he discovers the crime his son, Steven, has committed. A group of white boys attacked a young black couple, raping the girl. Martin describes what was done to her by saying, "There was a piece of paper wadded up inside her. Lined paper like from a book report. 'Kill all niggers. Kill all cunt niggers.' [...] Niggers, with one 'g.' Couldn't even spell that right" (Rogers 30-1). Martin's son has used actions and words to demonstrate how he feels about black people; he has expressed his racism openly in a way his father cannot. Steven's horrible violence is ineffective in furthering the cause against racism; rather, it promotes it. Martin must now take what his son has done to make sure his own hidden racism is better dealt with. Instead of denying his racism and his inability to communicate or act against it, Martin learns from Steven's actions how he must actively deal with his own hypocrisy. Further, Martin believes that he has tried to listen to his son and doesn't understand how this has failed. He feels helpless in his relationship with Steven, just like the helplessness he should feel in the outside

world, but has not encountered yet. When his son says, "I hate this life", Martin responds, "How do you communicate a response to that? Then – right then - what could I have said? What could I have done that would've made a difference?" (Rogers 26). Not only does this communicate the helplessness he feels with his son, but it also shows how lost he is in dealing with the race issue. The audience can feel comparable to what Martin expresses here, the certainty that there actually is nothing to say. Martin gives the audience one more look at themselves when he says, "What did I miss? I thought I was listening. I thought he wasn't talking because he had nothing to say" (Rogers 33). Everyone thinks they are listening, and believes they are saying things that have definition, that mean something, that will do something. But we do not realize how wrong we are until something affects us directly and shakes our belief system. This is the most important message that Rogers is trying to tell his audience through the character Martin.

Alan approaches racism in a different way than Martin. He is not as much of an observer; he tries to participate in the active crusade against racism. However, Alan constantly runs into brick walls that seem unavoidable and show the unwillingness of others to help him in his crusade. First, Alan tries to explain the meaning behind the things that he finds meaningful. He tells a story where the punch line is, "It all depends on what you're listening for" (Rogers 8). This is a major theme for Rogers and should resonate with the audience as they are watching the three characters unfold. It indicates that we are not always listening for the right thing and should put our lives in a better perspective so that we will hear what we should be listening for. In the case of *White People*, it indicates that we should re-establish where we are in fighting against racism and how we can make a bigger impact by listening to the anti-racist activists and ideas. Alan goes on to describe who he is as a character, for the audience to more fully relate to him; he says, "It's my passion, really. Historical Anthropology [...] why we act, why we do certain things to each other" (Rogers 8). Alan is showing the more analytical approach he has to viewing racism and how he can dissect the idea and meaning behind it more clearly than Martin could. In fact, the mere idea that Alan is a historical anthropologist means that he understands the history behind racism and tries to interpret how it affects people of different cultures. By having this background, Alan seems more willing to understand racism and take an active role in fighting against it.

A good analogy is created when Alan talks about the freshmen class he teaches. It can be compared to any one person trying to speak out against the masses and finding resistance and even complete ignorance. Alan states, "I mean, what do you do? How do you communicate any complexity? How do you

seek an answer in a group that size? I just water things down” (Rogers 19). Alan relays the struggles that any singular person might have in dealing with racism. The complexity of racism and its history is lost on such a large group, and by watering things down, Alan is forced to erase some of the true meaning behind his purpose. Alan goes on to say,

Half of them are sleeping, talking. The others waltz in late, as if what they missed was irrelevant. As if what I am trying to explain is some mothballed thing to be snickered at [...] I know we’re supposed to like them, to want to nurture, but I’m up there and notes are passed and gum is snapped and all I want to do is shout: ‘FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!’ (Rogers 20)

Alan shows the frustration any member of the audience might feel when trying to express something they find important to an uncaring audience. This scene also forces the audience to listen to Alan, to Rogers’ play, to the full story he is trying to tell, because otherwise, they become just like the ignorant snobs in Alan’s class, students who walk away without learning anything.

However, there is one bright hope for Alan. Alan shows the audience this example and confronts them with the seeming impossibility of overcoming the shortcomings of fighting against the majority. He then gives the example of Felicia, the one bright student in his class who speaks up and tells him what she believes in. Alan says, “Doesn’t even bother to be called on! Just juts her hand up and yells out in this ear-shattering boom. But what she says, the questions she asks [...] she has no idea of the scope of what she’s holding in her brain” (Rogers 19). Felicia is seen as almost a rude student; however, because she has so many of her own ideas to share, of her own questions to ask, she is also the brightest in the class. She is comparable to someone who can speak out against racism, who can further the movement to eradicate it and can add her own knowledge in the process. Alan later mentions, “She’s speaking in this code that is like a foreign language to me! I’m watching her thinking: These words, these terms, how did they evolve? How did I miss this?” (Rogers 28). The African-American student Felicia is far ahead of how Alan thinks and is a reminder to the audience of how time progresses and how language and communication can become stronger. She is the hope that even though we are fighting against large amounts of racism and racist people, we may affect just one, and then that one will go on and evolve our mission and affect others. Alan is the common man, fighting against oppression, against racism, feeling lost in the void that is ignorance and misunderstanding. However, he also shows the audience that if they listen, that if they communicate with others, there can be progress, as difficult as it seems.

The climax of Alan’s story is the twilight attack on his wife and himself by a group of black men. By using this example, Rogers points out the struggle that will occur for the audience members as they go out and seek to find the truth and meaning behind anti-racism. This attack is a stereotypical moment in the play, but also entirely believable. In Wolf’s article, she states that, “Well-Meaning White People in conversation hear that someone of their background has been assaulted by a group of young men. The immediate next question is in code: ‘Was there a description of the attackers?’” (45). Wolf’s example illustrates the exact situation that Alan is placed in. He is angry about the attacks, but his anger does not remain contained to only the attackers; he extends it to the entire black race. He is angry towards his prize student, Felicia, even though she is not related in any way to the attacks. Alan struggles with the idea that he should not take this out on any black person, but that he is actually afraid of the entire race now. While Wolf argues that, “What I’ve never read [...] is an anti-racist white person talking honestly about what their own racism looks like, sounds like, feels like” (Wolf 44), Alan is actually taking this step forward and facing the racism that resides within him. Although this first may appear to be a large step backwards for Alan, we can see progress in his hopes of reconciling with Felicia and trying to understand in his mind where this rage is coming from. He is like any other member of the audience; he tries to move forward, tries to persevere. Most importantly, he can show the audience how setbacks can be overcome and the common man can do something important to impact the way we view these incidences. Even though Alan struggles to fight against the racism he knows is present within him, he is stepping forward, trying to communicate to the masses, trying to show the audience the hope of future progress through the example of Felicia.

At the end of the play, both Alan and Martin end parts of their dialogue with the word “begin”. Martin is talking about his son and states, “I just want him to talk to me. To raise his head... Begin” (Rogers 34). Martin appears to only be calling forth his son to start communicating, but he also is directly calling on the audience. The character on stage directly addresses the audience, giving them the command to talk, communicate, listen and begin in their search towards anti-racism. Alan states, “Then I can try. ‘Fight the good fight.’ Then... I can begin” (Rogers 35). Alan attempts a similar call to action, except he relates the audience to himself, the man who has already risen in a crowd and tried to communicate meaning and complexity to a mass of people. He is a man who has already succeeded in reaching out to one student and continues to make himself less of a racist. Now he asks the audience to look at what he has been through and join him to struggle forward to a brighter future.

Importantly, Rogers places both Alan and Martin in front of an audience, replicating whiteness to whiteness. In his review, Brantley says, “[Rogers] seems to be saying to his audience, ‘[Just look.] The evidence is all there – not only on the stage, but also in your own lives’” (Brantley). Brantley shows the impact Rogers’s characters have in reflecting on the audience. Rogers creates a mirror by only allowing his characters to recite monologues to a blank audience. This mirror is important: audience members can recognize the deficiencies in themselves before confronting other races and racism. In his book *Race and Communication*, Oscar H. Gandy writes, “An individual’s position on matters of public importance can be influenced by her sense of herself as well as her sense of others whom she believes are like her” (193). Gandy is arguing for the importance of understanding ourselves through people that are like us. In the case of *White People*, Rogers hopes to show his audience how they act and the deficiencies with their language and reaction by purposefully reenacting it and revealing the thoughts and misgivings which we keep held inside of us. He exposes our deficiencies so we can come to further understand them.

Rogers wants to create an impact on his audience by allowing them to see themselves in his work. As John T. Warren and Deanna Fassett state in their article, “Critical scholars in theatre have led the way, creating critical performances of whiteness that function to mirror, particularly to white audiences, the mechanisms and machinations of their oppressive actions” (412). Warren and Fassett point out the importance of using whiteness in a production in order to make the audience understand the connection between performance and actuality. Through the characters of Alan and Martin, Rogers reproduces whiteness on stage, creating a scenario that “must hold both our everyday talk and our everyday actions accountable for the ways we each reproduce whiteness as a socially powerful, culturally centered location” (Warren and Fassett 414). Rogers creates this imaginary world on stage merely to show the contradictions and sympathies behind the white audience’s own words through the contradictions and sympathies of his main characters.

Rogers’ prime purpose in *White People* is to show his audience the shortcomings they possess in their acceptance of different races and their pursuit of ending racism. He gives us two characters who represent the common white man and his approach to race: Martin and Alan. Martin shows the hypocrisies of Well-Meaning White People; he tries to prove the meaning that is contained behind words but yet fails to see the meaning in what he himself is saying. Alan must try to organize the masses,

as futile as it seems. His triumph in one student is hope for the audience that they can also spread information about anti-racism. Alan counters Martin in this way; he has meaning behind his words, unlike Martin, and is at the point where he is able to spread his meaning to others without getting stuck behind hypocrisy. Both of these characters represent whiteness and the struggle against accepting racism; they confront the audience with their monologues in order to create a reflection of what the audience is itself. Rogers’ technique of using whiteness to describe whiteness not only shows the importance of communication in combating racism, but also allows the audience to feel comfortable in confronting who they really are in order to change.

Works Cited

- Brantley, Ben. “Theater Review; Guilt So Deep That It Derails Words and Intentions.” *The New York Times*. 15 Feb. 2000. 8 Dec. 2008 <[http://theater2.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?html_title=&tols_title=WHITE%20PEOPLE%20\(PLAY\)&pdate=2000215&byline=By%20BEN%20BRANTLEY&id=1077011432008](http://theater2.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?html_title=&tols_title=WHITE%20PEOPLE%20(PLAY)&pdate=2000215&byline=By%20BEN%20BRANTLEY&id=1077011432008)>.
- Gandy Jr., Oscar H. *Communication and Race*. Arnold: London, 1998.
- McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies.” *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancio. Temple UP: Philadelphia, 1997.
- Rogers, J.T. *White People*. Dramatists Play Service Inc.: New York, 2006.
- Simpson, Jennifer Lyn. “The Color-Blind Double Bind: Whiteness and the (Im)Possibility of Dialogue.” *Communication Theory (10503293)* 18.1 (Feb. 2008): 139-159. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. EBSCO. Maxwell Library, Bridgewater, MA. 7 Dec. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com.libservprd.bridgew.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=28397414&site=ehost-live>>.
- Warren, John T. and Deanna L. Fassett. “Subverting Whiteness: Pedagogy at the Crossroads of Performance, Culture, and Politics.” *Theatre Topics* 14.2 (Sept. 2004): 411-430. *Project Muse*. Maxwell Library, Bridgewater, MA. 7 Dec. 2008 <http://muse.jhu.edu.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/journals/theatre_topics/v014/14.2warren.pdf>.
- Wolf, Naomi. “The Racism of Well-Meaning White People.” *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*. Eds. Marita Golden and Susan Richards. Doubleday: New York, 1995.