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# Belligerent shyness and puzzlement: a discursive analysis of 'not racism' and the post-racial on UK phone-in radio

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the ways in which racism thrives at the very moment in which it is denied. Analysing phone-in radio calls in the UK which perform definitional disputes about the meaning of racism, I interpret how the idea of a colour-blind post-racial field is discursively established and protected. Using an anti-racist and race critical lens, the paper outlines connected features of the way in which racism is discursively defined as *elsewhere*. Drawing upon a particular characterization of the denial of racism as the circulation of 'Not Racism', within these calls I identify the twin themes of the establishment of the post-racial field through lament and puzzlement, and its enforcement, through counter accusations and the construction of anti-racism as hegemonic. Appropriate to this radio context, I find the nature of these utterances to be 'dialled-up' performative juxtapositions: persistent claims to being silenced whilst speaking, with a belligerent quality to the 'shyness' about racism.

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Statements . . . insisting on the meaninglessness of race . . . are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in . . . discourse is itself a racial act.

(Morrison 1993, 46)

## Introduction

This paper examines some of the ways in which racism thrives at the very moment in which it is denied (Goldberg 2015). Analysing phone-in radio calls in the UK which perform definitional disputes about the meaning of racism, I interpret how the idea of a colour-blind post-racial field is created and

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protected. What do people actually say as they deny the relevance of racism and construct racism as being over? Using an anti-racist (Mondon and Winter 2020) and race critical lens (Goldberg and Essed 2002),<sup>1</sup> I outline connected features of the way in which racism is discursively defined as *elsewhere*. I present the twin themes of the discursive establishment of the post-racial field through lament and puzzlement, and its belligerent enforcement through counter-accusations and the construction of anti-racism as hegemonic.

There are many discussions of the post-racial which cannot be fully rehearsed here. Barnor Hesse has argued that the post-racial is actually intrinsic to the very European conception of racism itself (2011), and David Goldberg and Gavan Titley have highlighted that the post-racial is not merely a description but 'an active political force' and the 'totality of the ways in which racism is re-formed' (Goldberg 2015; Titley 2019, 7). For the purposes of this paper, 'the post-racial field' is intended in a limited sense (cf. Goldberg and Essed 2002; St Louis 2015) as the assumption, in Anglophone countries including Britain, that racism has generally been overcome, with its attendant logic that talk of race is therefore 'unhelpful'. Appropriate to this phone-in radio context, the paper analyses the nature of these utterances as 'dialled-up' performative juxtapositions: claims to being serially silenced whilst speaking, accompanied by what I contend is a persistent, belligerent shyness within and about racist discourse.

There is relatively little academic work which features both a discussion of phone-in radio and a race critical analysis of racism in the UK. However, the audiences for these kinds of phone-in radio programmes are significant. The extracts used in this paper are drawn from a commercial phone-in radio station, LBC, which according to the most recent Radio Joint Audience Research Ltd (RAJAR) figures achieves a weekly audience of over 2.7 million listeners (RAJAR 2023). The literature includes phone-in radio studies which analyse the construction of 'outgroups' in the UK, and some work in Australia about negative-other representation (cf. Chichon 2020; Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos 2011). Drawing on aspects of discursive psychology, I analyse how people discursively construct and defend the idea that racism is no longer a problem. The paper also serves to witness and archive the circulation of a particular form of mediated racism denial in Britain, theorized by race critical scholar Alana Lentin as 'Not Racism™' (2018; 2020b).

### '(Not) racism' as discursive practice

As Stuart Hall makes clear in his seminal lecture, published as *Race: the sliding signifier* (2017 [1994]), it is more important to understand the changing dynamics of race and racism in practice, rather than trying to fix and defend one particular definition. This is because, he argues, the meaning of race shifts

and is constantly produced and reproduced. Hall's theorization of race understood as a practice is the foundation for this paper. The particular discursive practice being observed here is, as Gavan Titley states, the 'debatability of racism' which he describes as 'the incessant, recursive attention as to what counts as racism and who gets to define it' (2016). Within the general framing of 'what counts as racism' are the many ways in which racism is discursively constructed as *elsewhere*, which serve to hold it in place as an item to be debated.

There is a wealth of scholarship in other contexts examining the ways in which people express racism through the denial of racism. For example, Wetherell and Potter 'map' the ways in which majority white New Zealanders discuss the Maori (1992). Bonilla-Silva examines the way in which white American university students in particular express a 'colour-blind' racial prejudice, denying that they see race at all (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Augoustinos and others build on the work of van Dijk in identifying both denial 'text and talk' by white participants when discussing minority groups (Augoustinos and Every 2007, 2010; van Dijk 1992, 1993). Ben Pitcher identifies how racist discourse is 'obliged to find expression *through* the language of ... anti-racism' (2006, 537). One key thread through all of this work is a description of the many ways in which speakers attempt to overcome what Billig labels the norm against prejudice (Billig 1988; Goodman 2010).

Lentin argues that 'the denial and redefinition of racism ... has become a central formulation for the expression and legitimation of racism' (2018, 401; 2020b). The key element of this is how the denial serves *as* the expression of racism. 'Not Racism' is itself a feature of racist discourse and emphasizes a different kind of discursive narrowing of the definition of racism: one which serves to debate and define racism 'out of existence' for anything other than past events such as the Holocaust, apartheid South Africa and slavery (Lentin 2020a). Crucially, this recursive debate is not only a product of ignorance or a lack of knowledge (Mills 2007) but better analysed as a *generative* discursive manoeuvre. It serves the function within a mediatised economy of generating a very particular kind of 'intensely circulated racist noise' (Titley, Nikunen, and Pantti 2021, 103). This background noise creates and reproduces a scepticism about anyone, particularly a racially minoritized person, trying to make a claim that racism has occurred (Lentin 2020b). Instances of racism, on this understanding, can never live up to those true past horrors and racism – by definition – becomes not as bad as it used to be.

At the same time, Lentin notes that the element of racism as a public event and spectacle, relevant in the radio phone-in context of this paper, actually facilitates this narrowing conception of racism that is accompanied by a distancing of the event from 'modes of acceptable behaviour and [are] thus isolated and containable' (2016, 36). The 'publicness' of the event and

the labelling of an event as a racist incident can actually serve to *reinforce* the location of racism as elsewhere, as an exceptional event, obscuring the 'hidden forms of systemic racism' (Lentin 2016b, 37). Another key dimension of 'Not Racism' in the public sphere is the allusion to anti-racism as a 'hegemonic moral orthodoxy' restricting the right of 'ordinary' people to speak freely (Lentin 2018, 406; Titley 2020). I contend that it is this repeated performance of reassurance which reproduces and promotes an '*idea* of censorship rather than its reality' (Lentin 2018, 409, original emphasis).

Lentin (2018, 2020b) and Titley (2020) contend not only that racism can be conceptually inflated but that racism is too often discursively deployed with the effect that it disappears entirely. This can be done by devaluing and weakening it, by reducing it to *any* mention of race and stripping it of its 'historical basis, severity and power' (Song 2014, 125), but *also* by defining any individual act of alleged racism narrowly *against* very particular historical horrors as noted above. Discursively, this forms a definitional pair to facilitate the circulation of 'Not Racism', the former 'devaluing' manoeuvre facilitating the complaint that racism *is said to be* everywhere, and the latter enabling the contention that racism cannot in fact be present. This is one sense in which racism is thus *simultaneously* 'everywhere and nowhere' (Mills 1997, 76; Titley 2016, 2019).

### Data and discursive analytic approach

The programmes from which these extracts are drawn were broadcast on a national commercial radio news phone-in radio station, LBC, in the UK. The calls analysed here featured debates on the question 'Is racism getting better or worse?' and a public puzzling over the meaning of 'woke'. Data was extracted from conversations where there was an element of conflict between the views of the caller and host, which broadly included a conversation about the existence of racism and its denial. The first programme was hosted by Rachel Johnson, a white conservative broadcaster and journalist, discussing Black History Month in October 2020. The second was hosted by David Lammy in July 2021 following the missed penalties taken by black players for the England team in the European Football Cup final and comments by British Olympian Sir Mo Farah that racism against black athletes was getting worse. Lammy is a black British man of Guyanese heritage who has been a Labour Party MP since 2000. The third programme was hosted by white liberal host James O'Brien in January 2022, in a segment puzzling over the meaning of 'woke', which is also a trigger for disputes about 'anti-racism'. Within these programmes, I focused mainly upon the speakers (both callers and hosts) seeking to deny racism and defend a vision of the post-racial field, to identify some features of how denials of racism were attempted in this context.

This paper draws upon the discursive analytic approach adopted by Wetherell and Potter in *Mapping the Language of Racism* (1992) in the sense that there is a focus on the utterance itself as a discursive practice (see also Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 2003). My interest here is not in trying to label and identify particular racists, nor am I seeking to understand speakers' deeper cognitions in these cases as to whether they are intentionally deferring, for example, to a 'social orthodoxy' against racism, or articulating their own genuinely dissonant logic of disavowal of racist beliefs (cf. Pitcher 2006, 539). My intention here is to situate and evaluate the function of their utterances in a broader context. The subject under examination is how these denials are discursively accomplished. As Wetherell and Potter state in describing their approach, 'we do not expect individuals to be consistent, we expect their talk to vary as they draw upon different repertoires to do explanation and justification in different contexts' (Wetherell and Potter 1992, 102, emphasis added).

### Phone-in radio background and media production

There are two broad strands of scholarship about radio phone-in programmes. The first is rooted in the fields of pragmatics and conversation analysis, and examines the structural features of the conversation (Hutchby 1999, 2006; Fitzgerald and Houseley 2002; Thornborrow 2001). The second focuses more on the production element (Ytreberg 2004) and, for example, callers' own understandings of the production gatekeeping processes (Ewart 2011, 2016; Dori-Hacohen 2012). Phone-in radio generally demands a high level of what Ytreberg labels 'format consonance', where participants are expected, and prepared, to fit in with the requirements of the programme. However, as he notes, the rules of the performance are not always shared. Callers must anticipate the right level of informality, demands for fluency and follow the host's lead (Ytreberg 2004, 684).

The content of commercial phone-in radio is used to generate and retain the attention of the audience which is then sold to advertisers. The participants in the programme are not simply debating racism, they are 'performing a racism debate' which must hold the interest of the audience and satisfy the commercial requirements of the radio station. This adds a layer of both interest and complexity to the discursive analysis. The racism debate is a commodity. The calls themselves are the product which can be carved into 'clippable' moments, with dramatic moments or repeat callers themselves becoming commodities to assist with promoting the station.

As Titley argues, 'the production of discourse is a structural and commercial imperative' (2020, 35). There is not just a political contest over the meaning of racism and which characterizations might advance the debate, but the very structures designed to ensure the ongoing media circulation of

discourse ‘eschew [the] closure’ of the meaning of racism (51). A ‘commercial logic’ drives the generation of comment, interaction, judgement and debate, which means that ‘there can never be closure on a reasonable definition’ (2020, 51). In debates about the definitions of racism, or whether racism is getting better or worse as in the calls below, the binary framing question functions as a trigger to rehearse an array of contesting views. As illustrated by LBC radio’s YouTube channel, these are broadcast within a more broadly mediated attention economy where there are ‘layers and layers of commentary and counter-commentary which can be monetized’ (Saha 2020, 2360). Radio phone-in programmes are a good example of where comment itself is free for the producers who create a theatre of the debatability of racism which serves both an ‘ideological and economic function’ (2360). Whilst I cannot explore the production or the role of social media and the attention economy further here, it is important to note the commercial context and purpose of the discussions themselves.

### **Constructing the post-racial field: belligerent lament and puzzlement**

The first broad theme identified is how the post-racial field is constructed. For speakers who insist that the introduction of race is indeed the problem, it is first necessary to present their vision of the field into which they contend race is being introduced. Speakers demonstrate their commitment to the post-racial by recursively performing a lament or puzzlement about any talk of race. Caller Mark, who suggests that it is Lammy who is being the ‘real racist’ in his call, begins by indicating his frustration that race is just not being ignored:

Mark: I don’t know why everyone seems to be having to say what colour they are. So I’m a, a white guy but I think . .

Mark expresses a frustration with the programme in which other callers, by mentioning their racial background, are bringing race in to the conversation. Racism itself is reduced to talking about skin colour. He goes on to set out his colour-blind worldview:

Mark: I I I just think it’s very sad we’ve moved from a period where, ummm, people didn’t see people’s or we just looked, and you know, it’s the classic Martin Luther King statement that, you know, you don’t judge someone on their skin colour, you judge them on their umm, morality and how how they are as a person. [but but, you can see] we’ve moved away from that now . .

If you look at what you’ve done as an MP, ummm, most of it’s regarding, ummm, a a a certain group of people that happen to have a skin colour. . .

Mark expresses a determination not to fall into the trap of referring to race. He cannot say black people or people of colour at all, because he has already framed that as a problem – as *the* problem – so they are ‘people *that happen to have* a skin colour’. References to race disrupt a default neutral post-racial field. For Mark, the implication is that to mention race at all, as he variously alleges in the call that the ‘Industry ... University ... the media ... BLM’, and the host Lammy himself, are all inclined to do, is to make it matter. According to this framing logic, to make it matter is to be racist, make racism worse, and disrupt the post-racial vision he is attempting to outline. He goes on to refer to himself *as part of* the struggle against apartheid South Africa:

Mark: ... but when I was younger, ummm, we sort of, we went through the Apartheid movement. And as a white person, we opposed the Apartheid movement, um, because it was obviously a terrible thing. And then life seemed to be starting to move towards, ummm, a nice life where people were just people, and it didn’t matter what their skin colour was. The trouble now is the whole narrative from people, you know, like yourselves and politicians, the media, that the main topic of conversation is, what colour your skin is.

These references to his own opposition to the South African apartheid regime are a positive self-representation and function both as an attempt to inoculate him against any allegation of racism and to accuse others of being racist for introducing race. As Brown and Mondon write, ‘... how can I be racist myself if I denounce racism?’ (Brown and Mondon 2022, 150). In this particular case, I can add that the post-racial field is actually framed to a small degree, as *Mark’s own* anti-racist accomplishment. References to ‘obviously terrible’ past exemplars of racism provide his strong and even expert anti-racist activism against ‘real’ racism, a discursive strategy identified as credentialing (Wetherell 2003, 19). As noted above, apartheid South Africa – quarantined in the past – is one of the purportedly acceptable ‘frozen’ standards set for ‘real racism’, as described by Lentin (2016b; Lentin 2016a; see also Mondon and Winter 2020).

Within these calls denying racism, I identify a related theme which is consistent with this type of lament for the old days and puzzlement about racism: an exaggerated or naïve description and framing of the UK as a sort of unproblematic, ‘hyper-global’ place. The tone here is one of celebrating a fantastic, perhaps even utopian, ‘rose-tinted vision’ of the colour-blind society ‘which has clearly never been the case’ (Mondon and Winter 2020, 205). The programme host Johnson describes her vision of the UK from when her own children were at nursery in the following terms:

Johnson: ... my children went to very multicultural nursery schools ... there would be 30 different languages spoken in the class and, you know, children coming from all over the world. And of course then, in the end, all the children spoke English, and became friends. And I probably am guilty of not having sat them down and explained any of that, and why children had different skin colours and why, why it didn’t make any difference?



This type of characterization is similar to Mark's world of a 'nice life' where 'you didn't see their colour'. In celebrating their colour-blind vision of a post-racial society, the host Johnson and caller Mark 'dial-up' their descriptions of diversity, where 30 different languages spoken in a class are united by speaking English and becoming friends. This vision, or as Sara Ahmed puts it, the 'desire for happy stories of diversity', is one where race simply did not matter (Ahmed 2007, 164). In these exchanges, it is those *who perform a sort of wonderment at diversity*, and in so doing, present a hyper-diverse vision or a 'nice life' untroubled by racism, who express puzzlement and/or become resentful of talk of race that punctures this vision. Indeed, it is not merely that they express puzzlement, and lament the loss of this vision, but that the puzzlement is performed as preambular to a more strident protection of that vision.

Lammy, on the other hand, in his call with Mark, offers a counter-narrative and challenges the existence of this colour-blind post-racial field:

Lammy: This business of being colour-blind, I mean, what does it really mean? The truth is (sigh), when you look at someone of course, there, you can see the complexion of their skin ... Mark, when you say you didn't see their colour, where were you growing up? Where was this happening?

Lammy, conceding and engaging with this reductive conception of race as skin colour, questions Mark's post-racial and colour-blind worldview. However, as we see below, Lammy is more disappointed than 'puzzled' that the racism emerged. This is particularly evident in his introductory monologue to the programme, which was prompted by the racist abuse suffered by the young black penalty takers in the European Football Cup final:

Lammy: ... I knew that because they were black it would bring out the vilest in some parts of the population. I went to bed. But of course, the next morning, there it was, the N word all over Twitter, all over Instagram feeds. It was rabid. It was nasty. It was vicious ...

So for Lammy, in contrast to Mark and Johnson, racism here is not spoken of as a puzzling presence nor is there a deployment of a virtuous post-racial field in order to deny racism in the present. In the next section, I identify other features which can be loosely grouped together as demonstrating how the post-racial field is discursively enforced and protected.

### **Enforcing the post-racial field: belligerent 'shyness' and counter accusations**

The second broad theme is enforcing the post-racial field. As noted above, one way this is achieved for those seeking to deny the existence of racism, is to

characterize anti-racism as a hegemonic, moralizing and stifling force which limits one's capacity to speak. This occurs at several levels, but I will focus on two themes here. The first is a type of running commentary about being unable to speak, facilitating the repetition of the claim that an anti-racist orthodoxy has gone too far, and a second smaller sub-theme is the misnaming and not naming of racism. Both are forms in which those wishing to deny racism make a claim to being silenced, even as they publicly speak to a large listening audience.

In the call where Mark accuses Lammy of increasing racism by his focus on race, he also repeatedly alludes to being muted or silenced. It is noteworthy that in the context of this particular programme, Mark actually speaks for more than twice as long as any other lay caller to the programme, whilst expressing his fear of being silenced:

Mark: you have had a tendency of muting people for a long time, if you don't agree with what they are saying ...

... It's a call-in show, so ...

Am I muted? Am I muted? ...

Mark discursively positions himself, both pre-emptively and in moments of frustration, as in danger of not being allowed to speak. He is presenting himself, at length, as silenced. As noted below, he also presents himself as speaking for other people outside of what he states is the 'mainstream media', who suspect that the English football manager only chose the black penalty-takers to make a political point, combining both 'bringing race into it' and from his perspective, the ultimate tokenism of 'affirmative action', to produce a national disaster:

Mark: ... were they chosen to take the penalties because of their skin colour? Or were they chosen to take the penalties, because they were the best people to take the penalties? ...

It is a question that's being asked. But it's a question that's not debated on, ummm, the media.

It is Mark's framing of the media as censorious of nameless others that is of interest here. For Mark, throughout the call, 'the media' are complicit in silencing discussion about matters including, according to him, the possibility that black English football penalty-takers were only chosen to reinforce the ('woke') hegemony of anti-racism.

Enforcing the post-racial field by minimizing and delegitimising claims about racism is also taken up by Matt in his call with Lammy, who makes the claim that:

Matt: The whole issue of racism after George Floyd ... has become so high profile that he's being raised continually, almost every day in different ways.

More than an intrusion into their colour-blind vision, Matt and Mark describe 'anti-racism' as a prevalent force which covers the field: they 'hear' it raised 'all the time' in different ways. Matt's main approach to denying racism in both the context of the racism the black English footballers faced, and the racism experienced by other callers to the programme, is to delegitimise their claims. Throughout his call, Matt argues that Lammy and those making a claim about the presence of racism need to 'prove it':

Matt: And I think the example of the footballers, that's not a real world example meaning, it's just, you know, it's a global event is so high profile. And they're, you know, you're always gonna get idiots on the internet who make comments ... are you talking about actual racist comments, or just booing the knee, or what? ...

Matt: So what are the other things? ...

Matt: Are they really examples, or are they ... is it just a disagreement or dispute? Or they say, they've decided, they feel they think, or they think they've had racism? Is it *definite* racism? Or is it just a disagreement in that situation? Which examples are we talking about?...

Matt: So what are the other examples? ... (emphasis added)

Matt makes a very determined attempt to define racism narrowly so as to 'debate racism out of existence' that Lentin identifies as a feature of 'Not Racism' (2016a). If it is acknowledged at all, Matt says that it is only done by 'just ... idiots on the internet'. When 'offline' examples of racism in the stadium are raised by Lammy, he seeks to differentiate 'actual comments' from simply the booing of the English football team for their taking of the knee. The social media world is not the real world. In practice, almost every real or imagined allegation of racism is denied or distanced. In a relatively rare moment of media 'format dissonance', it is actually Matt who ends the call when Lammy introduces racism as broader structural inequalities relating to housing and employment, suggesting that if it looks 'like a duck, and quacks like a duck', then it must be racism.

Johnson begins her programme with two expert guests, Charlene White, a newsreader and TV personality from South London with an African-Caribbean background, and Shobna Gulati, a British soap actress of South Asian background who had just written an autobiography. Johnson is especially persistent with her second expert guest Gulati, in her support of the colour-blind approach. This is particularly striking as it comes after a series of attempts by both her expert guests to explain, in various ways, that race should not be ignored, for example:

White: ... sort of trying to explain to them that that is just not true. And actually, that is not how things change by pretending that that people aren't different races. That is not how things change. ...

Gulati: the more you shove things away and the more that we don't then want to understand . . .

In other words, Johnson's 'expert' guests, if anything, are arguing to some degree that we *need* to bring race into it and not pretend otherwise. Nevertheless, after having spoken with her two guests in turn for about 12 minutes, Johnson restates her concerns about 'introducing' difference:

Johnson: So I think it's unhelpful. And I didn't want to kind of say this to Charlene. But when people use the word different, why would you tell little children that they're different when we are all the same under the skin?

Gulati: I think it's important to recognize difference, but at the same time, it's also important to recognize similarity.

Johnson: But, do you think it it helps umm the process of eliminating racial division by telling children with a darker skin that they're different from a child with a white skin in this country?

For both Gulati and White in responding to Johnson, one of the main solutions to racism is to 'uncover our stories' and to have a different kind of conversation which includes race. As Gulati goes on to say, a conversation that 'wouldn't reduce it down to, to what we're, what we're doing now'. Gulati *does not name* what they are doing, but implies that what '[they] are doing now' is reproducing precisely the sort of tedious and insistent colour-blind discourse that she wishes to avoid – reducing race to a question of skin colour, and concluding that it is 'unhelpful' to introduce race into it because we are all the same. Johnson's insistence upon colour-blindness has a polite but belligerent quality, one premised upon an assumption that to speak of race is to unhelpfully bring it into existence, rather than to stay quiet and eliminate it. Despite Gulati's protestations, Johnson concludes the call with an instance of an all-woman, all-people of colour Shakespearean production as an extraordinary exemplar of progress.

Johnson: I know you've experienced pigeon pigeon holing, but you've also experienced the opposite. Because you've you've played parts that are both gender and colour blind, haven't you? [Yes] So and you know, things have got better. Can you imagine that happening back in the 70s?

Johnson drives towards this hyper-real example where the colour-blind vision which Johnson advocates has been achieved. Much like the benign vision of Mark in which skin colour is incidental and should be ignored, Johnson, having already ended the call with Gulati, insists upon her concluding vision of a liberal, post-racial world in which anyone can

Johnson: . . . prove that you don't have to be pigeon-holed and you pretty much do anything, whoever you are . . .

The determination to exclude the very ideas of race or racism as expressed by those seeking to enforce the post-racial field has some more literal

manifestations both as a failure to directly use the word racism and as the inability to speak at all: a secondary theme of ‘not naming’ or ‘misnaming’. Throughout her programme, host Rachel Johnson uses a series of euphemisms, or none at all, instead of using racism or racist, preferring words such as ‘racial division’, or unqualified words such as ‘climate’ or ‘hate’. Johnson variously labels this hate, ‘bizarre’ or ‘ridiculous’. The recurring tone of puzzlement and Johnson’s repeated use of words like ‘bizarre’ elsewhere to describe what she would call ‘hate’ also function to distance, isolate and contain racism within a series of ‘incidental admissions’ which can, as van Dijk notes, be comfortably coupled with, or indeed reinforce, an overall denial of racism more generally (Lentin 2016b; van Dijk 1992, 97). It is the framing of any incident as exceptional which serves to reinforce the post-racial norm.

In explaining where he experienced the move towards a ‘nice life’ where no-one saw race, Mark stumbles over attempting to answer Lammy’s question of where this was happening. For example, he attempts to describe Australia as no longer having problems with racism, and as being quite multiracial or multicultural. In this case, Mark cannot fully utter the word, and, just like at the beginning of the call in being forced to declare his skin colour, his long sigh here appears to signal an exasperation around utterances to do with race:

Mark: No, they did, well they sort of did have but they’re quite a multi rac., racist, racist, no wrong word (small nervous laughter), a multi ummm... (long sigh) ummm, they’ve got a broad ...

The difficulty speaking is most striking here, demonstrating that the post-racial field is maintained through a framing of anti-racism as silencing, both ‘volubly’ (Tittley 2020) and perhaps in this case, literally.

The final extract comes from a call in a programme, hosted by LBC’s James O’Brien, structured so as to puzzle over the definition of ‘woke’. The call enacts a similar conflict to previous calls in that Luke seeks to defend the idea that wokeness has gone too far, similar to political correctness in the past or the ‘loony left’ in the more distant past (Davies and MacRae 2023; Smith 2021). Luke opens the call by defining ‘woke, or woken-ism’ as people ‘seeking offence where it does not exist’. The playfulness of the term ‘woken-ism’ forms part of a performance of mutual ridicule in which both host and guest engage. The framing of people as ‘seeking’ offence is important. Set in context, it is this simple assertion that there is not anything even remotely justifying offence, which serves to enforce the post-racial. When pushed, Luke offers an example of what he describes as ‘courses’ about ‘being nice to each other’ foisted upon him at the local authority where he used to work. The following extract is lengthy to give some sense of the pattern repeated throughout the call, which is performatively framed by the host as Luke’s ‘shyness’ and refusal to be explicit:

O'Brien: ... what were the (training) courses ... designed to do?

Luke: I think they was designed to stifle rational discussion and debate ... Um, well let's say for example, a, um, y'know preventing barriers to staff progression. So people from certain religions, cultures, races, etc.

O'Brien: But you were gonna give me an example of something that happened in America.

Luke: Yes, I know that's happened. No no, I was just, I won't bring that up I think,

O'Brien: Well why not? Why don't you bring that up?...

Luke: I think most of your listeners know what I'm referring to.

O'Brien: ... just tell us, everybody already knows, Luke. So just tell us what it is you object to ...

Luke: Well, I just think it's really insincere.

O'Brien: Yeah, but we can't really know what that means until you tell us what it was, can we? [oh] So, what, what what was it, mate?

Luke: James, I'm a bit scared to go down the rabbit hole. [just to be clear, you] Because you're gonna, accuse me, accuse me of being a fascist or something,

O'Brien: You didn't ring in by accident, did you?... (emphasis added)

When pushed on naming the event, Luke resists again, saying 'I think most of your listeners know what I am referring to'. Like Mark above, where people 'happened to have a race', or 'people of certain colour', Luke is not explicit, referring only to 'people from certain religions, cultures and races'. And unlike Matt, Luke refuses to even name the murder of George Floyd, the event in America, expressly. However, his complaint is similar to the way in which Matt and Mark characterize the prevalence of 'talk about race', with what they consider to be its attendant courses designed to 'stifle rational discussion and debate'. Luke, like Mark, claims to be silenced. The host, James O'Brien, repeatedly goads Luke into giving an example of what he considers to be woke, and to 'tell the listeners what [he] is talking about'. Luke continues to resist and declares towards the end of his relatively long call that he has been 'cowed into silence by your lot'. In the context of the 'war on woke', this is an example of what has been identified as the 'discursive construction of in-group victimisation' (Davies and MacRae 2023, 33). However, the relevant point in this radio phone-in context is not merely to identify another ad hoc instance of the construction, but to demonstrate the belligerent dynamics of its repetition *within* a single performance, where an exchange about 'not being able to speak' becomes the main substance of the call itself. When pushed one final time, in this exemplary dance of speaking about not being able to speak, Luke concludes the call: 'I'll let you fill in the gaps'.

## Summary discussion and conclusion

Establishing and protecting a post-racial field is a key element in the circulation of racist ideologies *which take the form* of denial, or Lentin's 'Not Racism™' as used throughout this paper. For the speakers identified and extracted here, some key features of the post-racial include that:

- 'definite' racism is not present, can be safely quarantined in the past, or located elsewhere as the work 'of idiots on the internet';
- there is an imagined 'multicultural' place with a 'nice life' into which any talk of race cannot but intrude;
- those continually 'making it about race' occupy a powerful place which prevents people's capacity to speak, sometimes quite literally;
- there is a concomitant fear, that is *rehearsed and repeated*, of being labelled racist.

These features in the service of denying racism and enforcing the post-racial serve to hold open what Lentin labels a structural doubt about the very existence of racism, a doubt that is 'structured into the very way that racism is conceptualised' (Lentin 2020a). The extracts demonstrate a determined strand of colour-blind post-racial discourse which sets and protects the boundaries of 'Not Racism'. Within these calls in this unique context of performed speech, patterns of discursive puzzlement and a sort of belligerent shyness or reticence are used to accomplish the denial of racism.

The general aim of this paper was to demonstrate how the 'debatability' of racism and the associated public, performative, puzzling over racism in the phone-in radio context, reproduces a form of racist discourse. The utterances serving to protect the post-racial field as extracted here mainly make the point that racism is elsewhere, even where there are clear incidents of overt racism such as following the 2021 Euros football final, as in the case of the call between Matt and Lammy. As demonstrated by Mark's counter accusations of racism, the shallowness of the discussions about racism actually serves to reinforce the idea that any mention of anything to do with race is labelled racist. In turn, this dynamic of the labelling of anything as possibly racist, and the repeated articulation of the fear of such labelling, has the effect, in practice, of actually debating racism out of existence entirely, and protecting the post-racial field.

The binary, polarizing phone-in radio format facilitates a set of live articulations about race and racism which are more performative and relatively less scripted than other forms of mediated speech such as news programmes and documentaries. Rather than the mere counter-observation that the UK of today is a multicultural place, which I identified as preambular to enforcing the post-racial field, these extracts also illustrate what may be described as hyperbolic or utopian vision of a post-racial society, where classes of children

in which 30 different languages are spoken all became friends, and where 'we were all moving to a nice life', where race simply did not matter. Similarly, there is not merely a shyness or reluctance to label events as racist, but a counter-attacking and belligerent defence and enforcement of the post-racial field. Appropriate to this context, these could be labelled a series of 'dialled-up' juxtapositions: setting up a dynamic of wondrous utopian post-racial visions to be cruelly punctured by those introducing race, or a form of belligerent and even aggressive 'shyness' about race. Whilst these visions did not go unchallenged in the calls, the nature of that dynamic itself is perhaps a marker of 'protesting too much' about the possibility of racism actually existing 'here' rather than elsewhere.

Far from the alleged censoring of speech, as these extracts illustrate, it is not that racism is not spoken about, but that it is continually spoken about *as the tedious preoccupation* of those who cannot let it go. This is nothing new. Indeed, as suggested above, perhaps the very idea of the post-racial is embedded in the very structure of Eurocentric racism. As Martin Barker explained (Barker 1979), reflecting on the dynamics of how racism works in the light of Enoch Powell's famous speech, this is how 'one's assumptions [are] built into common sense . . .' (1979, 2). Moreover, following Stuart Hall, if racism itself is a discourse, it is *both* belligerent and shy, aggressive and polite, and it (dis)appears into common sense in changing ways. Having cyclically created and invoked this common sense, these speakers, exemplified by Luke, are then freed to perform a sort of public exhaustion that they are talking again about the same anti-racist 'nonsense'. This performative exhaustion, from wonderment to puzzlement to aggression, are all part of the long-standing and ongoing discursive work to maintain the common sense of 'Not Racism' so that an accusation of racism, or even the potential for it, becomes the racist event itself. As Sara Ahmed writes, people are said to be 'creating rather than describing a problem', and ' . . . the talk about divisions is itself divisive . . .' (Ahmed 2010). Those who are the subject of, or inclined to point out racism, are framed and reframed as bringing race in to it, and as we have seen from these extracts, bringing racism into existence. The belligerent, insistent dynamics of this shyness and puzzlement about race is another way in which the post-racial field is continually established and protected.

## Note

1. I use race critical deliberately here just to indicate my own reliance upon an older strand of race theorizing which, following theorists such as Goldberg, Essed and Lentin, challenge US-centric references to critical race theory, which of course themselves remain highly contested (eg. Curry 2009, 2022).



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